Largely neglected in American Christianity, the practice of meditation experienced a resurgence in popular American culture in the 1950s and 1960s when Zen Buddhism was introduced to the United States through the publication of books and other writings on meditation. More recently, a particular form of meditation—mindfulness meditation—has become very well accepted in popular culture and western medicine alike.

Mindfulness has been practiced in varied forms for thousands of years by people of various traditions, including the Buddhist, Jewish, and Christian traditions. Mindfulness has been described as the awareness that arises through “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4). It has also been described as “the nonjudgmental observation of the ongoing stream of internal and external stimuli as they arise” (Baer, 2003). This non-judgmental observation of thoughts and feelings, information from bodily sensations, and external stimuli is central to mindfulness meditation. It is in contrast to our very human tendency to react to these internal events, judging ourselves or attacking another.

An internet search reveals that mindfulness meditation has become the most popular of all meditative practices applied for therapeutic purposes. The popularity of the application of mindfulness for clinical purposes began in the 1980s when Jon Kabat-Zinn, a molecular biology professor in the College of Medicine at the University of Massachusetts developed a protocol of mindfulness that he described as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). His protocol stripped the practice of its Buddhist religious philosophy. He initially applied MBSR in the treatment of chronic pain patients and later employed it in the treatment of a range of maladies such as anxiety, hypertension, heart disease, cancer, and AIDS (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). More recently, other variations of the protocol have been developed, including Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) for the treatment of depression and the support of persons recovering from addiction and a variation of Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) for the treatment of patients with suicidal ideation or emotional dysregulation.

Ministers and Stress
We have always lived in a world that is full of noise. The fast pace of the age of information technology has made life even noisier. So much information is available, literally at the touch of a keyboard or screen, that living mindlessly, reacting to each stimulus, seems to be the disorder of our times.

Religious ministers are subject to the adverse effects of these same changes. At its heart, religious ministry is already exceptionally demanding. In an increasingly isolated world, ministers are often first responders when a member of the congregation is in crisis. The on-call role is just layered on top of a schedule already packed with weekly responsibilities for liturgical services, communal prayer, teaching and administration. Pastoral ministers are often called upon to join with peers in reaching out beyond their congregations to resolve conflict in their communities. With the dwindling number of clergy and religious, young ministers are often appointed to ministry positions without
Beneﬁts of Mindfulness

The practice of mindfulness meditation leads to signiﬁcant and observable changes in the neural connections and density of the brain; this has an enduring effect on behavior. Mindfulness meditation improves the immune system, reducing cortisol levels and blood pressure (Siegel 2009). A consistent practice of mindfulness meditation activates areas of the brain and neural connections that facilitate body regulation. It enhances attention and decreases rumination or worrying. It builds resilience.

Mindfulness meditation also improves communication, and so builds the social support network so critical to human health. It increases the capacity for emotional regulation, response ﬂexibility, fear modulation, insight, empathy, and a deep sense of morality. It decreases anxiety and worry, improves creativity and innovativeness, and sharpens the capacity for accurate analysis and problem-solving.

With mindfulness practice the individual is able to stop the maladaptive tendency to avoid, suppress, or over-engage with one’s distressing thoughts and emotions (Hayes & Feldman, 2004; Kabat-Zinn, 1990). And so it is that mindfulness deepens one’s sense of self, gradually dissipating dysfunctional patterns of thought, and freeing the person to be more ﬂexible, integrated and compassionate with self and others. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that mindfulness meditation has been linked to improved spiritual life and wellbeing.

The method is amazingly simple. Mindfulness meditation teaches us to recognize memory and imagination as events of the mind. These events are allowed to pass through consciousness, considered but not reacted to, and then allowed to drift away just as they came.

The calm consideration of memories and imagination allows the person to more easily recognize temptations and unhealthy habits, and provides emotional space in which it is possible to choose the optimal course without harsh judgment of self or others. There develops a clear distinction between those internal events and the self. And so are planted the seeds of compassion.

Waking up the Autopilot

In practical terms, mindfulness meditation transforms the human tendency to get caught up in mental or behavioral action that is carried out without real awareness. This way of operating has been described as autopilot, or living in the doing rather than being mode. We operate on autopilot, when for example, we drive without paying attention to the turns we are taking; when we read a book and cannot remember what we have just read; when we eat without tasting the food we eat, or brush our teeth with our minds wandering from one thing to the other, and when we take our baths with our minds far away from the shower, floating from one thought or image to another. More painfully, we are on autopilot when we react defensively to others or carry shame.

Individuals who practice mindfulness develop the capacity to be fully present in the moment, to be fully awake, to be aware of how one can be prone to mindless engagement in many different thoughts or activities. With the practice of mindfulness, one becomes aware of how hyperactive the mind can be; how the mind tends to drift back to painful memories of the past, and project to the future with anxiety-ﬁlled anticipation making us vulnerable to mood and anxiety problems. And more, the practice of mindfulness wakes us up to the rich texture of life that we miss while operating on autopilot.

