

MINDFULNESS AND SELF CARE:  
*A WELLNESS WORKSHOP FOR THE ARTIST*

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## ABSTRACT

For my Departmental Honors Project Thesis, I decided to organize and execute a wellness workshop for the artist focusing on mindfulness and self care techniques to help combat stress and mental health issues that are prevalent in many students today. In my thesis below, I will stress the universality of the artist - that we all have in us the need to create and exist for a greater purpose. I will focus on the need for theatre artists in particular to learn mindfulness tools such as slowing down and remaining present in every area of life, practicing yoga, and eating nutritious, well balanced meals to support growth and combat stress in the craft. I will also incorporate a detailed analysis and reflection of the process leading up to my final execution: the workshop itself. Throughout this process, my greatest goal was to share my personal experiences with mindfulness and the way they helped me thrive as a student, artist, and human being. and stress the importance of self care. My hope is that this workshop, or one like it, would be duplicated each year as a way for students to become educated and practice their own self care. My thesis will aim to accentuate my notion that as creative beings, we must function in the healthiest version of our minds and bodies in order to fulfil our greatest potential as artists and people.

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## Mindfulness and Self Care:

### *A Wellness Workshop for the Artist*

We all carry within us the essence of an artist. It does not matter what skills we possess: whether they be that of a fast paced, logic minded biologist, an emotionally driven actress, or a unique, eccentric businessman - we all feel the need to create. To be a part of a bigger process that brings something good, beautiful, and true to the world. We may not all feel creative all the time, and we may reject our inherent artistry, but the longing dwells within all of us to create something in this life that both fulfills us and makes us feel as though we are here for a purpose. It allows our souls to come to life.

This process is, of course, different for everyone. The brain surgeon performing a life or death surgery on a young patient would never in a million years be fulfilled in the same way as a famous actress would, getting up on stage and performing a full scale production in front of hundreds of people. I would argue, however, that both of those things are inherently artistic and stem from the need to be a part of something bigger than oneself. No matter what kind of artist you identify as, a healthy well being and a sense of wholeness is essential to a healthful life. It is not the quality of the ingredients we use to build our lives that matter, but the care we bring to the process itself (McManus). It is so easy, especially as college students, to focus solely on the final product and miss the beautiful journey it took to get there. When we rush the process, killing ourselves to get to the finish line, we often suffer physically, mentally, emotionally, and creatively.

## THE GOAL

While I believe in the importance of acknowledging the ‘universal artist’ as stated above, for the purposes of my project, I decided to focus on the art forms of theatre and performing, since I have spent four years studying the craft while at Texas Christian University, and for many years before that as a practitioner. Theatre artists are unique in the way that job success greatly relies on vulnerability. To be a truly successful actor, a presence of openness is required. Actors must allow their unique humanness to show through in order to impact and affect audiences. They must be willing to embrace deep, sometimes uncomfortable emotions in order to fully embody a character and achieve success as a working actor and performer. Great stress is put on the mind as well as the body and the work is often extremely taxing both physically and mentally. As a theatre artist myself who understands the inevitable, harsh self scrutiny involved and due to the competitive nature of the entertainment business, I wanted to create a *Mindfulness and Self Care* workshop specifically geared toward the artist in response to the mental, physical, and emotional stress from which performers often suffer. For actors and performers, healthy bodies are essential to what we do. Having stamina, healthy working muscles, and a thriving mind and spirit is key to maintaining a successful career, as well as our own sanity. Tools to combat stress, anxiety, self-defeating thoughts, and fear associated with being an actor are desperately needed, especially for students who are about to move on from their safe college bubble, and embark into a world of constant auditioning - their talent and self worth constantly scrutinized.

