

Mindful of the art of stillness

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Professor of clinical psychology and author Prof Mark Williams will speak at the mindfulness conference in Dublin next week, writes **SYLVIA THOMPSON**

ANYONE WHO practises mindfulness meditation will tell you that the realisation that you are more than your thinking mind is one of the most liberating aspects of the experience. Another liberating realisation during meditation is that by attending to bodily sensations (even those of pain and discomfort) and strong emotions through a focus on the breath, you discover that, like thoughts, they too come and go and are constantly being replaced by other sensations and emotions.

It is both these aspects of practising mindfulness meditation that drew Prof Mark Williams to research it for treating depression.

“We discovered in the 1980s and 1990s that the big problem no one could solve was the recurrence of depression and the fact that it was starting earlier in life for many people,” says Williams, who is professor of clinical psychology at Oxford University and the director of the Oxford Mindfulness Centre in England.

“We found that antidepressants and other therapies were doing a good job for an acute episode. We also found that cognitive therapy itself was pretty good at protecting against a relapse but it wasn’t widely available to people.

“We also needed something that we could teach people when they were well that would give them long-term protection, and mindfulness meditation can do that,” he says.

Williams is one of four authors of *The Mindful Way through Depression, freeing yourself from chronic unhappiness* (Guilford Press). In the book, the authors (including American mindfulness teacher Jon Kabat-Zinn), explain why our usual attempts to think our way out of a bad mood or just snap out of it lead us deeper into the downward spiral. They explain how learning to side-step these mental habits that lead to despair, self-blame and self-criticism becomes the key to facing life with a sense of hope and wellbeing.

“The critical aspect of cognitive therapy is the ability to see your thoughts and feelings like clouds coming and going and not take them too personally. If someone can do this in cognitive therapy, they will do well,” says Williams. “Mindfulness meditation becomes a way you can train this skill when someone is feeling perfectly well,” he says.

According to Williams, some people see meditation as relaxation. “It’s not relaxation. It is learning to see the patterns of our own minds and not take them so personally,” he says.

In the book, the authors explain how our vital inner resource which we often ignore or take for granted, whether depressed or not, is the body itself. Those sensations within the body give us immediate feedback about what’s going on in our emotional and mental state.

“Focusing on them not only keeps us out of the mental trap of leaning into the future or getting stuck in the past but can also transform the emotion itself,” writes Williams and others. They also argue that unhappiness itself is not the problem but

rather the harsh negative views of ourselves that transform sadness into persistent unhappiness or depression. And that a little kindness and gentleness toward yourself is a wiser and more skilful response to feeling threatened than any amount of analytical problem-solving.

Williams will speak at *The Art of Being Still: Mindfulness and Mental Health* conference in Dublin next Wednesday (June 16th). The conference, which is organised by the Sanctuary, a spirituality centre in Smithfield, Dublin, is already booked out, which is testimony to the popularity of mindfulness meditation in Ireland at this time.

Why has the approach become so popular? "There is a hunger for greater depth now and people have tried the experiment of material things and discovered it doesn't work. This has encouraged a deeper wondering of the other dimensions to life," says Williams.

"Mindfulness meditation is one of many types of therapy but this one has been taken on by the academics. It has been tested in clinical trials and neuroscientists have discovered the changed brain patterns of those who practise it," he explains.

Williams, who is also an ordained minister in the Church of England, acknowledges how mindfulness has influenced his own life. "It has given me a greater sense of space amidst the busyness of life. It slows time down rather than speeding it up which is a marvellous gift as we get older," he says.

The Art of Being Still: Mindfulness and Mental Health will be held in Dublin Castle on June 16th. Although the conference is completely booked out, details of the proceeding will be available on sanctuary.ie, tel: 01-6705419

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