

West County Psychological Associates

The WCPA News

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The World Is Too Much With Us: Mindfulness in the Age of Cybertime

Written by Dr. Mary Fitzgibbons

The phrase, "The world is too much with us" comes from the title of a poem written by William Wordsworth. In this poem, Wordsworth is criticizing the world of the First Industrial Revolution contending that society, at that time, was caught up in materialism and distancing itself from nature. In this work, he reflects that humanity must get in touch with nature to progress spiritually. Wordsworth wrote this poem in 1802 – over two hundred years ago. Let's fast forward to 2014. We have progressed from the Industrial Revolutions to an era of technology which we can call Cybertime. Unfortunately, Wordsworth's words still hold true, perhaps even exponentially. But now, not only is it nature we must get in touch with, but more critically, it is ourselves. We are losing the sense of connection with ourselves. In simpler words, we don't know who we are.

Therapists' offices are filled with the very young to the very old with diagnoses of depression and/or anxiety. Except for the elderly, few complain that they have too much time on their hands. We are all too busy, in fact, sometimes frenetically busy. I once asked a client whose weekly complaint was that she couldn't get everything done, if she would make a list of the things that she had to do that day. Next to the activities, she was to write how long it would take her to complete each task. She did that. In one 24 hour period she had over 50 hours of work to complete. Her anxiety was certainly understandable. While that situation may seem extreme, most of us set unattainable goals for ourselves.

The other issue is the role that technology plays in our world. We are in connection with others, but as time and technology progresses, it is a very superficial type of connection. We don't talk, we text. If we're upset with another person's behavior, it is rare that we have a healthy verbal confrontation. Rather, we e-mail them our thoughts and feelings – often with negative consequences. Not only do we not make time to connect deeply or meaningfully to others, we tend to avoid this. Unfortunately, another reason for a lack of connection with others is that it is very difficult to have a meaningful interaction with another if we have little sense of knowing ourselves. This means knowing our thoughts, but, more importantly, knowing our feelings. In fact, I believe that it is the avoidance of dealing with our feelings that is the basis of the increase in the numbers of people who are experiencing anxiety and depression.

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It is not surprising that, as the speed of living and technology advances, there is an increase in activities like yoga, meditation and mindfulness. Participation in these endeavors demands that we slow down; it demands that we become reflective. It is becoming the antidote to our frenetic lifestyle. Rick Hanson, in his book, *Buddha's Brain*, tells us that as our mind changes, our brain changes. When neurons fire together, they wire together. This means that mental activity can actually create new neural structures in the brain. Our thoughts and feelings can leave lasting marks on the brain. Therefore, we can use our minds to change our brains for the better.

The term “mindfulness” is becoming a more prevalent term in various areas such as psychology, education, living, parenting, leadership and even sports. Daniel Siegel describes mindfulness as living in the present moment, where we are aware of our own thoughts and feelings and open to the thoughts and feeling of others. We have the ability to stay present with clarity within ourselves which allows us to be fully present to others and respect each person’s individual experience, since no two people see situations in the same way. Being mindful means that our actions are intentional. With intention we purposely choose our behavior. We are better able to connect. It is within these emotional connections that we develop a deeper sense of ourselves and a greater capacity for relating. It also helps us to develop the ability to be compassionate - not just with others but with ourselves. Self-compassion reduces self-criticism, lowers our stress hormones, increases our ability to self-soothe, increases our resilience and helps in healing hurts and traumas from early childhood.

Hanson tells us that being mindful simply means having good control over our attention. When our attention is steady, we are stably present, grounded and unshakeable. The focus of our attention eventually shapes our brains. Studies have shown that being mindful increases activation of the pre-frontal cortex in the brain, which regulates our emotion, helping us to lift our moods. However, it also decreases activation of the amygdala, which produces negative emotions. Therefore, not only does mindfulness lift our spirits, but also helps in regulating our feelings and aids in making better choices. As we internalize our choices, this becomes the antidote to our ills.

There are various activities that we can do that will help us develop this mindful process. The following suggestions may be very helpful in getting us to adopt a mindful approach to daily living:

- At the beginning of any activity that requires focus, establish a deliberate intention. Keep reestablishing your intentions as the day progresses. As you continue to do this on a daily basis, neural pathways in the brain are created making this activity more automatic.
- Get out of the frenetic lifestyle by making a conscious effort to slow down. We live in a society which prides itself on multi-tasking. However, most studies show that multi-tasking doesn’t improve our efficiency or productivity. As we slow down, completing one task at a time, we begin to quiet the mind. Mindfulness will never come about while we are in the midst of a whirlwind of thoughts and behaviors.
- Talk less and listen more actively to others. Instead of giving others our full attention, most of us are concentrating on our response. The result is that the other person doesn’t feel heard and the interaction becomes superficial, which results in a lack of connection. However, as we center our attention on what the other is saying, it detaches us from our own emotions, resulting in a place of calm. This empathetic behavior creates the connection between two people.
- “Taking in the Good” – Hanson suggests that we practice this activity five to six times daily. For 30 seconds, breathe deeply, inhaling and exhaling, and immerse your thoughts on something that is positive for you. Allow yourself to physically feel this good thought. As we are breathing deeply, we are oxygenating the nervous system; as we are increasing the oxygen in our blood, we are stimulating the brain.
- Relax into a feeling of calm presence with other people. This can be achieved by being aware of what is occurring only in the present. As you find yourself drifting away in thought, return to the present. We are returning to our “center.”

