

Author reveals how to find happiness through meditation

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Anyone who has watched "The Oprah Winfrey Show" the past 25 years has noticed the yo-yo effect of the talk show host's weight.

"Fat is a down comforter," said Paul Epstein, a Westport-based naturopathic physician, mind-body therapist, and mindfulness meditation teacher.

Epstein believes diets don't work and the only way to pay attention to weight gain is to get to the underlying cause that may manifest itself in overeating. Winfrey, he said, has talked about her abuse as a child and maybe there is some unfinished business in addressing this childhood experience.

Author of the just-published book "Happiness Through Meditation," Epstein said, "the mind stills holds onto the burdens of the past and people need to adopt mindfulness practices to address these burdens, which can manifest themselves in mental, physical or emotional afflictions. People should rid themselves of them or adopt techniques, such as meditation, to deal with them."

Epstein will talk at the Norwalk Public Library on Wednesday night at 7. Also, he will talk at the Fairfield Public Library on Feb. 9 at 7 p.m. and on Feb. 16 at 2 p.m.

During his lectures, Epstein will address what happiness is, where it comes from, and how it's achieved.

"Many of us believe we achieve happiness solely through external means, from acting a certain way, to acquiring things," Epstein said. "We often find, however, that the more we are doing and getting and striving, the more elusive real and lasting happiness becomes."

His book opens the door to this often-elusive state of being with insights, guided meditations, helpful quotations and more.

During an interview Monday, the day the community paused to honor Martin Luther King Jr., Epstein cited King and other prominent people -- including Nelson Mandela, Michael J. Fox and Morrie Schwartz, the 79-year old former sociology professor that author Mitch Albom chronicled in his 1997 bestseller "Tuesdays with Morrie" -- to illustrate how they dealt with personal and societal ills in their own mindful ways.

The lives of King, Mandela, Fox and Schwartz, though worlds apart in their personal journeys in life, share the common ground of mindfulness in the way they dealt respectively with racism, apartheid, Parkinson's disease and ALS.

"Mindfulness is more than just a technique causing pleasant and relaxed feelings; it is a way of relating to seeing, feeling and being with our experience just as it is," Epstein said. "Ultimately, it can teach us to face and be open to all of life's challenges and experiences, the painful and the joyful, the happiness and the sadness, all that life has to offer. The inner balance of mind, cultivated and developed by consistent practice of mindfulness and meditation, allows us to face all of life's situations with greater clarity."

"Happiness Through Meditation," a tiny book that can fit in the palm of one's hand, is a basic instructional book, a primer for mindfulness practices to achieve happiness.

It's a guide to how to be "present in the truth," Epstein said. "As we are present in our lives and conscious of our power to choose how to be, we cultivate greater happiness in everyday life."

Citing Schwartz's battle with ALS and the challenges Fox continues to face with Parkinson's disease, the author said, "meditation teaches us how to respond to what is happening, not to control what is happening."

Traditional medical doctors may tell patients they have to live with their afflictions, but "no one tells us how to live with them," said Epstein, emphasizing the therapeutic benefits of meditation.

Epstein, who was born and raised in New York City and founded the Israel Center for Mind-Body Medicine, hopes his little meditation guide will whet people's appetite to see meditation as another tool in addressing physical, mental and emotional ills. It begins with a guide to how to meditate and then addresses the qualities that need to be cultivated to be more mindful. These include kindness, compassion, equanimity and how to be joyful.

Through meditation, people practice being in the moment, and they engage in self-healing through patience, trust, acceptance and letting go, especially of anger and resentment.

"People are not glad they have their illness, but (through meditation) they are fighting it. They are not doing it with hatred or anger," Epstein said.

He cites how Martin Luther King Jr. dealt with racism with patience and love.

"Trust the process doesn't mean give up," Epstein said. "It means to accept the truth and to deal with it."

One way of dealing with the truth is not to seek a cure, but a healing. The difference, he said, is that curing is dealing from the outside in; whereas, healing is dealing with the inside out.

"Healing is a process over time in which the individual evaluates the cause," he said. "The person must be patient. Curing is more immediate, more rational. ... In curing, we are looking for answers. In healing, we live questions."

When prompted to elaborate on what it means to "live questions," Epstein said the tendency is to seek the answers; in other words, what will cure an affliction? Instead, people should live questions, from a healing standpoint. "How did I get like this? What happened to me? Am I going to look inside myself in order to heal?"

Pain may be inevitable, but suffering can be optional, he wrote in his book.

"An important part of the therapeutic value and approach involved in the practice of meditation as medication is that the patient becomes a responsible participant in the treatment and in so doing is actively and consciously engaged in the healing process."

Epstein also said, "Making a commitment to meditate regularly enhances the intention and sustains the effort to get well. In healing, we trust the emergence of whatever will be -- we trust the insight will come."

Epstein cites a 1988 study of family physicians in which 75 to 90 percent of visits to family physicians are stress-related complaints. People tend to have an affliction of some kind, go to the doctor and want a pill for a quick fix.

He also cited Anne Harrington, a historian of science at Harvard University, who said that, "More physical treatments like meditation have been shown to be effective in controlled scientific studies for depression, anxiety, high-blood pressure, skin diseases, cardiac pain, insomnia, diabetes, ulcers, colds, fever, asthma, arthritis and alcoholism."

In his book, Epstein, who teaches an ongoing mind-body health class at the Westport Center for Senior Activities, wrote: "The practice of meditation in action is possible in any time, in any place and in any situation. It is simply being deeply present and choosing to respond to what's happening with wisdom and compassion. It's a way of being in harmony with the way things are."

For more information, call Epstein at 203-226-3923 or visit www.drpaulepstein.com.