

# Making the mind matter



**Aging positively starts with mindfulness, according to this mindful movement specialist. Learn how you and your clients can add mindful activity into daily life and ‘reinvent the way we age, one mindful thought at a time’**

*by Lawrence Biscontini, MA*

As we continue to unlock the power of the mind, the concept of mindfulness grows as a hot topic of research in the active-aging industry. Our mental outlook truly sets our tone about, and attitude towards, what we can achieve in our lives, because a positive outlook includes making positive choices. Since the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention<sup>1</sup> says that our very choices are more important than pharmacology and exercise combined, the right mindful approach to each day proves key to aging positively.

We are united as active-aging professionals and organizations in our desire to “change the way we age.” As we embrace our International Council on Active Aging® mission, we can support better health, wellness and quality of life

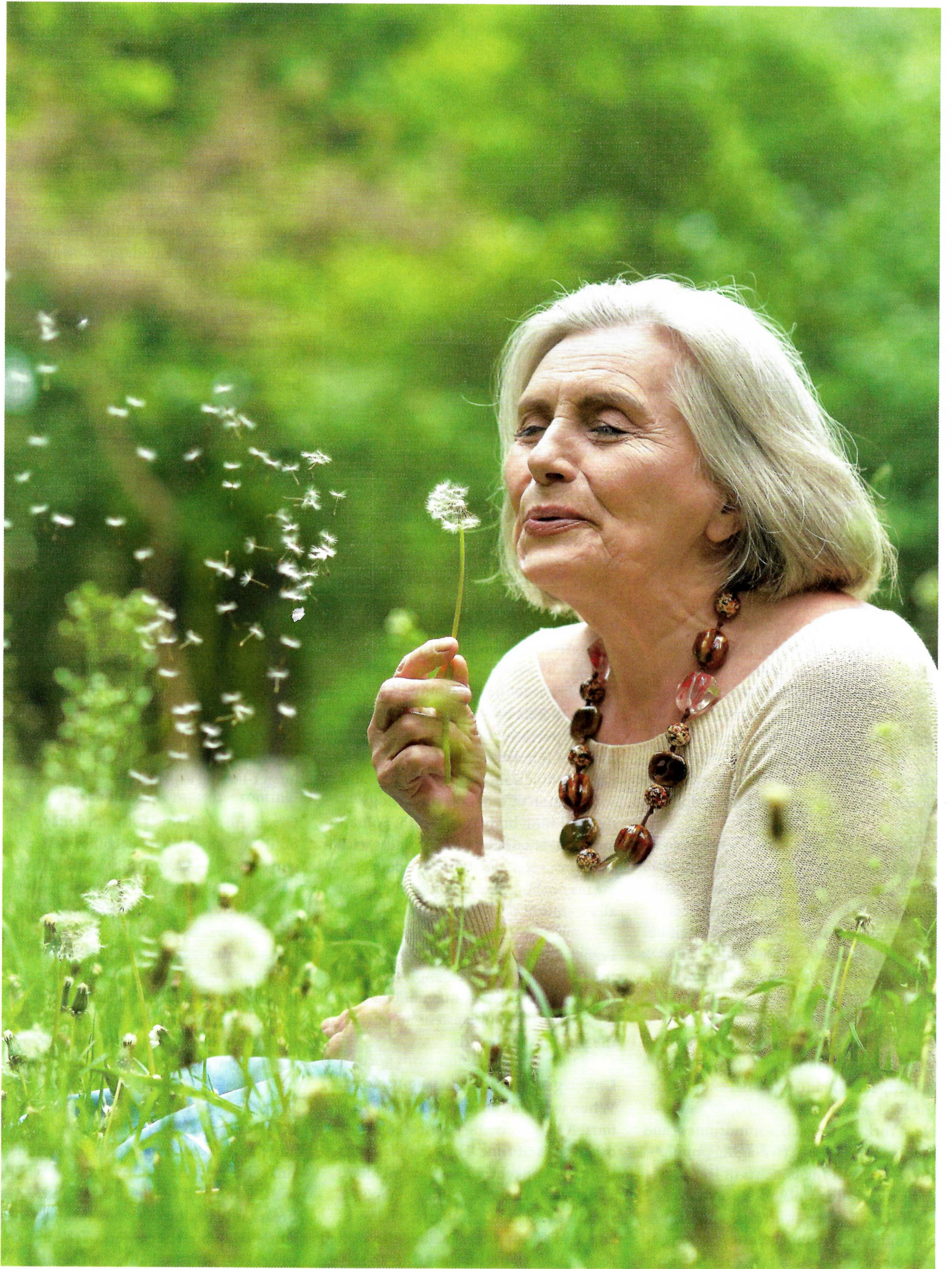
by encouraging people to practice mindfulness. Let’s explore here the physical value of mindfulness for older adults, some of the highlights in this growing field, and some suggestions for adding the concept of mindfulness into our programming for this population.

