The Millennial Student: A Strategy for Improved Wellness

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To my Millennials, may they be inspired
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Introduction

Throughout history—particularly recently—various names have been given to generationally-defined groups of people. For example, “Baby-Boomers” refers to the post World War II population. A younger population, those born between 1980 and 2000, has been referred to as Generation Y or “Millennials.” As with other generational groupings, Millennials are often said to possess certain defining characteristics. In my professional life, I work with college-educated Millennials on a daily basis. My job entails advising students on school policies and procedures as they make their way through professional school, which has afforded me the opportunity to observe Millennials’ characteristic behaviors. I have found that Millennials bring a unique perspective to their interactions with peers, staff, faculty and the administration. In this thesis I will explore factors that contribute to selected characteristics of this generation.

When I began my graduate studies, my millennial-aged daughter gave me the book *Generation Me* (Twenge, 2006) and told me I “had to read it.” She said that it accurately portrayed her generation and reflected her own experiences in college and graduate school. After reading the book, I felt Twenge confirmed much of what I have observed in my own work. I was intrigued and my exploration into the world of Millennials began.

In *Generation Me*, Twenge provides a critical assessment of Millennials. Hers is a decidedly negative portrait of the largest living generation in America—a generation to which she belongs. However, my experiences working with Millennials corroborates much of what she writes. In attempting to describe a whole generation, care must be taken to avoid over-generalization. Yet, when I share my findings with colleagues, classmates, friends and acquaintances, they tend to resonate with my assessment of some of the core characteristics of
this generation. One of those characteristics is the pervasive, underlying belief held by Millennials that their somewhat excessively prized self-esteem is to be protected and nurtured.

In fact, I have gradually come to realize that the students I observe seemed to have an unfalteringly high sense of self-esteem. Furthermore, as a parent of three Millennials, I vividly recall what I considered to be the “self-esteem curriculum” that was taught to them as early as pre-school and also through television programming. I can “hear” the voice of “Mr. Rogers” (from the long running children’s television program Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood on Public Broadcasting Service) saying how special each and every child is “just the way you are”. I agree that this can be a healthy attitude for any child as long as it is accompanied by a developing sense of self-assessment. However, Millennials, as my research into their generational characteristics will reveal, consider that a high sense of self-esteem is their birthright, and their self-worth is a “given,” and not earned as a result of their accomplishments. When Millennials were in grade school and competed in sports, everyone received a trophy for participation, rather than for being a “winner” or for superior performance. Reflecting back, I see now that the “love-yourself-first” mentality may not have served Millennials well as they reach independence and adulthood. While it is true that parents, teachers, and coaches had high expectations for these young children to achieve great things, for Millennials their own self-esteem often seems to come first.

American Millennials face steep challenges as they compete globally to gain entrance into colleges and universities because at present, societies are technologically connected and very mobile. Therefore, Millennials are free to go to school or work almost anywhere on the planet, or even stay at home and obtain their degrees online. Millennials also have an understanding that in today’s society, they may have to compete globally for a desirable career,
and this may add an increased level of stress as the number of people they are competing with multiplies exponentially.

Concurrently, I witnessed Millennials raised with the message that they could be anything they wanted to be. What Millennials desired for their future could not be limited by lack of talent or resources. This is in stark contrast to their “Greatest Generation” grandparents and Baby Boom parents. Much good can come of these beliefs, as a healthy sense of self-esteem and lofty visions for the future are highly valued in our society, but I have also observed some negative effects of this type of upbringing. Many millennial students I work with display a great sense of entitlement, making demands on their instructors and college staff. Millennials’ sense of what constitutes professionalism and ethics seems to be different from those of Baby Boomers. I began to wonder what it was about their upbringing that influenced this particular development of their values and what, if any, concern our society should have about these traits. Will Millennials be able to transition to adulthood, reach their career goals, and serve our society by leading us to a greater future? Or, have Baby Boomers raised a generation of self-centered, entitled individuals who lack the awareness to become socially conscious and lead our nation?

The research cited in this thesis and my personal experiences may seem one-sided to many, as there are those who have a more optimistic view of Millennials. I do not pretend to assert that these are all-encompassing characteristics that apply to all individuals of all backgrounds of this age group. However, I do find that the characteristics I am about to describe in Chapters 1, 2 and 3 are present in Millennials’ collective consciousness, and I hope that my personal experiences and assessment will lead to a clearer understanding of this generation.

At the same time as observing and assessing the Millennial generation, I also had experience with Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction. The benefits of meditation practice
intrigued me, and I began my own exploration into the subject. I visited and participated in traditional Buddhist meditation sessions as well as read and practiced deep breathing meditation. One of the benefits I experienced was a deeper sense of self-awareness. Simultaneously, through my graduate studies, I was exploring the literature on Millennials and their values and sense of professionalism and ethics. As I read a series of journal articles on medical and dental ethics education, a common theme throughout was the idea that Millennials might well benefit in all areas of learning and social life through the experience of self-reflection. In my experience of working with approximately 450 Millennials each year, over the past seven years, self-reflection is not an activity that many engage in. Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction instructor Dr. Eric Storlie of the University of Minnesota, described his millennial students as being highly distracted by all of their technological “toys,” and he claimed they were hesitant to take time for self-reflection or meditation. Dr. Storlie described Millennials’ need to check emails, Facebook and texts on their mobile phones as a compulsion. The flashes of light, color and sound, as well as endless discussions on blogs, in chat rooms, and on Facebook can easily absorb one’s attention. As I would later find out through the literature, this compulsion can lead to pathological Internet use or what is characterized as “Internet addiction” (Kandell, 1998, Young, 1996, Niemz, Griffiths & Banyard, 2005).

Addiction to technology may explain why Millennials suffer from more depression and anxiety than previous generations (Twenge, 2006). The development of advanced communication technologies and Internet-based social networks has enabled a large-scale connectivity in ways that were unavailable to previous generations. Younger Baby Boomers had “sex, drugs and rock ‘n roll.” Millennials have texting, tweeting and Facebook. Technology allows almost instantaneous access to increasingly vast amounts of information. As with other
types of addiction, some Millennials may suffer discomfort in the form of depression and anxiety when access to the Internet is removed. In my opinion, excessive use of the Internet, amounting to an addiction, cannot be healthy for individuals or for our society. It began to occur to me that mediation might be an effective means of bringing Millennials back to present moment awareness and help to alleviate the ill effects of Internet use that approaches addictive levels.

In this thesis, I will explore the idea that a significant number of globally connected Millennials do, indeed, engage in compulsive behaviors around the use of social media Internet websites and mobile phones and, additionally, suffer from inattentiveness, social disconnection, depression and anxiety. Could meditation mitigate the effects of addictive use of technology by bringing Millennials back to present moment awareness and attentiveness, decrease the need for their compulsive use of social media via the Internet, as well as alleviate the physiological effects of depression and anxiety? If so, this might well encourage Millennials to develop the face-to-face social skills necessary for meaningful social, educational and professional connections.

Additionally, I will discuss in more detail the prominent characteristics of the millennial generation—that is, the ways in which Millennials use technology, the nature of Millennials’ global and family connectedness and their sense of self-esteem and entitlement. I will explore how Millennials differ from their Baby Boom parents and Greatest Generation grandparents as their behaviors are observed in college classrooms and experienced in the workplace. Research into the compulsive use of social media and texting is new, but it reveals much about how Millennials connect with others in their immediate environment and around the world. How does this connectedness affect their social and professional behavior and personal relationships? I will also explore the use and benefits of mindfulness meditation, concentrating on how daily meditative practice may be especially beneficial for the millennial generation in combating some
of the negative effects of unbalanced dependence on technology. While I understand that there are many different approaches to meditation, my inquiry will focus mainly on Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction and deep breathing meditation (which is more in line with traditional Buddhist meditation.)

