
THESE THREE THINGS

PSYCHIATRIST, POET AND WRITER RAVI CHANDRA DISCUSSES CULTIVATING WELL-BEING IN THE REAL WORLD

WORDS NICOLE WONG

Dr. Ravi Chandra spends a lot of time thinking about how ancient healing practices can solve modern illnesses. The San Francisco-based writer and psychiatrist's debut nonfiction book, *Facebuddha: Transcendence in the Age of Social Networks*, explores the psychology of social networks through a Buddhist lens, emphasizing the importance of building meaningful relationships in our changing technological environment.

"We're relating to each other more and more through screens," he says. "That offers some possibilities, but also dangers."

Chandra says the social media-obsessed can end up sinking into depression, low self-esteem, narcissism and jealousy.

So what's an ultra-connected 21st century guy or gal to do?

Hyphen magazine asked Chandra to share his take on mental health, from both a scientific and spiritual perspective.

"Health is not simply an absence of disease, but the presence of well-being on biological, psychological, social, cultural, environmental and spiritual levels," he says. "I think we can cultivate well-being with these three things: mindfulness, compassion and relationship."

MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness is awareness of present experience with acceptance. Being online is usually the opposite of mindfulness as we erode our attention span with endless distractions. While mindfulness derives primarily from Buddhist teachings, its benefits have been secularized; mindfulness is now being used in various settings, from prisons to health care to schools to corporations to government.

You can start by simply focusing your attention on your breathing, anywhere from a few breaths up to an expanded meditation session of 45 minutes or longer. Mindfulness has been shown to decrease anxiety, depression, chronic pain and stress, and to improve sleep, heart disease and other physical ailments.

One way it works is by enhancing the "experiential self" — the self composed of awareness of bodily sensations, feelings and thoughts. Pain, for example, consists of both the physical pain and what the mind does with the pain. Mindfulness decreases pain by allowing us to be aware of sensations without reacting to them.

COMPASSION

The Dalai Lama says: "If you want to be happy, practice compassion; if you want others to be happy, practice compassion."

Why is this so? It's because the opposite is also true: "If you want to be unhappy, practice self-centeredness; if you want others to be unhappy, practice self-centeredness."

Compassion — feeling another person's suffering and being motivated to help them — breaks us out of our self-centered inclinations. Along the way, we need to practice self-compassion.

I regularly teach this practice to connect mind and heart and to decrease our tendencies to criticize and even hate ourselves. This is especially important for those of us who come from harsh, critical or demanding families. Loving kindness and compassion are the basis of good mental health and a good society. While it's possible to send compassion with likes and shares, we're built for face-to-face interactions in which we can fully nourish our positive emotions.

RELATIONSHIP

"No man is an island" — yet Asian Americans often "go it alone." Because studies have shown that we suffer from higher rates of depression, anxiety and suicide, we need each other.

All suffering is ultimately a crisis in connection. By developing and strengthening relationships within our families, friendship circles, communities and organizations (yes, including romantic relationships!), we can work toward health on all levels.

My bias is that it won't happen online, despite all the allure and benefits of social media. Love and relationship require presence in the real world, an appreciation of nuance and complexity and a great deal of humility and acceptance.

*A comment thread is not the
tapestry I seek.
Love's loom shuttles
heart-to-heart;
looms larger than "likes."*