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Deep thinkers rejoice: UB to hold first SUNY-funded mindfulness conference



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More than 250 people have signed up for SUNY's first mindfulness conference, which has been moved to a larger space at the University at Buffalo North Campus, conference codirector Dr. Lisa Napora says. Members of the general public, business leaders, yoga instructors, educators, physicians and researchers are among those registered. (Photo by Katie Darling)

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You know the study of mindfulness has forged a foothold in scholarly circles now that it has emerged.

MBSR – Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, a practice created by Jon Kabat-Zinn (http://www.umassmed.edu/cfm/about-us/people/2-meet-our-faculty/kabat-zinn) founding executive director of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School.

MBCT – Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy that can harness the mind to influence brain function.

Buffalo is about to join the mindfulness movement in a more meaningful way.

Breaking

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“Launching SUNY Initiatives on Mindfulness & Health: A multidisciplinary scholarly conference will bring some of the foremost thinkers in the nation to the region next month to talk about how mindfulness can improve education, health care and other disciplines.

It’s the first time the SUNY system has funded a mindfulness conference.

“Lots of people from the general public are coming, which is so wonderful,” said conference co-chair Dr. Lisa Napora. “Representatives from HSBC Bank, the Better Business Bureau will be here, along with researchers, faculty and staff, and definitely students, clinicians, doctors.

“There are practitioners coming of various kinds: yoga instructors, martial arts instructors, and people coming who aren’t even involved in implementing anything in the system that they’re very interested in learning about mindfulness and the research.”

Napora is visiting scholar in the University at Buffalo Department of Learning & Instruction and the Executive Leadership & Change Master’s Program at Daemen College, and chair of the University at Buffalo Contemplative Faculty & Staff Group.

The conference is open to the public and will run from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. March 4 at the Buffalo Center for the Arts. Click here (http://www.wnycollegeconnection.com/documents/Contemplative/CONF%20202.5.pdf) to register for the event – which costs \$20 by Monday, \$25 after that – and email mindful@buffalo.edu for more information.

The Contemplative Faculty and Staff Group – which formed under the auspices of the University at Buffalo Center for the Arts Conversations in the Disciplines grant program. The group was among nine funded applicants.

SUNY schools at New Paltz, Purchase, Albany, Buffalo State and UB have been involved in the conference, Napora said, New Paltz and UB in planning the conference.

Conference leaders look to push the needle when it comes to infusing mindfulness in higher education particularly.

They point out that the U.S. spends far more per capita on health care than any other country, but the health care outcomes that are “disproportionately low;” that chronic disease blows an ever-increasing hole in state and federal budgets; that the time has come to focus more heavily on illness prevention and care treatment.

Their aims:

- Address and beat back symptoms of chronic illness
- Improve mental health as a way to address anxiety and depression
- Promote more critical thinking
- Improve academic learning
- Improve social wellbeing by better managing emotions and instincts
- Provide insights in how to better manage stress and stress-related disease.

“We want to provide the space for conversation about research, creating collaborations across the state,” Napora said. “SUNY would like to see that as part of its effort to create a more mindful New York.”

SUNY Trustee Joseph Belluck – who has pushed more mindfulness across the system and encouraged SUNY leaders across the state to attend the conference – will give the opening address.

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Dr. Daniel Barbezat, executive director of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society at the State University of New York at Buffalo (http://www.contemplativemind.org/about/team) in Northampton, Mass., will lead the conference with a focus on mindful research in the modern university before a series of panel discussions begin.

Topics will include Clinical Education & Training for Healthcare Professionals; Mindfulness-Based Interventions for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention; Mindfulness and Education.

Dr. David Vago (http://davidvago.bwh.harvard.edu/), professor of psychology and director of the Center for Mindfulness at Harvard Medical School will give the keynote address, "Neuroscientific Assessment of Mindfulness on Brain Functioning."

During a recent interview, Napora spoke about the conference – and mindfulness. B

Q. In its simplest terms, what is mindfulness?

A form of awareness that's cultivated through paying attention in a particular way, to the present moment. It can be thought of as a cognitive training process and by being that way, it enhances awareness, attention and the ability to bring mental and emotional greater voluntary control. Mindfulness covers the gamut: physiological; psychological; treatment and all aspects of well-being.

Q. How can it be used to reach goals, reduce stress and improve wellness?

The more we focus internally, and become more aware of thoughts and our feelings, the more they start to change, including our relationships with ourselves. We become more aware of our patterned ways of relating, our general everyday patterns. As we start to focus inward, our relationship with the outward.

If you want to focus on the physical dimension of that, with the awareness of what's going on, we start to gain an understanding – say if it's stress – of how we're creating stress in our working with ourselves, awareness has waves of repercussions in that way, like a domino effect. These facets of wellbeing. It all is related to practicing and engaging with ourselves and then leads to vast benefits over time.

Q. I've talked to many people who've started their health-care journeys being told that their pains are all in their minds, as if there's no validity to that, that it should just be a conference a step toward addressing this mindset?

I'm not a health care provider. I'm an educator and a systems thinker focused on systems in the higher education system, but this conference will be working toward that perception. I'm a speaker that see this as their primary work.

Q. How have physicians begun to understand mindfulness in terms of treatment in the context of severe disease?

They're using it in several ways: One, in mindfulness-based interventions for the treatment of psychological ailments. They're also using it in the physician-patient relationship and training of doctors to help in that relationship, as well as for their own wellbeing.

Q. Physicians these days are not trained much when it comes to nutrition but the trend is changing from a treatment-based to a preventative-based system. Maybe that change is coming, but as we're moving in that direction, is this something that physicians are more aware of the preventive, self-awareness and mindfulness aspect?

Yes. As mindfulness is being infused, it will affect both the physicians themselves and the relationship between the physician and patient. That's being infused now into a variety of education training. One of our panels at the conference will be focused specifically on

Q. What is it like to work in the mindfulness field?

The work itself exists in pockets and in disciplines. In coming together, that presence influences systems and perception of the work. So that's where I focus. The system is changing, the systems accept and infuse the work at deeper levels. It can be any system. One of the goals of the conference is to build community statewide to bring together researchers, faculty, students, clinicians, community participants, and bridge the mindfulness and health work across

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across institutions and organizations. The space that's created at the conference is where people can learn about the latest mindfulness-based approaches across the d provide a space to share and discuss future research possibilities, foster new research scholarly change across the state.

Those interested in this area don't think there's other people out there doing mindf might only know one other person. In a some disciplines, the mindfulness work still fringe of systems-level acceptance.

Q. What are some of the disciplines that have started to embrace mindfulness?

At the individual level, it's in every single discipline. People everywhere are seeing ti individuals, are the system, how we need to be concerned about the wellbeing of evc we need to infuse into systems to foster that wellbeing?

Q. What tend to be the major emphases in terms of study of mindfulness?

All forms of medicine, whether someone's looking at addiction or chronic diseases. I follows that design. Neuroscience or psychology. The number of research studies is exploding every year.

Q. Now that you have this systems-level awareness, where do you see things goi.

I can speak to that from the perspective of higher education. There is an organizatio for Contemplative Mind and Society, which is based at Amherst College. They are th contemplative teaching and learning in higher education, so this hub has been foste mindfulness in education for about eight years now. ... I will be involved with helping their upcoming initiatives on a national level. They have some funding to support, "F contemplative community in higher education level and how to we evaluate and ass the higher education system?"

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