While I do find many of the students I work with to be a particularly entitlement-minded cohort, I feel almost certain that this might well not accurately describe an entire generation, regardless of ethnic background or social class. However, if there is merit to this idea, at least among college students, what does this mean for the future of our society? In his book, *The Greatest Generation* (those born between 1914 and 1926), Tom Brokaw described an exceptionally brave, hardworking group of citizens who led us through World War II, had a strong work ethic and went to work and war with an attitude that no sacrifice was too great to defend their country and family. Baby Boomers sacrificed and served during the Vietnam Conflict and the economic recession of the 1970s. Baby Boomers, too, have been described as the “Me” generation, who set out to “find themselves” but they tended to do so in groups. Boomers protested against the establishment with sit-ins and demonstrations and experimented with communal living. Boomers were seeking their individuality, but seeking it together. Millennials have also been described as individuals who are seeking their true calling, that is, “finding themselves”, but they seem to do so in increasing isolation through their uses of technology.
Chapter 1: Millennials’ Use of Technology

Finding Community

As I walk through the campus on which I work and attend classes, I see an overwhelming number of students walking with their heads down texting, and also a large number of people with ear buds, listening to music on their iPods. This is certainly not unique to Millennials, but the number of undergrads walking from class to class and building to building, distracted by technology is staggering. I notice signs along the way directing students to various places and also giving directions on how to proceed. For example, “walk your bike zone”. As I contemplate the issues Millennials face and I experience a crowded walkway of students, I wonder: “Don’t they know that it would be dangerous to go careening through the area on a bike?” The more startling observation is that many of these students daily walk through campus without engaging others because they are too engaged in their technology. Certainly, the goal of walking through campus is to arrive at the next class, or to get to the bus or your car to go home, but whenever I observe such scenes, I do not feel a sense of community. Is this normal for Millennials? There is the occasional couple walking together, but not groups of students who pass and greet each other. I feel no sense of “the student body”. Students are so immersed in texting and the music coming through ear buds that social interaction does not take place; I do not observe students making eye contact with others or feel a sense of camaraderie.

As I explored further into the lives of Millennials, I found that many had led very scheduled and organized lives as children with school, music lessons and sports. In general, Millennials are goal oriented and they desire structure, wanting to know the rules to meet the next goal. Therefore, when I see the signs on campus with rules posted instructing students how
to walk (or ride a bike) and where to walk or ride, how to get from one place to another without thinking about another individual’s comfort or safety, I wonder whether society ought to become concerned about the lack of direction from within on how to simply travel from one part of campus to another. It seems that students can go from class to class without an awareness of whom or what is in the immediate environment. Students don’t have to think while traveling through campus because the signs tell them how to behave. You don’t need to consult your inner compass; you only need to look for the rules. This is what Millennials have come to expect from their parents, teachers, coaches and their academic and professional institutions. Millennials are able to succeed when given clear parameters to reach their goals, but they may be missing meaningful personal connections along the way.

I see Millennials finding “community” through shared interests in a “global” way. One can surf the Internet to find, for example, those who like the same art, music and culinary interests. In *Mind Your X’s and Y’s* (2006), author Lisa Johnson, a marketing pioneer, researcher and expert on consumer behavior, describes how even religion is “sold” through the Internet (p.195-206). Millennials don’t have to physically go to a church, restaurant, coffee shop or bar to find others who share their interests. For example, there is a humorous, though painfully accurate, television commercial that portrays a Millennial who has encouraged her parents to get “connected” on Facebook because she is worried that they are getting old and “out of touch”. She woefully admits that they only have 14 “friends” on Facebook. In the meantime, her parents are out riding mountain bikes with friends, having a wonderful time while she sits in front of her computer and she exclaims, “I have 687 friends. Now, that’s living!” What does this example say about Millennials? Does this mean Millennials would rather be “sharing” on the Internet than be face-to-face, having fun experiences with friends?
Disconnection in college classrooms

An unintended consequence of technology-based global connectivity may be an increasing lack of attention and indeed a sense of “disconnection” in classroom settings. For example, a survey of 269 college students by Tindell and Bohlander revealed, “About 92% admitted that they have sent or received a text message in class at least once or twice, and 30% do this every day. Students also notice texting done by others in the classroom, with 97% of students indicating they have noticed this at least once or twice” (p. 3). In my own college classroom experience, I have observed students surfing the Internet or texting on their mobile phones, thus being distracted from their instructor and classroom discussions. Additionally, studies of millennial students such as Christine Blue’s (2009) published in the Journal of Dental Education revealed that Millennials want efficient access to course material required to pass exams. They often ask for a copy of their instructors’ PowerPoint presentations before lectures, which in my opinion, allows them to be physically present, but not fully engaged in class. They don’t want to take the time to analyze information to put it into real world contexts. That is, they want to be given access to the answers in class to pass exams, but are reluctant to engage in a discussion of how this information could be used in their future professional life. Millennials want their instructors to do that for them. Millennials have instantaneous access to needed information, so the attitude can be “why bother” to ponder and evaluate information when it can be called up with a mobile phone or laptop computer allowing them to move on to fulfill their social needs with the same technology.

“Technology is a way of organizing the universe so man doesn’t have to experience it.” This quote from the 20th century playwright and author, Max Frisch, describes the paradox that is the millennial generation. Millennials can organize their professional, academic and social lives
without being fully engaged in the experience. They can “be” anywhere in the world at any time but not be fully present.

**Technologically connected, yet isolated**

Millennials stay connected globally with laptop computers and smart phones, but they also use technology to remain isolated and disconnected from the present moment. In *The Millennials, Connecting to America’s Largest Generation*, authors Thom and Josh Rainer describe a typical Millennial: “My laptop is open, iTunes playing, while I monitor my smart phone. I just turned off Skype but left Facebook open, just in case a notification pops up” (p. 28). I have personally observed the multitasking going on in college classrooms. To me, it is apparent that while students are looking to stay connected with the global community online, they are also looking for personal connections with “friends” on Facebook and with mobile phones. In *Wherever You Go There You Are* (1994), Jon Kabat-Zinn claims that our minds are not built for multitasking and that when we try to do so, we become much less productive. A logical conclusion could be that these high tech devices are great distractions and that there is not much “learning” taking place. The number of hours that Millennials spend each day on social websites and texting is approaching a number greater than the amount of time spent in face-to-face communication. I suggest that the result is a generation that is “disconnected” in the classroom and lacking in interpersonal communications. Furthermore, it can be argued that the compulsion Millennials feel to constantly check email, Facebook and texts to stay socially connected contributes to the increasing numbers of their generation who suffer from anxiety and depression. They turn to technology and login to be connected, that is, to have constant access to information they need to succeed in their social, academic and professional lives, but when all is
said and done when they log off, they are left with an empty, disconnected feeling; and then the cycle begins again. They must go back to technology for more; to fulfill the need to be connected to others, receive guidance from parents and mentors and have instant access to the information they need to succeed.

**Engaging Millennials with technology**

It is true that Millennials are the most “in touch” generation, as witnessed by the number of students you can observe texting and talking on mobile phones. Rainer and Rainer (2011) state, “The Millennials are constantly connected to multiple sources of influence” (p. 200). This includes music, social media blogs, Internet (more than any other generation) and news feeds. Walk into a coffee house, the student union or a library on campus and you may be hard pressed to come across an individual who is not “connected” to an electronic device. Walk into a sports bar, for example, and you may find that your attention is averted to the many television monitors, strategically placed to connect you to many different events happening around the world. Then watch as others sitting in the establishment turn their heads as flashes of light and color from the television screens instantly directs attention. This could be seen as a constant source of distraction from the present moment, diverting the mind to take in more and more information.

**What Millennials expect from employers**

Corporations who wish to recruit Millennials need recruiting websites that are entertaining to attract their attention. Ron Alsop, author of *The Trophy Kids Grow Up* (2008) believes that recruiting websites should also feature other young people who work for their
company so Millennials feel like they could fit in and find some social, as well as professional, connections. I see this as evidence that Millennials are seeking interpersonal relationships as well as professional connections.

Millennials’ expect more than their parents and grandparents did from their employers. When describing a Millennial’s dream job, Alsop states, “Well, it would definitely have to provide unlimited career opportunities, plenty of praise and rewards, flexible work hours, a casual and fun atmosphere, and of course, a meteoric rise to the executive suite” (p. 211). One only needs to take a look at the corporate headquarters of Facebook as depicted on television and in movies as evidence to support this idea. The offices are completely open (no walls), there are very flexible work hours, and to inspire creativity, plenty of computer games and leisure spaces are available. Alsop continues to describe Millennials as demanding and impatient; speed counts in reaching their professional goals. He states, “Their trademark flip-flops and ripped jeans, ubiquitous iPods, and preference for text messages rather than face-to-face communication are driving some older colleagues and managers nuts” (Alsop, p. 4). While Baby Boomers may find them a bit too “energetic” Millennials were raised in a highly competitive world that demands speed.

Ron Alsop (2008) describes another dilemma within the educational and professional lives of Millennials. He states,

“College professors and corporate recruiters are concerned that technology is damaging the millennial generation’s writing abilities and interpersonal communication skills. Email and text messages have certainly contributed to the generation’s sloppy writing, and their preference for interacting virtually is reducing the amount of valuable face-to-face interaction in the workplace.” (p. 162)
One can spend only a few moments on a college campus and one will observe Millennials constantly multitasking. It is difficult for professors and corporate recruiters to keep their attention and find increasing use of podcasts, videos, computer games and interactive technology a must. Millennials are very accustomed to being engaged by features of technology devices.

