'Mindfulness training' study shows cognitive, emotional and social functioning benefits

Becoming Jackson Whole study is the first of its kind, the Jackson nonprofit says.

By Timothy J. Woods
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Through her nonprofit Becoming Jackson Whole, Sara Flitner is educating people in mindfulness.

RYAN DORGAN / NEWS&GUIDE

As children, many of us were taught to be mindful of our elders. Perhaps we also should have been instructed to be more mindful of ourselves.
A new “first-of-a-kind study” done in conjunction with local nonprofit Becoming Jackson Whole is demonstrating that youngsters and elders — and all ages in between — could realize significant benefits from mindfulness and by training themselves to be more attentive.

The study was conducted by Becoming Jackson Whole’s chief science advisor Dr. Amishi Jha, a cognitive neuroscientist at Florida’s University of Miami. She reported “significant benefits in the areas of cognitive, emotional and social functioning” as the result of an eight-hour course called “Mindfulness-Based Attention Training” followed by four weeks of mindfulness practice, according to Becoming Jackson Whole.

It is that kind of research — which aligns so well with Becoming Jackson Whole’s goal of helping develop a more resilient Jackson by equipping the community with scientific mindfulness tools — that drew the nonprofit’s founder, Sara Flitner, to Dr. Jha and her work. Ultimately it’s what led Flitner to corner Dr. Jha at a conference in November 2018 and convince her to join the Becoming Jackson Whole team as chief science advisor.

“Within five minutes she was completely enamored with the idea that we know how much these [mindfulness- and attention-related] tools help individuals, and communities are simply a gathering of a bunch of individuals,” said Flitner, a former town of Jackson mayor. “So, you know, what if we work together to deliver a curriculum to our leaders in the community [and] we measure the impact? The idea is that we replicate this with some frequency so that people can see what’s happening in our community.”

The ensuing research locally found that daily stressors in people’s lives — being overworked, lack of sleep, work-related stress or problems at home being among any number of such factors — leads to a lack of focus, inattention, being distracted, minds wandering, etc. Basically, a lack of mindfulness.

The resulting Mindfulness-Based Attention Training program — which Flitner herself underwent and credits for positive changes it made in her own life — has shown demonstrable success, she said.

“In health care, for instance, studies just like the one we did, done in hospitals, showed a 26% improvement in prescription errors,” Flitner said. “So, just from a mindfulness training very similar to what we did, 26% fewer errors [were caused when] people walk in the room and they’re not focused and they give medication to John Smith when it’s Jackie Jones in front of them.”
Other areas where they have seen measurable improvement is less absenteeism from work and, long-term, better employee retention, according to Flitner. And, simply for people’s everyday lives, the MBAT program helps people to interact more effectively, improve relationships, increase productivity and make fewer mistakes. It even improves their mood and sense of personal well-being, she said.

Dr. Jha says that people honing their attention skills “has a contagion effect” and that people in the workplace respond much better to leaders who are attentive than to those who they know aren’t truly paying attention.

“That’s why our outgoing partner, [now former] CEO of [St. John’s] hospital Paul Beaupre, is so beloved — because over and over again people referenced his ability to connect with them, to pay attention to them,” Flitner said. “Even though he did not have a lot of time when he sat down to meet with them, he gave them his full attention.

“I don’t want to geek out too much about the science, but ... we are wired as human beings to connect.”

A group of MBAT graduates, so to speak, from some key local institutions — including law enforcement, health care, education and social services, among others — are currently wrapping up Jha’s “Train-the-Trainer” program. They will then be certified to teach MBAT to colleagues in their workplaces.

While select local leaders have been involved in the initial MBAT cohorts, Flitner said there will be training available to the community at-large in October this year and in January 2022. As many as 40 people can be accepted into each cohort, which involves eight hours of MBAT followed by four weeks of mindfulness practice, with assessments completed at the beginning and the end of the training. Flitner said there is no cost to participants for at least all of 2021, but even beyond this year “it will always be affordable or free.”

“We can’t afford to let distraction have the last say,” Flitner said. “We need to really make an effort to become an attentive society.”

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