Memphis Center for Mindful Living

By Anne Marie Durgin

Mindfulness. Therapy. Environment. Presence. Mental Health. Calming. Relaxed.

These words describe the mantra of the Memphis Center for Mindful Living.

*“Breathe in, breathe out.”*

The instructor lays on a mat at the front of a dimly lit room. The warm light makes it feel cozy, like a family room at Christmas time. The plants in the corner make the vibe of the room relaxing, and the class falls into a gentle lull.

Jasmine Sullivan, the instructor, lays and guides the class.

*“Turn over on your right side and extend your arms above your head. Take a deep breath.”*

The Memphis Center for Mindful Living, founded in 2017, helps those struggling with mental health cope through meditation, yoga, nature therapy, and other forms of therapy to help people cope. The Center has seven therapists, including Amy Balentine, the owner and executive director of the Center.

The Center’s mission is to “provide holistic services that address the mind, the body and spirit. Providing evidence-based care with a focus on mindfulness interventions and nature-based therapy,” Balentine says. “We see kids ages 5 and up. We work with a lot of teens and adults, work with a lot of traumas, also anxiety and depression, relationship issues and grief.”

*“Turn on your left side, extending your arms above your head again. Take another deep breath.”*

Balentine started the Memphis Center for Mindful Living at other mental centers, including Christ Community Health Services, the Boling Center for kids with developmental disabilities, and a transformation center that treats eating disorders, to name a few.

Balentine is a licensed clinical psychologist. She received her doctorate from the University of Kentucky and started her career after moving to Memphis in 2001 for an internship. At her current practice, she is working with ages starting at just five years old for all things mental health.

“For about a decade or so, I have been practicing mindfulness and meditation,” she says. “I found it to be invaluable for myself. I found it to be really helpful in reducing my own anxiety and headaches I was having related to that. I also found that it had been very helpful for me in my ability to be kinder to myself, to have less of an inner critic, and I wanted to be able to share that with other people.”

The Center offers a variety of classes each week: offering yoga, meditation (at the Dixon Gallery and Gardens); mindfulness-based stress reduction classes for adults; A Friend in Me, a mindful self-compassion class for kids and their caregivers; mindfulness coaching and classes for schools, organizations, and businesses; and mindfulness programming at local churches, hospitals, and schools.

*“Sit up slowly.”*

Sullivan leads the weekly “Treat Yo-Self Thursday Yoga” class. Sullivan is a licensed master’s level social worker and works at the Center as a full-time therapist, mainly for kids ages 5 and up, with a specialty in trauma, anxiety, disassociation and OCD. She also helps people manage their ADHD.

She has been in the mental health field for eight years and has worked at the Center for two years. “I gravitated towards helping people and had this natural tendency to be curious about them,” she said.

Sullivan has been teaching trauma-informed and trauma-sensitive yoga for almost three years. “I really love yoga as a way to help us reconnect with our bodies. A lot of times when we experience a lot of stress we completely disconnect from our physical experience.”

Sullivan also practices mindfulness for herself. She does ecotherapy, which is therapy outside in nature. “There is a lot of research showing that being outside is really great for becoming more present,” Sullivan said. “I love forest bathing because it really is the meld of being outside and being mindful.”

*“Close your eyes.”*

To some, mindfulness might sound like a cliché. But to those who practice it, mindfulness is more than treating yourself to feel better mentally. It is a way of being.

“Sometimes I feel like the word mindful can be not focusing on the right piece. We are not trying to focus entirely on our mind and our thoughts; we’re really trying to focus on being present and here in the moment and noticing and being with,” Sullivan said.

Sullivan has been practicing mindfulness for most of her life. Balentine has been practicing mindfulness for about a decade. Each brings their own ideals and mindfulness techniques to the Center.

“As we know, our mental and physical wellbeing are very interrelated, and so I just wanted a space where we could really attend to people’s mental and physical and spiritual wellbeing,” Balentine said.

*“Take one last deep breath.”*

Sullivan and Balentine find nature therapy or ecotherapy to be the most helpful and relaxing form of therapy for themselves and their clients. “We also do ecotherapy where we take people out in nature, and we incorporate nature into our work because we know that we are part of nature and we do respond well to it. It can help to regulate us and feel more connected to the world around us. In a lot of ways, I was trying to address the whole person. Nature for me is really regulating and healing and when I’m out doing therapy with my clients it’s also helpful in healing for me,” Balentine said.

Offering classes has been beneficial for Balentine, her therapists and her clients. Opening the Center has created an opportunity in the Memphis area for people to have access to different forms of mindfulness and therapy. “I think it was taking things I experienced being helpful for myself and creating a center where we could offer that so other people can get the same benefits,” Balentine said.

*“Our session is over; you may now open your eyes. How do you feel?”*