

Hello everyone, it's good to be here and see all of you, I'd like to thank the Mental Health Association of the Heartland for inviting me to speak, which is an honor as always. I'm going to talk for a while, but I would like there to be as much discussion as possible, and I really want to know what your questions might be and what you would like to talk about.

First, a word about the title of this talk: Mastering Your Thoughts and Feelings. Stacy supplied me with the title, which was very nice of her and saved me the trouble of having to come up with one, but as I thought about the title I thought of one I liked even better: "Living with our Thoughts and Feelings in Peaceful Co-existence". We are so often in battle with ourselves, as though our very own thoughts and feelings, the negative ones, that is, were the enemy that must be vanquished. Now "mastery" is a fine word, and we certainly need to master our minds, (though I'm not sure about mastering emotions), and it's certainly a better word than "managing" or my least favorite, "controlling", yet it still implies that our thoughts and feelings are a) a problem that needs to be fixed and b) that these thoughts and feelings are at a distance, somewhere "out there", rather than inside of us, an innate part of us. Kind of like saying, OK, I've got to master this cold, or this bronchitis. Thinking about our thoughts and feelings this way does us a grave disservice, I believe, because it keeps us disconnected from ourselves and maintains the false belief that SOMETHING IS WRONG WITH US. My life's mission is to help liberate myself and others from this damaging belief.

Today's topic is one I have spoken about before, and will doubtless talk about again and again. Wondering about why this is, I am reminded that the nature of my work as a clinical psychologist is just that: helping people master their thoughts and feelings. Apparently many if not all of us, including this speaker, finds this to be a challenge, and so preparing for this talk was a good reminder that we as humans are all pretty much in the same boat, except perhaps for the Dalai Lama and a few of his buddies. (I'm going to test out my theory by asking if anyone in the audience has made it to 7pm without at least one negative thought or feeling. Let me know if you need examples!) OK, so there's the Dalai Lama and his crew, and I imagine even they have their bad days. The rest of us struggle with so called "negative" or difficult feelings every day. Why? My belief is that most of us were never taught how to deal with feelings, or upsetting thoughts, at all. We

never learned it in school. Do you remember class between Math and History called, “How to deal with your Feelings?” I sure don’t. Maybe some of us were lucky enough to learn these skills somewhere along the line, from a teacher or a grandparent or a friend. Few of us learned it at home. On the contrary, if you grew up in a family where there were problems and people didn’t talk about what was really going on, or if you experienced any kind of abuse or neglect, what you learned was how to protect and defend yourself, so you could survive a stressful environment. So, in fact we learned the opposite of what we needed to learn. Instead of learning how to love ourselves, including all our feelings, we learned that parts of us were “good”, e.g., the parts that behaved, did well in school, did as we were told, etc. while other parts were “bad”, e.g. when we felt or expressed anger or even sadness, misbehaved, etc. If we grew up in a really troubled family, we might not have been treated in a loving way even when we behaved perfectly. What results from this kind of experience are children who feel unlovable, and grow up to be adults who struggle with low-self esteem, don’t believe they are very lovable, and feels that nothing they do is ever quite good enough. And heaven forbid we ever have a bad thought or a bad feeling. Then we are REALLY in trouble. Such things are forbidden! So we were taught. So is it surprising that now, as adults, we are terrified of our thoughts and feelings, especially the not to pretty ones? No, it makes perfect sense that we would be anxious, depressed, stressed out, and very disconnected from ourselves and others. It might also explain things like addictions, self-destructive behaviors, even violent crime. So. What to do? Let’s first imagine this: Imagine if you had grown up in a family and in a society where your thoughts and feelings were treated as exactly what they are: universally human phenomena that are as temporary and fleeting as clouds passing across the sky. Imagine that when you were a tantruming toddler or an angry teen, you had been treated with firm but loving discipline (which by the way means, teaching, as in disciple), where you were treated with respect even when you did something “bad”. Imagine that there was never a “good” you and a “bad” you, that there was simply YOU, accepted and loved with all of your different moods, quirks, wonderful attributes, and flaws. Can you imagine?