## THE INSPIRATION

The idea behind this wellness workshop was multi-faceted and came from various influences. During the second semester of my junior year at TCU, coming fresh out of a semester spent studying abroad in Florence, Italy, I experienced a dramatic shift in my overall well being: mood swings, hormone imbalances leading to abnormal menstrual cycles, poor eating habits, and an increase in anxiety and fatigue. My stress level was higher than it had ever been, though I did not understand why, and was at a loss as how to fix it. I figured it was just the combination of little sleep, and a heavy workload. It was normal for a college student to often feel sluggish, fatigued, and depressed, right? Wrong. Deep down, I knew that this gloomy, exhausted version of myself was a complete contrast to my usual energetic, and joyful personality. That same semester, at the end of the year banquet for our theatre department, I sat through twenty farewell speeches from graduating seniors. At least half of them mentioned mental health, anxiety and depression, or stress as a personal battle they had dealt with throughout college. I was completely blown away. One small department, a department in which some of the most beautiful art is created, should not be filled with so many young students struggling with depression and anxiety. Those speeches greatly impacted me, as I began to solidify my summer plans.

That summer, just before my senior year, I had the opportunity to intern with Heath Perry, a health and wellness professional in Ojai, California - easily the most beautiful place I have ever visited. I worked on a farm by day, and their sister restaurant by night, learning how to grow my own food and nourish people in the most loving and sustainable way. I assisted on personal training sessions, hiked countless mountains, planned local community gatherings, and

soaked in everything I could from the people in that special town - people who each had their own individual story of how they came to Ojai to heal. The biggest thing I learned from my month in Ojai was the concept of slowing down and taking time for yourself. The concept of self care and the benefits of it were proven to me over and over through the people I met there. One woman's story struck me in particular. A middle aged, financially secure, and successful lawyer, this woman had fled to Ojai from a fast-paced, high stress, self detrimental life in the middle of Los Angeles. She had worked for several years as an extremely powerful attorney for famous stars and had achieved a status of high society and an abundant income. However, the workaholic LA lifestyle was slowly killing her as she learned that she was diagnosed with cancer, which was quickly spreading. A wife and mother, with two high school aged children, she had no intention of dying at the peak of her life and decided to take her health into her own hands. She left her job of wealth and glamour in LA, moved to Ojai, planted a huge garden, and opened up her own tiny law practice revolving around sustainability in farming. In just a few months, she had reversed her cancer and was on the road to a full recovery, after many doctors told her there was little chance for survival. This woman's story made a huge impact on me, as I realized that a certain kind of lifestyle can in fact contribute to, and in some cases cause, detrimental health consequences. It also made me realize just how powerful the process of slowing down and caring for yourself can positively impact your health, sometimes meaning the difference between life and death.

When I returned to Texas for the rest of that summer, I made it a priority to do the things my body was desperately craving. I gave up certain foods that my body rejected in order to maintain my hormone levels, prioritized sleep, spent more time in the sun, grew more plants and



herbs, made my own food as much as possible, played my ukulele, read more books, practiced a lot of yoga, exercised almost every day, danced and took classes, and spent time with the people I love the most. I vowed to prioritize my mental and physical well being throughout my senior year, even when I knew the semester would pick up and stress would be constant. I spent time researching stress in the body: how and where it culminates, what it really means, and efforts to combat it. Through my research, my time spent in Ojai, and my experiences in yoga, the words mindfulness and self care continued to arise. These terms were key in my search to heal myself and I realized I wanted to help my friends and peers to do the same. As a theatre artist in college, we are extremely susceptible to high stress, mental taxation, and intense self analysis and comparison - and it would only get more intense post graduation. Through my own personal search for mental clarity and wellness, I knew that my knowledge could be useful when shared among my peers, which is what led me to this idea for an informational and interactive mindfulness and self care workshop specifically geared to the artist.

## THE PLAN

During the early stages of planning and researching my project, I had to solidify exactly what it was I was hoping to achieve and what I wanted the take-away to be for my attendees. My ideas took a great many shapes as I wrestled with various considerations for my project. The final version of my workshop came out of watching and gaining inspiration from Heath Perry, the health professional I shadowed in Ojai. One of my responsibilities under Perry was to put together a promotional video of footage previously taken from a three day self care retreat he had singularly executed during which attendees were taken through an exercise regime, led through a

daily meditation and yoga sequence, as well as created and cooked their own meals using local, sustainable and organic ingredients. This all encompassing, interactive wellness workshop was the perfect vehicle for relaying this important information that many people knew they needed but did not know how to gather and implement themselves. As a senior fine arts student in my last semester, I knew it would be a feat to execute a three day long workshop, not to mention impossible to fit into our packed theatre calendar and course work. So, I decided on a single three hour workshop in which I could incorporate all of the things I had researched and experienced for myself, as well as have the chance to teach a short yoga sequence, and allow attendees to have a hands on food experience in which they could create their own healthy parfaits.

