Mindfulness can cultivate content and compassion

By Amanda M. Perez

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A variety of mindfulness sessions are being offered digitally at the University of Miami to help you improve your sense of well-being.

As the mindfulness video Zoom session launched, Kelly Miller began by teaching a common breathing exercise to help attendees improve their sense of well-being.

Although the 45-minute mindfulness session is usually taught at the University of Miami Libraries, the class has been transitioned to the digital platform because of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Miller, associate dean of Learning & Research Services, during the transition she has experienced both new opportunities and challenges.

“One immediate result was that many more people were able to attend, so that was wonderful to see. I do miss the intimacy of being with other human beings, but I am grateful for the technology that enables us to be connected even in the midst of a pandemic,” she explained.

Miller said that she hopes the sessions remind people to cultivate kindness and compassion, which are fundamental building blocks for the practice of mindfulness, during this unprecedented time.

“As President Julio Frenk mentioned in one of his videos about COVID-19, pandemics remind us of our vulnerability and interconnectedness as human beings,” she said. “Mindfulness can help us pause to acknowledge and honor our own fear and anxiety, remember our deepest intentions, and then act wisely, for the benefit of others.”

Miller explained that compassion practices in mindfulness training can also help us strengthen our connectedness to ourselves and others during this period of physical distancing. By setting an intention to reduce the suffering of others and by silently offering them wishes for health and well-being, people can connect to others’ hearts even when our bodies must abide by distancing practices, she said.

“Like so many, I have a family member, my youngest sister, who is on the front lines working as an ICU nurse in Jacksonville. It’s easy for me to get caught up in the worries about her health and well-being. Compassion practices give me a way of inclining my heart away from worry and toward her well-being and that of others,” Miller pointed out.

Micaela Huber-Thacker, manager of monographic resources at UM Libraries and a regular attendee of the mindfulness session, is glad to see it transition digitally since she always found it to be personally rewarding. She believes it helps overcome the social isolation and allows people to have a special timeout for themselves.

“It’s like a pause button on all of the media noise, the constant email bombardment, the demands from others,” she said. “It’s an important quiet time to just sit and become aware of our body and our breath, and the fact that right now, in this very moment, we are okay.”

In addition to UM Libraries, the Lowe Art Museum has also brought its ongoing mindfulness program online. The sessions are led every Tuesday by the museum’s education staff, Jodi Sypher and Hope Torrents, in collaboration with Scott Rogers, a lecturer at the School of Law and director of the Mindfulness in Law Program and co-founder of UMindfulness, the University’s Mindfulness Research and Practice Initiative. Most sessions are an innovative offering known as “Mindful Looking,” which integrates art from the Lowe’s collection and mindfulness insights and practices. Monthly opportunities to explore a basic mindfulness session are led by Rogers and alumna Alice Lash, founder of Mindfultime.
"Disconcerting news reports and other people’s reactivity can be agitating to our own well-being," Rogers noted. “The practice of mindfulness helps to more skillfully observe our experience and impulse to engage in automatic reactions. This, in turn, leads to a steadier attention and wise and compassionate action."

Rogers, who has been a student of mindfulness for more than 30 years, says he has found it to be intellectually stimulating, psychologically fascinating, and experientially profound. Most recently, Rogers and a group of researchers at the University of Miami, including Ekatarina Denkova and Amishi Jha, received a grant to investigate the protective effects of mindfulness training in older adults during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While mindfulness training has emerged as an effective program to enhance cognitive functioning, psychological and physical health, and to reduce loneliness in young to middle-aged adults, little is known about its effects in elderly adults. Thus, this project is well-positioned to advance basic research while advancing solutions to the current public health crisis.

“Through ongoing opportunities to learn about and practice mindfulness through the weekly sessions at the Lowe and Richter, members of the University community and public will find ways of deepening their connections to each other and themselves, thereby enhancing their well-being and capacity to meaningfully navigate these challenging times,” Rogers said.

“I hope they get a more experientially rich connection to the various practices, insights and benefits mindfulness offers and an ability to practice with greater confidence of their own,” he added.

As for Miller, she hopes to keep helping others who are facing difficult times.

“Mindfulness gives people an opportunity to do absolutely nothing but appreciate being human, being alive, for just a few minutes. To notice whatever is happening in their own lives, in their own bodies, and discover some ease,” she said.

Learn more about the Lowe Art Museum’s Mindfulness Program here.

Find more information about the University of Miami Libraries Mindfulness session here.

For more information about UMindfulness, click here.

For more information about the Mindfulness in Law Program, click here.

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