## **The proof is in the lab**

In a world of increasing stress, some sources reveal that just listening to the evening news on television or radio can increase the cortisol rates in the body up to 7%.<sup>2</sup> Compounding the stress in people’s lives are current technological advancements that bombard the senses, and rising loneliness and depression (two issues that also reside in the mind).<sup>3</sup> With this almost-unending sensorial onslaught, the body easily can suffer from too little time to reprogram, repose and resynthesize. In the active-aging world, this can mean that we become so taken up with activities that create stress—and its deleterious effects—that we lose a sense of self and, consequently, lack mindful elements throughout the day.

By adding mindfulness in the guise of stress-reduction techniques for body and

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Lawrence Biscontini recommends a yoga-inspired pose to connect mind and body

mind as we start and finish each day, we not only increase our general well-being, but also our overall health and healing.<sup>4</sup> To be sure, the techniques outlined in this article may be attempted at any time of day. But the chance of reaping the benefits of mindfulness increases the closer to waking time we practice these tips.<sup>5</sup>

Ultimately, it is sometimes more important that our day includes attention to the mind—the most important “organic muscle” of the body—than to exercise. While adding mindfulness may itself be novel, this author reminds those who are new to this concept that “if you want what you’ve never had, you sometimes have to do what you’ve never done.”

Why be mindful? Yury Rockit, movement specialist and personal trainer for the JCC and Equinox Clubs, based in New York City, teaches mindfulness and meditation to the active-aging population. “Some of the benefits of learning to be mindful as we age,” Rockit says, “include a greater awareness of body and mind, interconnectedness among all aspects of one’s self, a faster relaxation

response when desired, and an enhanced sense of alertness. Mindfulness opens doors to a deep, meaningful living that is so crucial, whether individually we feel alone and forgotten or otherwise fast-paced and busy. Furthermore,” he notes, “being mindful can stimulate our PNS, or parasympathetic nervous system, which is the system that the body uses to heal itself.”

Research tells us that the process of mindfulness occurs in two main steps. First, bringing attention and awareness separately to our brain, body and breath produces the physiological effects that Rockit mentions, including improvements in energy, blood flow, and overall well-being in that particular area. Second, mindfulness with these *separate* effects can lead over time to a *holistic* experience, with the unified (integrated) body including a heightened sense of awareness and general well-being.<sup>6</sup>

How do we define mindfulness? Numerous textbooks now exist on the topic. For the purposes of this article, we will consider mindfulness to be attention to the coordination, communication and cooperation of our “internal trilogy”—that is, brain, body and breath. Some individuals associate mindfulness with religions, sects and cults. The concept means nothing more, or less, than overall awareness of this trilogy.

Perhaps the least intimidating place to start with a practical example of mindfulness is the most significant common denominator of all sentient beings on the planet. Our breath.

### Let’s get practically present

When we focus on our breath, we free ourselves from being connected to other parts of time. For example, oftentimes we concentrate on *past* incidents, which can bring up feelings of anxiety, remorse and guilt. Similarly, when we concentrate on *future* incidents, we often fear a chain of events occurring in less-

than-ideal ways, with statements such as “what if \_\_\_ happens,” for example. Such common preoccupations with the past and future not only are the opposite of mindfully connecting to the present, but also contribute to depression and loneliness.<sup>7</sup>

Our concern with guilt (of the past) and fear (of the future) automatically disappears when we focus on our breath, because this simple mindfulness exercise keeps us anchored in the present. Guilt and fear cannot exist in the present moment. However, these two emotions *can* keep us locked to the past or future and thereby undermine mindfulness. Rockit sums it up this way: “We can’t have a future if we keep our past present, so just taking life minute-by-minute allows us to reap the benefits of being mindfully present.”

