

Training a Healthier Mind

Saving Lives through Mindfulness

By Anna Dwyer



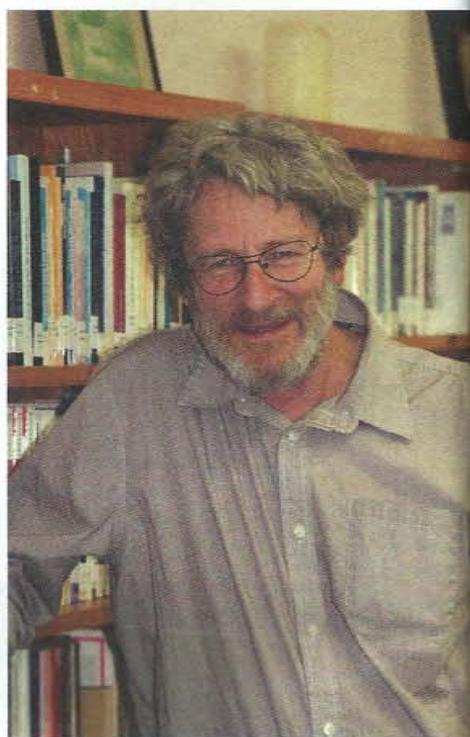
After several years of setbacks – both personal and professional – I once found myself plagued by recurring thoughts of suicide. At times, the intrusive thoughts seemed more like an obsession than any serious desire to harm. That is, until an impulsive act landed me in a psychiatric hospital. And even after the waves of shame and guilt had subsided, the thoughts returned with increasing urgency. Even on days when I didn't feel completely without hope, it was like, what's the point? Nothing would ever work out anyway.

By chance, in May 2025, I found myself in a small group learning to use meditation as a tool to help manage intrusive thoughts. The idea is to use sitting practice techniques to create a gap between negative feelings and impulsive responses, explained program developer and facilitator Andrew Safer. By focusing on the present moment, we learned to move our attention away from the past and concerns about the future to what's happening now. Doing that alongside those experiencing the same struggles was truly powerful.

"Normally, people go about their lives with a lot of things going on," said Safer. "With sitting practice, the aim is to not move, to not engage physically. To just be here and available to experience whatever the mind comes up with in that environment. The main thing is to do [the practice] consistently over time."

A life-long practitioner himself, Safer has been teaching people how to use those traditional methods to help manage modern-day pressures for well over 25 years. His applied mindfulness workshops assist people living with mental health conditions, specifically suicidal ideation, depression, addiction, anxiety, and attention deficit disorders. He has written two books on the topic: *Anxiety, Stress & Mindfulness* and *Mindfulness in the Workplace*. Based on his experience as a mindfulness trainer, he has noticed a connection between negative emotions and impulsive behaviour, which can lead to suicide attempts. His goal is to reduce these incidents by helping people understand what's happening in their minds.

"For example, in the case of anxiety, people start to feel jittery. There's a



**Andrew Safer,
mindfulness trainer**

trajectory: a restlessness that builds to anxiety," he said. "The aim is to head that off by being an observer of your own thoughts. When we are more self-aware, we begin to notice what's off, and then, we're less blindsided when a negative emotion comes along."

Participants in the eight-week Suicide Prevention Through Mindfulness program met weekly to engage in sitting and walking practices, and to learn about self-compassion and the brain's relationship to thoughts and emotions.

Between sessions, Safer emailed links to relevant articles and videos as well as encouragement to maintain a daily practice. For additional support, he teamed up with certified counsellor

Janet McDonald; Tina Davies, a mental health advocate with suicide-prevention training; Darren Fancey, a mental health advocate; and Kathy Porter, a meditation instructor. These experienced individuals were also on hand for one-on-one support when necessary. Two former participants of the pilot project, which Safer developed in 2021 with funding from the CMHA-NL and VOCM Cares Foundation, also spoke to the group.

The inspiration to develop this program arose from Safer's work with people living with mental illness and his personal experience with just how unkind our minds can be.

