

## **What is Mind-Body Medicine?**

Mind-Body Medicine focuses on the interactions between mind and body and the powerful ways in which emotional, mental, social and spiritual factors can directly affect health. The Center for Mind-Body Medicine emphasizes an approach that uses scientifically validated techniques that respect and enhance each person's capacity for self-knowledge and self-care. These techniques include self-awareness, relaxation, meditation, exercise, diet, biofeedback, visual imagery, self-hypnosis and group support.

Mind-body approaches use the conscious mind to directly affect the workings of the brain and the rest of the body. The techniques exert their effect on the hypothalamus, the switching station in the brain, which exercises control over the autonomic nervous system (which controls heart rate, blood pressure etc.), the endocrine (glandular) system and the immune system.

The scientific literature on these approaches is now rich and robust. Studies dating from the late 1960's showed the power of these techniques to balance the over - activity of the sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system ("the fight or flight" and "stress" responses) which is implicated in many physical and emotional diseases and conditions, with parasympathetic nervous system stimulation that promotes relaxation. More recently, these techniques have been demonstrated to create beneficial changes in many of the body's physiologic responses (including blood pressure, stress hormone levels, pain response and immune functioning) and to make a significant clinical difference in conditions as diverse as hypertension, HIV, cancer, chronic pain, and insomnia as well as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

The Center for Mind-Body Medicine's programs teach these techniques for affecting physical and emotional functioning in small groups that also provide an opportunity for self-expression and mutual support. These experiences of self care – experiencing one's ability, for example, to lower blood pressure or decrease anxiety – enhance each person's sense of self-efficacy and self responsibility even as they provide direct physiological benefits. The groups also provide an opportunity for ongoing practice of these techniques and offer members support in making the major changes in lifestyle, which are required to alter the course of chronic physical and emotional problems.

These approaches and the "Mind-Body Skills Groups" in which they are taught make use of peoples' strengths; encourage them to experiment with their own abilities; enhance their sense of control; are free from any stigma that may be associated with "mental illness"; and are as well, interesting and fun. The techniques and the groups have proven appealing and applicable to people of all ages, ethnic groups and levels of education – from war traumatized Kosovo children and U.S. inner city teenagers to stressed out medical school faculty, military and diplomatic personnel in hostile situations, and elderly people with chronic illnesses.

Research on our own and similar programs at Harvard, Stanford, Georgetown, UCLA and the University of Massachusetts Medical School has consistently demonstrated the power of this kind of group intervention in treating heart disease, cancer, HIV and chronic pain; in helping medical students and health professionals reduce their levels of stress; and in relieving the psychological stress and trauma that accompany war and terrorism.