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MATT OWEN

To See & To Perceive

Dr. Jonathan Walker has spent 36 years helping people see. These days, he's also helping people perceive.

The ophthalmologist with Allen County Retinal Surgeons grew up in Los Angeles; he tried meditation in the 1970s, it didn't resonate.

Years later, he came to the practice of mindfulness meditation through frustration and burnout. "Things start to go wrong in the world and in one's head. The usual resources—spirituality, family, work—are helpful, but there is this growing sense of un-rightness," he said. "That's often what gets people to look into things like mindfulness."

One of the benefits of trying to practice mindfulness is not having to clear much time on your schedule or worry about copays or deductibles. "You can just literally start doing it on your own," he said.

But what exactly is mindfulness? Walker defines it as an awareness

of present-moment experience with openness and curiosity and a willingness to be with what is. This is something you can do anytime you are awake.

"Meditation is time you set aside to build the skill of being aware. You set down all the other things going on and bring your awareness back to an object of focus, like the breath, sensations in the body or sounds. And when the mind wanders, you gently guide it back... again and again and again," said Walker.

Walker began to learn about meditation through a series from *The Great Courses*, which provides a variety of educational materials and classes.

"After a few months, I could detect changes I didn't expect and wasn't hoping for," he said. While he didn't feel better, per se, "I started to notice changes in things I didn't even realize were a problem. That drew me further into the practice."



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From there he moved on to online meditation programs, such as the popular Headspace app. He also took a course on Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) with Dr. Jack Dyer, now a retired nephrologist and other classes with Richard Johnson, Ph.D.

Learning helped, said Walker, but setting aside 20 minutes each day—whether in one or two sittings—helped even more. You can start with one to five minutes, he added.

“After a year or two, I really began to recognize how powerful the practice of mindfulness can be,” he said. “That’s when I knew I wanted to be part of bringing the practice to the community.”

Walker has been teaching mindfulness meditation through Purdue Fort Wayne’s Continuing Studies program and leading workshops for the university’s students on how to cope with finals. He also said that he has some programs for companies and their employees in the works. He teaches mindfulness pro bono. “When something is offered with an open hand, it just opens things up,” he said.

The benefits of practicing mindfulness have also carried over to Walker’s medical practice.


“It transformed my experience in the clinic from a nonstop series of

irritations and hassles to an enjoyable and engaging experience. It can still get rough, but the overall tone of my work is vastly more pleasant,” he said.

Walker is careful not to oversell mindfulness meditation. All the mindfulness, yoga and lavender oil in the world will not fix burnout, which is a normal human response to a broken system, he said. In crisis situations or in cases of significant psychiatric illness, trying to be mindful and meditate may just recycle the pain.

“We spend a great deal of time worrying about our appearance, which car we’re going to buy or how we’re going to redo our kitchen. We spend very little time paying attention to the lens through which we experience our lives—our mind,” he said. “Doing this can change how you experience and perceive what is going on around you in a way that benefits everyone.”

Practicing mindfulness is about noticing how our minds get in our way. Then it’s about developing the ability to choose how to respond to situations, rather than react in habitual ways.

That’s easy to recognize as an intellectual truth. “Mindfulness lets you lift up the hood, get down into the engine and see what’s going on as it’s happening,” said Walker. 

—Nancy Crowe

PRACTICE OF MINDFULNESS: COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Indiana Buddhist Temple: Meditations and retreats. 7528 Thompson Road, Hoagland. 260.447.5269, indianabuddhistvihara.org

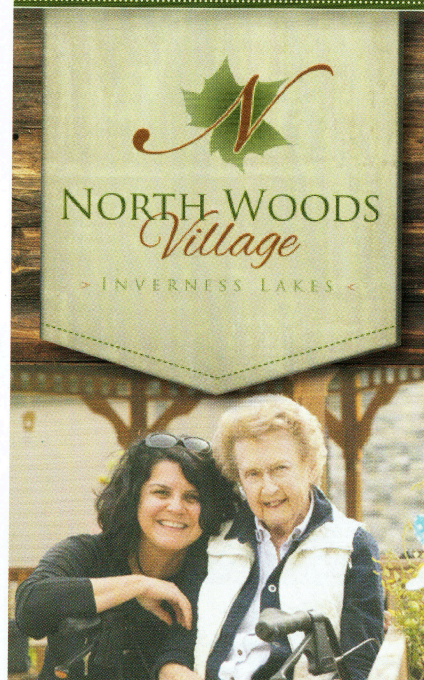
Insight Meditation Fort Wayne: Vipassan and mindfulness meditation, yoga and more. *Insight Meditation Sangha House, 2332 Sand Point Road, imfw.org*

Parkview Center for Healthy Living: Variety of classes and consultations on subjects including mindfulness. 1234 E. Dupont Road, 260.266.6500, Parkview.com

Purdue Fort Wayne Continuing Studies: Professional and personal enrichment programs including mindfulness. 2101 E. Coliseum Boulevard, 260.481.6619, pfw.edu/continuing-studies

Refuge Recovery Northeast Indiana: Buddhist-inspired path to recovery from addiction. *Insight Meditation Sangha House, 2332 Sand Point Road, refugerecovery.org*

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