Once I solidified my plans towards the end of the fall semester, I spent all of Christmas break researching and gathering material to use for the informative aspect of my workshop. Prompted by my advisor, I watched many Ted Talks and videos from working professionals that had experience with stress and mental health, particularly pertaining to the artist. While I am committed to proving that mindfulness techniques are universally beneficial for everyone, I wanted to focus specifically on the theatre artist for my project simply because I relate to the lifestyle of the craft. Through the fourteen years I have spent working in the theatre, I have become increasingly cognizant of the damage we do to ourselves as a sacrifice for our craft. I wanted to explore this more intently and share with my peers certain tactics actors can use to keep themselves healthy while achieving utmost success in their line of work.

Theatre and performing, as a craft, requires actors to put huge amounts of stress on their bodies and spirits on a regular basis. We expect our bodies to meet intense physical demands,

from dance classes to tumbling to stage combat fighting, even aerial silks - simply to meet the basic expectations for hire-ability in the real world. Now, pair this with personal daily exercise routines to maintain fitness levels and stamina in order to compete amongst the countless others going after the same role. To achieve success in the world of acting, the body must be in its best possible condition, simply to compete on the most basic level with the thousands of other actors who may be going after the same role. One specific, real life example pertaining to the high physical stress put on the body during performances is the story of the musical “Spider Man: Turn Off the Dark.” The actor playing Spider Man's stunt double was supposed to swing through the audience on a harness, however one night when he jumped, his safety harness flew open, dropping him more than 30 feet to the orchestra pit (Kloberdanz). Though this is an extreme example, it exemplifies the physical demands and stress that many productions require. Dancers, in particular, must endure rigorous hours of strenuous rehearsals and then maintain their physical health through performances eight times a week, with only one night off. Pulled muscles, injuries, and just general fatigue is common, especially if one is not in their best physical condition.

Artists are also put under an intense amount of mental and emotional stress. It takes an incredible amount of creative effort to produce your very best work. The preparation an actor takes on in order to fully embody the character in which they have been cast takes endless hours of research, character analysis, and acting techniques to achieve the emotional state called for in specific scenes. Not to mention the outside stress and emotional taxation that comes with endless auditioning, constant rejection, and the inevitable need to compare. Often, it is draining and discouraging to the point where actors completely lose touch with their identity and can no

longer see the unique gifts they bring to the world. When our mental capacity is cluttered and stressed, no room is left for creativity, which is discouraging and counterproductive for our artistry! Throughout these four years of college, I have walked with my peers through many situations of crippling anxiety and deep set stress due to the pressure and the workload that comes with working towards a BFA in theatre. The need for stress management techniques and self-care resources to be taught as part of the theatre curriculum is extremely apparent, as it would set students up for success throughout college, as well as post-graduation life. I made it a point my senior year to be more open about the information I have learned as well as my own personal experiences after several of my peers had taken interest in my nutritional and exercise habits. Many wanted advice and recommendations for how to duplicate these wellness techniques in their own lives. This gave me the courage to further share my passion for health and nutrition and encourage my friends and peers to get involved. In February, my roommate and I began co-teaching a free weekly yoga class for students in the theatre department, from which we received extremely positive feedback. The success of this experiment gave me confidence and helped to grow the idea for my workshop, as I knew that there would be an audience for it.