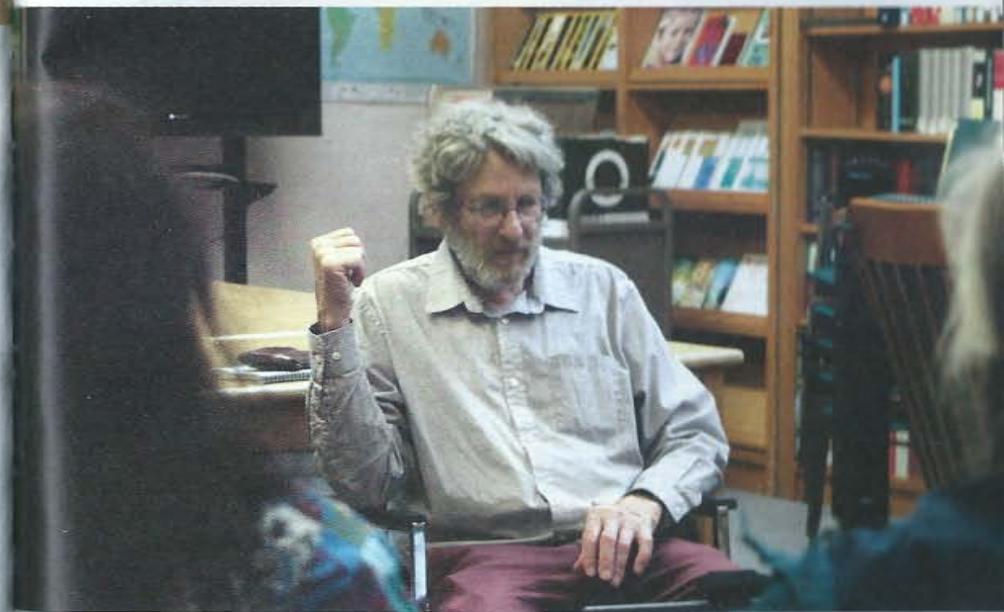
"About 30 years ago, I felt backed into a corner, thought there was no way out. So I made a plan," he said. "But I was fortunate enough that I was unable to carry it out. I know circumstances can seem dire at times, but

nothing is fixed. I focus on that: when we feel boxed in, our circumstances can change. We just have to be around long enough for it to pass."

He noted that this is why it's important to be able to assess the credibility of our thoughts, adding that research shows sitting practice can help us become better observers of our thoughts and behaviours.

According to statistics tracked by several organizations, including Statistics Canada, the mortality rate due to suicide in this province remains among the highest in Canada, tripling since the 1980s despite an overall decrease in the national average.

Although statistics may vary, this upward trend is evident among both youth and middle-aged. Causes are complicated and vary among populations despite government efforts to increase resources and treatment options.



Andrew Safer explains mindfulness practices in a group session as part of his Mental Health and Addiction Workshop Series



Suicide Prevention Through Mindfulness Support Team: Tina Davies, Andrew Safer, Darren Fancey and Janet McDonald

Safer feels encouraged, however, that mindfulness practice can enhance mental wellness by eliminating intrusive thoughts, including thoughts of suicide. By the end of both the pilot project and, more recently, the eight-week program, many participants reported an overall decrease in the intensity of their suicidal thoughts. That program, funded by the Washington-based Khyentse Foundation, maintained a near 100 percent rate of participation throughout the sessions.

When asked why he thought the outcomes were reassuring, Safer reiterated that learning to focus on the present is key.

