



Opinion/Perspective

From Urine to Mindfulness – A Personal Reflection on my Work in Mind-Body Medicine

By Aviad Haramati, PhD

Dr. Haramati reflects upon twenty years of teaching and practicing mind-body medicine and his experiences at the recent KNN conference – Connect, Convene, Catalyze Toward Flourishing...

Last month I had the privilege of participating in the Kern National Network's national conference in Milwaukee. I presented on our twenty years of experience in providing medical students and faculty at Georgetown University Medical Center with an elective course in mind-body medicine. This course is designed to foster caring and character, as well as tools for stress reduction and enhanced well-being. I have spent several days since the conference reflecting on how I got involved and why I am determined to help other institutions consider incorporating this course into the curriculum for health professionals.

You see, my wife and children will agree that my personality and demeanor (up until 20 years ago) were so different from 'mind-body,' or any image those words conjure up. So, the fact that I now teach these practices, and train others, continues to amaze family and friends, as well as myself.

I was born in Jerusalem, Israel, to Israeli parents—teachers in fact—and raised in New York City, since the age of two. I pursued a doctorate in physiology and, for my entire career as a bench scientist, focused on the kidney and regulation of fluid and electrolyte homeostasis. The science suited me well: precise, objective, and unambiguous. So, how did I get from analyzing urine to leading meditations?

For those who have been in academia for a while, you know that a career trajectory is rarely a straight line, and, sometimes, opportunities arise that take us to new areas and experiences. For me, the interest in medical and health professions education manifested in the mid-1990s, as formats such as problem-based learning and case-based teaching were becoming more prevalent, and medical education was moving to more active and experiential learning.

My own interest in education was developing, especially in exploring how science can be used to foster positive attitudes in students and improve patient-provider communication. In that context, I led a team that submitted a grant to NIH (in early 2000) to develop a curriculum that would incorporate elements of complementary and integrative medicine, as a way to produce knowledgeable physicians who could help guide and advise their patients about these therapies. We also wanted to see whether any of these practices could help students and, with the advice of experts, decided that mind-body practices could be a unique way to foster student self-awareness and self-care.

With two colleagues at Georgetown, I attended a week-long training for clinicians who wished to incorporate mind-body tools into their clinical practice in the form of patient support groups. However, we went to see if we could adapt this to an educational intervention.

And so, in the Spring of 2002, we launched the first pilot using mind-body medicine skills groups with first-year medical students. Thirty students volunteered to participate and were assigned to a group (each with 10 students and two faculty facilitators). We partnered with the faculty at the Center that trained us, and I got to see first-hand the impact of these groups on the students and me.

The format for each two-hour session was similar: start with a short opening meditation to get everyone in the group centered and focused on being intentional with the others, then each person had an opportunity to 'check in' with the group and share how they were doing physically, emotionally, spiritually, psychologically or any aspect they wished to share. The goal of this part was to provoke introspection and to encourage verbalization of any insights to the extent that individuals felt comfortable doing so. As each person spoke, we all listened intently and with an open heart, what we call 'compassionate listening.'

In the second hour, one of the facilitators would introduce a new mind-body practice, such as meditation, guided imagery, movement or reflective writing. We would experience it together, and then process what that experience was like for each one of us. Yes, the facilitators were also participants. These practices became platforms for self-awareness to emerge, and as we heard how each person's experience was different, we also learned about ourselves through this personal sharing. The group experiences also created an atmosphere of caring and connection among group members.

To make this a safe place for sharing, especially to enable faculty and students to be authentic and real, there are several ground rules which are critical. In addition to strict confidentiality, we asked that each person exercise non-judgment as best as they could. We were not there to 'fix' anyone's problem, but rather to listen, respect, and not judge. And, most importantly, we were there to allow each person to be heard.

Power of non-judgment

Perhaps the most profound lesson for me was learning the power of non-judgment. As a New Yorker, I joke that we do ‘judgment for breakfast.’ New Yorkers are known for their impatience. We are so sure of what someone is about to say, that we help them move it along by finishing their sentences for them. I am certainly guilty of that unfortunate habit.

And yet, in the groups, listening to students and colleagues, I learned not to be so quick to assume I knew what was coming. The power of listening compassionately and non-judgmentally forced me to listen to the end, to check my assumptions and preconceived notions, and to learn how to be humble.

Practicing non-judgment for two hours a week in those sessions is so different from what we do in medical schools, where we judge constantly. That is our job: to assess, evaluate and draw conclusions.

However, in the mind-body groups, we let that all go. This is a cherished time of not judging, especially not judging ourselves. We come together to be in the presence of others and unite in a common goal to understand ourselves better. It seems simple, but actually, it is hard work. But oh, the benefit! Therein lies the treasure--shared connections and meaningful relationships, a sacred bond.

Shared connections and meaningful relationships continue to draw me to facilitate mind-body groups, and train faculty and staff to lead them. I still enjoy teaching and directing the Renal Module at my medical school, and I cherish the various academic roles and responsibilities that I have. However, my involvement in the mind-body program connects me with students and colleagues as humans in a unique way and feeds my soul. To me, that is a gift and is what health professions education should be.

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