## THE EXECUTION

So, what is mindfulness exactly? By dictionary definition, it is a mental state achieved by focusing one's awareness on the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting one's feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations, used as a therapeutic technique. Mindfulness techniques are great ways to manage stress, improve sleep, and avoid illness, which is essential

to maintaining a creative headspace, as previously mentioned. The biggest culprit for deteriorating health, anxiety, and fatigue is stress, which taxes our ability to be creative and immerse ourselves in experiences. Kaitlin Hopkins, a former Broadway actress and current Theatre Professor at Texas State University, has dedicated this phase of her life to incorporating mindfulness techniques into their theatre department's curriculum. She does a thorough job of explaining exactly what stress is and where it culminates in the body, which helps diagnose the true issues and more accurately move forward. Fascinatingly, as Hopkins explains, stress is purely chemical and is triggered by the limbic system, which means that the problem is not the stress itself, but how the limbic system interprets the data it receives. For this reason, in order to combat our stress, we must train the limbic system to take the information it receives from our five senses and interpret it in a way that sends the data up to the neocortex instead of down to the brain stem. In less scientific terms, we rely on the neocortex for creativity, compassion, clear decision making, and general happiness, whereas the brain stem carries a build up of cortisol, the chemical that manifests as stress.

The body is programmed to respond to stressful situations in “fight or flight” to ensure survival. This is instinctual and is a positive reaction to emergency situations. However, most of our bodies do not understand the difference between “running from a lion,” a historical fight or flight response, and a pressing deadline at work or school - a more modern manifestation of stress. Because of this, people who experience consistent high stress have constantly higher cortisol levels than normal. The effects of this include a redirection of circulation to the muscles and heart, and away from digestive and detoxification organs, a breakdown, or burning of muscle for energy, counteracting insulin and causing an increase in fat storage (weight gain),

suppressing the immune system (more susceptible to sickness), damaging the brain cells responsible for memory and learning, and preventing deep and restful sleep (The Hearty Soul). It is no wonder that so many students often walk around like zombies on campus!

Hopkins's tools help students shift from the reactive, fight-or-flight part of their brain, to the upper 80% of the brain: the neocortex, where creativity and compassion live. Using meditation and mindfulness techniques, Hopkins teaches students that they can train themselves to alter the chemical makeup of their bodies to release serotonin and endorphins - the ability to think clearly and feel better - instead of cortisol. Hopkins stresses the importance of mindful breathing, meditation, and yoga courses to reboot the nervous system as equal to core and performance classes. She believes that there must be as much time spent on mental health as there is on vocal and physical health and training. The best part is that Hopkins is actually seeing results. There has been an increase in healthy behaviors in her students and an apparent decrease in the severity of mental issues from the time she began the mental health curriculum to now. What would happen if more fine arts programs adopted this commitment to mental health in their students? I believe in the power of creating a dialogue between faculty and student in order to better communicate and connect with one another regarding the things more important than earning a perfect grade, or booking that next job. Just think: what could we be capable of if we lived in the healthiest, most creative versions of our minds (TeachMentalHealthNow)?

## THE WHY

It is not surprising that mental health issues have become more prevalent in the last several years. The millennial generation has grown up in a world of technology, multitasking and

utilizing social media as a substitution for human interaction. We pride ourselves on our amazing ability to multitask, considering it a positive, normal attribute. However, it is actually counterproductive. We tend to think that our ability to multi-task only grows stronger as we do it, however the fact is, the more we multi-task, the *worse* we become at it. (Editors of TIME).

According to professor Earl Miller, a cognitive neuroscientist, every time you switch your focus from one thing to another, a switch cost occurs - your brain stumbles and it is harder to get back to where you were before the distraction occurred (The Editors of TIME). In this day and age, the effects of multitasking are most apparently seen with cell phone usage. Our devices follow us everywhere these days, leaving little or no time for recovery. When the brain becomes accustomed to checking a device every ten minutes, it will struggle to stay on task even when it is not interrupted by digital alerts. This is known as the 'phantom text syndrome' - a problem we have all experienced at one time or another when we absentmindedly pick up our phones just for the satisfaction of making sure we have not missed anything. This obsessive device attachment can be dangerous, as a 2014 study from the journal *PLOS One* points out: "people who spend time 'media multitasking' tend to have less gray matter in the section of the brain involved with thought and emotion control" (The Editors of TIME). This is a sobering fact for all young people, but especially hits home with me as a theatre artist. As performers, we rely on our ability to control our emotions and awareness of thought. Without the ability to emote, the art we wish to create loses its impact as well as its intensity and falls short in the eyes of the audience. In order to combat this susceptibility to distraction, we must slow down and remain present in our lives. Mindfulness embraces the beauty of *monotasking*, paying attention on purpose to every moment without judgement.

