



whole being, well-being



Human flourishing is a complex topic that requires interdisciplinary approaches.

When people from a low-income population were randomly assigned interventions that either directly provide economic benefit or those directed at improving mental health, long-term data suggest the mental health interventions **improve the economic conditions** of these participants more than the economic interventions.



The human body is home to more than **30 trillion** microorganisms on average, and scientists are beginning to understand how microbes – even in the human gut – can influence a person’s mental health and well-being.



Research is showing the **value of the arts** to promote healing and greater public health via four key areas: music engagement, visual arts, movement-based creative expression and expressive writing.

In the United States, more than 5 million children — 1 in 14 — have incarcerated parents. As a result, coping with the effects of having an incarcerated parent is a major part of many children’s lives.



Center for Healthy Minds faculty member Julie Poehlmann-Tynan is rethinking how to help kids of incarcerated parents in wide-reaching ways — from Muppets to policy. Poehlmann-Tynan, the Dorothy A. O’Brien Professor of Human Ecology at UW–Madison, served as an advisor to *Sesame Street* for 4 years on its Emmy-nominated initiative, “Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration,” which helped bring

supporting children of incarcerated parents

a new Muppet to life. “Alex,” who had an incarcerated father, learned how to navigate visiting and relating to his father and explaining the situation to his friends. The character, shared with millions of young viewers, experienced what a visit with an incarcerated parent might look like, how friends can support their friends who have incarcerated parents and how to deal with “big feelings” associated with such a challenge.

Poehlmann-Tynan’s work ventures into new territory, as previous research surrounding incarceration focused on the individuals incarcerated and paid little attention to the well-being of caregivers or children. Interventions for incarcerated parents have yielded mixed results, and there’s been little evidence to guide families on how to navigate these challenging situations with young children. Few interventions for affected children exist.



“There are a lot of advocates who say children shouldn’t visit their incarcerated parents because it’s too traumatic. Other advocates say all children should visit,” Poehlmann-Tynan says. “As a scientist, I wondered, *What does the research say?* There was not a single study focusing on how children do while visiting an incarcerated parent.”

This lack of research motivated Poehlmann-Tynan to conduct the first observational study of children visiting their parents in corrections facilities, and now she is experimenting with interventions intended to help children and their caregivers cope with stress.

Practices include short-term mind-body stress reduction interventions that could potentially help children decrease their stress as they walk into a corrections facility to visit their parent as well as when they leave their home environment for school and other activities.

Though her work with mindfulness practices is ongoing, her previous research findings suggest that children have a more

positive experience when they can physically interact with their parent and do things like sit on the parent’s lap or give the parent a hug. These children also display higher levels of distress when they interact with a parent through Plexiglas or some kind of barrier.

Outside of the home, the science points to the impact of conditions and attributes of individuals, families and communities that can help children cope more effectively. Providing children of incarcerated parents with stable living arrangements with positive, stimulating and educationally supportive home environments generally improves children’s cognitive and emotional well-being — a relevant discovery since these children are more likely to have unstable placements relative to the general population.

do we have depression all wrong?

Is the latest science at odds with our understanding of depression, the world’s largest source of disability? That’s the question Center for Healthy Minds faculty member Charles Raison poses in a new book.

You suggest a shift in our current thinking regarding depression. Why?

We don’t know exactly what depression is, but we’re increasingly recognizing that it’s not a single “disease.” One thing we write about in this book is that in the literature and studies, depression seems to be less of a discrete disease and more of an evolved response to adversity.

So there’s something about how our ancestors lived that gave rise to depression?

Yes, and I subscribe to an evolutionary perspective suggesting that things we see that are passed on from generation to generation exist because they somehow enhanced our ability to pass on our genes. The things that make people depressed today are the same things that made people who lived in smaller hunter-gatherer societies depressed — like being ostracized, having lower status in the group or being infected.



What benefit did depression have in order for it to serve an evolutionary purpose?

If you look at some — not all — people with depression, they have chronically elevated inflammation. This may be an evolved, adapted mechanism, and that part of the reason why depression came into being was that it grew out of sickness. Many of the symptoms of depression, like those of sickness, help conserve energy for fighting an infection and/or cause people to withdraw.

Do you think depression is “curable?”

In some people, yes, but more importantly, I believe there’s a need to humanize depression. What makes people depressed is they come up against something in their make-up or how they are in the world that is causing them trouble, and they can’t get over it, transcend it, or transform it. I think many, many people now struggling with depression — if they can hang in there, we are on the edge of becoming better at helping people either get rid of depression or transmute it into a powerful force for good in their lives.



Sources: The Lancet (2011). Mental Health Care—The Economic Imperative. The Lancet, 378; Sender, R., Fuchs, S., Milo, R. (2016). Revised Estimates for the Number of Human and Bacteria Cells in the Body. PLoS Biology, 14(8); Stuckey, H., Nobel, J. (2010). The Connection Between Art, Healing, and Public Health: A Review of Current Literature. American Journal of Public Health, 100(2), 254-263.



HELPING FAMILIES AND IMPROVING WELL-BEING

Larissa Duncan, Center faculty member, is kicking off efforts throughout the state of Wisconsin to equip expectant parents and nurses who work with them with the skills to reduce stress and promote resilience during pregnancy. Her goal is to reduce racial disparities and poor health outcomes as well as expand ideas of well-being to include entire families rather than individuals.

FLOURISHING FRESHMEN

Faculty member John Dunne and other Center experts launched a project with the University of Virginia and Pennsylvania State University teaching the first-of-its-kind course with college freshmen focused on well-being and flourishing. If fully funded, the six-year research project would study the impact of this course on 10,000 incoming college students, and outcomes will include short- and long-term measures of student success, health and well-being.

DAVIDSON HITS THE ROAD WITH NEW BOOK

Center Founder and Director Richard Davidson traveled the country this fall with longtime friend and co-author Daniel Goleman to promote the Center's work in his new book "Altered Traits." Davidson held captive audiences of more than 20,000 people and visited some of the country's top tech companies, including Google, Apple, Facebook and LinkedIn.

K IS FOR KINDNESS

More than 12,200 educators and parents from around the world have downloaded the Center's mindfulness-based Kindness Curriculum. We're honored to get our work out into the world and were pleased it reached more than 3 million people through social media and news media. Get your copy and share with a friend at go.wisc.edu/kindnesscurriculum.

UNLOCKING THE SECRETS OF AGING

A Center study provides new clues to better understand how meditation-based stress reduction practices may promote healthier aging. The work is the first to suggest that the long-term practice of meditation may slow down the epigenetic clock in immune cells.

pay it forward

Paying it Forward – it's the reason why we decided to release our Kindness Curriculum for kids to thousands of educators and parents for free; it's why we make all of our research findings available to the public in efforts to transform the world into a kinder, wiser, more compassionate place.

We invite you to pay it forward on Nov. 28 for Giving Tuesday, an initiative that connects diverse groups of individuals, communities and organizations around the world for one common purpose: to celebrate and encourage giving.

Join us in celebrating #GivingTuesday with your gift to the Center for Healthy Minds Fund, which is used to support the areas of greatest need of the Center such as staffing, systems, scientific leadership and our investment in people, ideas and initiatives. To learn more about donating, visit go.wisc.edu/GivetoCHM.

