

Marin Snapshot: Therapist uses mindfulness to help others lessen chronic illness

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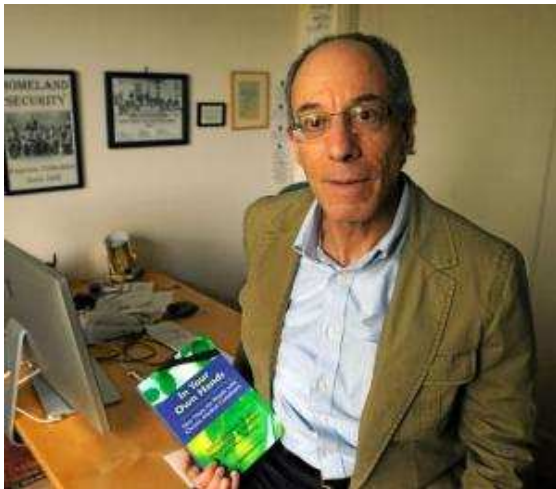
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Larry Berkelhammer of San Rafael is a licensed marriage and family therapist who has explored various alternative methods — including tai chi, Transcendental Meditation, biofeedback, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, and Buddhist traditions, including Zen and Samatha Vipassana — for coping with incurable disease and pain. Berkelhammer, 67, is the author of "In Your Own Hands; New Hope for People with Chronic Medical Conditions."

Q: You're a psychotherapist, right?

A: Mind-body medicine practitioner, really. I'm retired. But I was working exclusively with people with chronic medical conditions.

Q: What prompted you to study how the mind affects health?



Larry Berkelhammer, PhD., is the author of "In Your Own Hands," a book that talks about mind training to improve health in instances of chronic

A: Even as a child I always had problems, where I just didn't feel well a lot of the time. In those days, the 1950s, they didn't know how to test for things. I grew up with enormous emotional distress because of being relentlessly shamed and criticized for always not feeling well; it was my fault.

Q: Who did the shaming?

A: It was my mother who was always the one criticizing me.

Q: When did you figure out what the problem was?

A: When I was in my early 50s, I went to the University of California, San Francisco, I'd never been to an academic medical center before. They diagnosed me with a primary immunodeficiency condition, and I was also diagnosed with severe malabsorption syndrome. One thing led to another. Because I wasn't absorbing nutrients, I developed a very severe osteoporosis, two forms of arthritis, a heart dysrhythmia and chronic headaches.

Q: What kind of instruction do you provide?

A: I teach various mindfulness-based practices, everything from sitting meditation to techniques that are based in tai chi and aikido. I trained for many years with some well-known Asian martial art masters. But I don't teach the martial arts, because I'm teaching seniors. It's my own synthesis.

Q: Why do you think this approach works?

A: Emotional distress plays havoc with chronic illness. It can exacerbate any chronic illness; so I teach people how to develop the skill of managing their stress levels. My teaching also helps patients with the loneliness of chronic illness. People with chronic illnesses often feel very alone because the rest of the world seems to be well and life is passing them by.

Q: How has what you've learned affected your own health?

A: I still live with a lot of pain and disability, but compared with how I was in 2002, I'm way better. I'm always careful to tell people, 'You can do everything I teach you but I can't tell you it will cure cancer, or anything.' But it does improve the odds. The body works better when you reduce stress.

Q: Now that you no longer see patients, what are you up to?

A: I spend all of my time now teaching at the College of Marin and Whistlestop and writing for two blogs, my own blog and Psych Central. I teach a class on Tuesday afternoons at Whistlestop called Mastery of Aging and my class at College of Marin, which starts in January, is called, "In Your Own Hands," which will include all of the material from the book.