

Lifestyle

The Mercury

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TasWeekend: Mindfulness is helping Tasmanians stress less

- by: SALLY GLAETZER
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Mindfulness, the meditation practice of fully appreciating each moment of life, is helping Tasmanians stress less. Picture: ANDREW TAUBER

Source: News Corp Australia

IN the 1980s, Bruno Cayoun was a self-confessed Bondi Beach hippie practising alternative therapies.

Now based in Hobart, the affable Frenchman is a doctor of clinical psychology whose method of combining ancient meditation techniques with Western psychotherapy to treat mental illness is used by thousands of health professionals around the world.

Cayoun has developed a program of mindfulness-integrated cognitive behaviour therapy, written two books on the subject and runs a busy private psychology practice.

TasWeekend meets Cayoun at his Macquarie St clinic on his return from Canada, where he hosted four workshops in four cities for more than 400 participants.

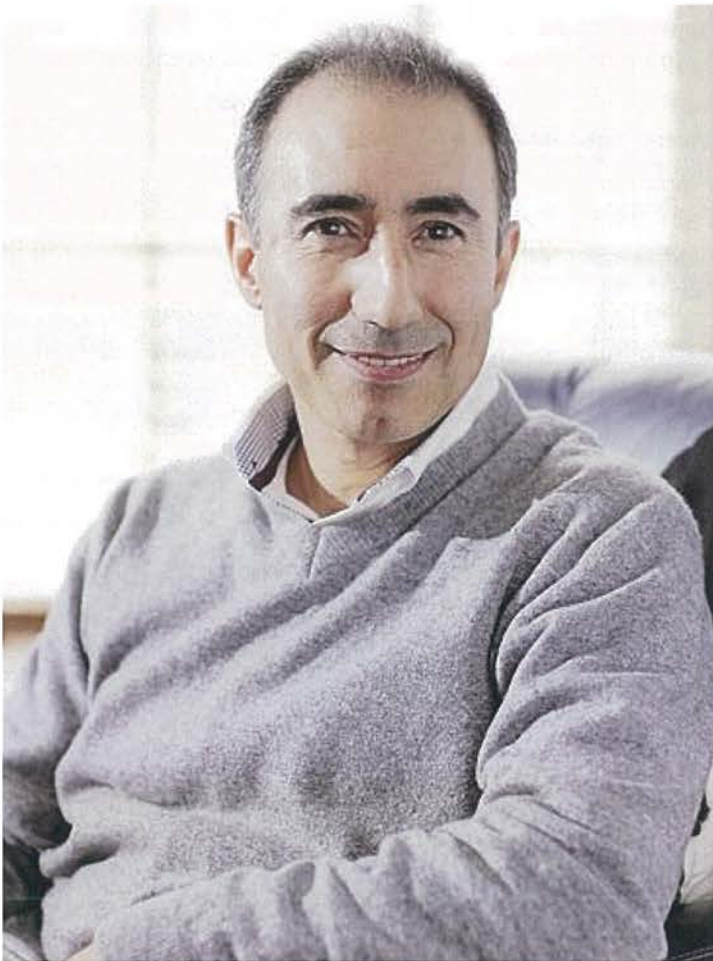
Charmingly energetic and engaging despite the jet lag, Cayoun admits he is reluctantly proceeding with the interview despite a past experience when he says his comments were taken out of context in the media.

He is torn between wanting to promote the benefits of mindfulness training and a fear of giving “false hope”.

Cayoun has treated patients suffering everything from attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) to schizophrenia since he started practising in 2001 but says it is by no means a miracle cure.

It requires at least eight weeks of dedicated meditation, based on the Buddhist vipassana tradition and tried and true Western cognitive behaviour therapy.

Patients are taught to notice and let go of unhelpful thoughts, to cope with problems or unpleasant situations without negative reactions and to be kind and compassionate to themselves and others.



Dr Bruno Cayoun combines ancient meditation techniques with Western psychotherapy to treat mental illness. Picture: RICHARD JUPE

Source: News Corp Australia

“There are contraindications,” Cayoun says, referring to cases in which a person with serious mental illness may suffer adverse effects during meditation.