**Immersion into the digital age and Internet addiction**

**Personal relationships**

Immersion into the digital age and electronic devices has happened seamlessly. I found some obvious contributing factors to college students’ vulnerability to Internet abuse and addiction. Generally, they have 24-hour access to the web through their college or university. No longer do individuals have to pay per hour usage fees. Having Internet access is a requirement for many college courses. Current college students are older teens who are experiencing a sense of independence from parents and are trying to fit in with their peers. For many, the college years are also a time in their lives for developing intimate relationships through dating. If students are to be successful in developing intimate relationships, developing face-to-face interpersonal skills is necessary. College students are moving away from dependence on parents for social connections and developing new spheres of social influence. Shyness and low self-confidence may pose a problem for some individuals in developing social relationships and the Internet provides a safe medium for them to engage others. Addictive behaviors can be a coping strategy for students who find it difficult to make the transition to independence from their “helicopter” parents. (Helicopter parents are described as parents who constantly “hover” over their children,
watching for the first sign that their assistance is needed to help their children succeed in almost any pursuit ranging from social to academic to professional activities.)

Naomi Troni writes in her Huffington Post blog, “Nearly half of Millennials (48 percent) and four in 10 Gen Xers have flirted with someone online; 30 percent of Millennials and 27 percent of Xers have experienced strong feelings of attraction for someone online; and 22 percent of Millennials and 20 percent of Xers have actually had a romantic, sexual, or erotic relationship online” (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/naomi-troni/millennials-romance_b_1280380.html). This is evidence that in the digital age an online intimate relationship is seen as a viable option for a large portion of the millennial generation. I would argue that this is inevitably an isolating pursuit.

Niemz, et al (2005) state, “…in general, Internet addicts tend to be lonely, have deviant values and to some extent lack emotional and social skills” (p. 205). The Internet provides an escape to portray themselves as they would like to be (as opposed to who they really are) and also provides a limited view of others. In the final analysis, it would seem that these falsely portrayed, technologically connected relationships are not as satisfying as face-to-face meeting.

Labeling extensive Internet use as an addiction implies that a person suffers some ill side affects if they do not have online access. Reportedly, excessive Internet use may impair scholastic abilities and be a cause of occupational and social interaction dysfunction. In other words, students may find it difficult to complete homework because they spend too much time on social media websites or they get into trouble on the job because they are texting. Indeed, it can be frustrating when you are trying to talk with a Millennial and they are constantly distracted by their mobile phone “buzzing” with the next text or notification.
Niemz, et al (2005) describes Internet addicts as displaying compulsive use and withdrawal symptoms if they are not able to obtain online access. Additionally, Internet addicts have increased tolerance of time spent on the Internet, display interpersonal dysfunction, health problems, time management problems, lack of self-control and mental distress. A case study by Young (1996) describes a middle-aged wife and stay-at-home mother who spent more than 10 hours a day online after the installation of the family’s first home computer. This caused her husband and daughters to leave her and yet she continued to deny that this was unusual behavior or a problem affecting her life.

While research in Internet addiction is new and researchers measure and define the effects of excessive or pathological Internet use differently, it can be said that the number of people who seem to always have their heads down, texting, tweeting, emailing or excessively checking Facebook is large. A case in point is a video of a woman who fell into a shopping mall fountain while texting and walking at the same time. (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jPW8xmI4w6U). This example is a demonstration of how being “connected” can cause one to be unaware of one’s immediate environment and the people one could encounter.

Pathological Internet use: anxiety, depression and self esteem

In a study by Niemz, et al (2006), hard science majors (that is, those in engineering for example) spend more time on the Internet than soft science majors (sociology). Males are more likely to spend more time on the Internet than females, which can be explained by more males being enrolled in the hard sciences (at the time of this study) and also tending to spend more time on computer games than females. This study used the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) to
determine if an individual was labeled a pathological Internet user. Questions asked were of the nature, “I have routinely cut short on sleep to spend more time online” and “I have got into trouble with my employer or school because of being online.” Answers were given on a Likert-type scale. The GHQ was also used to determine levels of anxiety, depression and self-confidence. Likewise, a self-esteem scale was used to determine social confidence. For example, “I prefer online communication to face-to-face communication.” It was determined that over 18% of the subjects were pathological Internet users, using social media or gaming sites 4-10 hours a week. Pathological Internet users scored higher on the socially-liberated and socially-confident scales but also were much more likely to score lower on self-esteem scales. The anonymity of the Internet can certainly make you more confident and allow you to express yourself in ways that you may not be comfortable with in social situations, yet, does not necessarily seem to give you a boost in self-esteem. As we will see in a subsequent chapter, a high sense of self-esteem is considered a birthright by the millennial generation. This study indicates that your self-esteem would not be supported by increased time online.

Internet addiction and Millennials’ value system

Engleberg and Sjoberg (2012) also found that the value systems of individuals with high Internet use tend to be much different from the mainstream of society. The example that immediately comes to my mind is from the Stieg Larsson book, The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo. The main character is a young woman who is extremely Internet savvy. She manages to destroy her enemy’s financial and personal lives with the use of her computer and the aid of her “close” associates who are her inner circle of online friends. She is covered in tattoos and piercings and does not subscribe to many societal norms; that is, she has deviant social values.
An additional finding by Engleberg and Sjoberg (2012) was a positive correlation between Internet addiction and against-the-norm value systems and loneliness and a negative correlation between emotional intelligence and work/leisure balance. As individuals were less addicted to the Internet, they described a value system more aligned with societal norms, possessed more emotional intelligence and increased work/leisure balance. In my inquiry into the lives of Millennials, I found that work/life balance is highly valued by this generation, but the findings from these studies would indicate that increased Internet use does not tend to contribute to increased work/life balance. Conversely, it contributes to an imbalance.

A most enlightening conclusion of Engleberg and Sjoberg is that high frequency Internet users are lonelier. They lack the ability to “read” others’ feelings and states of mind. They find it more difficult to “fit in” in social situations, yet, Millennials’ desire to make social connections. Face-to-face connections provide the chance to develop social skills and a greater sensitivity to emotional cues coming from others. This is the “reward” Millennials should be encouraged to gain by engaging in less Internet time and more personal, face-to-face time.

In my opinion, the larger story in the study by Niemz, et al (2005) is that 51% of the subjects reported some symptoms of pathological Internet use. The college students were self-selecting in this study which may be the cause of this alarming figure. This was an Internet based study. That is, students were on a website and asked to fill out a questionnaire and may have participated because they thought they might have a problem (they chose themselves as subjects), and over half of respondents displayed some symptoms of pathology which is quite astounding. Here, over half of the subjects were inclined to think that they used the Internet excessively in some way, and at least contemplated the idea that they were overly dependent on their connection to the Internet.
Millennials behavior online

As I observe students’ behavior on campus while they are technologically connected, I wonder if their personality online is different from their physically present behavior. Studies reveal that they are generally more open and friendly, yet pathological Internet use seems to add to social isolation. Since the Internet is a “safe haven”, it is easier to find “friends” and escape from the pressures of school. A better term may be “excessive” Internet use, but the effects are the same. As we will discover in the following chapters, excessive Internet use may lead to less connectedness and, increasingly, feelings of lower self-esteem, loneliness, depression and anxiety.
Chapter 2: Millennials are Connected

The development of advanced communication technologies and Internet-based social networks has enabled a large-scale connectivity in ways that were unavailable to previous generations. Technology allows almost instantaneous access to increasingly vast amounts of information. As I discovered, Millennials are indeed the most technologically connected generation. Additionally, Rainer and Rainer (2011) list characteristics of this generation as relational, non-religious, the most educated in America, family oriented with involved parents, embracing diversity and wanting to make a difference with respect to the environment and politics. While some authors are more critical of their behaviors in their quest for quality work/life balance, I will endeavor to discuss this generation’s main characteristics regarding their connectedness to family, their community, government and their desire for personal interconnectedness.

Connections to government

When it comes to their long-term future, Millennials look to the government. When interviewed by Rainer and Rainer (2011), Millennials felt frustration that the Social Security System may not be available to them when they retire. Millennials blame Baby Boomers for acting irresponsibly with taxpayer funds, but are not certain that Boomers are able to fix the system. Additionally, Millennials do not feel confident that they can save enough for their future retirement and that government should be responsible for providing, in part, for their retirement. This can be seen as more evidence of an entitlement attitude held by Millennials, but also adds to
their anxiety about the future. Millennials still look to government to solve problems of financial inequities, joblessness and discrimination.

