

HEALING THROUGH MEDITATION

Turnings works with offenders as they reintegrate back into the community.

When Mike (not his real name) got off the plane in St. John's over a decade ago, having served federal prison time, Ron Fitzpatrick and Dan McGettigan met him at the airport. Both staff members with Turnings, Fitzpatrick and McGettigan have been helping Mike live life on the outside.

Mike is comfortable in places he's familiar with. The Turnings office is one of those places. It's where this interview is taking place. Some of those who have helped Mike through the years are in the room.

MINDFULNESS

Andrew Safer introduced him to a form of meditation called mindfulness.

Based on Buddhist philosophies, mindfulness became popular in the United States in the 1970s.

In this age of distraction, Safer says, people all over the world are turning to mindfulness to regroup and recollect their thoughts. Mindfulness is about staying in the moment. It's about acceptance of your thoughts and feelings. It's non-judgmental. "We tend to be very impulsive but with (mindfulness) we develop the capacity to see what these thoughts and impulses are and let them be just that – thoughts and impulses rather than something we need to act upon."

Mindfulness is a way of being grounded, Safer says. "We can get carried away with our plans and our thoughts and our ambitions and our fears and our paranoia that tends to build in our mind. But there is a way of interrupting that process and recognizing that it's basically our thoughts. It's not real."

Studies have shown that mindfulness has both physical and mental health benefits. Safer is a believer.

He works closely with staff at Turnings. The group is



▶ Dan McGettigan and Kevin Foley of Turnings talk with Andrew Safer about how mindfulness meditation is helping Mike stay grounded.

known for its success in helping former offenders like Mike turn their lives around.

Safer is originally from Paris, France.

A writer, workshop facilitator and program developer, he began the study and practice of mindfulness and awareness in 1968 after meeting meditation master Shunryu Suzuki at the Tassajara Zen Mountain Center in California. In 1973 he continued studying with meditation master Chogyam Trungpa.

TEACHING MEDITATION

In 1992 he began serving as a meditation instructor and Shambhala Training Assistant Director with Shambhala International in Halifax.

Paul March, mental health co-ordinator with Eastern Health introduced Safer to Turnings when March learned

that Safer was interested in bringing mindfulness to people dealing with mental health issues in this province.

Safer not only taught Mike about mindfulness but trained his respite worker Carl (not his real name) in how to guide the sessions that run about 15 minutes.



SHUNRYU SUZUKI



CHOGYAM TRUNGPA

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— Andrew Safer



Prisoners Meditating (File Photo)

"First when I got out of prison it was really hard on me but through the years I got help. This meditation helps me not to get angry as easy and I can stay in control..."
— 'Mike'

The place where the meditation takes place can be anywhere from a room in a home to a church or anywhere else where the people involved feel comfortable and will not be interrupted. It needs to be a quiet place, Safer says.

How you sit is also important, he says.

"We have a particular posture which involves an upright spine and we are relating to the physical posture and bringing ourselves into this particular room among the different thoughts and concerns that we have. We check them in at the door and we just relate to why we are here," Safer says.

"BREATHING & POSTURE"

Those meditating focus their attention to their breathing. "We notice the thoughts in our mind. We have a way of acknowledging them and then we bring our attention back to our breathing and concentrate on our breathing and our posture," Safer says.

It's okay to acknowledge any discomforts that come with the meditation such as restfulness, Safer says. The control you have over your own mind and body helps you to continue to sit, he says.

"We know it's not the end of the world and that we can actually bare it. And that helps us overcome other condi-

tions. It's okay to know that being uncomfortable is a part of life and doesn't last."

CIRCLES OF SUPPORT

A retired parole officer, McGettigan says mindfulness has found its way into maximum security prisons in the United States. There is a retired sister/nun in Ottawa doing mindfulness in some of the jails in Ontario, he says.

Mike spends a lot of time at Turnings. McGettigan says he's seen a real improvement in his behaviour since he started meditating. He's a lot more positive and accepting. It helps him get through the day, he says.

Mike also takes part in Turnings' Circles of Support and Accountability and is supported by numerous groups in the community. McGettigan says the combination of all the supports Mike is getting is helping him stay on the outside.

Respite worker's perspective: Carl says it was a long process learning how to work with Mike and learning about his needs. It's important for Mike to be around other people, he says, – people who care and are accepting of him despite his past criminal background.

Carl credits the mindfulness meditation they do every day for helping Mike get along better with others and deal

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"With meditation we recognize when we are getting carried away and we have a way of coming back."

— Andrew Safer

with the hurdles of everyday life.

Mike has gone from being very impulsive to being a lot more in control, his respite worker says. The process has changed his whole behaviour. "He's a lot more respectful. He doesn't react the same way to things that would upset him in the past at all. Something that could ruin his entire morning he now takes it all in stride."

MIKE'S HURDLE OF RESISTANCE

Mike lives with a mental illness. In order to make him more comfortable with the interview, others have talked first. He has tried his best to sit and listen. He seems to like the kind words from those who have learned to accept him for who he is.

When questions are put directly to him, he does his best to answer them, despite his speech impediment. "I did jail time over 10 years ago. When I came back I met Dan and Ron at St. John's airport... my respite worker, Dan, Kevin (Foley), Ron, my social worker and my financial officer. They all help me," Mike says. But just as there are many who support Mike, there are others who taunt him. "First when I got out of prison it was really hard on me but through the years I got help. This meditation helps me not to get angry as easy and I can stay in control... But people still won't leave me alone."

Mike has a bag with several books. He keeps the bag by his side. The books are geared toward young readers. But this older man enjoys reading and is encouraged to do so. Mike's choice of books is just one hint that his mental age is much less than chronological age.

His honesty and eagerness to please is just as present in the room as his books. "First when I did (mindfulness) with Andrew I would try but I would quit on him and come back. And quit on him and come back. But now I even do it at home. And, like Andrew always says, the balloon tries to carry you away but you got to stay focussed on the ground."

Mike smiles in Safer's direction. Safer returns the

Credit: Jodi Miller Photography



◀ *The man going after the balloon represents our fascination with our own thoughts, feelings, emotions, and moods – our tendency to get carried away by them. The woman pulling him back down to earth represents mindfulness. Safer says once we recognize that we're caught up in our thoughts we can come back to reality – the present.*

smile. He's surprised Mike has remembered the photo that he showed him years ago. "With meditation we recognize when we are getting carried away and we have a way of coming back," Safer says expanding on what Mike has said.

Mike's respite worker says it's astounding that Mike has been able to overcome the hurdle of resistance where mindfulness is concerned. He's proud of him, Carl says.

McGettigan stresses the need for community supports for those like Mike who have done the crime, served the time and return to their communities. It's the only way to keep communities safe, he says.

Mindfulness is one of many supports that Mike has in his life, McGettigan says.

McGettigan is confident it could help other former inmates as well. "You need to see the person and what can happen when they are supported in their integration into the community. Otherwise, the offending is just going to continue," he says. ▲



ANDREW SAFER



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