## THE HOW

In order to remain present, we must become aware of even the most mundane things in life - the things we often take for granted such as cooking dinner, folding laundry, or having a conversation with a friend. Becoming aware and focusing on these simple tasks keeps us from thinking too far in the future, or checking our device every five minutes. Spending time in nature and engaging in meditation practices may also assist in achieving a mindful presence.

Monotasking and refraining from cell phone use is easier said than done for most of us. In my workshop, I discussed several tools that make living in the moment and not via a screen much more feasible. These techniques include powering down your phone before you sleep, or plugging it in elsewhere to avoid the temptation of checking social media or emails just before dozing off. I tried this out on my own, and even invested in an alarm clock so I could be phone free at night, and also in the morning right after I woke up. I noticed positive effects such as peace and contentment before falling asleep, a more sound sleep, and less stress upon waking. Practicing mindfulness such as focusing on the people and places in your life more often than social interactions through a screen, can also help you accept things without strongly attaching to them.

As young artists in the theatre business, where self analysis and comparison is so prevalent, it can be difficult not to take things personally, or feel things too deeply. Often, emotions completely take over, allowing no room for logic, and we are left broken or confused. Practicing mindfulness still allows the experience of intense emotions, but it leads to a quicker



baseline recovery (The Editors of Time). To be grounded in mindfulness, we must be more present in our emotions, especially as theatre artists where the success of our work depends on the ability to emote truthfully. If we do not know how to acknowledge or appreciate our emotions, they will control us and can ruin a day or sabotage relationships. We must find a balance between acknowledging them and allowing them to be there, versus letting them control us (The Editors of TIME). Additionally, sleep plays an important role in mindfulness and resetting emotional activity.

## Sleep

Sleep is vital for rehabilitation of the body, mind, and spirit. Without sleep, the susceptibility to illness, fatigue, anxiety, stress, and brain fog is much more present. In my workshop we discussed ways to approach a nightly routine that are most conducive to a sound sleep. I encouraged the attendees of my workshop to create their own personalized morning and evening routine creating an ideal atmosphere for a sound sleep. A few tactics I came up with based on research and personal experience were as follows: Eat a light meal 2 hours before bed, shut off electronics one hour before sleeping, establish a repeatable and consistent evening routine including taking a bath or shower, stretching, drinking tea, observing your day and extending gratitude for the events that unfolded. We also discussed things to focus on during the day that will aid in a sound sleep at night. These include getting exercise and spending time in natural light, as artificial light throws off the body's natural circadian rhythm. In addition, we talked about avoiding caffeine after noon, eating well rounded, nutritious meals, and feeling fulfilled during the day by doing the things that make you feel happy and productive.

A weekly ritual I like to keep is practicing yoga in the morning when I wake up or in the evening to wind down. It helps me relax, find balance, and focus on myself instead of the million other things I have to do. It gives me a clear headspace and allows me to take time for myself, even if for just a few minutes. Yoga as a practice is a powerful tool for combatting stress and focusing on breathing. Classically, it was designed to rejuvenate the spirit and prolong life using radical techniques to cleanse the body and mind by breaking the knots that bind us to our physical existence (Elise Greig, Saptarshi Ray). It focuses on the exploration of the physical-spiritual connections and body centered practices, which is exactly what the concept of mindfulness urges us to do: become more aware and in tune with our body, breath and emotional thought processes.

## Yoga

I felt it was important to incorporate a short yoga practice in my workshop that the students could replicate on their own, whether it be just before going to sleep, upon waking, or as a warm up before a performance to overcome the nerves. There are many types of different practices, and poses that aid in various physical problems such as digestive, detoxification, and stress. I took the attendants of my workshop through a practice that was conducive specifically to stress and breathing. Of course I have heard that yoga eases stress and strengthens the spirit, and have even experienced it myself through several particularly therapeutic practices and instructors. However, I wanted to find out through my research the reasons behind this phenomenon, in order to understand how I could better structure my own yoga classes and help others structure their own. What I learned was that there are two sides to the brain, known as the logical brain and the emotional brain. The emotional brain initiates a ‘stress response’ via the

