**Minding Mendocino**

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**More on Mindfulness: How Nature Helps**

Walking on a wooded road last fall, I was quite caught up in thinking about everything but that present moment. Bills needed paying and cleaning needed to be done before the precious weekend ended and the next regular work week began. Suddenly a sound entered my awareness; one strange sound that I later identified as a type of locusts in the trees; this sound gracefully brought me back to the moment. My steps slowed and became more intentional. My breathing became a rhythmic mirror to my movements, and unexpectedly, I could smell drying grasses and the promise of rain. The colors in the sky became radiant, and I remembered that the peace needed to rest in the weekends lies not in what tasks I accomplished, but in the moments I could become present to the ‘presence’ of everything around me. This is where healing and rejuvenation can manifest into the physical.

               With subtle calls to our senses, we may have nudges into the present experience that are not as available inside of our home or office. And our senses are such a powerful key, as we can choose to focus on a sight, smell, sound, taste, or feeling any time we want!  All it takes to have a mindful moment is to focus on the present, on purpose, and without any judgements.

                So, why on Earth is this important? Prolonged stress changes a person’s brain. This sort of ‘brain change’ can manifest itself as anxiety, inability to sleep properly, depression, mood swings, emotional reactivity, and troubles with concentration and memory to name a few. Current science shows that the reason for these symptoms is because the neurons travel, or migrate, to the stress centers in the brain as a result of coping with prolonged stress. When we want to make a change to a calmer state, then we need to provide regular moments where we **use** the calming centers of our brain. Then the neurons will migrate, over time, to that area of the brain we are choosing to use the most. Therefore, with regular, present moment experiences we can experience less stress in the long-term because we are choosing to change the neural-make-up of our brains from the stress centers to the calm centers!

                The more mindfulness the merrier, but it is also said by some research that these changes can begin to occur with only fifteen minutes of practice each day. This practice can be formal (structured meditation, awareness of breath, or body scanning) or informal (building awareness of the breath and senses into our daily routines, such as showering, washing dishes, exercising, or anything else we might imagine).  Here are listed some suggestions to that end:

* To assist with certain types of sleep disturbances, you could incorporate a body scan into the routine at night. Think about it.  When people are paying attention to their breath, senses and body (in a non-judgmental way), they are not thinking about all the subjects that may generally keep them from falling asleep.
* Another example involves anxiety throughout the day. One key with using mindfulness practice with anxiety is to use it when the anxiety is not present, as well as when it is. It is not always helpful in the middle of the anxiety, but over time has been shown to reduce anxiety before it starts. Generating more mindfulness can produce long term results because, according to neurobiologists, this practice essentially changes the brain. Try any type of formal or informal practice for these results.
* With mood swings and emotional reactivity, try taking a mindful walk, shower, or bath. Sometimes putting in some rhythmic music, with a positive ‘vibe’ is a great idea. Try to listen to the music and breath or move with it mindfully. The rhythm of the music stimulates the brain in a calming way.

With that, Laytonville, thank you for reading. If there is a subject you would like me to write about, please send a question to me at PO BOX 870, Laytonville, CA 95454.