

WELLNESS NEWSLETTER

Counseling Department
Community Center Shanghai

Issue No.7



To arrange an appointment,
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or connect on WeChat.



This unique time period as we face the Coronavirus is unprecedented territory and has resulted in a myriad of adjustments and adaptations we all must make. The uncertainty and rapidly changing circumstances can produce a wide range of issues, responses, and emotions. It is normal to feel some degree of distress and disorganization. In the hopes of offering support to our community during this time, CCS is creating this Wellness Newsletter where CCS Counselors will address some of the challenges and difficulties that are common to many people. If you have an issue you would like to see featured in this newsletter, you can email counseling@communitycenter.cn. Also, if you feel you or someone you care about could benefit from additional support, CCS does have counselors available for virtual sessions via phone or video.

TAKE A DEEP BREATH AND DIVE INTO CALMING ANXIETY

Throughout this recent crisis, topics such as anxiety, stress, fear, lack of control, anger, and separation from families and friends have received much attention. In our previous newsletters, we have touched on these subjects and we have learned much about ourselves, those around us, and our environment. We learned about our capability to manage our time, emotions, how to face pain and grief, how to manage isolation, loneliness, and relationships. We gained tools that help us organize both our personal and professional life and work efficiently from home. Most importantly, we learned how to be united in a common purpose and help each other. Now even as we slowly return to normal, the global situation requires us to consider the future, both how we can regain our focus and a healthy pace of life and how to rediscover ourselves and calm our minds and bodies.

Today I want to share with you a powerful word that over time has converted into action and into a lifestyle. This word is "meditation" and derives from the Latin verb "meditari," meaning "to think, contemplate, devise, ponder." As the definition says, meditation is a mindfulness practice to bring increased calm, clarity, and joy into our lives. Meditation has many benefits, such as reducing stress and anxiety and improving our health and sleep. For some of us, these have been difficult goals to achieve recently due to the fact that we are experiencing more stress and anxiety than ever before. We are experiencing daily pressure to succeed, and we are self-critical when we do not. We are running all day to get things done and at the end of the day, we fall into bed exhausted, just waiting for the weekend to arrive and anticipating the day when everything will be achieved or accomplished. However, when these days do arrive, we often spend them thinking of all the things we did not achieve or what is next on our plate rather than enjoying and celebrating the moment.

The exercise of mindfulness through meditation helps us to wake up, pay attention, and become more fully present in the moment so we can get the most out of our lives. It teaches us all kind of new things - how we can respond more calmly to new and uncomfortable situations, how to recognize our unhealthy habits, and how to become more tolerant, less judgmental, and more kind to ourselves and others. A 2011 Harvard University study showed that participating in the practice of mindfulness meditation makes measurable changes in memory, sense of self, empathy, and stress levels.

How do we start practicing mindful meditation? It is a universal practice that has nothing to do with organized religion or dogma of any kind. It can be done by anyone at any time and in any place. Some people hold the misconception that meditation is a strange and mystical activity that involves withdrawing from the world, but it is just the opposite. It is an active practice that involves deepening our concentration and continually returning into present. This process offers insight into ourselves and wakes us up to the HERE and NOW. Staying in the here-and-now can be a challenging task, but through meditation we can gradually accomplish it.

With time you will notice you start bringing the concentration and awareness you developed during the practice of meditation into other parts of your daily life. Accordingly, you will notice benefits such as no longer feeling hijacked by your emotions and finding yourself more resilient to stress. You will also find that you are more accepting, patient, and compassionate towards yourself and others and will experience medical benefits such as a more balanced nervous system and an increased ability to fight disease and heal pain.

Now that you know a little about the practice of meditation, let us put it into practice right now:

Begin by finding a quiet and comfortable place and a relaxing position that allows you breathe easily. Sit with your back straight and tall, chest out, and relax your legs and hands. When you are ready, let us start our practice! While slowly reading, please focus on your breathing. Usually, at this point, we close our eyes and try to concentrate while we listen to the narrative, but today you will be your own narrator as you read this script.

Worry and anxiety affect all of us, especially during times of pressure. In fact, tens of millions of people suffer from anxiety; it is one of the most common mental health issues around the world, so if you experience it, know you are not alone. Anxiety makes people feel nervous, tense, and overwhelmed. It evokes emotions such as worries, agitation, and distress. It affects the mind and body. It induces sensations such as sweating, dizziness and muscle tension. Some people experience body pain, a racing heart, or sleep disturbances. It manifests in many ways.

Anxiety is caused by our biological and genetic predispositions as well as our outlook, coping mechanisms, and environmental stress. It is often a response to future worries and the mind can become anxious even without an identifiable fear. Fortunately, mindfulness and meditation practices are extremely effective for easing anxiety. During

this session, we will explore the value of being fully present and will learn how to respond to anxiety in a healthier way. We will learn ways to soften our reactivity and press pause for a moment. We will also explore the nature of change and how to befriend anxiety rather than run from it. For our first practice, we will start with a simple breathing exercise. Focusing the mind on the breath or the body helps us to connect to the moment. This is useful in times of anxiety because when we are focused on HERE and NOW, we are not fixating on the past or future concerns. Focusing on the present moment offers our mind a break from being preoccupied and reacting to the content of our thoughts. It also gives us a chance to step back from our spiral of worries to observe what is happening with a calmer mind.