Mindfulness and Christian Pastoral Ministers

It all sounds perfect for the religious minister, but its adoption in Christian circles has been hampered by understandable suspicions that the practice of mindfulness is an extension of Buddhist or oriental religious practices. Some Christian ministers warn members of their congregations about the seductiveness of mindfulness and urge caution. However, a closer look at current western-style mindfulness practices brings to mind millennia-old Judeo-Christian meditative practices.
The Hebrew Scriptures are replete with accounts and reflections on God’s glory present in the experiences of God’s chosen people and visible in creation. The psalmists in the Scriptures display a keen interest in creation and express strong beliefs in the providential presence of God (Psalm 8, 95: 4-5, 96: 11-13, 104, 139). Later, Paul would eloquently describe this mindful understanding of the presence of God suffused in creation: “Ever since the creation of the world, God’s invisible attributes of eternal power and divinity have been able to be understood and perceived in what God has made” (Romans 1:20).

Many of the Gospel accounts can be construed as showing Jesus being very mindful, compassionately aware of the suffering of his people and the presence of God who remains with them. In the Gospel of Matthew chapter 6: 25-34, Jesus exhorts His followers not to worry about tomorrow, but to take one day at a time, with confidence in God’s providence. Jesus was mindful of people and events. Jesus himself was known to seek out quiet places for prayer (Mk. 1:35; Matt.14:23; Lk. 5: 15-16; Lk. 6:12).

Classic disciplines in traditional Christian spirituality have developed the practice of attentiveness and awareness of the presence of God in the present moment. The practice of recollection brings to mind how God has been with us; the practice of the presence of God brings us to awareness in the moment. It is the conscious practice of awareness that brings us to the understanding that all life’s experiences are opportunities to meet God. And the God we meet is personal and loving.

There is no evidence that the practice of mindfulness opens the door for some indirect or direct involvement in other religious beliefs. A life of mindful attention to God in all things is clearly an important aspect of the Christian tradition and scripture. On the contrary, the practice of mindfulness meditation promises great benefits for Christians in general and ministers in particular. Beyond the psychological and physical benefits, practitioners of mindfulness meditation have reported an enhanced spiritual life (Wachholtz & Pargament, 2005).

**Mindfulness Practices**

The internet (see, in particular, youtube.com) is full of varied presentations of mindfulness meditation. However, caution is necessary, because these demonstrations are not all by persons soundly trained in the method. A good resource for sound information on mindfulness are those produced by Jon Kabat-Zinn. There are also numerous books on mindfulness practices that are recommended for people who want to engage in mindfulness activities.

Mindfulness can be practiced either as a formal meditation or as a way of living and doing any and all activities of the day. The following mindfulness meditations have been developed and are in popular use: mindfulness of the breath, mindfulness of the body and breath, body scan meditation, mindfulness of sounds and thoughts, befriending meditation, and three-minute breathing space meditation.

Daily practice for about 15 minutes, twice per day, for eight weeks has been known to be effective for depression, anxiety, stress management, and many other problems. A good beginning, a test of the suitability and effectiveness of mindfulness practice for a particular person, is presented in “Mindfulness: An eight-week plan for finding peace in a frantic world,” by Mark Williams and Danny Penman.

Consider the invitation. A list of resources accompanies this article.

Any minister, already deeply formed in faith, with a deep understanding of scripture, has within him/herself the framework that will allow mindfulness meditation to flourish as a form of prayer. Once learned, it becomes then the vehicle for helping those we serve to grow in gratitude and humility, standing always before God, and growing in physical health, psychological health, and resilience in dealing with all the challenges of life in our modern world.

For further reading consult the following:


**References**

From the Director’s Desk

We have literally packed this edition of our newsletter, cover to cover, with information on mindfulness meditation and its application to the religious minister. I know you will find the article, written by Rev. Dr. Anthony Anike to be helpful. I hope it will inspire you to learn more about mindfulness mediation, and maybe even take up the practice to support your mental and spiritual wellbeing.

Mindfulness and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy are cornerstones of the Program for Psychology and Religion’s Intensive Outpatient Program. It is such a powerful program and has been so for more than 25 years. Yet, I frequently receive feedback that tells me that what we have to offer is not as widely known as I would hope. Two questions come up regularly.

**How does your intensive program differ from residential programs?**

The most obvious difference between our intensive outpatient program and a residential program is that clients do not reside onsite at St. Louis Behavioral Medicine Institute. (Clients often stay with a local religious order.) While some superiors worry about the increased level of autonomy and responsibility this arrangement allows the client, we find that it actually enhances treatment involvement and outcome for most. Our intensive programs can treat many of the same concerns often referred to residential programs, and the cost is significantly less than residential treatment.

**How much does intensive outpatient treatment cost?**

We charge $200 per day for the intensive program. Treatment is continuous from Monday through Friday, with on-call service provided on weekends. Psychiatric services (medication evaluation and management), when needed, are provided for an additional charge. An average month of treatment in the intensive program costs approximately $4000 - $4500.

There is much more information about our clergy and religious assessments, intensive programs or general outpatient services on our website: www.slbmi.com. I am always available to speak with you by phone or to correspond by e-mail if you have additional questions.

One other important item I want to mention before closing this letter: The Program for Psychology and Religion is seeking to add an additional psychologist to our team. We are especially interested in recruiting a clinician trained in the integration of religion/spirituality and psychotherapy and with ministerial experience to participate in the evaluation and treatment of clergy, religious professionals, and lay persons of faith. Please encourage qualified candidates to contact me directly by e-mail.

Warm Regards,

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