“In the case of psychosis or extreme anxiety the person can harm themselves, especially if they are not closely guided or the therapist isn’t aware of what’s going on.”

He is concerned by the so-called “McMindfulness” phenomenon that is seeing the teaching of mindfulness stripped back to an easily accessible – and sellable – product.

"I am concerned that it becomes the opium of the masses and that it is too devoid from the wise psychological system surrounding mindfulness," Cayoun says.

"I'm very against the idea of using mindfulness [smartphone] apps but I must also say that I do acknowledge that some people do benefit."

Cayoun is prone to bursts of laughter as he tells of his journey to mindfulness.

It began in early 1989, what he calls "the heyday of alternative therapies in Australia".

Cayoun was running late for an appointment to obtain an Australian driver's licence. When he arrived, the man behind the counter berated him for his lateness.

"This man was telling me off and I burst into tears," Cayoun says.

"I was 26 and I thought, 'What's going on?' Almost on the inside I was laughing."

At the time, Cayoun was working in an alternative therapy clinic in Sydney, using both Gestalt therapy and "rebirthing" techniques.

"I had just come back from an intensive rebirthing workshop where you lie down on the mattress and you cry your eyes out for seven days," he says.

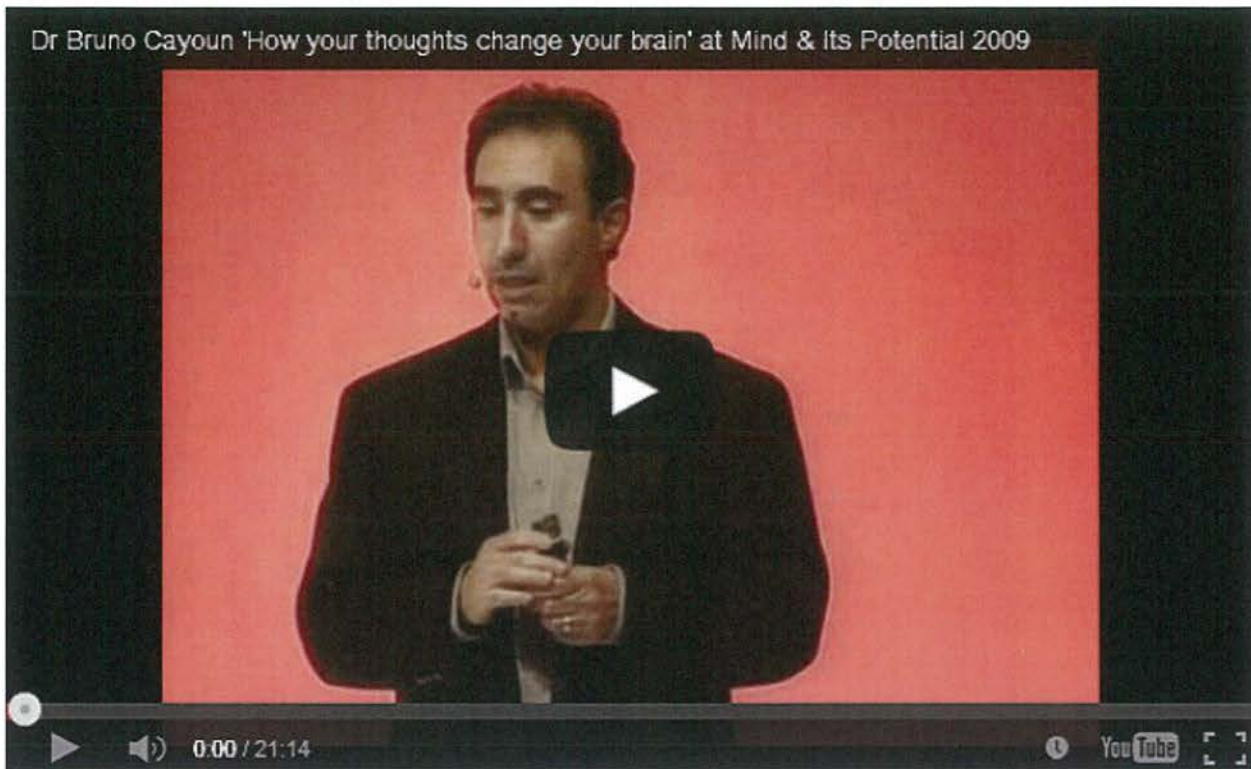
"I had trained my brain to be super-reactive and, having wired my brain for this for so long, the next day just a tiny trigger like this and I burst into tears."