My answers to this question of how to re-wire our brains and be better able to live our lives fully are still evolving, but I have a few good leads. Many of these leads come from the Eastern religion and philosophy, for example Buddhism, which focuses on acceptance

of what IS, not what we think should be. There is also a strong emphasis on self-love and self-acceptance, as well as compassion for self and others. Now don't be alarmed, I'm not asking anyone to convert. I myself am not a practicing Buddhist but I have found the principles of Buddhist psychology so useful that I now incorporate them almost automatically, into my clinical work and into my life. Why? Because they make sense to me AND they really work. As a matter of fact, they work so well that these days, words like "mindfulness" are being used more and more often, and even medical doctors are taking classes in mindfulness so they can help their patients (and themselves) handle stress better. Moreover, the phenomenon of "Positive Psychology", which emerged in this country about 10 years ago, is rapidly gaining popularity in mainstream psychology. The gist of P.P. to look at and study what is right with us, vs. what is wrong with us. In other words, focusing on mental wellness vs. illness. This is very different from the traditional model of diagnosing and treating so-called mental illness. While you may hear that positive psychology emerged in 1999 through the work of the seminal research psychologist Martin Seligman, the truth is that these ideas have been around for a long time and can be found in any Buddhist psychology writing. Until recently, not many people in the West, even therapists, were familiar with these ideas. Fortunately this is shifting, as people grow tired of the old medical model and grow tired of being given a diagnosis and feeling like that's their identity. And then being told that they need to be a good patient and take their medicine and then they'll be better. I believe that the growing evidence of interest in Positive Psychology as well as meditation/mindfulness practice is evidence we are slowly but surely moving away from the classic medical model (I'm sick and the doctor/medicine will fix me) to a new model in which we are empowered and put in charge of our own health. Of course this also means taking responsibility for our health, including our emotional health, which isn't always easy. We are after all a culture that likes the Quick Fix.

Here is a summary of some of the work of Barbara Fredrickson and her colleagues, who have done empirical research in the field of positive psychology. They hypothesize that positive emotions undo the cardiovascular effects of negative emotions. When people experience stress, they show increased heart rate, higher blood sugar, immune suppression, and other negative adaptations. If individuals do not regulate these changes once the stress is past, they can lead to illness, coronary heart disease, and heightened

mortality. Both lab research and survey research indicate that positive emotions help people who were previously under stress relax back to their physiological baseline. Interestingly, research on mindfulness and meditation practice has shown very similar findings. The connection between these two things, positive psych and mindfulness practice, is very simple: practicing mindfulness and doing just about any kind of meditation, help people feel better, physically and mentally. And guess what? When we feel better, less stressed, physically restored, we also feel happier and more positive! This in turn has a ripple effect on those around us. We are not simply talking about being in a good mood. We are talking about re-wiring the brain to make room for positive emotions. One thing I feel I need to add here is that we will most likely need support in the form of therapy as well as mindfulness practice, especially if we are already experiencing things like depression and anxiety, and/or have painful issues from the past that have resulted in these conditions and need to be addressed. It would be nice if meditating were enough, but I have not found this to be the case, either for myself or my clients.

So what is mindfulness? It simply means awareness. When we are mindful, we are in the moment, aware of what is happening around us and, most importantly, inside of us. What does this have to do with handling difficult thoughts and feelings? Well, we need to be aware of what we are thinking and feeling in order to do anything about it, right? So mindfulness means getting quiet enough to become aware of what is going on inside our heads and hearts. It's a huge step. When we can slow down, take a breath, and OBSERVE that we are sad, angry, having an obsessive thought, or whatever the case may be, we are already in a very different place, because now we have a bit of DISTANCE from what is going on, vs. being in the midst of it and having no perspective whatsoever. Once we have even the smallest bit of distance, we are no longer the victims of our thoughts and feelings, because we realize there must be more to us than those thoughts and feelings, since there is an "I" who is observing the drama. This is a crucial point. And how do we learn mindfulness? It can be as simple as doing regular deep breathing, taking a yoga class, or actually taking a mindfulness class (yes there are mindfulness classes, right here in Kansas City). Books can also be very helpful. However, when you're first starting out, it is best to have a teacher. This teacher can also be a psychotherapist that is familiar with mindfulness practice. Mindfulness can help us live from our CENTER, the core of our true self, rather than the false self where so many of

us live from in our daily lives, especially in our interactions with others. As we develop the Observer Self and can watch the drama even for 10 seconds, vs. living IN the drama, 24/7, we have taken a huge step toward wellness and recovery.

