MINDFUL AGING

Mindfulness is an active state of curiosity, observation and awareness of our thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations, along with our external circumstances. Cultivating mindfulness increases self-awareness and challenges our beliefs about ourselves and others. We can use mindfulness for learning, increased focus and attention, as well as enhanced control over our emotions and reactions.

Aging offers us innumerable opportunities to use mindfulness, to practice staying in the mindset of an observer, rather than reacting negatively to whatever we are experiencing. And often, that shift in perspective can alter our experience in positive ways.

Many people are habitually caught in loops of negative or catastrophic thinking, imagining bad things that might be triggered by present or near future events. Once that scenario is imagined, it is difficult to avoid “rehearsing” it over and over again – negative thoughts are very compelling! This process of repetition is exactly how the brain learns: whether it is a math formula, a new language, the cha cha, or a chain of one painful thought after another.

Plus, two conditions enhance learning, whether it is beneficial to us or not:

1. Visualization
2. Negative emotion paired with the experience or thoughts about it

It is easy to see how we can create a state of misery! Alternately, we can use mindfulness skills to stop and even reverse this self-defeating progression of negative thoughts and feelings. It is empowering to see how, over time, we can use a simple set of skills to enact profound changes.

There is no doubt that aging and its concomitants can engender fear, worry, aversion, loss of confidence and self-deprecation. Western attitudes about aging reinforce these feelings. Mindfulness practices can help us step outside of our automatic beliefs and assumptions, to stay open to and curious about possible alternatives, and to support us in developing and maintaining a positive outlook as we navigate our later years.