While rebirthing encourages a response to emotions – such as crying – mindfulness trains people to recognise and accept emotions without reacting.

"Being mindful is neither giving a free licence to our emotions nor suppressing them and pretending they are not there," Cayoun says.

"It teaches us to accept them with equanimity. This becomes wisdom, when you understand that the emotions will pass and they are not yours or you or part of you. The bus didn't turn up. I might be frustrated or even angry, but it will pass, another will turn up."

Dr Bruno Cayoun



If you have not heard of mindfulness you may have been living in a cave,” Pamela Lovell says of the discipline she has been teaching in Hobart for nine years.

Newspapers, magazines and the internet are full of articles about mindfulness.

“Can mindfulness improve your productivity?” one article asks. “How to boost your profits through mindful meditation,” another tempts.

Mindfulness smartphone apps promise to reduce stress levels and increase happiness for as little as \$2.99.

In Tasmania, a wave of research is looking into the effectiveness of mindfulness in treating chronic pain, whether it can improve brain function in older people and if the practice can alter the way a person is perceived by others.

Workplaces from the Royal Automobile Club of Tasmania to the Department of Premier and Cabinet are integrating mindfulness training into their occupational health and safety regimes.

Doctors at the Royal Hobart Hospital are undertaking mindfulness training to help cope with the stress of the job.

Organisations such as the Salvation Army and the Missiondale Recovery Centre in Evandale are using the technique to help combat drug and alcohol addiction.

When Lovell’s students gather in her office suite above a pizza place in Hobart at 6.30pm on a recent Wednesday, the scenario is repeated in cities around the world.

They sit on their yoga mats and try – for 2.5 hours each week for eight weeks – to not think about their phones, bosses, kids, grocery shopping, dinner or next month’s holiday.

For those who have been living in a cave, mindfulness is defined as the awareness that comes from the ability to pay attention to the here and now.

If you are brushing your teeth it means focusing solely on the process of brushing, the sensation of the bristles on the teeth, the up and down movements of the hand, the taste of the toothpaste.

Lovell uses the definition coined by fellow American Jon Kabat-Zinn, who in 1979 developed the mindfulness-based stress reduction program, which is now taught globally.



Pamela Lovell has taught mindfulness in Hobart for nine years. Picture: RICHARD JUPE

Source: News Corp Australia

Kabat-Zinn says mindfulness is “the awareness that arises through paying attention on purpose to the present moment non-judgmentally”.

“Most people know we are hardly ever in the present moment,” Lovell says. “We are mostly spending a lot of time in the past or we’re spending a lot of time in the future on our to-do list.

“We don’t even have a shower in the present moment: we’re in a meeting or having an argument with someone who’s not in the shower with us.

“Our whole life from birth to death is just moment-to-moment experiences and if we’re not paying attention to them we miss them.”

In a busy world surely it is reasonable to ask where the harm is in planning that presentation while brushing your teeth or deciding what to have for dinner while driving home from work?

But Lovell says it is all about building up an “attentional muscle”.

She argues that by training the brain to stay focused on one thing – for example, the breath during meditation – we can prevent ourselves getting bogged down by regrets and anxiety.

She cites a 2010 Harvard study, which linked “mind wandering” to unhappiness.

The study, which used a smartphone app to gauge the thoughts of 2250 volunteers at random intervals throughout the day, found respondents spent, on average, 47 per cent of their time thinking about something other than what they were doing.

“What they found was if you were paying attention to what you were doing, your emotional tone was positive, even if it was an unpleasant task,” Lovell says.

“So let’s say you hate the ironing, but you’re paying attention to it. You are actually happier than if you were planning your next holiday while you were doing it.

