Neuroscience, Mindfulness, and Working with the Elderly

AN ONLINE WORKSHOP FOR HEALTHCARE & OTHER PROFESSIONALS

When: Monday, Apr 11th to Sunday, May 8th, 2022 (4 weeks) ONLINE weekly at your discretion
Cost: $240 (Students $120) Sufficient Enrolment Decision Deadline: Monday, Apr 3rd, 2022
This workshop will be offered only if there is sufficient enrolment.

Workshop Objectives:
To understand the importance and implications of neuroscience as professionals working with older adults, including i) better understanding ourselves, ii) understanding why we are so wired to connect socially with others, iii) exploring what deep safety is to the brain and how we use it to promote our well-being and that of those under our care, and iv) implementing an organizational model of dementia care based on neuroscience and mindfulness.

Although this course focuses on Neuroscience it is not a biology heavy offering. While some fundamental neurobiology will be emphasized, this course focuses more on the downstream implications of understanding neuroscience for working with seniors. We will be looking at the implications of neuroscience knowledge for understanding behaviour, cognitions, emotions and well-being and how this impacts how we work with seniors.

Context:
Knowledge about the brain has expanded considerably over the last several decades particularly with the advent of fMRI scanning and other sophisticated technologies. Yet not much information has focused on the downstream implications of these new neuroscience discoveries. How does understanding the brain explain the kinds of problems that we experience related to emotions, behaviours, and cognitions? Why is anxiety so prevalent? Why is emotion regulation so challenging? Why is social isolation so damaging to our well-being? This online course explores how this new knowledge can inform caregivers both in understanding themselves and in helping to enhance their professional care to the elderly.

Content:
Week 1: Fundamentals of Neuroscience. This week explores the characteristics of the brain that explain our feelings, behaviours and cognitions. It explores how fear is so fundamental to our species and how we are “Velcro for negatives and Teflon for positives”. While the brain is the most complex adaptive system in the known universe, it also presents issues for us such as anxiety, depression, and social isolation. This exploration also includes understanding implications for those who work with the elderly.

Week 2: The Brain as a Social Organ. This week examines how we are all “wired to connect”. Our survival depends on our ability interact with others. Our brain requires the stimulation and support of others to develop and thrive. We have mirror neurons that reflect what others are experiencing and this information is taken into the body and physically changes us to mirror what is happening to others. We experience these changes as a “feeling” and this is the basis of our ability to be empathic and connect with others. Social isolation activates the same circuitry as physical pain. Evolution requires us to constantly be in connection. We are made to be close to others. We are built to help each other emotionally co-regulate. This knowledge is explored from the perspective of professionals involved in caring for the elderly. Some fundamentals of Mindfulness Meditation will also be examined, especially in the context of the Social Brain.

Week 3: The Role of Safety in Promoting Well-being. Stephen Porges, a noted scientist, explained that the “...human nervous system is in constant quest for safety”. Safety is defined as a deep safety. The brain constantly scans its internal and external environments for any signs of threats. Most of this is automatic and unconscious and it impacts us in so many ways. Not feeling safe affects the brain’s functioning so that learning, memory,
problem-solving, emotion regulation and relationships become impaired. And it lowers our sense of well-being. Intimacy is impossible without some feeling of safety in the relationship. This week explores the importance of safety and examines how caregivers can promote safety for themselves and in their professional work within their organizations.

**Week 4: Integrating Neuroscience, Mindfulness and Dementia Care: The Butterfly Household Model of Care**

This last week examines a new organizational model for working with people with dementia. Much of the knowledge in weeks 1 to 3 will be applied to exploring the Butterfly Model of Care for the elderly with dementia. This model moves away from a medical, task-based approach towards a person-centred emphasis building on promoting feelings, relationships, and stimulating environments. The model also underscores the importance of the well-being of the caregivers in promoting emotionally intelligent, warm and responsive communities. Mindfulness will also be explored and connected with the Butterfly Household Model of Care.

**Dr. Robert MacFadden** is an emeritus professor who continues to teach some graduate level courses at the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto, in the areas of Couple Therapy and Neuroscience in Social Work Practice. He co-founded and teaches within the Applied Mindfulness Meditation Certificate Program within the School of Continuing Studies, University of Toronto. He has worked at Queen Street Mental Health Centre, Lakeshore Psychiatric Hospital, Family Service Agencies and maintained two private practices. He has also been President of Peel Children’s Aid Society, Durham Children’s Aid Society and the Associate Dean of his Faculty twice.

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