Further, the more we add mindful moments to our day to focus on brain, body and breath in isolation and then integration, the more we reduce stress and enhance overall feelings of well-being in our lives plus increase transference to longer-lasting aspects of our day.<sup>8</sup>

Given the plethora of stimuli today, omitting mindfulness becomes easier and easier. Active agers may not all live in the technologically-rich socially-connected space of smartphones, Internet, and message bombardment, but constant distractions still arise from telephone, television and radio advertising that is more plentiful and diverse than ever.<sup>9</sup> Mindfulness depends on paring down both the number and type of stimuli to which we are exposed.

Why stop and be mindful at various times of the day? Will it solve our aches and pains? Research tells us that mindful techniques are not magic. However, while awareness of brain, body and breath integration does not cure preexisting ailments, the powers of the mind to heal continue to baffle traditional

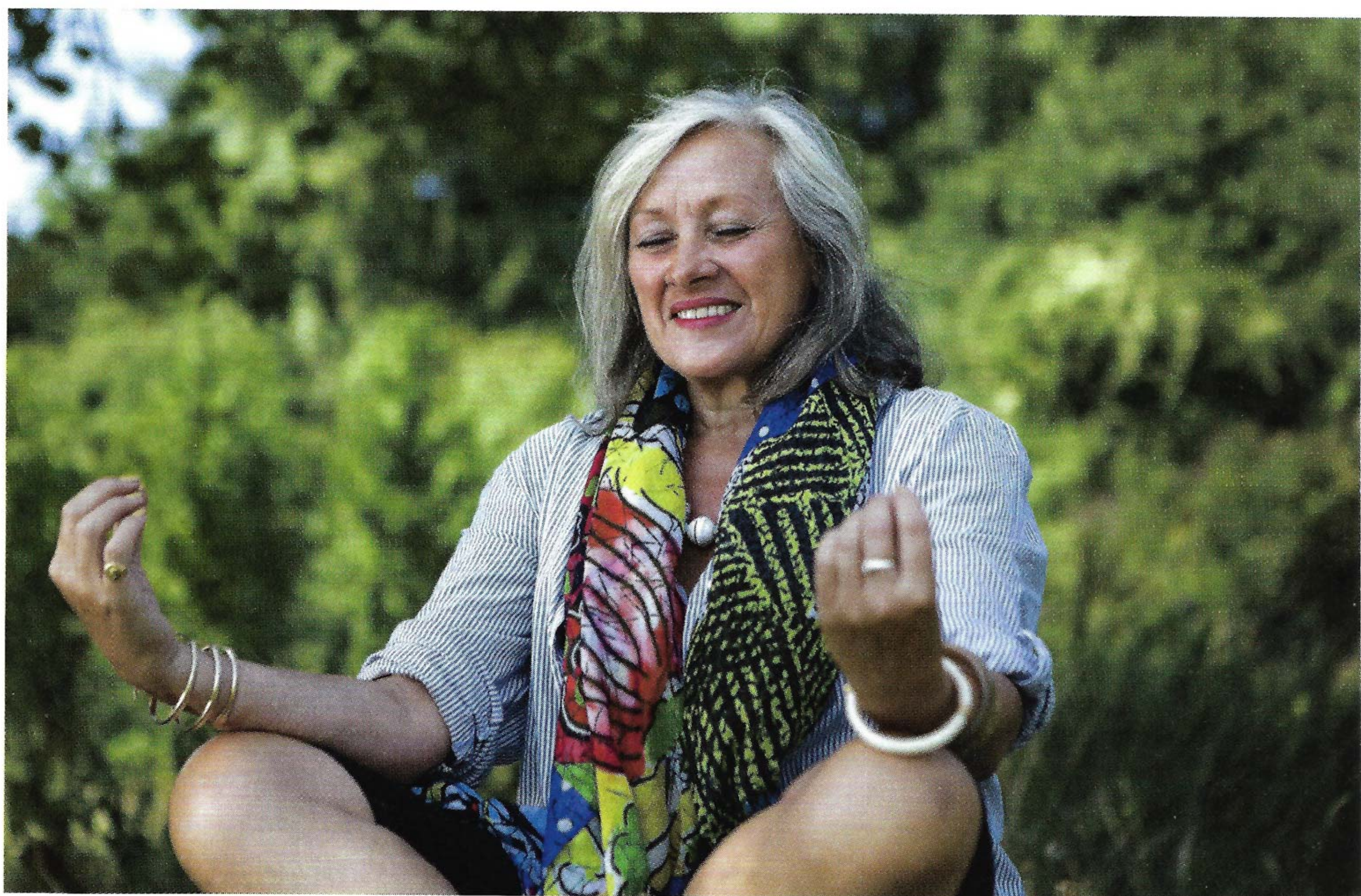
medical science. Many studies conducted this century document how a deeper communication with all parts of the self can result in happier and healthier individuals.<sup>10</sup>