It is also pointed out by authors I have cited that the events of September 11, 2011 may have played a big part in influencing Millennials’ need to stay connected. As the safety and security of the whole nation was called into question, suddenly, the world could drastically change in the course of a day. In my opinion, this helps explain the need for individuals, and especially young impressionable Millennials, to have close personal connections, which may add to feelings of security and confidence in the leadership of the previous generation.

Alsop (2008), Twenge (2006), and Johnson (2006) all agree that Millennials’ dissatisfaction with political leaders lead to the election of Barak Obama. His theme of “change we can believe in.” was particularly appealing to Millennials. As stated before, they don’t want the “same old thing” from politicians or religious leaders. This is consistent with the theme of connectedness, harmony, diversity and inclusiveness. It is not the anti-establishment mentality of the Baby Boomers. Millennials look to the “establishment” for leadership that will provide inclusiveness, connectedness and security for their future.

**Connection to religious institutions**

However, these factors did not seem to lead this generation to religious institutions, as discussed by Rainer and Rainer (2011), as one might expect. Millennials are not against individuals being religious, but when asked, Millennials stated that religious dogma was not an important consideration in their decision making processes. What seems to matter most is the
guidance of parents and mentors; those they have personal relationships with, not the guidance of the church or the government.

Not surprisingly, with the increased reporting of corruption in politics, religious institutions and the corporate world, this generation has become disillusioned. Millennials understandably may have lost faith in institutions of religion, big business and politics. Millennials may want a more positive message and may be turned off by religious institutions that preach about what they are against or who and what they will not accept. I believe that this may be why meditative practice could be appealing to Millennials as “positive spirituality”; spirituality that could bring society together, is “connected” and inclusive as opposed to exclusive. The basics tenants of meditative practice are to observe without judgment. One is not deemed acceptable by declaration of a particular belief system, but only asked to look within and observe, accepting what “is”.

Rainer and Rainer (2011) report that Millennials’ belief systems tend to be more a combination of different spiritual dogmas. Millennials may claim to be Christians, but not believe in or live all of the tenets as they take on the beliefs of many different faiths. This generation accepts diversity. Rainer and Rainer also call them the “Mediating Generation” as they want all people to live in harmony. I would assert that meditation could be seen as a very inclusive addition to their spiritual practice as there are no requirements; no one is excluded.

**Connections to family**

A connected family is also reportedly important to Millennials and diversity in their family structure is acceptable (Alsop (2008), Rainer and Rainer (2011), Twenge (2006)).
Millennials are more accepting of divorce, remarriage, same sex marriage and step-siblings. It seems inevitable that this generation would need to be more accepting of varying family compositions since more of their parents are divorced and remarrying and in order to retain family connections, one must be accepting of diversity in family units. Rainer and Rainer (2011) report that they are distressed by the high divorce rate of their Baby Boom parents and could explain the reports in the literature that marriage is an important institution to Millennials and that though they plan to marry later, they do plan to marry, to marry only once and have children. This is a shift in attitude from the “free love” Baby Boomers of the sixties.

Millennials tend to look to parents, teachers and mentors for guidance. Tom and Jess Rainer’s interviews in The Millennials, Connecting to America’s Largest Generation (2011) reveal that American Millennials’ desire is to set goals for their future, work diligently to reach those goals and that it is the job of their parents, teachers and mentors to assist them by providing the environment that promotes their success. In the case of their education, Millennials need “A’s” to advance in an increasingly competitive environment, so they will accept nothing less from teachers than an excellent grade for their work. From parents, Millennials desire financial and emotional support.

Millennials invite more parental involvement in their lives than previous generations. They seek advice from parents on difficult academic and professional situations. I believe this comes from having “helicopter parents”, that is, parents who “hover” over their children, intervening with teachers, coaches or anyone who may derail their children from succeeding in their endeavors. In general, Millennials’ are the first generation whose parents would do most anything to see their children succeed, to get into the right school and land the perfect job. Baby Boomers want their kids to be happy. I believe that Baby Boomers may be the last generation to
remember the slogan “children are to be seen and not heard”. Millennials have become the focal point of the family and put more trust in older generations, which is far removed from the ‘60s anti-establishment movement characterized by the popular slogan, “you can’t trust anyone over 30” that was common in the ’60 and ’70s. In general, Millennials are more dependent on their parents.

**Connections to community**

To their credit, Millennials are more accepting of differences in race, religion, sexual orientation and social class. These are not the difficult issues faced by their parents and grandparents. This is the most racially and ethnically diverse population in the United States, which may be due to the acceptance of interracial marriage in the 1960s and ‘70s, an influx of racially and ethnically diverse immigrants and the integration of schools and communities. Millennials have not known a time when people were openly discriminated against because of their differences.

This is also evident as many authors report that social class does not matter as much to Millennials as it did to their parents and grandparents. However, Millennials find it important to have a career that affords them an affluent lifestyle. It is prevalently reported in the literature that they desire material goods such as computers and smart phones, but tend to see things that were important to their parents (cars and houses) as “keeping up with the Jones’s” rather than essentials to their quality of life and work.

Technology has made it possible for individuals to stay “in touch” with people who have been present in Millennials’ lives. One can connect via the Internet to extended family, high
school and college friends and work colleagues who have moved away. It doesn’t matter where one lives, geographically. Individuals can stay connected to family, community and professional organizations. According to Rainer and Rainer, “The best motivators in the workplace for this generation are relationships. The best connectors in religious institutions are relationships. The best way to get a millennial involved in a service, activity, or ministry is through relationships. The best way to get political allegiance of this generation is connecting them through relationships” (2011, p. 105). Subsequent to extensive interviews, questionnaires and work with Millennials, they have determined that what engages this generation is their relationship to others, that is, “building community.” Millennials work so that they may spend time with family and friends and to acquire the technology to stay connected with others. Clearly, Millennials seek to have close personal connections in life and understand that relationships are a vehicle to getting their next big break in the workplace.

Connections in the workplace

When searching for career opportunities, Millennials look to technology. In *The Trophy Kids Grow Up*, Ron Alsop states, “Merely inviting students to corporate presentations and cocktail parties won’t command the attention of the tech-obsessed Millennials. In fact, nearly two thirds of the M.B.A. recruiters in a 2007 *Wall Street Journal Harris Interactive Survey* said that to attract top job candidates employers must resort to new tactics, ranging from searching online résumé databases to joining social networking sites” (2008, p. 189). It seems a bit paradoxical as Millennials are searching for interpersonal connectedness, yet rely on technology to be connected. Millennials may not value the face-to-face connections that previous generations have relied on. When recruiters are surfing the Internet for information on
candidates, it could be that Millennials feel a bit threatened as they strive to keep their Facebook page hidden from potential employers, yet easily accessible for social purposes. Millennials may, internally, walk a fine line between connectedness in professional and personal realms.

Millennials are confident that they can make a positive impact on the future of their country, community and family and they desire, most of all, work/life balance. Rainer and Rainer (2011) asked a group of millennial age individuals just entering the work force if given the choice of a cash bonus or more vacation time, which would be preferred. Extra vacation time was chosen by a majority over the cash. This makes sense considering Millennials’ desire to stay connected to family and friends and emphasizes the importance of those connections.

This does not mean that Millennials don’t desire meaningful careers to make more money; social status just isn’t their main motivation. Millennials want enough money to do what they want and have what they want. Their “toys” are just different from their parents. The emphasis is on technology, such as computers and smart phones, not on cars, boats and houses. Given that Millennials’ quality of life is dependent on staying connected, this would be logical.

As I contemplate the need for all of us to be connected to one another, I cannot help but think that the same technologies that we use to stay connected seem to be distracting us from the many possible human connections in our immediate environment. I believe that I may have found, through mindfulness, a strategy to assist Millennials to gain the connectedness they seek for a balanced life.
Chapter 3: Millennials’ Self-Esteem and Entitlement

How does increasing connectedness to technology affect Millennials sense of self?

Individuals can “be” whoever they want on the Internet. It is possible to be anonymous and the Internet can free the individual to experiment with different kinds of chosen personalities. One could argue that this can help the individual develop social skills, but it may also prove frustrating if social media experiences do not go well; that is, if one fails to make connections or find satisfying relationships on the Internet. It can be particularly frustrating to individuals during their college years when they should be trying to become independent of their families and doing the work of growing up, including forming professional and intimate personal relationships.