Let us start this session by taking a few long, deep breaths. Let any concerns and thoughts fade into the background and allow to your full length of your body to relax.

With each breath you take begin to feel more and more at ease.

Relax the breath, returning to the natural rhythm. Follow the movement of each breath, in and out. Observing each inhale and exhale connects you to this very moment.

Now let us shift our attention to the body, scanning it from head to toe. We will start with the top of your head, not looking for anything in particular, just noticing sensations here.



Bring your awareness to your face, relax your eyes, relax your forehead and the jaw. You might even feel sensation inside your mouth or your lips.

Extend your focus down to your neck, relaxing the front and the back of your throat and then shift your focus into your shoulders and if there is any tension or tightness there, allow it to ease. Focus on the sensations here and use the breath to connect you to the present moment.

Then notice any sensations in your arms, maybe tingling or pulsing, heat, or coolness. You might not feel any sensation at all, just accept whatever your present moment experiences.

Extend your awareness down to your wrists, hands, and fingers, use the breath to sharpen your focus on all the sensations here.

See if you can feel an openness into your chest now, observe your lungs expanding and contracting, filling up with air and then releasing it. Breathe in and out. Shift your focus down to your abdomen. It is common to hold emotions here, so notice if there is any tightness or discomfort and, if so, see if extending the breath into this area creates a softening.

Bring your awareness to the length of your back, not judging anything in your experience, but just observing whatever is here, strong sensations, subtle sensations, or even no sensation.

Bring your awareness to your pelvis, noticing any points of contact and support with your cushion or chair. Release any tightness you might feel here.

Connect with the length of your legs, filling the legs up with the breath, bringing attention to each detail. Direct your awareness down to your thighs into the knees, ankles, feet, and toes and being open to everything in your present experience.

Observe the weight of your body, the temperature of the room, any sounds around you, connect with everything from this very moment.

Now, notice how it feels to rest your mind in present moment awareness.

When we focus our attention on the breath or the body, we offer our minds a chance to slow down and gain perspective. Mindfulness helps to create space, so we are able to be less reactive to the content of our thoughts that is why is so useful in easing anxiety.

And as we come to the end of this session, come back to the room, wiggle your fingers and toes.

Congratulation, on completing this first session on calming anxiety! Try to practice this on a regular basis and enjoy all the benefits it offers you.

**Eunice Lazar, Psychologist
CCS Counselor**

FAMILIES SEPARATED DUE TO THE PANDEMIC

After a few months of a roller coaster ride, China is slowly recovering from the impact of the pandemic with schools reopening, work resuming, and social life reactivating. However, there are some families who are still painfully experiencing the impact of the pandemic as members are separated in different part of the world due to the policy that went into effect March 28 suspending entry for all foreigners.

We interviewed the mothers of two families who, along with their teenage children, are separated from their spouses and would like to share their experiences and how they are overcoming this extra hardship on top of the pandemic itself.

Q: What is the most difficult part of not being physically together with your spouse during the pandemic?

Angie W: *The most difficult part is the inability to communicate in a timely manner because of the differences in time zone and place. It makes us unable to co-parent our children.*

Connie: *The most difficult part about not being with my spouse during the pandemic is that it makes me feel like we are not a family*



Q: How do you and your family cope with the current split?

Angie W.: *We talked about it with our kids and we pray for peace and believe that this is a temporary separation. We make sure we are using the necessary protection, so we are all safe. Then, one of us does not have to worry about the other(s). We share about our separate lives through social*

media, sending texts, pictures, news we read, songs we listen to, etc.

Connie: *We cope by talking on WeChat, just the four of us. We try to talk regularly so we do not have so much catching up to do. My girls and I also try to buy gifts for their dad when we get the chance. My husband tried to send us a care package of face masks from China, but customs would not allow the package to be sent.*

Q: How do you find ways to connect with your spouse? What works and what does not?

Angie W.: *Planning ahead really helps to make sure we have an established time to talk. My husband works in a different time zone and with a busy conferencing schedule. We eat meals together with the help of Zoom. This really helps a lot to stay connected as families. However, I feel unsatisfied that there is very little time for us as a couple. I really need to have that couple time.*

Connie: *This is so difficult for us. My husband is working so many hours because of the pandemic and I am on another continent. It is really difficult to call or connect because of the time zones. We mainly try to talk on WeChat just to stay in contact.*

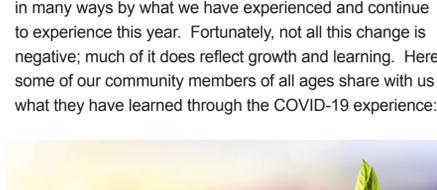
It is incredibly difficult for families to have to manage this kind of separation on top of the pandemic and without a foreseeable date for their reunion. If you are also experiencing this same situation, we hope that sharing these experiences helps remind you that you are not going through this alone. Please know that even those of us who are not in your situation are thinking of you and hoping you will be able to be reunited with your loved ones as soon as possible. Please do not hesitate to reach out if there are ways, we can help support you and your family during these difficult days. You may be separated, but you are not alone.