Petra Kolber, host of “The Perfection Detox” Podcast on iTunes and an author, speaker and movement specialist based in New York City, has long been guiding people to both think and move mindfully. “One of the longest journeys we’ll ever make as humans is the journey from our head to our heart,” Kolber details. “And we are so busy being busy—and also beating ourselves up for not being busy enough—that it can be exhausting. When we are *mindful* instead of having our mind *full*, we are better able to make friends with ourselves, see the good in others, and find the ‘extra-ordinary’ in the seemingly ordinary of days.”

The idea of becoming mindful can seem overwhelming if we think it means committing to, say, an hour-long meditation practice once per week. This author recommends starting a practice of mindfulness for less than five minutes at a regular time each day. Just as fueling ourselves with breakfast feeds our physical body, practicing mindfulness feeds our spiritual and emotional body.

“How we begin our mornings is how we set up our day,” Kolber says, “so my invitation is to choose one morning routine and turn it into a mindfulness ritual. It may be adding mindfulness to making your morning cup of coffee, brushing your teeth or making your bed. Choose one thing, do it with intention and attention, and thereby increase the success and joy for your day.”

Adding mindful thought to an existing habit or chore, as Kolber mentions, proves an excellent way to introduce some of the benefits of mindfulness to our day. We can enter a mindful state by being aware of our breath, movements, posture and thoughts while making the bed or brewing coffee as if it were the first time we engaged in such an activity. By incorporating such nonthreatening mindful activities into our daily lives, we can become increasingly comfortable with this practice.



### Trends in this growing field

Given that the positive effects of mindfulness are clear,<sup>5</sup> the concept is appearing globally for the first time in group fitness programming for the over-50 participant. Classes that are now popular on the group fitness menus of both traditional gyms and “senior centers” include Seated Yoga, Partner Pilates, and Mindful Breathing. More creative classes dedicated to embracing mindfulness include Sit and Feel, Mind and Motion, Mind-FULL, Breathing & Stress, and Our Daily Breath, which introduce mindfulness and stress-reduction techniques into breathing—something we already do as humans, with proven results.<sup>11</sup>

Among the growing trends in the field, instructors of more *traditional* formats—strength and cardiovascular conditioning, for example—are incorporating aspects of mindfulness into their classes. Below are some of the ways:

- setting three minutes at the start of all types of classes to do some breath-awareness work
- ending classes with full body-scans to foster the brain-to-body connection and help participants discover how they feel *after* a session compared to its start
- introducing the first few repetitions of strength and endurance move-

ments more slowly than normal to improve integration of mindfulness with overall muscular form, movement integrity and plane-of-movement accuracy

- adding mindful components into personal training sessions with older adults<sup>12</sup> to reap benefits outlined earlier in this article
- adding mindfulness, neuroplasticity, and brain games with movements to promote neurogenesis (the birth of new neurons in the brain) through classes such as Train the Brain, Building Mental Muscle, and Brainercize

The sidebar on page 29 offers a sample primer for delivering these types of programs with mindfulness aspects.

