



Paul Haigh and Clea Eykelkamp practise their mindfulness skills

How mindfulness is helping Tasmanians get mental space

PAUL Haigh's relationship with meditation and mindfulness has had its ups and downs.

He first gave the practice a try in Brisbane in the early 2000s, and it became an integral part of his life until the demands of full-time study saw it slowly slip down his to-do list.

Fast forward 20 years and Paul, now living in Launceston, felt inspired to try to take it up again after his partner spotted a Mindfulness Programs Australasia poster at her workplace.

It was an opportune sighting — Paul's professional life in aged and disability services had recently ended, and he was adjusting to retirement's initial lack of routine.

"I don't see it as a negative, but you do have to restructure your whole life, so it's not easy," he says.

"At the time, I did feel the tank was on empty. I was pretty tired and a bit run down."

Throwing himself back into meditation felt like a good way to recharge, so Paul signed up for Mindfulness Programs

Australasia's Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction course.

The course comprises weekly sessions of two to two-and-a-half hours over eight weeks during which participants practise self-regulation and insight skills through mindfulness, and non-judgmental activities and discussions.

Courses are free and supported by Primary Health Tasmania under the Australian Government's Primary Health Networks Program.

The statewide service is intended for adult Tasmanians experiencing or at risk of mild to moderate stress, anxiety or depression.

Paul says while he doesn't have clinical anxiety or depression, the course was a way to "recharge the batteries" after a demanding professional life.

"I think during the course I noticed that I felt more resilient — the issues in your life don't necessarily go away, but your relationship to them changes," the 64-year-old says.

"More than that, it really does replenish. You start appreciating things more, and all of a sudden, you're stopping to smell the roses."

The regularity of the group sessions, which Paul says were about 20-strong when he took part in the program, helped strengthen the mindfulness muscle he had first developed years ago in Brisbane.

"It was great to have a beautifully guided sit," he says.

"At home, it's a bit of a slog at times, but in a group I find I can go much deeper."

Paul is now at the stage where he can take part in day-long 'booster' sessions from time to time, to strengthen his skills.

"I find it does need to be practised, otherwise the benefits do drop off over time."

Mindfulness Programs Australasia director Christine Hiltner says mindfulness is about learning how to be fully in the present moment, without responding or reacting in our usual or habitual ways.

"Mindfulness allows us to respond to our stressors rather than to react," she says.

"This is especially important when we are feeling stressed or overwhelmed, as our habitual reactions or behaviours to stress may not be the most suitable, neither serving ourselves or others."

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Christine says one participant — a middle-aged man who had struggled with depression for more than a decade after a successful corporate career — benefitted significantly from trying the course, despite an initial reluctance.

“Once this participant realised that he was not alone in his experience with depression, nor was he ‘inherently flawed’ as others in the group had similar experiences through their depression, he started to connect to others in the group and from that point he made significant progress,” she says.

“Before the eight-week course ended he had started driving again and has now taken up a new hobby which brings him great joy and pleasure. He told us that he ‘got his life back’.”

She says the courses are best suited to adults who have the time to attend in a group setting, and who are genuinely motivated and dedicated to learning new ways to manage stress.

Just like Clea Eykelkamp.

The 58-year-old found out about the course after spotting flyers at her local medical and community centres, and thought it could be a good way to alleviate seasonal depression.

“The classes were great,” she says.

“My fellow participants were all engaged with the course, and very honest about their thoughts and feelings.

“It’s given me another way to combat depression.”

Clea, who lives near Exeter, says she is keen to build on her mindfulness practice by following Christine’s suggestion to take part in another course designed specifically for people with depression.

“I’m keen to do that,” she says.

For Carey Mather, who did the course in the first half of 2019 and lives in Tasmania’s north, trying the eight-week program was a way to offset some “subliminal signs

of stress”, such as a problem with grinding her teeth (a condition known as bruxism).

“I guess I was also curious about the growth in mindfulness, given my work in health sciences, as well as about how it could help me in my own life,” the 55-year-old says.

“It’s given me another way to combat depression.”

Clea Eykelkamp

As someone who is, in her own words, “always thinking”, Carey didn’t expect to pick up mindfulness practices — things like doing a ‘body scan’ by mentally noticing different parts of one’s body — as quickly as she did.

“I took to it like a duck to water,” she says.

“It’s really changed my outlook. Not that I was particularly insular before, but I guess I’m making that extra effort to be outward-focused.

“Now, before I start the day and literally before I get out of bed, I do a body scan (and) I’ve turned my stretching exercises into mindful movement.”

It’s important to note, however, that the courses aren’t designed or suitable for anyone who is suicidal, experiencing significant trauma symptoms, or has psychosis or a serious drug or alcohol addiction.

“Being fully present allows us to experience the inherent goodness of what’s right in front of us, things that we often miss, like the smile on someone’s face, our natural environment or the person that just gave way to you in traffic,” Christine says.

“Small things that we often miss or just don’t notice because we may be busy thinking, planning, reacting, or ruminating, thus being in our thoughts and not open to everything else that is around us.”

Or as Paul puts it — creating mental space.

“It gives you a bit of space in your mind, so then you don’t feel so crowded in by everything.” ■

Primary Health Tasmania’s work for people with mild mental illness

Primary Health Tasmania has two commissioned providers, known as low intensity mental health services, offering support for Tasmanians with or at risk of mild mental illness.

They are:

- Wellways Australia
- Mindfulness Programs Australasia.

Wellways Australia delivers the Wellways to Health program across Tasmania for individuals and groups, and participants also have access to the Wellways Helpline — a telephone support service delivered by Wellways volunteers on weekdays from 9am to 9pm.

Mindfulness Programs Australasia delivers Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction and Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy group sessions to communities around the state. The program is available via face-to-face sessions, community workshops, and telephone and internet sessions.

These services are designed to encourage people to self-manage their mental health and wellbeing.

“Sometimes when we talk about mental health services, we tend to focus on the more acute end of the spectrum,” Primary Health Tasmania’s Grant Akesson says.

“But a key principle in providing joined-up, integrated care is ensuring that someone can access the right type of support at the right time, ideally preventing their illness from becoming more acute in the first place.”

With that in mind, Primary Health Tasmania’s commissioned mental health and wellbeing services are free to eligible people and available statewide.

“It’s all about taking that first step that may seem small, but can make a big difference down the path,” Grant says.

“Ultimately, we all go through periods of stress or change. These commissioned services help Tasmanians learn practical skills to maintain good overall mental health and wellbeing during those times.” ■

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