Achievement and Entitlement

As reportedly the most educated generation in the United States, more Millennials have gone to college, or are in college, than in previous generations. Many of the authors I have cited agree that too much emphasis on achievement, especially of good grades, has led teachers to complain that millennial students are too demanding about grades rather than concentrating on the depth of their learning and understanding (Alsop, 2008). I have experienced this first hand in my work with professional students who tend to put more emphasis on what needs to be done to achieve an “A” rather than internalizing course content. They want good grades to get high paying jobs upon graduation. Millennials also have a heightened sense of entitlement. Ron Alsop states, “If there’s one overriding perception of Millennials, it is that they are a generation with
great—and sometimes outlandish—expectations” (2008, p. 24). As a generation, Millennials have a sense that others, including co-workers, should adapt to their needs. With their high level of education and entitlement attitudes comes a collective sense of superiority to their Baby Boom co-workers. Millennials want too much too soon and many feel they deserve a lot from their employers, yet they themselves may not return the loyalty that their employers bestow on them. It is often difficult for employers to retain them, even after thousands of dollars may have been spent on training. (Alsop, 2008) Millennials’ willingness to work in teams and their flexibility to move—even across the globe—makes them desirable employees for some employers. Yet, Millennials also want employers to provide community and a teamwork environment. Dr. Jean Twenge (2006) states, “The generation’s intense need for positive reinforcement in the workplace stems from experiences as children and teenagers. Parents have praised Millennials and made them feel special since birth, and both parent and child have been obsessed with achieving high grades in school” (p. 114). Additionally, Millennials have received almost unconditional praise from coaches, trainers and teachers. When they matriculate to higher education, Millennials want accolades from their college professors and, subsequently, from their employers as well. Millennials are the “checklist” kids, according to Alsop (2011). That is, this generation is compelled to work towards the attainment of the next goal in life. Millennials want structure and clear direction, are unable to think independently and are risk averse. This explains the desire for parental involvement in Millennials’ lives and the need for mentors in the workplace. One could ask if, as parents, Baby Boomers have expected too much achievement in too many areas of life—in sports, in academics, in professional life. Have Baby Boomers raised a generation of individuals who feel entitled to good grades, good jobs and meteoric rises (promotions) in the work place?
Global competition

Baby Boomers’ children have become the center focus of their parents’ lives. As Boomer parents observe the globaliza-
tion of the economy and the competition for jobs and admittance into educational institutions, I believe they feel compelled to do anything to help their children succeed. Millennials can’t simply be the best in their school or their state; they must be the best in the world. Millennials must excel academically to compete for entrance into educational institutions with individuals throughout the globe. Therefore, parents push their children to ever higher levels of achievement.

In the workplace, Baby Boom supervisors find Millennials difficult to work with and recognize their lack of ability to act and make decisions independently. My experience in the educational system with my millennial children is that there has been extensive emphasis on teamwork and learning to complete projects in groups. Thus every person felt equally capable. The same was true in early childhood sports. There was no keeping score in t-ball because as parents and coaches we didn’t want anyone to feel like a loser. Everyone was a winner! I would even make the argument that since Millennials have not experienced failure, they are afraid to risk failing. They cannot risk the blemish on their resumés nor can they risk the blow to their self-esteem.

Self-worth

The literature suggests that Millennials are the most self-confident generation, but again, this seems paradoxical since it seems that individuals of this generation are loath to act independently. Self-esteem curricula of the ‘80s and 90’s may have instilled an internal sense of
worth, but not an outward sense of self-confidence. A heightened internal sense of self-worth may explain why Rainer and Rainer (2011) found that if Millennials are not promoted quickly, they tend to seek other employment. Twenge (2006) labels this as a lack of humility and states that Millennials believe that no one is allowed to question their worth. Millennials’ self-esteem was not earned through achievement, but was considered to be their birthright. According to Rainer and Rainer (2011), three out of four Millennials think that they receive and internalize information faster than their Baby Boomer supervisors and I must admit that Millennials’ proficiency in using technology lends credibility to this thought. Yet other studies cited earlier in this thesis report that Millennials are not “internalizing” the information—they simply know how to access vast amounts of information. Millennials seem to be impatient individuals who want what they want, now! They are accustomed to instant feedback from technology (that is, through the World Wide Web, instant messaging and texting) and rewards and praise from parents, teachers and coaches for “participating”, not necessarily achieving. Given this, I feel it is logical that they feel entitled to receive praise from employers and attain meteoric rise to the top of the corporate ladder, and if the rapid promotion is not forthcoming, they move on to another employer.

An example, in my work with millennial professional students, is that of the student who, after graduation wrote an eight paragraph email to a school administrator complaining that he did not receive enough acknowledgement and awards during his senior year. He mentioned that he often was singled out by other students to teach them procedures and that faculty also looked to him to show them how particular procedures could be performed when they experienced difficulty with patients. When this information was shared with the student’s Baby Boom faculty mentor, the response from the faculty was that it was the student’s consistently displayed
arrogance that prevented him from receiving more accolades and awards. This student was not only looking for praise, but demanded instant feedback and open acknowledgement that he was the best.

In her study of millennial age dental hygiene students, Blue (2009) reports that Millennials are always looking for positive feedback. This is consistent with the high praise that was always freely given by parents, teachers and coaches. As young children, Millennials led very scheduled lives where an adult was ever present to cheer them on. I propose that it may be more beneficial for Millennials to develop a skill to look within themselves for motivation to achieve and recognize accomplishments rather than consistently looking to another individual.

**Self-esteem and happiness**

The need for instant feedback and volumes of praise may be a contributing factor to depression and anxiety, which this generation suffers from in record numbers. Describing a young a college graduate who was just hired for his dream job, Twenge states, “Suddenly, uncertain about what he wanted to do with his life, he sank into depression. He was devastated that a lifetime of achieving his goals had not brought him happiness” (2006, p.104). For many Millennials, happiness is defined as work/life balance. This individual was accepted into, and graduated from, an Ivy League school which could lead to a very bright future and yet he was not happy with his life. Some authors, including Twenge, believe that Millennials do not have the same work ethic as their Baby Boom parents. Members of this generation expect great rewards from a job, including high praise and quick “meteoric” promotions but do not expect to put in long hours; thus feelings of depression follow when these expectations are not met.
The Greatest Generation differs greatly in their work ethic from Millennials. The Greatest Generation came home from World War II, ecstatic to be “home” and went to work with a sense of duty and loyalty absorbed, I believe, from their military service. Tom Brokaw’s book *The Greatest Generation* is filled with narratives of men who came home and were so loyal to their work that some may have neglected their emotional connections to family. Several of the stories included reports from the offspring of these dedicated men who felt that their fathers spent too much time at work; becoming distant and aloof. The emotional scars from a world war were probably many, but the overriding objective—even *necessity*—was to provide food and shelter for their families while assimilating back into civilian life. I believe this may be why their children (Baby Boomers) became the generation who were more engaged in “finding themselves” and “in touch with their feelings”. Later, Baby Boomers went on to raise Millennials with their overriding objective to make certain that their children were happy and emotionally healthy with an internalized high self-esteem.

**Depression and anxiety**

The statistics on depression rates for Millennials is overwhelming. After extensive research, Twenge reports,

> Only 1% to 2% of Americans born before 1915 experienced a major depressive episode during their lifetimes, even though they lived through the Great Depression and two world wars. Today, the lifetime rate of major depression is ten times higher—between 15% and 20%. Some studies put the figure closer to 50%. In one 1990s study, 21% of teens aged 15 to 17 had already experienced major depression. Although some of this trend might be due to more frequent reporting of mental illness, researchers have concluded that the change is too large and too consistent across studies to be explained solely by a reporting bias.” (2006, pp. 105-106)
Additionally, these statistics on depression were not reported incidences of feeling “blue”, but of depression deep enough to require extensive therapy and medication.

Could it be that Millennials’ expectations are just too high or is it becoming “normal” to experience a state of deep depression? Twenge goes on,

. The number of people being treated for depression more than tripled in the ten-year period between 1987 to 1997, jumping from 1.8 million to 6.3 million. During 2002 alone, 8.5% of Americans took an antidepressant at some time, up from 5.6% just five years before in 1997.

(2006, p. 106)

I would argue that instead of relying on our internal “compass,” Americans are, in greater numbers than ever before, seeking help from physicians and therapists who give us medications and guidance to get through difficult times. Even as one moves into adulthood in the college years, individuals rely on external forces instead of our own wisdom. I am going to suggest, later in this thesis that there is a drug free alternative that can increase Millennials’ self-awareness to have confidence in their own thoughts and feelings.

Twenge supports her findings after extensive review of the literature on Millennials’ depression and anxiety levels.

