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Mind–Body Skills Course
Changing Culture of Medical Education at Georgetown

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In the past decade there has been increasing emphasis on developing initiatives to promote altruism and humanism in medical students. One highly successful educational initiative at Georgetown University School of Medicine (GUSOM) teaches mind–body medicine skills to blend science and humanism by fostering student self-awareness and self-care. The result is a palpable change in the attitudes of both students and faculty members who have participated, which is having a ripple effect throughout the school.

"I believe the Mind–Body Skills program is beginning to change the culture within this medical school," said Nancy Harazdik, MEd, MSW, the director of the program. "Students are becoming more passionate about their medical careers, and they are supporting each other rather than competing with each other. When I came here seven years ago, there was so much animosity about being a medical student. Now, they think, 'I can do this.' They have a sense of the bigger picture, focusing not so much on grades but on how to be better physicians.

These accomplishments are especially impressive in light of the challenges that must be overcome in implementing such an initiative, including carving time from the rigorous science and clinical components of the typical medical school curriculum and the resistance of some traditionalists to alternative medical approaches. Mind–Body courses also require resources; in addition, assessment of skills, such as self-awareness and self-care, is not clear-cut.

So why is this initiative so successful, with approximately 30% of the medical school class choosing the first-year elective and many opting to continue with the course in their second and third years despite busy schedules? The answer may lie in the "buy-in" of some of the key opinion leaders of the school, who go through the training sessions and in turn become facilitators of the course and champions of the concepts.

Development of the Program

In 2000, Aviad Haramati, PhD, a psychologist and medical educator at GUSOM, brought together a team of educators, researchers, and clinicians to consider integrating aspects of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) into the curriculum. A small grant from the medical school led to a significant educational curriculum grant from the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine at the NIH in 2001, to
incorporate knowledge, skills, and attitudes about CAM and integrative medicine into the medical school curriculum. "We brought acupuncture into anatomy and neuroscience, biofeedback into physiology, and the science of stress reduction into endocrinology," he said.

In addition, Dr. Haramati launched an experiential component involving mind-body medicine skills groups (as a pilot for 30 students) within the Human Physiology course. After the pilot program, he surveyed the students about the impact of the course. He realized that students found the opportunity to learn stress management skills and to engage in self-reflection and exercises that foster self-awareness, in an environment that was safe and non-judgmental, to be truly transformative. He subsequently changed the focus of the project to include more faculty development and train additional facilitators. The results have been profound. "We want students to experience the mind-body connection firsthand and understand more about themselves," he said.

**Structure of the Course**
The course, which meets two hours per week for 11 weeks, is offered in the second semester of the first year in order to introduce mind-body skills early in training, while students' attitudes are still in the formative stages. Six groups are conducted in parallel, each containing 10 students and two facilitators.

Students who are friends are discouraged from joining the same group. "People should be able to speak freely with no constraints," said Ms. Harazdik.

Each session follows a structured format. An opening ritual, such as lighting a candle, meditating, or ringing a chime, introduces the session and allows students to shift their focus from their hectic lives to become present in the moment. After five minutes, the check-in period begins, during which all members—including facilitators—share aspects of their daily experiences, discuss any issues they have, and explore any insights they have had about themselves. "Each person is allowed to say what they feel without judgment or analysis," explained Ms. Harazdik. "The purpose of the course is to create a safe place so students can learn about themselves, be open, forthright, and authentic." Another goal is for students to learn how to practice listening actively and generously. Complete confidentiality about the discussions is a priority.

After the 45-minute check-in, the facilitators introduce a new mind-body skill (which takes about 20 minutes) and then the group has a chance to practice the skill (which takes about 35 minutes). Figure 1 lists some of the techniques used.

For instance, different types of meditation are taught, such as mindfulness meditation, explained Ms. Harazdik, who was trained in mindfulness meditation at the Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, NY, and in guided imagery at the Academy for Guided Imagery in Mill Valley, CA. Students sit quietly or lie on the floor in a darkened room, and are asked to focus on the present moment via concentrating on their breathing. "Students learn that the thoughts which intrude are not the enemy, and they learn to accept the thoughts and then bring their attention back to their breath," she said.

