



Mastering the Art of Mindful Living

After years of working in mental health, **Brandi Matheson** adopted a new approach to wellness for herself and her clients. by **ALICIA NEPTUNE**

My father, who has worked in the mental health field for 30 years, is at times maddeningly perceptive of my mental state. Our

after-dinner conversations frequently revolve around how I'm managing my anxiety, and he has always let me know that I not only have his support, but also many healthcare services available to me. Through him, I've seen how mindfulness has taken hold in the healthcare system over the past few years. From psychologists and counsellors utilizing mindfulness techniques to community programs offering meditation groups, the practice has become increasingly widespread. And though I was initially hesitant, it was through my dad that I had my first encounter with a mindfulness meditation practitioner, Brandi Matheson.

When I first met Matheson, she went right for the hug. Far from the perfunctory, awkward hugs I was used to with strangers, hers was wholehearted. In her mid-30s, Brandi has a grey hair or two hidden among the blonde, and tiny laugh lines around her eyes—which I'm sure she would rather I not notice. Between the perpetual blush in her cheeks and the kind smile on her face, my first impression of her was of a warm, compassionate and genuinely caring person, a feeling that only grew over the two months she led me in mindfulness sessions. Though she has more than a decade of experience working with people to improve their mental health, learning about mindfulness marked a shift in the way she approached wellness as a whole.

Her journey into mindfulness started in 2011, when she became the program manager for Centennial Place in Mission, B.C., a program operated by Communitas Supportive Care Society. "It was, ironically enough," she says, "a mental health and wellness centre that I was in charge of creating." The centre belongs to the clubhouse model, which aims to provide a supportive and encouraging community. Individuals are referred to Centennial Place by their family doctor or a mental health professional. As members, they help manage the clubhouse and take responsibility for their mental health. While working with her team to get Centennial Place up and running, Matheson noticed the impact stress was having on her own mental health. "At that point," she says, "the things which I was doing for self-care were no longer really helping."

She considered taking her mental wellness into the healthcare system. Working for Communitas since 2005 in various mental health programs, she knew what kind of support was available. But then someone gave her a book on

Brandi Matheson took up mindfulness to deal with stress of creating and running a mental health centre.



mindfulness and something clicked into place. “I was literally in tears in the first chapter because I was like, ‘Oh my gosh, this is what I’ve been needing.’ And then I just started practicing.”

In addition to creating opportunities for individuals to gain employment and access education, Centennial Place also offers a variety of wellness activities and classes led by members. Because of her role there, Matheson was in a position to share what she was learning with other people who were receptive to the idea and could benefit greatly. She would read books about mindfulness, research online, go to a local Buddhist centre for meditations and then share what she was learning with the members.

“It started really grassroots,” she says. “Let’s read this together, let’s explore this practice together. That’s really what the first year was, more or less—me trying to make sense of it myself while journeying through it with other people.” Together, both Matheson and the clubhouse members saw improvements in their well-being.

“Everyone started seeing changes. And it

was the first time in my life—and at that point, I’d been eight years into working in mental health—that I felt like I had something I could share with people that would truly start to change their lives.”

Matheson continued learning and began training in mindfulness, meditation and yoga. In 2015, she left her manager position, and is now a qualified teacher of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Trauma Sensitive Yoga.

When I first met Matheson in May 2016, I had just started a new position as an outreach organizer and was overwhelmed by stress and anxiety. My coping mechanisms had grown to be less and less helpful. My doctor referred me to a psychologist who turned out to be a poor fit, which only discouraged me further. Something had to change, and I knew I couldn’t do it on my own. My dad had previously recommended that I try a mindfulness program. I was skeptical but finally decided to give it a try. I contacted Matheson and began an eight-week MBSR program.

Originally developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn in 1979 at the University of Massachusetts Medi-

cal Centre, the program includes mindful meditation, yoga and body awareness. Kabat-Zinn had studied meditation with Buddhist teachers and hoped to bring mindfulness, the practice of bringing one’s attention to the present moment, into a new context: healthcare. The program’s first participants were patients dealing with chronic pain. In the decades since the program’s creation, research has shown that mindfulness can positively impact the way we deal with not only physical pain, but stress, anxiety, and other health conditions. The program’s foundation in science and research helped bring mindfulness to the mainstream and lay the groundwork for other programs like mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT).

Matheson and I met once a week for 90-minute sessions. After our formal practice each week, she left materials to help guide me as I continued my individual practice. Under her guidance, I would meditate, bringing attention to my breath, to sounds, to sensations. I practiced being non-reactive and accepting my emotions. I stopped trying to avoid discomfort and allowed myself to sit in the present moment, whatever that moment brought.

The other focus of our sessions was bringing awareness to the body. One practice in MSBR is the body scan, during which you focus your attention on one part of the body at the time, noticing each sensation without judgement. We would also practice yoga and mindful exercises involving walking or other movement. While I found stillness to be most effective in combating my anxiety, Matheson notes that movement is often a gentler way of becoming in touch with your body. "Stillness can be very invasive," she says. "I would say if someone has a lot of trauma that they should do movement first." Her training in trauma-sensitive yoga allows her to offer a different way of dealing with emotional states than traditional talk therapy.

