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Lifestyles

Howard Millman turns pain into joy

By DON HEPPNER

Howard Millman, a Pound Ridge psychologist, is on a mission to transport people from pain to joy. Dr. Millman is not standing in a traveling medicine show selling bottles of "Doctor Good," but he does offer practical advice that allows individuals suffering from pain to cure their own illness, whether psychological or in some cases physical, by simply changing their outlook about a situation or changing their approach to healing.

"I've written seven books and have practiced psychotherapy for 40 years," Dr. Millman said. In the last few years, he has amassed his knowledge in an effort to help people, and after that work, he came up with the phrase from "pain to joy."

He has run workshops based on that phrase that get rave reviews from participants. His basic precept is simple: "Most pain — and I am talking about psychological and physical pain — is unnecessary," he said. "Human beings perceive their situation in one way or another. It's people's perception that often causes anxiety and worry."

For example, somebody says, 'I might lose my job' or 'The economy is terrible.' Those thoughts can cause pain. He has always dealt with psychological pain, but so many of his patients complained of physical pain, often as a result of stress. "To put it simply, mind and body are one," Dr. Millman said. "The concept has changed dramatically in the last couple of years, even in medicine, about mind versus body."

He said the point to remember is mind and body are one. Stress for long periods will absolutely cause physical pain, such as back pain or some other pain. If the psychological aspects of a physically ill person are addressed, the ill person will respond even better to medication.

"Over the long run, psychotherapy and medication is better than medication alone," Dr. Millman said. "The idea is to help people cope with their problems."

Stress, according to Dr. Millman, is a vague term when used most of the time. Identifying what is really troubling an individual is necessary before a cure can be effected.

"Of course I feel lousy. You would too if you were me," is a statement made by many people, as if the pain is necessary and inescapable, according to Dr. Millman. Many people think the pain they experience is a part of life. "My pitch is that the pain is not part of life," Dr. Millman said. "Joy is a part of life."

Coping with pain is not the answer, and just getting rid of the pain is not enough. "If you become joyful and exuberant in living, that is what it is all about," he said. "Even the American Psychological Association has been focusing on positive psychology. What are the positive attributes that help people get by? They are flexibility and resiliency."

It was pondering those concepts that gave Dr. Millman the idea to create workshops to help people with pain.

"What is the most effective way to get rid of pain and increase joy?" he asked. "What I came up with is the traditional psychological principal that psychologists use when people come to them. That principle is cognitive modification. That means the individual should change the way he or she thinks. If an individual thinks a certain way about a problem and it causes depression, the way that person thinks should be changed."

"Stop feeling negative and start feeling positive," he said. "That concept has been around for 40 or 50 years. Sometimes it is not easy; sometimes it is difficult. A lot depends on the nature of the personality. Someone who has been negative all their life, it is tough for them to change."

Dr. Millman's treatment is not self-enriching. He often recommends activity rather than a couch. "Something like yoga is very effective for people," he said. His concern is that yoga can be

rigorous, and not everyone is physically equipped to endure its exercise regimen. He has incorporated some yoga positions that are easily practiced into a workshop format.

If an individual believes his job is at risk, he can go into a state of depression. "Does worry help anything?" he asked. "Well, no. Well then, why do you do it?" Dr. Millman says that if worry doesn't help, the individual should find something that does help. He suggests trying to make your current job more secure or starting to look for another job could be two alternatives that will help as opposed to sitting around and being negative.

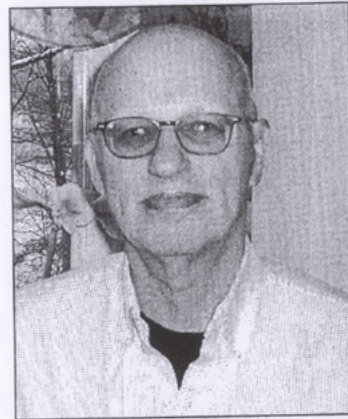
"The concept is: what can you do?" he said.

Maybe the individual is going to lose his job. Dr. Millman says that person should realize life is not over and he should cope with the situation by saying "I'll get over it." He suggests taking the optimistic approach instead of the pessimistic approach, which is when the person assumes he will never get another job. The optimist assumes he will get another job.

"The truth is, regardless of what the person thinks he cannot or can do, reality is what it is," he said. "The worry aspect is what causes pain."

He said studies show religious people have better mental health than nonreligious people. If a person believes in something that helps him or her get through difficult times, that positive attitude propagates a happier ending.

Dr. Millman includes Buddhism in positive religious beliefs and says there are aspects of that philosophy that can even help non-Buddhists. For example, he says living in the moment is a Buddhist teaching that can be very productive. "You don't have to be a Buddhist to enjoy the moment," he said. "If you are enjoying the moment, all you can do is make the best of the situation, prepare yourself for the future, be a force of good in the world, and joyful feelings happen that replace the feeling of worry and anxiety."



DON HEPPNER PHOTO

Howard Millman

The third aspect of Dr. Millman's formula for healthy and productive living is the connection of the mind and the body.

He said most adults have some sort of pain somewhere. He says that he is not a physician and does not provide medical diagnosis. "There are muscles that bring blood supply to the sore area," he said. "I teach people to get at their own pain and use the muscles and the blood to help cure the pain experienced in a given area."

Dr. Millman has simple yet effective treatments that might do the job. Hot showers can allow warm water to run over the painful area. Most people have heard of acupuncture but have not heard of acupressure, he says. Acupressure is a system of treatment where the individual presses the sore area and feels a knot or tightness. The area should be massaged with the person's own hand. "It will feel fantastic, and you will see you have the magic yourself," Dr. Millman said.

He said he believes you can learn to take care of yourself and offers group sessions at the library and elsewhere. For more information, call 764-1343.