

CONNECTIONS

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Four Brain Benefits from the Farmers' Market

by Linda Wasmer Andrews, Minding the Body

Farmers' Markets Offer Bushels of Benefits for Brain Health and Well-Being



Farmers' markets are an old idea enjoying new popularity. As of mid-2011, there were more than 7,100 farmers' markets in the United States—a 17 percent increase from 2010, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Along with a bagful of fruits and veggies, you may bring home bushels of mental health benefits from a trip to the farmers' market.

Nourishing Your Brain

The fresh produce at a farmers' market is as good for your brain as it is for the rest of your body. Soluble fiber—the type of fiber in oats, barley, legumes, and some fruits and vegetables—helps lower LDL (“bad”) cholesterol and therefore the risk for cardiovascular disease. “It may be protective against stroke,” says Rachel Begun, MS, RD, a registered dietitian and spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. “Examples of fruits and vegetables that are particularly good sources of soluble fiber include blueberries, carrots, celery, cucumbers, and strawberries.”

Polyphenols—a particular group of plant chemicals—may help prevent neurodegenerative diseases, such as Alzheimer's. “Studies in cell cultures and animals show that polyphenols may protect neurons by reducing oxidative stress and cell damage,” says Begun. “Examples of fruits rich in polyphenols include apples, blueberries, cranberries, raspberries, red grapes, and strawberries.”

Monounsaturated fats—a type of fat that's good for the heart—may be beneficial for the brain as well. “There is preliminary research showing that replacing saturated and trans fats with monounsaturated fats may help improve cognitive function,” Begun says. “Standout sources include avocados and olives.”



Greetings City Employees!

In support of warm summer days and excuses to get outside, this month we have included an article on the impact going to the farmers' market can have on brain health! It is a good reminder that mental wellness can be found in a variety of places. Tying into the theme of summer, we also included an article by FEI on summer activities for kids, with the key being stress free for the person engaging them in the activity!

Additionally, many of us, myself included, have times when it is easier to play the blame game than taking a breath and stepping back to identify what our role is in stressful and uncomfortable events. I hope you take a moment to read the article we have included on blame, and think about the role it may have in your life, where blame stems from, and what to do about it. There is also an entertaining and short clip from Brené Brown on blame which I encourage you to watch! Lastly, if you are interested in learning more about and/or practicing mindfulness, we have included information on how to access a 21-day online meditation program from StayWell which is available to City employees.

I wish you peace and all good!



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Building Your Bonds

Besides the nutritional benefits, there may be social and psychological ones as well. For one thing, a local farmers' market is a natural place to rub shoulders with your neighbors. A whole branch of psychology, known as community psychology, has grown up around the notion that a sense of community is important for personal well-being. Connecting with those around you can promote a sense of belonging, a feeling that you matter, and a healthy trust in your neighbors.

Feeding Your Senses

A farmers' market is a feast for the senses: the rich hue of berries, the sweet scent of peaches, the slight squish of a ripe tomato, the tempting tastes of jam and honey, the friendly hum of conversation. Research suggests that such sensory stimulation can help keep your brain young.

In fact, multisensory stimulation is sometimes used as a therapy for dementia. This approach makes structured use of lighting effects, music, aromas, and textured objects. Some studies have shown that it may improve thinking and mood in people with dementia, although others have not.

There's stronger evidence that mental stimulation in general may help healthy people prevent or delay dementia. Research in mice genetically prone to Alzheimer's-like disease has shown that a rich environment can boost their ability to form new neurons in the hippocampus—part of the brain that's hit early and hard by Alzheimer's. It can also reduce their levels of tau and beta amyloid—two proteins that form abnormal deposits in the brains of people with Alzheimer's disease.

Diversifying Your Diet

Dietary guidelines emphasize eating a variety of fruits and vegetables for better overall health. "When people—especially children—are familiar with foods, they're more likely to try them," says Begun. "I can't think of a better way to become familiar with fruits and vegetables than by taking a trip to the farmers' market. It's a unique opportunity to speak directly with the people who produce our food and learn more about how it's grown, when it's at its peak, and how to prepare it."

To find a farmers' market near you, check the [USDA's online directory](#).

Photo Credits: [Dane County Farmers' Market](#)



Local Farmers' Markets

Did you know that The Dane County Farmers' Market is reported to be the largest producer-only farmers' market in the country? All items are produced by the members behind the tables. No re-sale allowed! This means that when you visit the Dane County Farmers' Market, you can truly get to know the people who grow and raise your food. Visit [Dane County Farmers' Market](#) to read more about the market history, schedule, and local growing season.

