

## SCI Café Story Series:

### Can Meditation Have Long-Term Health Benefits?

by **Kelley Murfin**, MSPH on behalf of the UTMB Institute for Translational Sciences | **13 February 2017**



What, exactly, is meditation? Is there scientific proof of meditation’s effects? How do you begin the process of meditating? On February 2 at downtown Galveston’s MOD Coffeehouse, community members gathered to discuss questions like these with Dr. Cara Geary, a professor of Pediatrics and the director of UTMB’s Perinatal Hospice and Physician Healer track, and Terry Conrad, the owner of Island Brain Works. This event, titled “Can Meditation Have Long-Term Health Benefits?,” was the first of the 2017 series of SCI Cafés. These gatherings allow the medical research community – academics, physicians, health professionals, and the public – to meet and discuss health topics in an informal setting.

Dr. Geary told the group she became interested in meditation after finding that conventional medical training was often insufficient in preparing physicians, like herself, to help patients deal with sensitive situations like grieving. She began exploring meditation’s impact on coping as well as on other aspects of health. She explained that the scientifically proven benefits of meditation include: less anxiety, balanced heart rate, fewer migraines, less psoriasis, improved symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome, and less cancer-related symptoms or side effects. In response to a community member who asked how meditation can provide these benefits, Geary explained that meditation impacts our sympathetic nervous system. This system determines our flight-or-flight response, and meditation provides an opportunity to “quiet” this system and give the body a chance to find its own balance.

Conrad also highlighted the benefits of meditation. In his work both in his practice and as a volunteer chaplain for the Texas prison system, he reported finding that meditation allows for clearer thinking and emotional balance. He offered practical ideas for those thinking about beginning to meditate; he believes that meditating for just 20 minutes per day for 6 weeks has potential to change the brain’s physiology and facilitate a healthier mindset. At the end of the discussion, Conrad led the group in a short, guided meditation session.

In response to questions from the group, both speakers highlighted that there are many different forms of meditation – guided, Zen, chanting, or even physical activities like yoga and Pilates – and that different methods work for different people. Despite these individual differences, both speakers stated that meditation, in some form, can be beneficial to everyone. Each emphasized that consistent practice is the key to experiencing the benefits of meditation.

UTMB’s Institute for Translational Sciences invites you to join the conversation! SCI Cafés are free and open to the public. The next SCI Café will be about the characteristics of a healthy neighborhood and community, and it is tentatively scheduled for March 30<sup>th</sup> at MOD Coffeehouse.