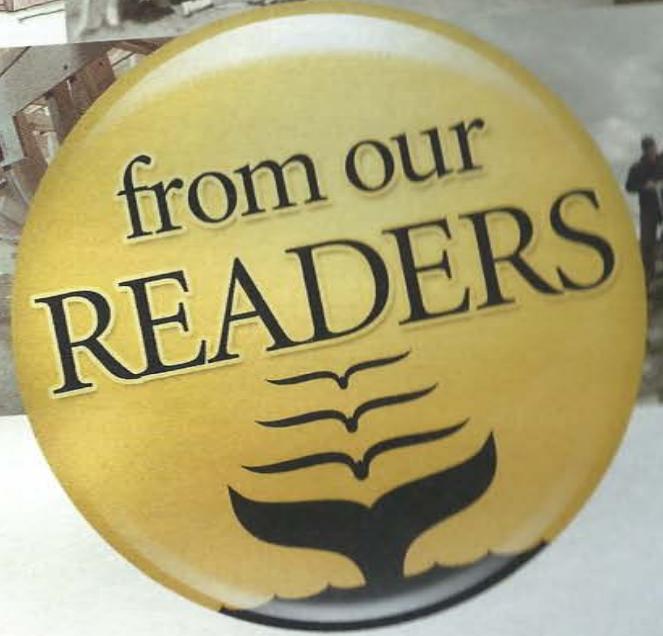
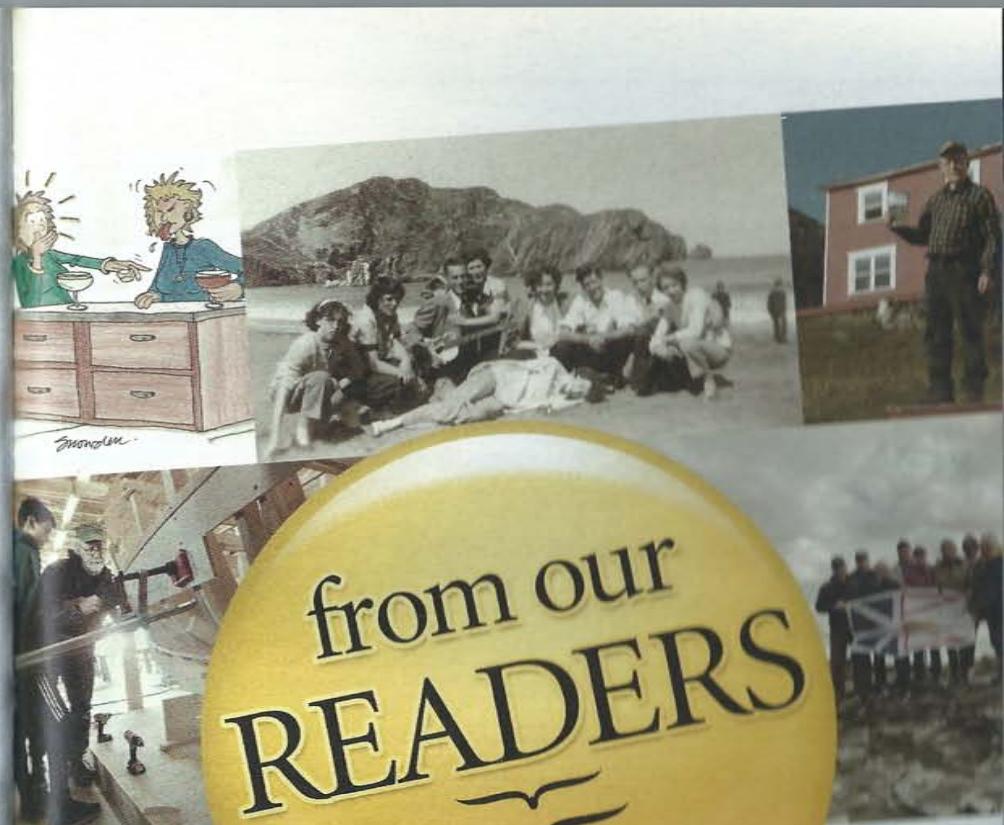
"Also, I like to treat people as people, not get into their mental diagnoses and problems. That tends to make people divide up and focus on their weaknesses. That's why self-compass-

sion is so important. When we focus on our weaknesses, we are already headed in the wrong direction. So far, the data is really promising."

Safer has further provided this training on a one-on-one basis, while continuing to offer group sessions to individuals with a general interest in meditation.

For me, the difference has been noticeable. I can feel the gap between my thoughts and the negative emotions that still spring up from time to time. In that space, I am now able to ask myself, Is that thought credible? Is it even real? I make an effort every day to do some form of practice – whether it's sitting or walking. Some days are better than others, but it is something positive to focus on.

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