“You’ve got this ability to increase your happiness – and I’m not talking about win-the-lottery happiness, it is contentment – just by paying attention, even with unpleasant tasks.”

A peaceful little oasis exists down an alley off Liverpool St.

Up a set of stairs to the office of Madhu Lilley’s Mindful Living Tasmania the smell of essential oils from a neighbouring massage place sets the scene.

It’s brought an awareness and a richness to my life that weren’t there before. — Anja Boot

Inside, the sounds of the street can be heard but Lilley says to close my eyes and simply listen to the sounds “without judgment”.

“We don’t label or judge, we just notice sounds as sounds. Listening, not labelling,” she says.

An ambulance passes and mentally I chastise myself for “labelling” the sound of the siren.

I try desperately to follow Lilley’s advice to focus only on my breath, the space behind my closed eyes and then various points of my body.

Annoying thoughts about deadlines and my stomach rumbling for its 3pm cup of tea and piece of chocolate persist (do I still have that dark Lindt chocolate with sea salt in my desk drawer?).

Lovell’s comment about training the “attentional muscle” as you might a bicep suddenly makes more sense.

Mine, it seems, is decidedly flabby.

When I admit my apparent failure to Lilley she is surprisingly easy on me.

“If you notice your mind thinking of other things you are doing it correctly,” she says. “You’re being mindful that you’ve wandered off.”

Lilley encourages her students to practise meditation every day but accepts not everyone can find the time.

“The more they do it, the more benefit they get,” she says.

“Throughout your life it strengthens your mental discipline. You start to recognise triggers for stress more easily so you can act to lessen the negative consequences of stress.”

A few days later I meet one of Lilley’s past students, Anja Boot.

Now working in organisational development, Boot has always been a go-getter.

In a decade she had two kids, built a house and set up and sold a successful mobile coffee business, Barista Sista.

A year ago, with both children at school full-time, she was about to embark on an exciting new work opportunity when she was diagnosed with breast cancer.

“Never in my wildest dreams did I think (the lump) was breast cancer,” Boot, 41, says. “It was like someone put an axe through my life.”

Struggling to deal with her emotions as well as the reactions of her family members, Boot joined one of Lilley’s mindfulness courses for people living with cancer.

“The course really made me aware of my patterns of behaviour and how they didn’t serve me well,” Boot says.

“I learnt to slow down and just sit and be and look at the emotions I was experiencing as emotions and knowing I am separate to them.

“Mindfulness meditation is training your mind so you can control it more, rather than it controlling you the whole time. It’s brought an awareness and a richness to my life that weren’t there before.”



Robyn Thomas, a consultant physician who cares for terminally ill patients at the Royal Hobart Hospital, has recently completed a mindfulness course to help her deal with the stress of her job.

Picture: RICHARD JUPE

Source: News Corp Australia

Mindfulness advocates say it is human nature to want to cling to the pleasant and avoid the unpleasant, but happiness only comes with the ability to accept the good and the bad.

“Even in the times when things can be quite difficult in life, if you can be present with it, there’s a beauty or a sweetness to it that is much better than pushing it away,” Lovell says.

This idea springs to mind the following day when I speak with palliative care doctor Robyn Thomas, who works as a consultant physician at the Royal Hobart Hospital.

Thomas says she finds treating and caring for terminally ill patients extremely rewarding, but acknowledges the emotional burden takes its toll.

When Lovell's mindfulness-based stress reduction course was offered to hospital staff, Thomas jumped at the chance to take part.

She was already seeing a psychologist regularly, a common practice among doctors caring only for terminally ill patients, to make sure they're coping with the nature of the work.

"I had reached the end of how helpful that was for me so I was seeking something else," Thomas says.

The result was, without hyperbole, a revelation.

"Mindfulness is a whole different way of being in the world and I felt like I had opened a door and discovered this place," Thomas says.

After the eight-week course, she and her colleagues went on a "silent retreat day" under Lovell's supervision.

"I was quite nervous about keeping my mouth shut for a whole day but it was incredible," Thomas says. "It was an amazing experience to give your mind time to be still. We so rarely do that."