As part of my doctoral dissertation, I gathered data on 40,192 college students and 12,056 children aged 9-17 who completed measures of anxiety (i.e. psychological inventories) between the 1950s and 1990s. I was stunned by the size of the changes I found. Anxiety increased so much that the average college student in the 1990s was more anxious than 85% of students in the 1950s and 71% of students in the 1970s” (p. 107). This study took environmental considerations into account; where one grew up and conditions of the family. The stress of the 1990s could be the strongest determinant of anxiety, including an increasing social pressure to achieve. There are increasing “wants” from social and professional life and when one fails to “get it all”, even after following all the rules, it can be emotionally crippling. …we are malnourished from eating a junk-food diet of instant messages, email, and phone calls, rather than the healthy food of live, in-person interaction. (2006, p. 110)
I believe that technology can help Millennials achieve great things and compete in a global economy. The instant access to information surely can enhance education and performance on the job. Yet, increasing rates of anxiety and depression is an indication that there is something lacking in Millennials’ lives to provide the emotional balance needed to perform at optimum levels.

**Mobile and isolated on the job**

All of these factors could be an impetus for lonely Millennials to compulsively go to social websites and experiment with Internet dating. For the socially awkward, feelings of loneliness may be intensified for those who don’t get responses, and as I have learned, going to social websites and email can become addicting. Millennials may be compelled by a feeling of isolation to keep going back there, but are never satisfied because the human interaction is gone once you logout. As young professionals may frequently move their place of residence to advance in their job, it can become difficult to put down roots. One can stay connected via the Internet, but again, it lacks a personal, face-to-face connection. Long-term commitments become difficult, such as connections in community organizations, church or civic groups. In comparison with the Millennials’ “I can be anything” upbringing, the pressure to achieve that culminates in getting that dream job does not always seem to lead to the happy, balanced life they desire. The result of high expectations not being met can lead to depression, anxiety and stress-related illness. The glamorous houses, jewelry and designer clothes of film and reality television stars may not materialize. Many of these “stars” are everyday people who seem to have everything one could want and need to be successful and happy. It is no longer good enough to be able to support your family and have the “home with the white picket fence.” What I observe is a
generation that turns to technology, which is the source Millennials “know” satisfies their needs. Millennials may see others achieve great success, wealth and fame without a college diploma, including Steve Jobs of Microsoft and Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook. These two individuals are great examples of how to “have it all” without following the path Millennials were brought up to believe would lead them to the success to which they feel entitled. For example, Twenge reports that Harvard rejects 50% of the applicants to their undergraduate programs who have achieved perfect SAT scores. This can only exacerbate the stress one feels by having taken the advanced placement classes and performed as the “well rounded” college candidate who is involved in sports, clubs and is involved in community service during their high school career. It is not surprising that this generation “escapes” through technology.

**Isolation in society**

Research indicates that one is more liberated or confident because of the confidentiality of the Internet (that is, you can “be” whoever you want to be). Your self-esteem should receive a “boost”. Engelberg and Sjoberg (2012) state, “Fascination with socializing on the Internet, such as chat rooms, may even increase a sense of loneliness because usage becomes so time-consuming that it impairs normal functioning with the social and work-related realm” (p.41). They also report negative effects of high Internet use on interpersonal skills such as higher degrees of loneliness and less balance between time spent on work and leisure activities; values that Millennials report as important in determining the quality of their lives and the things Millennials desire most. Instead of gaining confidence, Millennials may receive a “blow” to their self-esteem.
The Internet can be very empowering. Millennials can exert great influence in the marketplace through social media websites. Reviews of music, food and movies can “go viral”. For numerically the largest generation of our time and the most globally connected, the World Wide Web can be a very seductive place to anonymously exert power, especially for those who are socially awkward. I propose a more empowering practice. Instead of looking “out” into the world for a sense of self-esteem and confidence, Millennials may be persuaded to reverse their feelings of isolation and increase awareness of their self-worth by looking within.
Chapter 4: Mindfulness and Meditation

Meditation as a practice to alleviate depression and anxiety

How can these high levels of depression, anxiety and feelings of isolation be alleviated, and how can Millennials develop greater interpersonal skills during college years and carry them to the workplace? Meditation, as a practice, and mindfulness as a way of life may be the answer. The terms are used somewhat interchangeably in the literature by many practitioners, but one concept that is agreed upon is that it is a practice. Meditation is not something that one does once or for a period of weeks or months to reap the benefits. It is something you “practice” whether you are a beginner or an experienced meditator.

Sitting meditation is a practice that is generally envisioned when one says “meditation”. Kabat-Zinn (1994) describes sitting meditation as sitting upright, feet flat on the floor and your hands on your thighs so that your whole body is supported. The most common way for a beginner to practice is to concentrate on the breath, whether your eyes are open or closed. One is mindful, or “notices” one’s breath as air passes through the nose or mouth, the rise and fall of the belly, the temperature of the air and the rhythm of breathing. Other thoughts will come to mind, but one simply acknowledges their presence without judgment. One may think of an event that will happen in the course of the upcoming day. One acknowledges the thought and moves back to awareness of breathing, letting go of thoughts as they come to mind. It is a letting go of judgments about thoughts as well as letting go of the ego. I was once asked by a colleague of mine about the dangerous effects of letting go of one’s ego. Coming from a fast-paced east coast city, she thought one would not survive, socially or professionally, without a large ego. My
response was, just think what might happen to interpersonal relationships, personal or professional, if one could let go of one’s ego.

A great recent example of the negative outcome of not letting go of one’s ego in conjunction with the use of technology is the recent case of the famous actor Alec Baldwin who was “kicked off” American Airlines for refusing to stop playing Words With Friends on his tablet computer. He was asked to turn off his tablet as the jet was preparing to take off. When he refused, he was asked to leave the plane; a lot of fuss, delay and arguing over a computer game. In this example, he was totally unaware of his surroundings, the comfort of others, as well as a compulsion to numb his brain with a computer game. I am making an assumption about his reasoning for continuing with unlawful behavior, but the point I endeavor to make is that there was a compulsion or “addiction” to the computer game, and “letting go” physically and psychologically did not seem to be an option for him. His ego would not let him “let go”. The other flaw in my example is that Mr. Baldwin is a Baby Boomer, not a Millennial, but I suggest that this behavior is indicative of someone who is consumed by a technological device with little awareness of himself or others.

Buddhist tradition informs us that enlightenment includes letting go of the ego. Unenlightened individuals may be said to be living a conditioned existence called samsara. Our consciousness has created the ego as a way of making sense of our current reality. We live our lives dictated by habits and compulsions; unconscious behaviors. This is how we “do things”. They may be behaviors that are dissatisfying but we are unable to change because we act unconsciously. The Buddha described this as a perpetual wandering. If we can let go of these habits, that is free our mind and let go of the ego, we can become aware of other ways of behaving and changing our reality. The ego is the filter through which we take in information.
Therefore, we create a reality that is unique to each of us, but is not “real”. Through meditation, we are able to “let go” of the ego, or the filter as it were, and see more clearly. We are able to experience existence without the filter, that is, the ego; living an unconditional life in which we are more aware of true reality.

**Insightful decision-making for wellbeing**

Time and time again, my readings on teaching and insightful learning by Millennials suggest that learning is enhanced by self-reflection, which is akin to meditation, mindfulness and self-awareness. A study by Shapiro, Schwartz and Bonner (1998), involving eight weeks of mindfulness meditation instruction, found that it reduced feelings of anxiety and depression for the subjects in the study who were pre-medical and medical students. Psychological stress, including the extreme stress felt by many professional students, can lead to alcohol and drug abuse, and may make personal interaction difficult.

The medical students participating in this study also reported increased levels of empathy with their patients and in face-to-face interactions in their personal lives after meditation training (Shapiro, Schwartz and Bonner, 1998). Results included increased scores of spirituality (on the psychological inventory, INSPIRIT), which was defined as an internalized feeling of a personal, intense connection to God and a personal conviction that God exists. (The students were randomly selected from pre-med and medical students who volunteered for the study and were not questioned regarding their previous or current religious beliefs.) The researchers found that scores of spirituality increased along with scores of empathy and speculated that spirituality would increase wellbeing for students, but that increased empathy would improve patient care. In a separate study, Boddoe and Murphy (2004) found that meditation practice increased empathy
for nurses working in a hospital setting. The nurses reported that they perceived they provided better patient care, making a stronger emotional connection with patients, and they thought mindfulness facilitated better judgment and decision making. Mindfulness helps the meditator to have an increased awareness of their own thoughts and feelings and an increased awareness of others and what is taking place in their surrounding environment. I believe present moment awareness can free the mind from preconceived judgments when making decisions.