In order to obtain the full, positive effects of mindfulness, it takes practice. The consistency of this process becomes transformational – leading to contentment, peace and clarity. It is the antidote to the Age of Cybertime.



Mary Fitzgibbons is a licensed psychologist, and the owner and director of West County Psychological Associates.

Fall Seminars Available Through West County Psychological Associates

OCD in the Classroom *A Seminar for School Professionals*

Wednesday, October 15th, 2014 1:00 to 3:00 p.m. \$40

Presented by Diane M. Prost, M.Ed., NCC, LPC

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder is a neurobiological disorder characterized by recurrent, unwanted and unpleasant thoughts or images (obsessions) and repetitive, ritualistic behaviors that a person feels driven to perform (compulsions). What happens when you see symptoms of OCD? Knowing the facts about OCD builds empathy, explains unusual behaviors in class and home, and helps school educators identify symptoms. This workshop is geared towards teachers, school counselors and social workers, and school administrators who wish to gain more information about OCD.



Topics Covered Include:

- Familiarization of causes, signs and symptoms of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
- Discussion of techniques to handle students with obsessions and compulsions
- Explanation of treatment techniques that therapists use and how school personnel can support.

To Register, visit conta.cc/1tatKce and follow the steps provided. Payment is expected at registration.

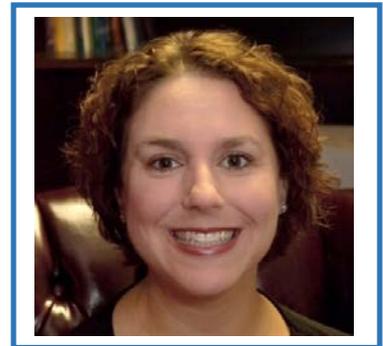
THE NEW DSM AND YOU:

A Seminar for School Professionals on School-Relevant Changes in the DSM5

Monday, November 3rd, 2014 9:00 a.m. – Noon \$50

Presented by Amy V. Maus, MSW, LCSW

The new Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM 5) recently became available for purchase. While matters of controversy in the new DSM are highlighted in the news media, such as changes to the Autism Spectrum Disorders, most changes are less provocative but just as important to understand. School professionals will soon be seeing new and changed diagnostic categories in the letters and evaluation reports that they receive from physicians and mental health professionals. This seminar presents highlights of the changes in the new DSM with which school professionals will particularly want to be familiar.



Topics Covered Include:

- General changes, including deletion of the multi-axial system and newly available rating scales.
- Significant changes in common diagnoses, including the Autism Spectrum and Learning Disorders.
- New disorders, including Hoarding, Excoriation (Skin-Picking), Binge-Eating, and the new diagnosis meant to replace Bipolar Disorder in childhood, called Disruptive Mood Dysregulation Disorder.
- Changes in diagnostic criteria for many other diagnoses, including ADHD.

To Register, visit conta.cc/1lhCnRF and follow the steps provided. Payment is expected at registration.

“Cultural Competency”: Always a Work in Progress

By Donna Garcia, M.A., M.S.

What do you think about when you hear the term culture? If you are like most, what usually comes to mind is race, ethnicity, or nationality. But culture encompasses so much more than just race, ethnicity and nationality. Although these are certainly a significant part of one’s culture, so are values, religion, traditions, knowledge, ideas, and activities.

Culture is a melting pot of these characteristics and is the complete package of everything we have learned throughout childhood and adulthood. These learned behaviors set the guidelines for appropriate behavioral expectations and formed identities. They allow us to identify with people who have these same or similar cultural characteristics while at the same time distinguishing us from those who do not share these traits.

The definition of culture is often associated with groups of people. Although groups of people may have a similar history or shared values, the same is true for individuals. As individuals, we consist of innumerable cultures; cultures upon cultures, upon cultures. Some of these cultures may include positive characteristics while others may have negative ones. Whatever these traits may be, these are the attributes we bring as we engage in interactions with others. We bring our preferences, our assumptions and our prejudices. We even bring baggage, known and unknown, carried with us from previous experiences.

Our impressions of people whose cultures differ from our own, are influenced by our personal cultures and often include stereotypes and assumptions. Perhaps it is safe to say that these stereotypes and assumptions are what we accept as truth without evidence. How can we practice sincere empathy if our truth is incorrect? If we are truly empathetic and want to know what it is really like to walk in someone else’s shoes, then we must develop awareness of different cultures and acknowledge and respect the traditions, beliefs, and the cultural values of others. This can happen only when we begin examining ourselves.