[**Ed.** For more about promoting neurogenesis with mindfulness, neuroplasticity and brain games, refer to Lawrence Biscontini’s two-part series on “Training the brain to change the way we age” in the *Journal on Active Aging*<sup>®</sup>, and “Building mental muscle toward neuroplasticity” in *AFAA’s American Fitness* magazine (see “Resources” on page 28 for details).]

### ‘New roads toward wellness’

The growing trend of mindfulness offers a great deal of potential for the active-aging population. A few techniques im-

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## Tips and tricks for delivering programs: A sample primer

The following four tips allow individuals who are new to mindfulness to gain insight into simple, yet profound, ways to implement mindful aspects with programming for active agers.

### **Tip 1: Our Daily Breath: Breathing work**

At the start of each day, practice a few physical warm-up movements and breathing awareness, reminding yourself to take ownership of your intensity, breath and inner feelings at all times. Since research shows that consciously thinking about your breathing muscles yields greater gains in cardio, strength and flexibility,<sup>13</sup> say an affirmation. A suggested script appears below:

*“Remember that I choose to be aware of my breath at several times today, and if I work from the inside out, I can get more results. I will take a few minutes and just focus on my inhalation and my exhalation to calm myself and gather my awareness thoughts. While I am inhaling, I will repeat to myself ‘the air comes in,’ and while I am exhaling, I will repeat to myself ‘the air moves out.’”*

### **Tip 2: Self-inventory: Think**

In addition to breathing, add mindfulness thoughts as a self-inventory. This will allow you to practice the skill to scan your body and take an internal roster of your physical and emotional states. Research shows that scanning your body is an excellent way to do a mindful inventory of it.<sup>8</sup> A suggested body-scan mindful meditation follows:

*“I’m giving myself permission to take my awareness inside my body, not to judge or complain, but to take inventory of my muscles and mind. First, this means working from my toes to my nose and describing to myself how I feel in each major section of my body in as little or as long a time as I want to do this exercise. Second, this means finding words to describe my emotions. After this, I sit in silence. Instead of telling my muscles and mind what to do, I make myself open to be still and listen to what they say to me as I decrease stress and enhance my overall well-being and integration. As I scan my body, I repeat to myself: ‘No judgements, just awareness.’”*

### **Tip 3: Standing mindfully in who we are**

To integrate the first two tips, try the following pose standing up (or do this pose seated for similar benefits). Stand in a yoga-inspired *tadasana*, or mountain pose, with your hands in prayer position, thumbs on your heart. Know that practicing a standing yoga posture does not mean you invoke any religious or cultish practice, but merely repeat an ancient discipline aiming to connect mind and body. Try to bring your feet together as much as you are able, keeping your kneecaps lifted, core engaged, shoulders back and down, spine neutral and gaze forward.

Pennsylvania-based Valerie Grant, a somatic educator and guild-certified Feldenkrais instructor, suggests the meditation script below:

*“I take a minute to scan myself again from toes to nose, not to analyze how each body part feels, but*

*to claim ownership of my body as I stand in gratitude for what I have been given at this moment. I focus on what I can do, not what my physical or mental shortcomings are. I strive for awareness and integration of all aspects of my body and mind to maximize my existence today.”*

### **Tip 4: Lighten up!**

Light a candle and place it within your visual field. When possible, use a candle with aromatherapeutic properties as it can increase your depth of breath and heighten your mindfulness by promoting longer awareness of your breath. Simply put, when the air smells good, we breathe more deeply. Set a timer for a few minutes. Before you start this practice, be sure to set the room at a warm, comfortable temperature, if possible, and dress in layers to ensure your comfort if you are in a group setting, as no one temperature pleases everyone.

Say an affirmation, such as the suggested script that follows:

*“I’m using this candle with a lit, live flame around me to symbolize the live, burning and collective energy inside of me. I will look and breathe while using this candle as a symbol to reintegrate my energy, and concentrate on my inhalations and exhalations.”*

Instrumental music complements the experience—for example, natural sounds or harp music.<sup>14</sup>