**Sharon Lui
Marriage and Family Counselor
CCS Counselor**

WHAT I LEARNED FROM THE COVID-19 EXPERIENCE

An article entitled Recovering from Trauma published in *Psychology Today* in 2001, author Ellen McGrath explains that "In the wake of crisis it is possible to learn and grow at rates 100 times faster than at any other time, because there is a door of opportunity. You can learn much that is deep and profound. You do this by interacting and by working together on the meaning of the difficult experience. Those who have the courage to bear the part of the trauma overcome their pain, also have the opportunity to share their growth."

"Crisis" and "difficult experience" aptly capture what 2020 has been in many ways thus far. Amid this though, we have seen our community pull together and unite as a "trauma tribe." There is no doubt that we have all been changed in many ways by what we have experienced and continue to experience this year. Fortunately, not all this change is negative; much of it does reflect growth and learning. Here some of our community members of all ages share with us what they have learned through the COVID-19 experience:



- *If we eat healthy food like rice, pancakes, and fruit, the good germs can fight the coronavirus. And I want to be a doctor to treat the patients.* -Oliver, 3
- *I like watching a lot of cartoons.* -Aylan, 4
- *Coronavirus might be dangerous and deadly.* -Niccolò, 6
- *I have learned to be grateful for everything I have and also that we need to cherish each day because things can change very quickly.* -Suraiya, 9
- *You don't understand the impact things have on your life until they are gone - for example, teachers, friends, nature (how valuable going outside is), food (haha lol I realized that a balanced diet is important).* -Nina, 12
- *During my quarantine time, I have learned that nothing is provided instantly. I had initially considered hanging out with my friends, going to school, eating outside during the weekends, and inhaling fresh air as usual things. However, the COVID-19 experience has taught me that my usual, daily routine is, in fact, not usual at all and that I have to be thankful for everything around me, especially for those "usual" things.* -Brian, 16
- *Respect every life that comes into my life.* -Cora, 25
- *We take too much for granted, so many things can be done virtually, pandemics bring out the best and worst in people, healthcare and grocery employees are*

modern day superheroes, global threats require global collaboration, and Carole Baskin most likely killed her husband. -Caitlin, 28

- *I learned that teaching online gave me a much more direct platform from which to connect to my EFL learners, and it forced my shy students to step up. I instantly got far more detailed and exact feedback from students. I ultimately found it incredibly rewarding and a way to connect more individually to students.* -Abby, 34
- *1. I need less stuff! I am still unused stuff and want to continue to live with less. 2. Human connections are the most valuable, in person or virtual, all of these counts. But I have been missing hugs; I never knew our behavior could be so valuable. 3. Stress changes so much, our behavior, our thinking, our ability to do things. This situation was stressful in one way, but also less of the daily work stress which meant our family was able to grow closer together again. In place of stress, came space for laughter, fun, understanding, and just breathing.* -Tanja 44
- *1. Mental health is as important as physical health. 2. My children are far more resilient than I gave them credit for. 3. Life is fragile. 4. We need to protect the vulnerable more.* -Michael, 41
- *We should learn to be more honest about the struggle... everyone is struggling in one way or another, we are never alone in the struggle.* -Melonie, 41
- *1. I have learnt that I wasn't spending nearly enough time with my wife and kids in my pre-Covid life and that I love their company. I will try to keep something of this routine when life gets back to normal. 2. I learnt that I actually enjoy working from home and that I can be much more productive than I thought I could.* -Vlad, 45
- *As we entered this liminal process that continues to unfold worldwide, it has been helpful to consider it within the model of A Right of Passage. A Right of Passage is when something happens in your life that causes a rupture in your old reality. Old ways of operating are no longer viable. As family members are dislocated from each other and cannot reunite until borders open, it has been essential for me to take a step back and reposition myself in my own life and my own story here in Shanghai and see it as a growth opportunity.* -Vilia, 52
- *We learned that love, faith, and compassion can work miracles.* -Kristine, 53
- *I learned I am not good at following rules.* -Nelda, 69

Hopefully, you, like each of the individuals above, too have experienced growth and learning. As a community, let us continue to share our experiences, both the pain and suffering and the growth and learning. Doing so will assist us as we continue to heal, recover, and move forward together as changed people and as a changed community.

**Carrie Jones, LCSW
Director of Counseling, CCS**