This leads me to another very important answer to the question of how to develop more kindness and compassion for ourselves, which leads to wellness and recovery, and that is SUPPORT. I define support as anything that is life-affirming, encouraging and makes us feel stronger. A colleague of mine defined it as, “something that helps you have more of yourself”. Support can be internal or external (give examples of both). Most of us need a lot of help developing internal support, because we didn’t have the bonding we needed in childhood to have a whole lot of it available (refer back to beginning). So learning about support is a process. For me, it is a lifelong process because when I started my own therapy many years ago I didn’t even know what support was. As a child I felt I was “on my own” from a young age so I just figured that’s how life was: you had to do everything yourself. Now at the age of 48 I am just beginning to see that I can ask for support and connection with others and it doesn’t mean I am weak or helpless. In fact, it takes great courage and strength to overcome one’s fear of appearing weak and vulnerable, and ask for support. Our culture does not give us a lot of support to do this. But, we are human, and sometimes we hurt, and we need love, support, and connection for that. Suffering is unavoidable, but we do NOT have to suffer alone. Connection with others allows us to share our suffering with another and not feel so alone. This in turn can be profoundly healing. Such a simple idea, but not so simple to live it. Another way of thinking about support is, the more we can take in positive support, the more we can truly love ourselves, not in the narcissistic sense, but in the truest most natural sense of the word. Gradually we realize that we are good, that we can have heart for ourselves, that we don’t need to be so hard on ourselves and try to be perfect. In other words, being an imperfect human (is there any other kind?) becomes totally acceptable and OK. When we have this kind of support, then the feelings and thoughts which once seemed so threatening, no longer need be, because we have room for them now. We can feel angry at our parent or our spouse or our best friend and not freak out. It’s not the end of the world—it’s just a feeling! Mind you, this takes a long time and cannot be done alone. But it can be done and it is worth the work.

I think it can also be helpful to remember the fleeting nature of thoughts AND feelings. Thoughts and feelings may feel very real and solid but in fact they are not. This does not mean they aren't important. It does mean that they come and go, and sometimes it can be helpful to bear in mind that what had you in a rage this morning might well be forgotten by lunchtime. In cases where we feel "stuck" to a thought or feeling, there are things we can DO to help get un-stuck, as we have already discussed.

A word about thoughts: It has been calculated that humans have between 12,000 and 50,000 thoughts each day. That's a lot of brain static. While many of our thoughts may be positive, full of goodness, even brilliant, some of them are simply "junk thoughts", much like "junk mail" and Spam. If we opened and carefully read every piece of junk mail or junk e-mail we got every day, we'd probably be a bit irritable, maybe even feel crazy! So it is with some of our thoughts. When a negative or anxious thought comes, we need to ask, "is this piece of mail worth opening or can I just toss it?" Developing this ability does not come overnight and you may need some coaching. But wouldn't it be nice to eliminate some of that brain-clogging static?

While I trust feelings somewhat more than I do thoughts (and if anyone wants to know why I'd be glad to elaborate), I believe there are "junk feelings" too. A junk feeling is an emotion that gives us no support and is in no way helpful, life-affirming, or even informative. One of my top favorites is guilt. Not remorse, but plain old guilt (ex. "feeling bad" because your reality doesn't match what you feel your reality SHOULD BE). Ex. I feel bad because I told Jane I was upset that she forgot to call me as she had promised, and now I've hurt her feeling by saying so. If you're ever unsure as to whether you are feeling plain old neurotic guilt vs. remorse, examine how the feeling is affecting you and the intention behind it: Is it trying to help you do what feels right in your heart, or does it feel like you're just getting beaten up and not getting anywhere?

Finally, don't worry if you don't want to feel painful feelings: this is normal and human. Suffering is something we universally run from. The irony is, the faster we run, the more suffering we create. However, "Feeling is Healing" and so we need to do the work as we are able and at the pace we are able, even if this is a drop at a time. Faster is not better. Healing takes time, patience, love and support.