Although clearly giving and empathetic by nature, Thomas says her newfound ability to "be present in the moment" has changed the way she treats her patients.

"I'll sit down next to them and ask them how they're going," she says.

For that moment I'm just focused on where they're at, rather than what tests we're going to order, how they're going to get home.

"They'll tell me things they haven't told other doctors and they'll say, 'No one's ever asked me about that before'."

Jayson Peterson, a senior hydrologist with Hydro Tasmania, chanced upon Lilley's flyer for group mindfulness sessions earlier this year.

He had just returned to Hobart after a particularly stressful time dealing with work and family issues and was looking for a way to deal with his anxiety.

"It was amazing. Even the first session made a difference, I felt great afterwards," says Peterson, 38, who believes mindfulness training should be used by all companies to reduce stress levels and improve performance among staff.

It was an amazing experience to give your mind time to be still. We so rarely do that. —
Robyn Thomas

Lovell is working with the Menzies Institute for Medical Research on a study into the effectiveness of mindfulness in the workplace.

The research will look at whether mindfulness training can change the way a person is perceived by others, including family members and colleagues.

"When we sent out the email to workplaces to say we were doing the study, we had hoped we would get 40 respondents and we got more than 600," Lovell says.

The results are due in September.

Last month, a study published in British medical journal *The Lancet* found mindfulness-based cognitive therapy reduced the risk of relapse in sufferers of depression.

Cayoun is supervising a study into the impact of a mindfulness-based technique on chronic pain. More volunteers are needed but there have been positive results for those taking part.

Not all studies show conclusive benefits.

A University of Tasmania study in 2013 tracked the brain function of 16 people aged 60 to 85 as they undertook a 10-week mindfulness-integrated cognitive behaviour therapy course.

The results failed to support a hypothesis that mindfulness training would improve attention and reaction times in the participants.

Lovell says caution is needed when spruiking the benefits of mindfulness.

"The concern is it becomes this universal panacea," she says.

"I think we need to be careful about the conclusions we leap to in the research and it's a bit tricky that the people who are researching mindfulness are also mindfulness practitioners," she adds, including herself in this context.

The key, she says, is for individuals to try it for themselves before making up their minds. Some will decide it is not for them, she says.

"The problem is, once you've seen the benefits of mindfulness meditation, you'd be crazy not to try it."

STEPS TO MINDFULNESS

1. In a quiet room, sit with a posture that keeps your neck and back straight so you can remain alert while relaxed.
2. With your eyes closed, simply pay attention to the breath that continually flows at the entrance of your nostrils. Limit your focus of attention to only a small triangular area consisting of nostrils and the area below the nostrils, above the upper lip. Notice the friction and temperature change it creates when it touches the skin.

Witness the breath as it is, without trying to control it or change it in any way, and let go of all other concerns.
3. At the same time, thoughts about the past and future will arise. This is part of the practice and is not to be disliked or desired. Without attachment, notice the thought, image or body sensation and confidently and patiently redirect your attention to the breath. Each time your attention returns to the breath, do your best to prolong your focus for a little longer.
4. You will notice when an unpleasant thought arises, unpleasant sensations in the body happen at the same time. Similarly, when a pleasant thought emerges, pleasant sensations arise. Train your mind to observe and not react to these body sensations.
5. Every time you gently reallocate your attention to the breath, you develop invaluable mental strength that progressively shapes your brain to produce these skills in daily life and keep you focused when you get distracted or worried, or when you are trying to sleep but overthink about the past or future instead. Also, every time you don't react with desire for pleasant sensations or aversion for unpleasant sensations accompanying your thoughts, you decondition your mind from re-enacting past reactions. You free yourself from the past.

Dr Bruno Cayoun, who heads the Mindfulness-integrated Cognitive Behaviour Therapy Institute (MiCBT Institute) in Hobart, advises this exercise is best learnt under the guidance of audio instructions provided by a well-trained teacher. If you have recently experienced traumatic memories, Cayoun advises to practise only under the guidance of a qualified and mindfulness-trained mental health professional.