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Forum: Mindful Listening & Speech

On May 7, 2015, Thao N. Le, PhD, presented *Mindful Listening and Speech*. Dr. Le asked the audience if they had cleaned their minds in the morning, a cleansing ritual like brushing one's teeth. She explained the importance of this process through three habit patterns of the mind that contribute to stress and suffering. In one pattern, the mind wanders from the present by worrying about the past or projecting the "what ifs" of the future. In another, the mind engages in aversion and distraction by avoiding unpleasant or distressing feelings and thoughts. As a consequence of avoidance, energy is directed away from maintaining good health, strong immunity, and happiness. In the third pattern, the mind hoards memories, biases, and concepts that prevent us from seeing new possibilities.



Next, Dr. Le explained two tools for cultivating mindfulness. Mindful breathing brings our attention to the breath as an anchor to the present. We maintain an awareness of the physical sensation of breath and acknowledge thoughts as they occur without reaction or judgment. Dr. Le conducted a brief exercise to introduce the audience to becoming aware of the breath cycles, recognizing distractions, and returning focus on the breath. She described the technique as, "Simple but not easy." Mindful listening offers another tool. Practice allows us to "pause and plan" before we speak so we are not drawn into the habitual fight or flight reaction. Dr. Le cautioned that since we often anticipate what another will say based on our own past experiences, we may listen selectively, jump to familiar conclusions, or become defensive. Stress increases the likelihood that we will rely on familiar behaviors. Dr. Le played a tape of sounds and asked audience members to identify them. The range in responses illustrated how our perceptions give meaning to what we hear.

Dr. Le advocated "beginner's mind" to abandon our usual filters and develop an open awareness of new possibilities. She explained how paraphrasing the speaker's words allows us to check our understanding and recognize that our filters may distort a speaker's intended message. Through the practice of mindfulness, we can release our preconceived ideas, develop patience and curiosity, and provide clear and authentic messages that convey our true intentions. Dr. Le may be reached at thaole3@hawaii.edu.