While much of the literature does suggest that mindfulness meditation increases awareness of the self and others, Toneatto and Nguyen (2007) believe it does not significantly relieve anxiety. Only half of the studies reviewed by these authors suggest that subjects displayed reduced levels of anxiety or mood improvement. They do admit, however, that a problem with the research to date is that when measuring levels of anxiety and depression after Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, many studies do not use a control group nor did many of the studies have long term follow up with subjects to see if the anxiety-relieving effects are lasting. Researchers in the field of meditation admit that it is up to the individual to keep up the practice of meditation for the positive effects to last. As learned from the work of Kabat-Zinn, meditation cannot be seen as a means to an end or as a way to achieve a chosen result. It is a practice to be used as a tool throughout a lifetime. This does not mean that if one fails to practice, that one cannot begin or start up the practice again. It is not a skill that one learns and then “forgets”. It is Toneatto and Nguyen’s opinion that in the future, having a wait-list control group (a group of individuals who do not receive treatment, that is, meditation training, but could receive it at a later time) would be the best way to compare levels of anxiety. They did find, however, that levels of anxiety and depression were reduced when meditation was used as a complement to other medical treatment modalities such as medication or physical therapy. It is
also clear that research subjects who are self-selecting (that is, they sign up for the meditation studies) add a motivational factor to make the meditation training work and report positive results. Patients are highly motivated to find a way to relieve whatever stress they are experiencing to seek a “cure” or a method for coping with their pain or disease.

**Meditation in the classroom to relieve test anxiety**

I believe that it would be beneficial for college advisors to add mindfulness meditation training to their arsenal of methods used to help students reduce test anxiety. Gina Paul, et al (2007) found that five minutes of *Deep Breathing Meditation* (DBM) practice, as led by the instructor at the beginning of a class period for pre-medical students, significantly reduced test anxiety and increased classroom attention. Benefits were also realized by the instructors who, in many cases, were racing from classroom to classroom. Five minutes of meditation gives everyone time to eradicate distractions from their mind and increase present moment awareness.

It is widely known that medical school is very stressful. In their longitudinal study, Paul, et al (2007) explored *Deep Breathing Meditation* as a concrete tool students could use to counteract the negative effects of test anxiety. The authors note that test anxiety produces a physiological response; namely the elevation of the level of corticosteroids which has been shown to impair declarative memory, concentration and learning. It was also noted that previous research revealed that test anxiety is evidenced in increased heart rate, blood pressure, muscle tension and gastric discomfort. Psychologically, students’ anxiety causes them to focus on themselves rather than the exam at hand.

Sixty-four post baccalaureate, minority pre-medical students participated in this two year, study. They were enrolled in the MEDPREP program at Southern Illinois University School of
MEDPREP is a yearlong program designed to assist students identified as disadvantaged in the application process to medical school. Subjects were enrolled in 2 courses; Academic Enhancement and Verbal Reasoning. There was no control group available since all subjects were enrolled in the same courses. Each student completed a pre-test before the beginning of the first summer semester, a post-test at the end of the first 6 week session and a follow-up survey at the end of the academic year. Tests were used to track changes in students’ perception on whether Deep Breathing Meditation was a tool they could use to relieve test anxiety and enhance their performance on exams. The questions were scored on a Likert-type scale with a score of 1 equaling “never”, and a score of 10 equal to “all the time.” Four questions measured feelings of test anxiety. Two questions concerned the students’ current use of Deep Breathing Meditation. The post-test included all of the pre-test questions, but also included a question on how DBM was useful in medical school. The follow-up survey included all these test questions plus questions about their future use of DBM and identifying specific instances in which the students later used DBM.

At the beginning of the students’ first course, Academic Enhancement, the instructor conducted five minutes of Deep Breathing Meditation followed by a one-hour lecture on the effects of stress and anxiety. To ensure that each student was actually able to elicit the diaphragmatic breathing central to DBM, they were all tested privately in a ten minute session with a training counselor using the HeartMath® Stress Management System which analyzes heart rate and rhythm as a measure of shallow breathing versus deep diaphragmatic breathing. All of the subjects reached diaphragmatic breathing.

The pre-test revealed that 67% of subjects had never engaged in Deep Breathing Meditation prior to the Academic Enhancement class, 22% had practiced DBM “only as needed”
and 11% performed DBM an average of 2 days per week. On the post-test, 100% of the subjects used DBM at least once in a testing situation (such as the MCAT) other than in the classes involved in the research. The mean scores in all six areas measured in the first 6 weeks of the semester changed significantly. Students reportedly perceived less test anxiety, less nervousness and self-doubt, increased concentration during exams and less loss of concentration during exams. The standard deviation from the mean scores hovered around 2 consistently over all questions, which showed a fairly consistent reporting of scores across all subjects. On the follow-up survey, when asked if the subjects thought they would use Deep Breathing Meditation in the future, they reported they believed it would be helpful in medical school and in their future medical practice. Paul, et al (2007) demonstrated that a very small amount of meditation training is beneficial in reducing anxiety and stress and individuals may transfer the use to other academic and professional situations.

**Meditation can improve present moment awareness and attention**

Objective studies have also revealed that meditation can be beneficial in training the attention system of the brain. Jha, Krompinger and Baime (2007) examined how meditation training affected alerting, orienting and conflict monitoring. Mindfulness training was given to three groups. Individuals who had no previous meditation experience received 8 weeks of Meditation Training (MT). Experienced meditators went on a one month retreat where mindfulness meditation was practiced in formal groups as well as individually. A control group of “meditation naïve” individuals was included. The most common form of meditation practiced was sitting meditation as described by Kabat-Zinn (1994) where one sits comfortably in a chair or on a pillow on the floor. Individuals are encouraged to sit upright or “tall” with shoulders
relaxed, and the whole body is supported. They are then instructed to breathe normally through the nose. During sitting meditation, especially for beginners, the participants concentrate on each breath, the rise and fall of their belly and the feel of the air as it passes through their nose and into their lungs. The uniqueness of this study is that the results were measured by an attention network test (ANT) administered with a computer rather than have the subjects self-report feelings and perceptions of improvements in attention. The authors felt that this measurement was important for research in the effect of meditation—as it was less subjective.

Beginning meditators tend to practice with what is called concentative attention as they become mindful of, or pay attention to, breathing without judgment. If thoughts or feelings “creep” in, they are instructed to go back to concentrating on the breath. Experienced meditators may transition to receptive attention—a state where the attention is open to the environment as one’s attention is “at the ready” and objectless. Many believe that meditating with receptive attention is a state that experienced individuals reach naturally, or without consciously moving to the receptive state. The importance in recognizing the difference in these two levels is that the attention network test (ANT) can distinguish between these two subsets of attention.

Neuropsychologists have used Magnetic Resonance Imaging and attention network tests to identify the different parts of the brain that are activated by concentrative and receptive attentional subsystems. Jha, et al (2007) found that the experienced meditators displayed better conflict-monitoring skills on the ANT, which on MRI was shown to activate the receptive attentional system. That is, experienced meditators displayed a heightened state of vigilance or preparedness, which is known as receptive attentiveness. The inexperienced group improved their orienting performance, or their ability to limit attention to a subset of possible stimuli, or concentrative attention. Thus, the benefits of meditation, whether one is a novice or experienced
practitioner, can be measured objectively. Additionally, the authors also suggest that there are many possible practical implications for the use of meditation training in educational settings, for example, with students suffering from attention deficit disorder.

**Attention and wellbeing**

Individuals who achieve a higher state of present moment awareness report less stress and anxiety and increased feelings of hopefulness, joy and contentment (Greeson, 2012). These are all part of a greater sense of wellbeing. When one is able to self-regulate awareness of inner emotional states and learn acceptance and understanding of inner fluctuations in mood, one may achieve a greater sense of wellbeing. Individuals may be more able to accurately recognize and label different emotional states, not just ruminate about a bad mood or feeling of depression. Further, Greeson (2012) reviewed studies that revealed that meditation training improves the efficiency of the attentional process of the brain on computer attention tests. Response times to stimuli were decreased. Slowing down one’s pace of thinking may seem counter intuitive, but spending a small amount of time in meditation may increase an individual’s ability to pay attention to the task at hand—as Paul, et al (2007) demonstrated using 5 minutes in a meditative state before class—and increase response times. Mental processing can be improved.

*Magnetic Resonance Imaging* (MRI) studies revealed that Mindfulness Training increased brain activity in areas of gray matter regions of the brain that serve awareness functions. Could this be the answer for Millennials who may need to be taught the ability to ignore the distractions placed in their way by mobile technology? Greeson states, “Based on these findings, not only is it possible to train the mind to change the brain, but, in fact, one’s ability to do so may get stronger as one gains meditation experience” (2009, p. 13). The
continued practice of meditation, even for small periods of time during each day, could have a profound effect on students’ attention to task, awareness of others and general health and wellbeing.

