



mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

waking up

Right now some of the most exciting developments in mental health are taking place outside of the therapist's office. Mental illness is no longer shrouded in *mystery* and a large measure of the shame that used to be associated with mental illness has diminished. Knowledge about mental health problems and treatment is accessible in a way that has never been true before. Books, magazines, the Web, and talk shows have brought knowledge about complex psychological issues into the mainstream of life.


Therapists have taken the tools of cognitive behavioral psychology and presented them in ways that people can easily use. People who have trouble controlling their anger or are depressed, anxious, or insecure can find books and workbooks that offer simple and yet very useful ways to help them feel better. Self-help books on healing from sexual abuse and other traumas are readily available. While reading and working alone may not be enough, these books can be important first steps or adjuncts to psychotherapy.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, many people are beginning to blend spiritual wisdom with medical knowledge in ways that I believe offer great hope for our future happiness. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is the scientific way of acknowledging what enlightened spiritual traditions have taught for centuries: we are the source of much of our suffering. Yes, bad things happen to us, but the way we process and think about ourselves and what happens to us determines whether or not we stay stuck in unhappiness or move on through acceptance, healing, and peace.

Mindfulness meditation and other techniques to quiet the mind enable us to focus on the

present moment and observe our thoughts and feelings, how they come and go. Rather than seeing ourselves as "static" we recognize that we are a constantly changing mix of thoughts, feelings, sensations and that we have a constant chatter going on in our minds that determines how we perceive reality. When we can step back and observe, we can see reality a bit more clearly and less through our 'story.' We can also recognize that we are far more than our thoughts, feelings, sensations and story. As we breathe into our heart space we might just be able to be in touch with that part of ourselves that is connected with the divine.

The new field of positive psychology is 'discovering,' as spiritual traditions have always taught, that deep happiness is available to all, no matter what the conditions of our lives. Deep happiness is based on living lives that have meaning, with an emphasis on gratitude, kindness, compassion and wisdom. For me this is another way of saying that love is the basis of happiness, love for ourselves, love for our families and friends, love even for our enemies and those who would do us harm.

There is an explosion of teachers now; the best in my opinion are saying the same thing and it is compatible with traditional psychiatric thought: Go beyond your feelings, thoughts, sensations, get out of your story. Pay attention to your breathing. Try to be in the present moment. Focus on that stillness within, breathe into it, and dwell in it. Learn to love yourself, not in a self-centered, self-absorbed way, but in the way that enables you to feel your connection with the rest of the universe and informs the way you treat yourself and all others. In that space fear melts and we know the words of Julian of Norwich are true: all will be well again. 

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