



## AGING TODAY

# Being Mindful of Mindfulness



By Bob Roth, Managing Partner of Cypress HomeCare Solutions

**Recently, my daughter called me after the first** exam of the semester to report her frustration and defiance. She arrived 10 minutes early to the testing site and had planned to review her notes. The proctor instructed the students to put their notes away in preparation for some guided meditation. "Yes, this is mandatory," the proctor shot back at my daughter in response to her prodding.

Fingers crossed, with 85 percent certainty, there was no eye-rolling that followed, but I can picture a cartoon version of my daughter with the caption, "Hurry up inner-peace, I have an exam to take!"

If you are like me, you may be thinking, don't you have to bend yourself into a pretzel, wear Birkenstocks, eat trees and granola, and eschew underarm deodorant to meditate? Actually, a mindful revolution is on the horizon, stepping into pop culture with impressive bravado.

To be honest, when I heard about my daughter's experience, the first thing I thought was, why would you ask students to clear their mind before an exam. While, there are some meditative styles that ask you to clear your mind, mindfulness does the exact opposite. Mindfulness asks you to fill your mind with focus.

Concentrating on your breathing is a popular first exercise or focusing on certain sensations such as letting a raisin linger in your mouth. Mindfulness training is practiced by taking time out of the day to be present at that very moment without judgment. Just let the full impact of this statement wash over you. How often are we ever in the moment? We are usually thinking about the past and projecting into the future.

If you are having a difficult time developing the concept of mindfulness, consider the exact opposite, mindlessness. Haven't we all been so lost in thought, that we barely remember our drive to work? Or maybe we are taking a shower and think, did I already shampoo my hair? Focusing on a steamy shower and its effect on our senses, seems like the perfect time to be supremely present without judgment.

Mindfulness promotes savoring the richness of the moment which is an important component to well-being. It can help us get along with others, dismissing judgments. If you are bracing for me to break into a chorus of Kumbaya, I will bring it all home with a popular refrain. Enter our inner caveman.

That's right, we are going back to the design specs. The evolution of the human brain which occurred over millions of years is not equipped to sift through the information overload of modernity, especially the digital age. We must learn how to find focus in a stressed-out multi-tasking culture.

Remember mother nature is a tinkerer. Our brains evolved in response to changes in cooking our food, using tools, and living in groups over millions of years. Shifting attention to focus on the present is what kept our Pleistocene progenitors from being a saber tooth tiger's taco.

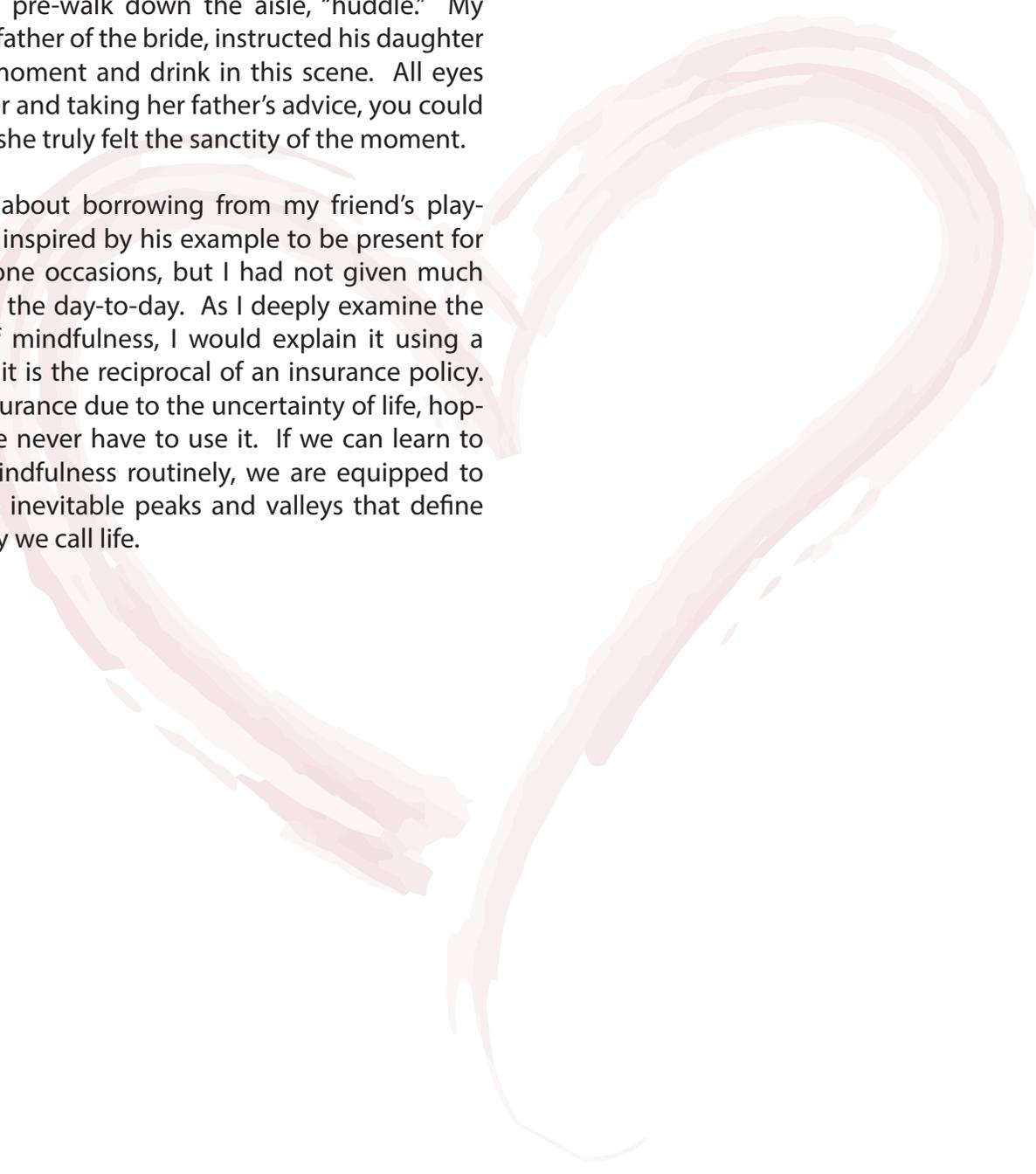
Looks like a dose of mindfulness is just what the doctor is ordering. According to Ronald D. Siegel, Psy.D., Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychology Harvard Medical School/Cambridge Health Alliance.

Mindfulness practices are moving into the mainstream of psychology, neuroscience, and medicine as their positive effects on the mind, the brain, and the whole body are being studied. Mindfulness practices keep important parts of our brain from withering with age. They also activate brain circuits associated with being happy, energized, and enthusiastically

engaged in life. They even lengthen telomeres, the ends of chromosomes that get worn down with stress, resulting in cell death associated with aging.

At a dear friend's daughter's wedding this year, I observed the pre-walk down the aisle, "huddle." My friend, the father of the bride, instructed his daughter to take a moment and drink in this scene. All eyes were on her and taking her father's advice, you could sense that she truly felt the sanctity of the moment.

As I think about borrowing from my friend's play-book, I am inspired by his example to be present for the milestone occasions, but I had not given much thought to the day-to-day. As I deeply examine the concept of mindfulness, I would explain it using a metaphor: it is the reciprocal of an insurance policy. We buy insurance due to the uncertainty of life, hoping that we never have to use it. If we can learn to practice mindfulness routinely, we are equipped to handle the inevitable peaks and valleys that define this journey we call life.



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