

WCM-Q psychologist discusses empowering concept of mindfulness

Doha - 21 September, 2016: The benefits of practicing mindfulness to reduce stress, enhance enjoyment of life and improve general health were discussed at the latest installment of Weill Cornell Medicine-Qatar's (WCM-Q) Ask the Expert series.

WCM-Q Psychologist and Learning Support Specialist Dr. Robert Beilke led an interactive discussion and activity session on mindfulness at an open public event at Doha's Diplomatic Club. The Ask the Expert initiative is part of WCM-Q's Sahtak Awalan: Your Health First campaign, which aims to equip all members of Qatar's community with the knowledge and motivation to make healthy lifestyle choices.

Mindfulness utilizes meditation, relaxation techniques and intentional awareness in the present to help people achieve balance, fulfillment and happiness in their lives.

Dr. Beilke explained: "Mindfulness is about learning to increase our moment-by-moment awareness so that we can live more fully in the present, rather than being preoccupied and distracted by the past or the future. This sounds slightly abstract but in reality it is quite practical. For example, we can be so distracted by getting to a destination that we don't even remember a car journey. We can rush through a meal and hardly taste the flavor of the food because our mind is concentrating on something we have to do later.

"Sadly, we can be so focused on achieving goals for ourselves or our loved ones, or so plagued by regrets, that we forget to enjoy our day-to-day lives. Mindfulness teaches us to be more fully in the present moment and to enjoy the meal, enjoy and be enriched by the journeys we take, and really appreciate each moment of our lives."

Audience members at the event, which was free and open to all, were invited to join in with the discussion by asking questions and offering their own insights into the topic.

Dr. Beilke also led the audience through a brief meditation session, explaining that just five or ten minutes per day of focusing one's mind can be extremely beneficial. Contrary to common perceptions, mediation does not have to involve sitting cross-legged on the floor or lighting candles. Simply sitting quietly in a chair with eyes closed while trying to focus on any and all sensations of your breathing in a nonjudgmental manner is sufficient.

"Just find a quiet space and give yourself a few moments to relax and slow the momentum of your mind by attending to your breath," said Dr. Beilke. "A key element of mindfulness is to approach these practices with a nonjudgmental stance. If you find your mind wandering while meditating, don't feel like you have failed because our minds do this naturally. Simply acknowledge your mind has wandered and gently bring your attention back to the breath. In this manner, we avoid the self-criticism that draws us away from the present moment."

The mindfulness movement has grown immensely in popularity in recent years, but has its roots in a groundbreaking eight-week stress-relief program developed in the late 1970s for patients suffering with chronic illnesses by pioneering American molecular biologist Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn. Scientific studies of



mindfulness and brain scans of individuals who practice it appear to show quite significant changes in key structures in the brain.

Dr. Beilke said: “Scans have shown that the pre-frontal cortex area of the brain, which is involved in decision-making, insight and reflection, and planning complex behavior, becomes more developed and active. Meanwhile, areas such as the amygdala, which are thought to be heavily involved in the fear reaction, anger and anxiety, appear to become less active.

“Such changes are thought to increase our ability to respond more calmly to stressful situations rather than becoming angry or anxious. However, it’s important to note that mindfulness is not going to suddenly make us all happy and fulfilled as if by magic. Rather, if it becomes a growing practice in our lives and a mindset; we will live with greater intentionality, be more likely to achieve our goals, and treat ourselves with increased self-compassion. Over time, this will help us gain greater fulfillment and happiness from life as we live more fully in the present.”

Sahtak Awalan – Your Health First was launched in 2012 in association with the Ministry of Public Health and the campaign’s strategic partners, Qatar Foundation, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, Occidental Petroleum Qatar, ExxonMobil and Qatar Olympic Committee.

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About Weill Cornell Medicine - Qatar

Weill Cornell Medicine - Qatar is a partnership between Cornell University and Qatar Foundation. It offers a comprehensive six-year medical program leading to the Cornell University M.D. degree with teaching by Cornell and Weill Cornell faculty and by physicians at Hamad Medical Corporation (HMC) and Aspetar Orthopedic and Sports Medicine Hospital who hold Weill Cornell appointments. Through its biomedical research program, WCM-Q is building a sustainable research community in Qatar while advancing basic science and clinical research. Through its medical college, WCM-Q seeks to provide the finest education possible for medical students, to improve health care both now and for future generations, and to provide high quality health care to the Qatari population.

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