There are many opportunities to support local growers in our city. For a listing of all of the farmers' markets in and around Madison, visit [Farmers' Markets in Madison](#).



6 Ways Mindfulness Can Improve Your Daily Life

by Christy Matta, M.A.

Mindfulness, an ancient practice developed to focus attention and awareness, has gained in popularity over the last several decades. Grown out of Zen Buddhism and present in many religious traditions, mindfulness is now taught as a non-religious practice.

Along with its growing popularity, there has been a growing body of research on the effectiveness of mindfulness. A recent edition of *Monitor on Psychology* identifies a multitude of psychological benefits.

1. Reductions in Rumination

Rumination, that is, going over something in your mind repetitively, is often an unpleasant symptom of stress, depression and anxiety. In several studies, novice meditators, after training in mindfulness, reported less rumination, decreases in depression and were better able to sustain attention on tasks than groups who were not trained in mindfulness.

2. Decreased Stress

Mindfulness has been practiced for the purpose of stress reduction for decades. In an analysis of studies on mindfulness and stress reduction, researchers found that mindfulness increases positive emotions and decreases anxiety. The review of these studies found that mindfulness may alter how we process emotion and our thoughts.

3. Improvements in Memory

In studies of mindfulness with groups in the military, those who participated in mindfulness training had improved memory, even during stressful periods before deployment, while those who did not, experienced decreased working memory during those times of stress.

4. Decreased Emotional Reactivity

Research shows that mindfulness can help people disengage from emotionally upsetting information. Those trained in mindfulness were then better able to focus on cognitive tasks, than those who had not been trained in mindfulness.

5. More Flexible Thinking

When we get stuck in rigid patterns of thinking we are more likely to become stressed, anxious and depressed. Flexible thinking and the ability to self-observe and take in new information tends to improve positive emotion. New research on the brain has found that mindfulness practice disengages certain pathways in the brain formed from previous learning and allows input from the present moment. It also activates the brain region associated with more adaptive responses to stressful circumstances.

6. Improved Relationships

Several studies have linked mindfulness practice to relationship satisfaction. Mindfulness practice can improve your ability to respond to relationship stress and communicate your emotions effectively.

Studies of mindfulness have identified other benefits, such as enhancing insight, morality and intuition. Research on the brain and health has linked mindfulness with increased immune functioning, improvement in well-being and reductions in psychological distress.

It's hard to know exactly why mindfulness has grown in popularity now, but it does seem to be the antidote to much of the pressure and stress present in our daily lives. Our culture has changed dramatically over the last century. With new technologies, such as radio, TV, computers, the internet and cell phones, our brains are now exposed to information and images at a much more rapid rate than at any time in human history. Mindfulness can help us focus in the midst of overwhelming amounts of information, pressures to act quickly and competing demands on our attention.

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See for yourself with StayWell's Mindfulness Collection, which includes the *Best Possible You* digital workshop series and *21-Day Meditation Experience*. It's easy to get started, and can make a big difference on your overall well-being.

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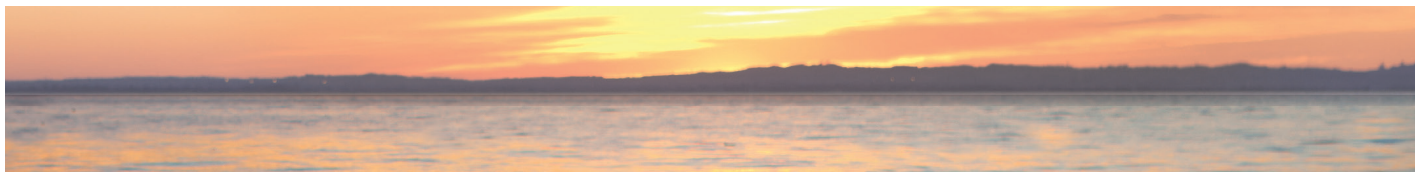
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Stress-Free Summer Activities for the Children

When school is out for the summer, many parents are at their wit's end about how to fill two months of their children's free time. Images of summertime are usually cast in a light of hot, lazy, relaxing days on the beach, but the reality for most working families is the struggle to balance the demands of adult work schedules with providing safe activities for children.