sympathetic nervous system which culminates in adrenaline and cortisol racing through our circulation. The logical brain, in contrast, is forever trying to ‘turn off’ this stress response and restrain the emotional brain. The stronger our logical brain, the better it becomes at controlling the emotional brain. When this emotional stress response is ‘turned off,’ our parasympathetic nervous system is consequently ‘turned on,’ which is the body’s signal to relax. In other words, a strong logical brain correlates directly with relaxation, which means we want to do everything we can to strengthen our logical brain. Stress responses and ‘relaxing’ signals travel through the body through a specific route with ‘switches’ that we can physically manipulate to turn on and off. Practicing yoga strengthens the logical brain, as the physical manipulations we perform in yoga help turn the signals on and off.

Every time we hold a posture, or asana, we must stay extremely still to concentrate and find balance, which activates our logical brain. Furthermore, when we bend forward into forward fold, our ‘relaxation’ signal is turned on through the ‘switches’ found in the neck. Bending forward and concentrating at the same times triggers both the logical brain and the relaxation signal simultaneously. In turn, *contracting* a muscle triggers the stress response signal, so when we bend backwards and contract our muscles while also remaining still and focused on balance, our logical brain is given an extra challenge. It must overcome the triggered stress response signal before we can be still and fully concentrate during a pose. By the end of a yoga practice, through a series of poses, the logical brain has had a full ‘workout,’ which can result in a rewiring of the nerve connections within the logical brain. This new circuitry enables easier control of thought formation, which may make it easier to channel thoughts in a positive

direction instead of dwelling on negative experiences. For this reason, yoga is said to counteract depression and anxiety and is often practiced as a therapeutic tool.

Whenever I teach my own yoga practice, I like to come around to each student while they are laying, eyes closed in savasana, an end of practice ritual that entails lying flat on your back, eyes closed, with limbs relaxed and uncoiled. I offer them a subtle neck massage and spray them with an essential oil blend to further relax and serve. It is always very well received and appreciated. I proceeded to do this during the yoga component of my workshop, and it did not disappoint. I think it is important to give back the love that you receive from willing and eager students who have shown up and remained present in your class for a whole hour. It is acknowledging and allowing them to acknowledge the strength they each hold individually and the power they contain. This is one of my favorite things about yoga: the way it encourages you to tune into your sensations and give your body gratitude for the multitude of things it allows you to do each day. When practicing yoga, the mind is occupied on strength, serenity, and space, instead of all the tiny worries and anxieties that we carry with us all day every day. It is a chance to breathe, to decompress, to practice mindfulness and be present in our sensations. This feeling is always what I strive to give back to my students, and what I hoped to have shown them in my workshop. I further wanted to bless and thank them by offering an informational and interactive nutrition component, in which each student was able to make their own yogurt and granola parfait.

## Nutrition

Before I let the attendants loose to create their own parfaits, I led a discussion on nutrition and the importance of nourishing the body with the nutrients it needs to not only

survive, but thrive. For college students, time is the biggest factor in our daily routine. Or rather, the lack of it. Anyone who attended college can attest to the late night fast food runs, early mornings functioning solely on coffee, library junk food, the dining hall. . . the list goes on. As a BFA theatre student, our time is even more jam packed considering evening rehearsals, practicing for in class performances, working behind the scenes on crews, helping with all day load in and strikes, in addition to making time for core classes and studying. There is very little time to think about eating healthy, let alone meal prepping and cooking your own meals. However, this abundance of fast food, sugar, and caffeine can lead to very low quality of living: poor sleep, excessive stress, breakouts, low immune system, foggy brain, sluggishness, weight gain, and more. Because, as artists and as students, we want to set ourselves up for the best opportunities for success as possible, that means staying on top of our health while we are young. Beginning freshman year, I co-started a healthy eating blog on Instagram with my roommate, out of a passion for food and nutrition as well as my desire to share it with my peers. So many of my friends think that eating healthy is practically impossible while in college, or that it just doesn't matter - a notion I desperately wanted to change, and felt compelled to do so.