Greeson continues, “Another key element of mindfulness is the cultivation of equanimity or non-reactivity” (p. 14). Through mindfulness, one is taught to pay attention to what is going on within the individual and also be aware of one’s surrounding environment, without feeling compelled to react. Individuals may simply observe and recognize thoughts and emotions, which can reduce the compulsion to cope through addictive behaviors, for example: to smoke tobacco or overeat when stressed. Likewise, the compulsion to turn to video games or social media could be reduced when one feels the need to “escape” or feelings of loneliness are recognized. Individuals can experience the emotion and consciously deal with it in an alternate way without impulsivity. The idea is to be aware of the thought without judgment. At this point one can choose to change one’s thinking. Ruminating, going over and over undesirable feelings and thoughts until one feels stressed and compelled to turn to less desirable coping behaviors, can be replaced. That is, one may replace texting or interacting on social websites to interacting with another individual, developing social skills and face-to-face connections. “Finally, research is beginning to prove what mindfulness practitioners have known for centuries – that greater attention, awareness, acceptance, and compassion can facilitate more flexible, adaptive responses to stress, which, in turn, can help free us from suffering and realize greater health and wellbeing” (Greeson, 2009, p. 15). Meditation can be an “inner technology.” Any individual can learn to use and improve their inner technology to achieve wellbeing.
Meditation as a way of life

When introduced to the practice of meditation; beginners are encouraged to accept that mindfulness is not a means to an end. In the context of my assertions, it could be argued that getting a whole generation to continue a practice throughout their lives is a monumental undertaking. I would, however, contend that benefits can be achieved with very little time and effort put forth. It is the process of “sitting” every day, achieving greater awareness of self and the present moment. There is no judgment, especially by the practitioner, regarding the quality of the meditation session or the practice. Furthermore, mindfulness meditation can be practiced in almost any environment.

Spirituality plays a part

I believe that spirituality can be said to be the unifying force in every human being. It is what makes us human and gives one a feeling of a personal, intense connection to God. I think of my daughter’s high school and college sports teams (comprised of Millennials). Every season team members were encouraged to buy athletic clothing embroidered with the team name, to give team members a sense of unity; of “oneness”. They called it “spirit wear”! This is the connection with others, and maybe with God, that Millennials may be striving to achieve. This is what can enhance their work/life balance. Cultivating spirituality can lead to enhanced physical and psychological wellbeing. Wellbeing gives us a better sense of self-control and studies show that this enables us to make better life choices to improve learning and personal relationships.
**Goals, self-control and mindfulness**

Mascicampo and Baumeister (2007) propose a different view of self-control as it relates to mindfulness. They state,

An alternative view is that mental presence or peace of mind is a state achieved by those who have freed themselves from unwanted worries; perhaps by tying up loose ends, so to speak, and becoming more or less pleased with the current state of affairs. We propose that the latter view may provide a more plausible explanation for individual differences in dispositional and state mindfulness, and that mindfulness may be understood because of, as well as an antecedent for, successful goal management and wellbeing. Thus, individuals who are successful at managing and regulating their goals may be more likely to exhibit qualities related to mindful awareness. (257)

I would suggest that the constant achievement of goals is partly what plagues Millennials. The pressure to get into the right schools, perform the best in sports, in school organizations, get the best grades, all to get the right job that maximizes financial gain to buy the best computers and smart phones. Additionally, if Millennials are as goal oriented as the literature would lead us to believe, it certainly has not resulted in more wellbeing for Millennials as a whole, evidenced by their increased rates of depression and anxiety.

**Wellbeing**

Cultivating spirituality can lead to enhanced physical and psychological wellbeing. This is the mind/body connection that is commonly written about in our society. Wellbeing gives us a better sense of self-control and enables us to make better life choices to improve learning and personal relationships. Millennials can turn to meditation or quiet contemplation instead of social media, computer games, alcohol or illegal drugs.
Greeson (2009) believes that mindfulness training can reduce anxiety, depression, anger and worry. He found that training students in mindfulness resulted in less rumination, which is associated with depression and mood disorders. The claim of resiliency theory is that one may realize one’s own good mental health by changing your thinking. In *Ordinary Magic*, social worker and author Ann Masten states,

> These anecdotes play an important role in the life course of resilient individuals who find mentors, enter the military, find a new or deeper faith, marry healthy partners, leave deviant peer groups, or in other ways take actions that have positive consequences for their life course. Resilient youth appear to place themselves in healthier contexts, generating opportunities for success or raising the odds of connecting with prosocial mentors…. (2001, p.233)

Changing one’s thoughts about oneself and the environment can increase one’s feeling of wellbeing and one’s ability to make healthier life choices. For a generation that suffers more from depression than any previous generation, values marriage and family, looks to parents for guidance and seeks mentors to assist them in reaching career goals, mindfulness can increase their awareness and attention to become more resilient. That is, to change their thinking (stop ruminating) about their inner life, their environment and their relationship to others.
Conclusion

In his 2008 review of mindfulness research, Jeffrey Greeson states, “The application of cutting-edge technology toward understanding mindfulness—and ‘inner technology’—is elucidating new ways in which attention, awareness, acceptance, and compassion may promote optimal health—in mind, body, relationships, and spirit” (p.10). The paradox for Millennials is that cutting-edge technology may have impaired their ability to have optimal health and wellness in personal and professional relationships. Millennials’ attention is diverted from present moment awareness of immediate surroundings and other people in it, by the constant “call” of their personal “outer technology”. This may explain Millennials’ increased longing for better personal relationships, their need for increased flexibility in their professional and academic lives to spend more time with family and friends in leisure activities, and their decreasing ability to be aware of co-workers’ needs in the work place. Millennials’ supervisors reportedly get frustrated by Millennials’ need to be promoted quickly and lack of professionalism when interacting with Baby Boomer colleagues.

I agree with Ann Masten (Ordinary Magic, 2001) that an individual’s wellbeing includes feelings of connectedness to others. Healthy connections with parents and other authority figures, the ability to self-regulate (as in being aware of one’s emotions as well as what’s happening in one’s surroundings), having a positive view of self and motivation to achieve is dependent upon one’s overall feelings of wellbeing. “Resilience does not come from rare and special qualities, but from the everyday magic of ordinary, normative human resources in the mind, brains, and bodies of children, in their families and relationships, and in their communities” (Masten, 2001, p.235). An excellent way to tap into one’s natural resilience and the resources of our own mind is
mindfulness meditation. Connections are what Millennials compulsively look for on the Internet through social media, blogs and chat rooms. Ultimately, Internet communities are not satisfying the need for meaningful connections because once you log off, the connection is broken; it is not lasting and personal. An addictive behavior implies that when the activity is no longer available, one suffers some ill side effects. The vicious cycle I see is Millennials’ need for more connectedness. Millennials turn to what is immediately available and what they are accustomed to. Millennials may get the “rush” of connectedness through texting or Facebook, but then suffer the ill side effects of loneliness and depression when they log off. The compulsion is to then go back for more. It is the immediate gratification received for a longed for connection.

In my opinion, Jon Kabat-Zin in his book Wherever You Go There You Are (1994) says it best,

> There is much to say, and, at the same time, nothing to say. The meditation practice itself is timeless, and it is deeply gratifying to see it taking root so deeply in our society at a time of such great inner and outer turmoil and confusion, and at a time of such ferocious time-acceleration, driven by the advent of the digital age and feeding our capacity for getting more and more done in less and less time, whereby dramatically increasing the risk of never being present with and for ourselves, of losing touch almost entirely with the domain of being. Nothing like this has ever been seen in the entire trajectory of humanity. The species itself is at a critical juncture, a tipping point, and mindfulness, our innate capacity for wakefulness and open-hearted presence and clear seeing, has never been more critically important. (p.272)

> Millennials can use their “inner technology”, through meditation, to assist them in making meaningful connections to friends, family and colleagues instead of computers, tablets, ear buds and mobile phones. Increased confidence and self-esteem can be realized by looking inward through self-reflection and mindfulness in the place of looking outward to the Web.
Although research in mindfulness and meditation is new and many studies are subjective, there is increasing objective evidence to suggest that changing one’s thinking and increasing present moment awareness can improve wellbeing and positively impact learning. Millennials suffer from increasing rates of depression and anxiety as they navigate our shrinking universe, and face staggering amounts of competition around the globe to achieve advanced education and desirable professions. Even small amounts of time spent in meditation have been shown to be valuable to achieving wellness. What may seem like wasted time doing “nothing” may, in fact, improve one’s ability to be more productive in our demanding, fast-paced society.
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