This dilemma often results in hectic, stress-filled days comparable to those during the school year. While summer camp is an option for some, the cost of day and overnight camps can be too expensive for many families' budgets. Structured activities are beneficial, but parents and caregivers should also keep in mind the advantages of unstructured time for children.

So what does one do to keep young children busy, yet also allow them to enjoy the summer months? A wealth of opportunities for fun, educational, and even relaxing activities is available. Here are some tips that may be useful for families and caregivers:

VISIT THE LIBRARY

Until recently, libraries offered little or nothing for children under three years of age, but in the past few years, many have introduced programs for toddlers. Children and adults can participate in activities that may include reading aloud, storytelling, finger-plays, rhymes, and songs.

Preschoolers usually enjoy the group activities offered by libraries, where they can participate in puppet shows and arts and crafts activities. For children in primary school, there are variations of the storytelling hours that often include discussions and presentations by the children themselves, as well as summer reading programs. Many public libraries also offer training courses for children in using different software or educational programs.

DISCOVER GEOGRAPHY

What makes a place special? What are the physical characteristics of your local area? Take children for a walk around your local area and look at what makes it unique. Point out how it is similar to other places you have been and how it is different. If you live near a park, a lake, a river or a stream, take your children there and spend time talking about its uses. Read stories about distant places with children or sing songs to teach geography. Make a wish list of places you would like to visit with your child. Look them up on a map and plan a trip—real or pretend.

VIEW AND CREATE COLLECTIONS

Go to a children's museum to view hands-on exhibits or suggest that your children start a 'collection' and build their own museum. They can collect natural materials, such as acorns and leaves from a local park or sea shells from the beach.

LEARN ABOUT NATURE

Older children can learn about weather by using a map to look up the temperature of cities around the world and discovering how hot each gets in the summer. Watch cloud formations and imagine. Do the shapes look like horses, ducks, or other animals?

At night, depending on their age, camp out in a tent in the back garden. Create a treasure map for children to find hidden treats in the yard. Read about your local birds and flowers, and if possible, bicycle ride to a nearby park to find them.

USE COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Watch for special events, such as free outdoor music festivals or concerts. Many communities host evening concerts in local parks—pack a picnic dinner and enjoy time with your family. People are resources too—collectors, painters, and backyard naturalists may live in your area, eager to share their knowledge with children.

RAINY DAY ACTIVITIES

Summertime often brings thunder clouds. On days when outdoor activities are not possible, you can share family history and photos with your children. Pull out the old videotapes of past family gatherings and events. Prepare an indoor picnic with your child or cook dinner together.

Whatever the activity, children can enjoy and appreciate the summer months in ways that are both educational and stress reducing for all involved!

Who's to Blame? The Real Downside of the Blame Game

How blaming yourself or someone else can stop you from doing what you want to.

by F. Diane Barth L.C.S.W., Off the Couch

Mattie* was a tiny, fragile, angelic-looking child who lived in a residential facility for children with psychological problems. When she was upset, she would let loose with a string of curse words that many of the staff who worked with her had never heard before. The rough language was so incongruous coming out of her mouth that we had a hard time not laughing out loud. But since laughing not only encouraged her, but also gave the other children license to join in, we quickly learned to restrain ourselves and set limits on Mattie as soon as she started shouting.

Reminded of the rules about cursing, she repeated regularly, "I can't help it. It's the way my mother made me."

Mattie's life experience and a severe psychological illness had burdened her with an overwhelming sense of powerlessness. She had no sense of personal agency, an important psychological capacity that my Psychology Today colleague Mary Lamia has described as the "ability to take action, be effective, influence your own life, and assume responsibility for your behavior." Not just because she was a child, but also because of her illness, she had no sense that she could impact the people around her or change her environment. Her primary sense of herself was, at best, one of helpless victim.

It has been many years since I last saw Mattie; but in my work as a psychotherapist, I often see a similar feeling of helplessness in clients, even adults who have a lot of power and responsibility in their jobs and in their personal lives, and who have many, many more internal strengths and external successes than Mattie. Yet like Mattie, they often look for someone to blame when things go badly. And when they can't find someone else to focus on, they blame themselves.

Psychoanalysts have long regarded the sense of personal agency as an important component of mental health. Daniel Stern, a psychiatrist who worked with infants and their parents, tells us that a sense that we can impact others and get what we need for ourselves is crucial to emotional and psychological health at all ages. And psychoanalyst and philosopher Robert Stolorow writes that helping clients develop personal agency is one of the primary focuses of psychotherapy.

