

## Strategies for Self-Care

*Summarized by Thomas T. Thomas*

Families who have loved ones with mental illness often experience an emotional world full of sadness, disappointment, coping challenges, anger, and frustration. The holidays and winter weather bring their own contribution to stress. At an informational meeting on December 4, 2024, we heard from **Diana Winston**, Director of UCLA Health's Mindfulness Education Center ([www.uclahealth.org/uclamindful](http://www.uclahealth.org/uclamindful)). She is also the author of many articles and books such as [\*The Little Book of Being: Practices and Guidance for Uncovering Your Natural Awareness\*](#); [\*Fully Present: The Science, Art, and Practice of Mindfulness\*](#); and [\*Glimpses of Being: A Training Course in Expanding Mindful Awareness\*](#). We also heard from NAMI East Bay Board Member **Susan Davidson**, who demonstrated breathing exercises based on James Nestor's book [\*Breathe: The New Science of a Lost Art\*](#).

Winston has been teaching mindfulness for more than a decade. She defines the practice as “paying attention to present experience with openness, curiosity, and willingness to be with the experience, to be right here, right now.” The science of this practice is young, she said, about thirty years old with about 10,000 studies to date, compared with 30,000 to 50,000 for other modalities. So, mindfulness is still developing as a therapy.

Mindfulness is good for treating stress-related health conditions, problems with the immune system, and chronic pain. It has been effective with attention deficit disorder (ADD) and improves mood. Mindfulness has been incorporated in psychiatric approaches such as dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) and cognitive behavior therapy (CBT). The long-term practice of mindfulness has been shown to create differences in the brain, such as a thickening of the prefrontal cortex, which controls the brain's executive functions and decision making. Even short-term practice can show structural brain changes.

In everyday life, our minds go back and forth between thoughts of the future and thoughts of the past. Mindfulness trains the mind to come back to the present moment, “back to my breath, my body, and my feet on the ground.” This takes us away from being “on autopilot.” It's a skill that can be taught and utilized, and it can help people have more gratitude and appreciation. “It's not a mystical thing from the East but an inherent part of being human. We all have it,” Winston said.

She then led the group in a basic exercise. She asked us to sit comfortably with our backs to the chair and feet on the ground, to close our eyes or look downward. Feel our feet on the floor, in contact with the ground. Take deep, slow breaths. Notice our bodies, our legs. Notice our stomachs as we take those breaths. Notice our hands and let them go soft and relaxed. Notice our arms and shoulders and let them drop. Notice our chest, neck, and facial muscles and let them relax. Notice our body breathing and feel each breath. Feel our abdomens and chests expand and contract with each breath. Notice the air moving through our noses with each breath. Pay attention to the sounds in the room and outside. Then pick one of these

sensations—the air in our nose, breath in our chest and stomach, or a sound—and notice it breath after breath. If our attention starts to wander, we’re not doing anything wrong, but just say in the mind, “Breathing,” or “Listening,” to refocus attention. After a few minutes of this, come back and notice how our bodies are feeling, if our minds are more rested, and what we are feeling. Notice our feet on the ground. And open our eyes.

Winston said there is a UCLA Mindful app, available on their website for both iOS and Android systems, in 19 different languages. The UCLA Mindful site also offers virtual meditation groups that gather participants from all over the world.

Susan Davidson then introduced James Nestor’s book, *Breath*. He developed it after watching skin divers who worked without air tanks and could hold their breath for two to five minutes. Breathing became important to him after he developed chronic bronchitis and pneumonia.

The book describes an experiment involving volunteers who, after taking baseline measurements, agreed to wear nose clips and breathe only through their mouths for ten days. After that time, every one of them got sick. This demonstrates that breathing through our noses filters particles and bacteria out of the air and warms it before going into our lungs. It also appears that breathing through our mouth rather than our nose makes it harder to think.

If your nose is stuffed up, pinch your nostrils and shake your head side to side and up and down for as long as you can. This will help clear it. You can also push up on your cheek bones to help open your nose.

Davidson demonstrated Nestor’s “humming breath.” It involves using your fingers to press your ear knobs—the bit of cartilage that sticks out in front of your ears—to close the ears and then breath through your nose while humming. This practice helps relieve frustration, anxiety, and anger.

If you get hot, curl your tongue into a tube and breath in through your mouth. This will cool the air going into your lungs.

A basic technique to improve our daily life and relieve stress is “coherent breathing.” It involves breathing in through the nose on a count of five and out through the nose for a count of five, repeating the cycle as long as needed. This reduces the heart rate.

Another technique is “diaphragmatic breathing.” Place one hand on your abdomen below the navel and one on the stomach below the sternum, then consciously breath into the abdomen at your lower hand. This can help with breathing challenges as well as relieving constipation, high blood pressure, and migraine headaches.

Nestor reports a Stanford University study for maintaining focus with “fox breath.” It involves breathing in through the nose for a count of four, holding for four, and exhaling through the nose for four, and repeat as necessary. An alternative is the “four-seven-eight,” or sometimes “four-eight-eight,” which lengthens the hold and exhale counts. This exercise blunts excessive emotions and thoughts. Done before bed, it can also help you sleep.

Finally, Davidson described the “breath of fire” as practiced by Dutch athlete Wim Hof. He could wrap himself in icy towels, enter a room at 50 degrees, and warm and dry the towels with his body by quickly taking thirty rapid, deep, nose breaths.

In closing the session, Liz Rebensdorf suggested other ways to reduce stress. Her own was to become productive, because “when we’re stressed we feel like we’re not accomplishing anything.” She described herself volunteering at the Oakland Museum’s White Elephant Sale and sorting napkin rings as a stress relieving activity. Others described working puzzles and playing solitaire, or simply watching birds, listening to music, or viewing art.

And finally, when life becomes overwhelming, there is the Serenity Prayer: “God [or whatever you hold as a higher power] grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”