In my workshop, I talked about the idea behind mindful and plant-based eating. This refers to eating seasonal, local produce when available and living in a way that is mindful of the connection between the source of our food and the nourishment it provides to our body. Basically, this means understanding where our foods come from and being curious and inquisitive about the process. Eating seasonal, local produce, as close to their most natural state keeps you in tune with the seasons and by extension, your own inner needs. It also guarantees that you are eating foods in their most nutritious and beneficial state.

When it comes to a plant-based diet, I simply mean getting most of your nourishment from plant-based whole foods: fruits and vegetables, whole grains, nuts and seeds - foods that are in their simplest, most whole state. I do not urge nor do I follow a vegetarian or vegan diet, as I believe everyone's body is different and protein from locally sourced, sustainable animal products are necessary for many people. However, limiting our intake of meat, and being mindful of where and how we acquire it, is simply better for our bodies as well as the environment. Lowering meat intake will lower your carbon footprint: for reference, to produce just one hamburger requires 660 gallons of water, and 51% of global greenhouse gas emission come from livestock, compared to only 13% from transportation. Many meat lovers may wonder where they are supposed to get their protein, if not from meat. Many people do not realize that there are important protein sources in many vegetables and grains. For example, dark green leafy vegetables such as kale, broccoli, brussel sprouts, and peas, are loaded with protein: as much as 8 grams per cup. Furthermore, quinoa, lentils, chia seeds, walnuts, hemp seeds and sprouted beans are another huge source of non animal-based protein.

## FINDING BALANCE

Of course, with everything in life there is a balance. Strictly depriving yourself of foods you love will only backfire in the long run. It is important to maintain a balance between eating and buying healthy foods and indulging in your favorite treat every once in awhile. The most important takeaway is the concept of eating mindfully. As previously discussed, mindful eating involves paying attention to what your body needs and what it doesn't. It means becoming curious about your internal cues and asking your body what it really wants. Is it food? Or is it

water, sleep, exercise or something else? By promoting self compassion, you may inhibit stress eating. Tips for mindful eating include focusing on the food: how does it taste, slow down and enjoy the moment. The quality of foods you eat and the attention you give to the act deeply affects your health and consciousness. When you take time to enjoy your food, you become attuned to what your body actually wants and when you have had enough. Slowing down is also essential for healthy digestion. As previously discussed, when you are in constant “fight or flight” or stress mode, you are unable to effectively digest your food, let alone give your body a break to do what it needs to do to be at its healthiest state: detoxing, eliminating, rebuilding immune function, and digesting.

## CONNECTION AND COMMUNITY

After leading a discussion on nutrition and mindful eating, I wanted to be able to show the students how delicious, and creative healthy eating could be. I provided everything needed to craft their own Greek yogurt and Chia pudding parfaits. In the weeks leading up to my workshop, I sent emails to many healthy snack brand companies that I have used previously, to ask if they would be interested in sponsoring my workshop. To my surprise, I received several responses complying with my request. I was overjoyed to receive boxes of sample packs, coupons, and buy one get one free passes from my favorite brands like Purely Elizabeth, Justin’s Nut Butter, and Salba Chia. While emailing back and forth, I promised to display their brands as well as send them pictures of my workshop as a follow up. After my workshop, I delivered thank you notes, and pictures of their displays as I had promised. These were received with gratitude and appreciation, as well as interest in displaying my pictures on their websites. Through this

process, I learned the importance of branding and maintaining positive relationships with anyone that may be able to help you. I was surprised by how easy it was to reach out to these companies, and how eager many of them were to assist me in my endeavors. If I were to do this workshop again, I would start the sponsorship process earlier and try and reach out to local grocery stores and cafes to see if they would be willing to donate products, or partner with me in any way. As the idea came later in the process, I only had time to reach out via email and phone calls, instead of going around to local vendors in person and further advertising my workshop to the community.

## LOOKING AHEAD

Overall, I was extremely proud of how the workshop unfolded. However, if I were to continue this event as a yearly workshop, I would pay more attention to detail and specificity. On a larger scale, I think it would be exciting to gain exposure from local businesses and create involvement within the whole community. This could be done through partnerships with local yoga studios, grocery stores and coffee shops for more product offerings and advertising on both ends. Sponsorship and donations from businesses would help decrease my out of pocket expenses and would in turn lend exposure to the brands and products. On a larger scale, this workshop could be extended to offer a meditation component, a longer yoga practice, and attendants could partake in a full scale community meal based on locally sourced ingredients, featuring products donated by local businesses. I would also ask for a small donation fee from attendants, and compensate by providing a goodie bag for each person to take home with them



featuring handouts of information discussed during the workshop, recipe lists, and brand coupons and giveaways.