Concentration skills are also sharpened through a walking meditation exercise, during which students are asked to focus on what they feel and experience as they walk in a garden, noticing the environment, even the process of taking each individual step. In eating meditation, students may be asked to focus on minute details—such as the taste, smell, texture, and color of a

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**Figure 1. Mind–Body Medicine Skills Groups**

**Techniques**

- Breathing (various)
- Meditation (mindfulness/awareness, concentrative)
- Guided imagery (several types)
- Biofeedback (autonomic training)
- Art (emphasis on non-cognitive approaches)
- Music (used in meditation and imagery sessions)
- Movement (shaking, dancing, exercise)
- Writing (journals, dialogues, service commitment)
Mind-Body Skills
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grape—so that the process of consuming one grape could last for 20 minutes or more.

Students also learn to utilize guided imagery techniques to reconnect the mind with the body. Feeling state imagery helps students relax by imagining a safe and relaxing place (such as a beach), whereas end-state imagery encourages students to imagine themselves successfully accomplishing something they are afraid of (such as speaking in front of a large audience). Biologically correct imagery is a technique that can be incorporated into medical practice, which, for example, encourages a patient to visualize cancer cells being destroyed by chemotherapy.

Students also learn to utilize art, music, movement, and writing as means for self-exploration. In an art exercise, students are asked to draw pictures of themselves as they see themselves that day, as they would appear with their biggest problem, and as they would like to look. Pictures drawn at the beginning of the course are compared with those drawn as the course is near completion.

After each exercise, participants are asked, but not obligated, to process with the group how the experience affected them. Each session then ends with a closing ritual. "These sessions help me tune out all the craziness of the outside world and the stress that accompanies medical school life. I love some of the imagery exercises," said third-year student Jaclyn Winikoff. Ms. Winikoff became an advocate of the program in the first year of medical school, and continues to meet weekly with a meditation group that grew out of the program. "The group provides a safe environment for us to reflect. It is a fantastic forum—a haven," she said.

Assessing the Impact
In order to assess the course, students were asked to complete a number of survey instruments, such as the Perceived Stress Scale, the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale, and the Attitudinal Scale, before and after the 11-week course. They were also asked to answer six open-ended questions that queried whether the course affected their view of medicine, medical school, and their relationship with their classmates.

Quantitative analysis of the survey instruments indicated that after the course, students demonstrated a significant reduction in perceived stress and an increase in their mindfulness, said Dr. Haramati. An increase in concern for classmates' welfare was also apparent, suggesting an improvement in empathy. A qualitative analysis of the open-ended questions found that students touched on five central themes as to how the course benefitted them: connections, self-discovery, stress relief, learning skills, and an enhanced awareness about issues in medical education. (For details, see Saunders PA et al. Medical Teacher 2007; 29:778-784.)

Ripple Effects Through the Georgetown Community

As of last spring, more than 700 people have participated in a mind-body skills course at Georgetown, said Dr. Haramati. This includes 450 medical students, 100 nursing students, staff members, and graduate students in physiology. There are now groups being formed for law students and for faculty members.

A sign of how much these ideas and skills have been embraced by the Georgetown community is that many high-profile faculty members, including course and clerkship directors, have taken the training to become facilitators. "We have the director of pediatric oncology and the director of the neonatal intensive care unit participating. These people have no spare time, but once they went through the course and noticed the positive effect it had on their own lives, they became enthusiastic backers and champions of the program," said Dr. Haramati. He noted that facilitators are excited to participate and are not paid for their efforts.

The dean of medical education, S. Ray Mitchell, MD, recently went through training to become a facilitator. Demonstrating the importance of the program to medical education at Georgetown, Ms. Harazdul, the director of the mind-body program, is now based in the dean of education's office.

Future Directions

With an educational curriculum in place, the focus is turning to research in mind-body medicine. This is in part spearheaded by the Consortium for Academic Health Centers for Integrative Medicine (www.imconsortium.org), a group of 41 academic medical centers in the United States and Canada. The group is sponsoring a research conference on integrative medicine, May 12–15, 2009 in Minneapolis. Dr. Haramati also cited the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM.nih.gov) for providing funds to advance research in the field.

Dr. Haramati spends considerable time speaking about the mind-body skills program at medical schools and conferences. "I see part of my mission as a scientist to talk about this," he said. "The incorporation of approaches that foster self-awareness and improve stress management may stem the decline in student and faculty empathy in medical school and advance their professional development. As one of my students said it best, 'Know thyself. Then you are in a better position to help others.'"