

THE ORANGE COUNTY
REGISTER

Mindful moments bring stress relief

By [COURTNEY PERKES](#)

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Michele Blair pays attention to the sound of a carrot crunching in her mouth when she eats. She inhales deeply when stuck in traffic instead of worrying about time. And she stops to smell the roses every day outside her home in Laguna Beach.

"I just love the practice of being mindful and taking myself out of my head and into the sensations of my body," said Blair, 66. "Mindfulness is like the actual physical practice of accepting what is. I don't need to go away on a fancy trip; the daily moments, I just treasure them."

On Tuesday, she completed a four-week mindfulness stress-reduction course for women at UC Irvine's Susan Samueli Center for Integrative Medicine. Blair joins a growing list of devotees, including corporate executives who want greater focus for their employees and medical practitioners looking for more ways to heal their patients.

Mindfulness is a secular practice, rooted in Buddhism, which calls for paying attention to the present moment with a kind, curious attitude and without judgment.

The payoff isn't just serenity or gratitude, but better physical health and psychological well-being, according to scientific research. Studies have shown that mindfulness can reduce pain, lower blood pressure, ease depression and anxiety, boost the immune system and thicken the areas of the brain responsible for decision making and emotional flexibility.

"There's a lot of things in our society which pull us away from being in the moment, and practicing just being, and calming down and appreciating what we're doing," said Don Maurer, an emergency medicine physician who teaches mindfulness classes at the Samueli Center. "Emails, cellphones, constantly being on call for everyone. I think that's increasing the kind of chronic stress we're dealing with."

Unmanaged stress can contribute to high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity and diabetes, as well as anxiety, lack of motivation and irritability, according to the American Psychological Association.

"The primary areas where mindfulness-based stress reduction have shown benefits are in lowering the biological markers of stress: cortisol and adrenaline," Maurer said.

Mindfulness can also improve cognitive function.

A 2010 study of mindfulness meditation involved Marines who were nearing deployment to Iraq. Over the eight weeks of mindfulness training, their short-term memory and attention capacity increased. For the Marines who didn't receive mindfulness training, their memory decreased in the midst of stressful circumstances.

Other studies have found enhanced ability to focus and tune out distractions among mindful meditators.

ENTERING THE MOMENT

During a two-hour class last week, Blair joined a group of women who after arriving to the UCI campus were then asked to arrive to the moment.

Instructor Beth Mulligan asked participants to clear their laps and use their senses to ground themselves. First they looked around the room, making eye contact and exchanging smiles. Then they closed their eyes and listened to their surroundings.

"Just knowing that sounds can only arrive in this moment, when we focus on them, it helps us arrive, too," said Mulligan, who is also a physician's assistant.

Mulligan asked the women to notice the sensation of their bodies making contact with their chairs. Then they took deep breaths.

"Open your eyes," Mulligan said. "Welcome again to this moment that we're in and we've never been in before and we'll never be in again."

From there, the group went outside for yoga stretches and a short meditation walk, where they focused their attention on their feet, legs and breath.

"If your mind wanders, just bring it back to the act of walking," Mulligan said.

Once they returned to their meeting room, Mulligan asked how they were incorporating mindfulness into their lives outside of class.

One mom described reacting without anger when her toddler had a tantrum in the middle of her bath. A teacher described using the final days of school for discussions with her middle school students rather than setting a rigid schedule. A wife told of the enjoyment of focusing on taste and texture during a mindful meal out with her husband.

Blair mentioned the joy she experiences from smelling her rose bushes.

"This capacity for noticing can help us in a tough spot," Mulligan said. "Suddenly, you do notice the birds singing, or you hear a child laughing or the wind in the trees."

Mulligan led a meditation exercise aimed at self-compassion, where the women silently wished themselves safety, happiness, health and peace.

"It's not a command, it's a very gentle wish like you might say to someone, 'May you sleep well tonight,'" Mulligan said.

Sapna Chopra, 39, of Orange signed up for the course in search of healthier ways to manage stress and to better parent her two children. She said she's really enjoyed the exercises and wants to do more.

"It's definitely a work in progress," Chopra said. "I feel like I'm very much still learning."

Mindfulness at UCI

An 8-week mindfulness-based stress reduction class, open to both men and women, will begin Tuesday July 9. The course will cover how to consciously and methodically deal with stress, pain, illness and the demanding challenges of everyday life.

When: 6:30-8:30 p.m.

Where: 1034 Hewitt Hall, UCI campus

Cost: \$395, 15 percent discount for UCI faculty and staff. Includes classes, workbook and all-consciously and methodically deal

To register visit www.sscim.uci.edu/ or call 949-824-5763

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