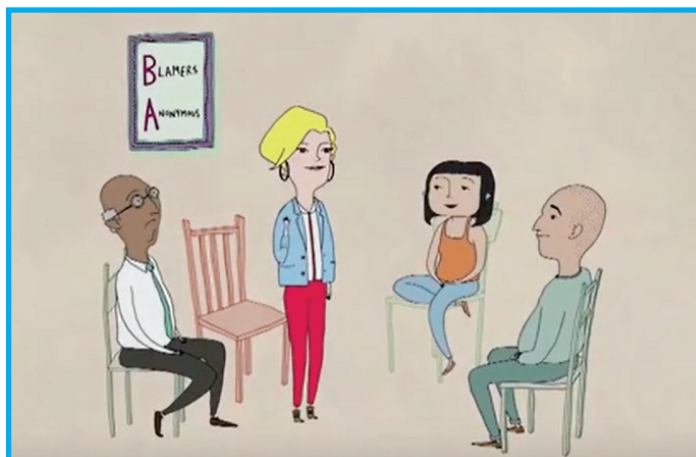
Blaming someone or something else is often an attempt to gain a sense of agency. "It's not my fault. I would have done it differently if only he/she/it had not forced me to do it this way."

Blaming ourselves is, interestingly, also a way of giving ourselves a sense of agency. "I should have been able to do it differently. It's no one else's fault, just my own." Essentially, failure to do what we know we should have done comforts us in a backhanded way. It's as though we're saying to ourselves and the world "I could have done it. I'm capable of doing it."

Paradoxically, both blaming someone else and blaming ourselves can make us feel better about ourselves when we feel bad about our situation. But the blame game, whether it's toward yourself or toward someone else can also create problems.

When you feel that you are being forced into a particular behavior by someone else, whether it is your partner, spouse, parent, boss, colleague, child, or someone or something in the larger world—the medical system, the school system, the political system, or even the weather or the cycle of the moon—blaming someone else can make you feel as though there is nothing you can do about it, even when there might be something you could do to change a situation.

And blaming yourself can make you feel so bad that you can't take steps to change, even though you can see them.



Whose fault is it?

Dr. Brené Brown discusses blame in this animated video which begins with a hilarious story about her own experience with the blame game.

Watch: Brené Brown on Blame

That's how it was for Liana*, for instance. She worked in a large company where she was getting consistent positive feedback for her contribution. She was pretty sure that she was in line for a promotion. But she was working horribly long hours and often much of the weekend. Her eating was bad, her sleeping worse. And she never exercised.

Her boyfriend encouraged her to at least get out of the office and take a walk every day, and Liana said she knew it was a good idea. She also knew she could do it. "There's time to at least take a fifteen-minute walk," she said. "But I just don't do it. I'm just too lazy."

Liana was anything but lazy, but this self-blame was how she explained and avoided taking a small step that seemed ridiculously simple to accomplish, yet was impossible for her to take.

There are many different reasons that we can't move forward on our goals, however big or small they might be. But if you're having difficulty, take a close look at your own personal blame game. It might be a silent one, or it might be out loud and shared by others, who complain about a given situation or a particular boss or leader as much as or even more than you do. But the blame game, as satisfying as it feels, might also be contributing to your difficulty doing anything to change your situation.

Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- Whose fault do I think this is?
- Why?
- If I shared the blame more equally, who else would I look at?
- If I didn't blame anyone, how would I explain the situation?

These last two questions might help you begin to think differently not only about the problem itself, but about how you are responding to it. When Liana began to ask herself these questions, she realized that she actually didn't go out for a walk because she was afraid that something important would happen while she was away from her desk. "That's so silly," she said. "Things do happen fast at my office, but I'll have my phone with me, so I will get any messages that I need to respond to immediately."

When she stopped looking for someone to blame, Liana was able to better understand the anxiety underneath her inability to take a fifteen-minute break. Understanding what was keeping her from taking a step that she knew would make her feel better freed her up to actually take that step.

So the next time you start blaming someone—you or someone else—for a difficult situation, step back, ask yourself the four questions above, and see if not blaming anyone makes it easier to take some kind of healthy action to improve things.

*Names and identifying information changed to protect privacy.

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*Thanks for reading,
we hope you found the information useful!*

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