To experience the level of empathy necessary to meet the needs of others, we must first examine our own cultures. What factors influence how we view the world? What impact do our beliefs, values, traditions, knowledge, ideas, activities, and socioeconomic levels have on us? What baggage, assumptions or stereotypes are preventing us from practicing empathy? Self-knowledge is essential for cultural competency.



We also need to have the resolve and openness to want to experience what others are experiencing. Knowledge, awareness and experience are critical components for genuine empathy. Positive change for successful interaction cannot occur without these.

Sometimes we need to step outside of our comfort zones to be empathetic culturally competent individuals. We may need to take a step back to honestly evaluate ourselves and determine whether or not we have the desire and skills to respond empathetically and effectively to those of other cultures.

Do you really want to feel what others feel or see through a different lens to truly understand the experiences, the plight, and the realities of others? Do you have the skills necessary to honestly and effectively practice empathy with those of differing cultures? Hold yourself accountable by becoming an empathetic culturally competent person. It’s always a work in progress.

Donna Garcia, M.A., M.S. has thirty years of educational experience as a teacher, principal and university faculty. She has a particular interest in working with parents who are striving to become better parents and educators who want to provide healthy learning environments and school cultures for their school families.

“Aging is for People Who Don’t Know Better!”

I heard a fitness instructor last week say, “Aging is for people who don’t know better!” I was taken aback. Many people agree with this statement, believing that age can ultimately be outsmarted by working hard enough. As a therapist who works with many older adults and their families through the various losses that time and aging bring, this statement concerns me. Furthermore, I think this belief may hurt older adults and their families.

Most of us can agree that some individuals “age better” than others. Research shows that good self-care – physical, mental, social, and emotional - throughout life is a key to aging well. People who cultivate each of these areas age more successfully than those who neglect any of these components of their health. Another element to healthy aging, though, is to first acknowledge that aging occurs. Aging is a natural part of life; we are born, we develop, and we experience life, love, and loss as we grow older. To deny aging occurs is to deny a fundamental truth of human development. Additionally, to imply that people are fools for aging invalidates the often difficult experiences of our elders.

Aging is frightening for all of us. As a society, we perpetually try to defy aging. Anti-aging creams, intense workout plans, and plastic surgery all represent a desire for youth, beauty, and immortality. However, when we as individuals buy into these societal ideals our realities become distorted. We try not only to hide our age from others; we try to hide from it ourselves. We convince ourselves that we can overpower nature if we spend enough time, money, and effort. Often, we maintain this belief as long as we and our aging loved ones enjoy good health.

One consequence of sustaining this belief is that we are blindsided when we or someone we love experience a decline in functioning associated with illness or aging. I have worked with older adults experiencing a great loss of self-esteem during this time. They have difficulty reconciling their current selves with a much younger version of themselves. They ask, “Where did I go? I never thought I would be like this.” Embarrassment, fear, and uncertainty are common feelings that older adults often express. Similarly, I have heard many adult children blame their parents out of frustration for “not trying harder” to recover from a medical event. They think if their parent works harder, they will reverse the aging process and be like they once were – the parent they recognize. Both older adults and their families wonder why recovery from illness or surgery now takes longer, and they become angry. All too frequently they have taken age out of the equation.

Another consequence of fighting age is that we overlook the positive aspects of aging. Individuals gain wisdom through healthy aging. They are able to reflect on their lives and reminisce without dwelling on mistakes, respect themselves for what they have accomplished, develop intimate relationships with others, and make peace with their loved ones. Since they have the understanding and awareness that time may be limited, they are able to focus on and enjoy life. They make the most of their time remaining.

Choosing to fight age is choosing to fight a losing battle. Frequently depression, anxiety and fear accompany this battle, as we inevitably fall short of unrealistic expectations. Rather than fight aging itself, we can shift our focus and work toward healthy aging. Implementing healthy habits at any age is beneficial in the long run.

We need to start by acknowledging and addressing each of our needs. Physically, we can implement a well-balanced diet, exercise to the best of our abilities, and keep regular doctor appointments. Mentally, we can work

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towards mindfulness - activities such as focusing on the present, brief meditation, and deep breathing can keep our brain engaged and healthy. Socially and emotionally, we can nurture our supportive relationships and engage in activities that bring meaning to our lives. Sharing our feelings, concerns, and experiences with a therapist or trusted listener can help us feel a stronger sense of self and empower us to make healthy lifestyle choices at any age.

Overall, the statement “Age well” is more productive than “Aging is for people who don’t know better.” “Age well” acknowledges the reality that we all age and change. It motivates us to make healthy lifestyle choices and reminds us that we can implement healthy habits to maximize our quality of life as we grow older – likely, the true intent of the fitness instructor.