

## Meditation and Mindfulness are in the national news...

Over the last year and a half, **Newsweek**, **National Geographic**, **Time** and **Consumer Reports** magazines have all focused some attention on either mindfulness, meditation or stress management in reference to improving our health, both mental and physical.

Recently in the news was a study by Sarah Lazar, PhD, a research scientist at Massachusetts General Hospital, finding that meditation may thicken the brain cortex of normal working men and women who practice on a daily basis. In addition it may slow the typical thinning of portions of the cortex due to aging. *What does this mean to you and me? It means that learning to meditate could help reshape our brains and improve our lives, both figuratively and literally.*

This story builds on research detailed in a rather spectacular cover story in **National Geographic**, March 2005, that also focused on neuroplasticity (the ability of the brain structure to change over time). This far more comprehensive story details research being done with the “Olympic athletes of meditation.” Tibetan monks who’ve spent tens of thousands of hours meditating have been subjects in fMRI research (MRI’s that work like videos instead of snapshots). The data gathered was the first to point to the tantalizing possibility that *we can alter the physical structure of our brains by meditating*. Dr. Lazar’s research seems to confirm that more casual meditators can produce similar results, though not as large. The Davidson research chronicled in the **National Geographic** article also shows increased activity and connections to parts of the brain that appear to be linked to happiness.

**Time Magazine**, January 16, 2006, refers both to the Lazar study and also to the fact that more and more corporations are offering classes in meditation. It has been confirmed elsewhere, too, that law firms, Fortune 500 companies, medical schools and hospitals are coming to see the value of offering meditation and mindfulness classes as parts of their health programs, curriculums and trainings.

**Consumer Reports**, November 2005 had a four page “On Health” spread about stress management programs. “Stress is now considered as much a risk factor as smoking, [being] over weight, or lack of exercise for a variety of diseases... extensive research now shows that learning techniques to... recover from the stress response can have beneficial effects on a wide range of conditions.” The article contains a table showing the effects of various forms of stress management on a range of conditions including heart disease, cancer, chronic pain, headaches, depression, high blood pressure and more. In the current **Consumer Reports**, March 2006, on the “Health” page, “New heart dos and don’ts: How to cut your risks” there are two important references. One emphasizes the need to not ignore emotions. “Anger and stress can alter heart rhythms and increase blood pressure, cholesterol levels, and clotting potential. Depression may cause clotting problems, too, and predispose the body to insulin resistance and diabetes.” The second reference finds that “a seven-year study in the ...American Journal of Cardiology linked regular meditation with a 30% drop in cardiovascular risk.”

**The news is that mindfulness, meditation, and reducing stress can be effective in helping to limit suffering and lower risks from a wide range of physical and mental health issues. The news is that reducing our stress can help make us healthier, happier, and kinder human beings.**

*Spring starts soon... Remember to take time to smell the flowers... With good news,*