As a component of my workshop, I felt it was important to follow up with my attendants and give them references and a summary of the information we discussed so that they could make use of it in their own lives. Therefore, I included a signup sheet upon entering the workshop asking for their name and email. Later that evening, I emailed all of the students who showed up a dropbox of materials I had gathered during my research. This included a digital recipe list that I created, an outline of the information I discussed during the workshop, scanned articles from a magazine entitled Mindfulness, as well as links to different blogs that have helped me in the past as I aimed to center my life on mindfulness and self care. In this email, I also urged the students to provide any feedback they wanted to share regarding their opinions on the success of my workshop, as well as their own personal stories or anecdotes relating to mental health and self care. Because my workshop was attended by a range of students including both theatre and non theatre majors, I received a large spectrum of follow up anecdotes. One, in particular, stood out to me and I wanted to include it as part of my reflection:

My freshman year of college I was faced with a variety of new people, experiences, and situations. Some of these things were beneficial to my growth as a young adult, but some were not. It was not long until I was diagnosed with anxiety, a mental health issue that was evolving into an eating disorder. I felt so lost. I happened to stumble across a yoga class one day in one of my darkest of days. Having danced all my life, the stretching and balancing made me feel at peace. It turned into a habit for me. I enjoyed the peace and was getting a decent workout in. Soon, this peaceful activity started becoming something so much more. It started becoming a mental space and sense of freedom from myself and the world. It was spiritual. I felt cleansed and confident. I felt empowered to explore and be my own self-- to start a new. Years later, yoga is still a huge part of my life. It has taught me to be grateful and spread light. I hope that, one day, I can assist someone who might be struggling with similar issues by giving them the gift of yoga. It truly heals.

Additionally, as a future teacher, I fully intend to incorporate yoga and mindfulness into my classroom. I believe in the healing that such self-reflection can bring. I want to share that with our future global leaders.

This response was written by a student majoring in elementary education, whose journey has been a long one, but whose success story reminds me why I want to continue sharing the value of mindfulness and self care practices. It is clear to me the difference a healthy mind and body can have on a college student, especially one pursuing the arts. I received only a few other personal responses, out of about twelve attendants, however I had an unexpectedly large number reach out to me who could not attend the workshop, but still wanted the information and supplemental materials. I realized that there is an obvious interest and need for a curriculum in mindfulness and mental health within the TCU theatre department. My goal, should I continue to move forward with this event concept, would be to present it to other Fine Arts Departments at various universities. The issue of mental health in youth and among artists is growing at a rapid rate, and it must be addressed. However, it must be addressed in a way that does not involve only offering drugs and medications to people who show signs of anxiety or depression.

## IN CONCLUSION

I am a firm believer in the power of nutrition, exercise, and self care as medicine for the body as well as the spirit. Not only have I seen its transforming effects in others, but I have witnessed it in my own life. We are not meant to serve as a slave to our work, our studies, or our peers. We are meant to not only survive, but thrive, in everything that we do. We are all meant to create something in this life - an artist within each one of us. Because, as Edward McManus writes in his thought provoking book *The Artisan Soul*, “great art inspires us to become our most

noble selves. It inspires us to greater courage, and sacrifice. It reminds us that in the midst of tragedy there is always beauty. The masterpiece refuses to leave us in the mundane and demands that the human spirit soar to a divine level. It reminds us of the uniqueness of being human and the power that comes in our shared experiences.” We must allow ourselves the best possible opportunity to explore this unique quality of our being. Focusing on your own self care, both physical and mental, is essential to living your most fulfilling and meaningful life. Ultimately, well being is not a journey toward perfection, but a journey toward wholeness (McManus). Well-being is not a destination, but the realization that the journey itself brings fulfillment and creates happiness. So please, breathe in that first scent of spring, wake up knowing how loved you are, how important you are, and take control of your life. The time is now.

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