Gradually, through the combination of movement, stillness and my new mindful approach to the present, I started to feel less anxious. I found that I was able to remain calm in moments of stress and not lose myself in worry or mindless distractions.

Matheson notes that she saw changes in the members at Centennial that were "organic and natural, that weren't forced." Unlike other mental health treatments, it didn't involve a concrete goal such as losing weight or finding a job. "This was something that wasn't as tangible, but all those things started happening for people."

I ask if she believes we should shift our thinking away from such strict, goal-oriented models when it comes to mental health. "Yes," she says emphatically. She laughs and taps on the table. "Get that on there!" She acknowledges that tangible, realistic goals are necessary and says she wouldn't be where she is in her practice without them.

The piece that goes missing when we are so focused on achieving a specific goal is that starting jobs, building relationships, or taking other big steps come with stress. She's seen people get the job they were aiming for, succeed at it for a few months, but then become overwhelmed because they didn't have the necessary tools to keep their life in balance. "We need to be able to have this safe harbour that we've created so when those opportunities come we have the ability to stick with it," she says. She adds that, "Mindfulness empowers us to do that inner work so we have greater resources available when things get stressful."

Leaving her manager position to start her own business was a big shift. One challenge she

faced early on was how to continue her practice and be her authentic self while also promoting herself. "Trying to build a career in this field, it's a very interesting dynamic," she admits. "This practice is about non-striving and when you're building a business, there's a whole ton of striving." Mindfulness' rapidly growing popularity had her feeling like she was at the top of a tsunami wave, hoping to be the first one to reach the shore. Part of her mental check-in was to recognize her ego and trust that her career would unfold in time.

"The way I look at it now," she says, "I'm so committed to this practice, and that's enough. That's enough."

Matheson hopes to one day see the practice become more accessible to everyone. I was privileged enough to come from a family that could afford to pay for private sessions, but for

"Environments make a huge difference," she says. "When I'm teaching it at a yoga studio that is more fitness-oriented, people aren't looking for the kind of practice that I can genuinely offer up. They're looking more for something that's going to make them relaxed and at ease."

so many people, cost is prohibitive. "My big dream," Matheson says, "is that mindfulness and meditation will be recognized as alternative health. Like, extended medical would pay for it, just like massage and naturopaths and all these different alternative therapies. I would love to see it offered where people who didn't have the funds could still access it."

Matheson currently teaches mindfulness meditation and yoga in a variety of settings, from private sessions to drop-in classes to corporate workshops. Those who seek her out for private sessions are willing to embrace the practice, though not everyone in her classes is always so keen. "Environments make a huge difference," she says. "When I'm teaching it at a yoga studio that is more fitness-oriented, people aren't looking for the kind of practice that I can genuinely offer up. They're looking more for something that's going to make them relaxed and at ease."

While relaxation or stress reduction can be a benefit of mindfulness, learning to sit

with discomfort and unpleasantness is also an important part of Matheson's teaching. However, she believes that the benefits of the practice will eventually emerge, even for those who walk away, or those whose immediate goal is to perfect their downward dog or sleeping tortoise poses.

"The seed is planted and whether they knew it or not that seed will grow in some way. And maybe it will be 10 years from now they'll have that a-ha moment, but it will happen. Because awareness is so powerful. Once we have that shift into wisdom, there's no going back."

As a teacher, mindfulness is at the core of both her personal and her work life. However, she is still only human and has her less-than-mindful moments like the rest of us. "Even being a teacher," she says, "you're still going to mess up and not be as skillful and present as

you want to be. You're going to have times when you completely lose the practice."

She recalls a moment on her recent trip to Myanmar. "At the monastery, I was really struggling with this judgement that was arising about this particular person. I don't like to judge people, and so I believe I suffered because I felt so bad that this thought kept coming up." But then one morning, during her 4 a.m. walk, she reached a new awareness. "I didn't intentionally think that thought, it just arose.

Why am I owning this judgement so much? What I can do now is choose how much I'm going to engage in it, and what way I'm going to engage in it." She opted to let go of the guilt she felt at her judgment and made that person the focus of her compassion instead.

Mindfulness continues to transform her life and the way she relates to the people around her, including her husband. Though he doesn't have a formal mindfulness practice, he's told her that it's changed him too. For Matheson, seeing the changes in him, in herself, and in all the people she teaches is the most rewarding part of her work. More than two years after my sessions with her, I'm able to tell her how meaningful mindfulness has been in my own journey. How I've been able to pursue opportunities my formerly anxious mind would never have considered and develop a compassion for myself that's been sorely lacking since I was a teenager.

Before we go our separate ways, she gives me the same wholehearted hug. I watch her walk away. And then I go on to the next moment. ■