



Exhibits at the Museum of Motherhood in New York City examine the story of motherhood and its evolving role in shaping an emerging culture and new generation. Pictured are Karen Brody, BOLD founder; Lisa Reagan, Families for Conscious Living cofounder; Cassandra Vieten, Ph.D., *Mindful Motherhood* author; Jeanne Ohm, D.C., PATHWAYS publisher; and Joy Rose, museum director. PHOTOS BY JOY ROSE

Mindful Mothering: It's Not What You Think!

*Sponsored by Families for Conscious Living, the Institute of Noetic Sciences
and Pathways, the first-ever Mindful Mothering Conference
gathers at the Museum of Motherhood in New York City*

By Lisa Reagan

Why do people conjure an image of a mother and child floating effortlessly through a field of daisies when they hear the phrase, “mindful mothering”? In daily reality, the practical tools of mindfulness are designed to bring us fully into the moment with an open mind and open heart, ready to accept the endless laundry, exhaustion and loneliness, as well as the connection, tenderness and joy we find on our brief journeys through motherhood.

I say “brief” because the 18 years of hands-on care for our children is now a fraction of our total lives, especially since most of us are living longer and will be active into our senior years. Put into perspective, most parents agree that, despite the stresses of modern parenting, we don’t want to miss a moment with our children. So how are we to stay awake and aware through the greatest adventure of our lives?

The first-ever Mindful Mothering conference, held at the Museum of Motherhood (MOM) in New York City on November 7, 2011, set out to answer this question. Its presenters shared their integrated insights developed through professional training and mothering experiences,

and then opened the floor to interactive audience discussion. Cassandra Vieten, Ph.D., author of the research-based and groundbreaking book, *Mindful Motherhood: Practical Tools for Staying Sane During Pregnancy and Your Child’s First Year*, shared mindfulness basics before moving on to the more serious implications of her three-year research project.

“Mindfulness is a practice of being aware of your experience, from moment to moment, allowing it to be just as it is without evaluation or judgment,” said Dr. Vieten. “Over time, mindful awareness of your experiences as a mom, whether they are internal (mental, physical or emotional) or external (situations with your baby or others), allows you to more and more often approach each experience with curiosity and compassion, for yourself and for others.”

Dr. Vieten explained to the MOM audience, “Mindful awareness recognizes that each experience is temporary, and with practice, you can learn to ride the waves of everyday life, allowing each one to arise, peak and pass away, as all experiences do. Mindful awareness can help you notice and derive greater enjoyment from the

simple, subtle pleasures of life as a mom—the way the light shines on your little one's fuzzy head, or the grasp of his hand on your finger—no matter what else may be going on.”

As PATHWAYS readers know, optimal wellness begins pre-conception. Echoing this vitalistic principle, Dr. Vieten's mindful mothering research reveals that the benefits to mother and baby increase the earlier the practice is begun.

“A large body of evidence in both animal and human studies indicates that stress and mood disturbance experienced during pregnancy increases the risk for preterm birth, low birth weight and other pregnancy-related complications, and may adversely affect the developing fetus,” explained Vieten. “Postnatal mood disturbance can interfere with attachment, quality of mother-infant interactions, healthy parenting behaviors, and child development. While a wealth of evidence supports all these facts, surprisingly little information is available to women and clinicians for reducing stress and improving mood in pregnancy and postpartum.”

Audience members at the conference found the information and presentations exciting and “unique.” Michael Chase, the sole male participant, said of Jeanne Ohm's high-energy presentation, “This is worth the price of admission alone!”

“Jeanne was very insightful. She's really made a business to educate people about birth and how it is meant and supposed to be. She has a great perspective,” he said. “I thought it was interesting to hear what women are thinking during pregnancy and birth. As a man, I am exempt from all of that.” But Chase, who is a talent acquisition specialist for Goodwill Industries during the day and a personal chef for the elderly by night, said he was now more prepared for his future, which included getting married in 2012.

Janae Shields, M.S.W., the green initiatives coordinator for Goodwill Industries, attended the conference with ten single mothers sponsored by GWI. Shields, who runs the Beyond Jobs program at the Goodwill Center in the Bronx, wanted to expose the mothers to the idea of mindful mothering.

“I actually think it is a great thing to share with mothers,” she said. “I was already familiar with the practice of mindfulness. It was my hope that the moms there would find what they need. A lot of people we help are in survival mode and just trying to get food on the table, and don't get to enjoy mothering. I was hoping that they would find something to help them manage their stress a little bit better as they manage their children.”

In a post-conference discussion, Shields said, “Everyone said they wished they knew about mindful mothering *before* they had their kids, not after they were five years old, or more. My daughter is four years old, and my son is ten months, and that was a completely different

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—DR. CASSANDRA VIETEN

experience, with paying attention to my son consciously instead of just getting through. It was much more of a struggle with my daughter.

“All of the mothers who attended the conference with us said they wished more people knew about mindful mothering,” Shields said. “How do we bring other people to this? That was our underlying thought.”

In the coming months, the online Mindful Motherhood program will be available to professionals and parents alike. The book and program is based on a three-year intervention development project at the California Pacific Medical Center's Research Institute. The study showed that participating in the eight-week program reduced negative effects and anxiety during pregnancy, and held the promise of reducing depression and increasing positive emotion through pregnancy into the postpartum period.

“This pilot study showed that it was possible to learn mindful awareness during pregnancy and early motherhood (even with baby in tow!), and that women who engaged in mindfulness training during pregnancy had fewer negative emotions and anxiety during pregnancy compared to women who did not participate in the training,” said Vieten. “There were also trends toward reduced symptoms of depression and increased positive emotion. The women in our courses were from all walks of life, and most found it an enriching experience.”

The first-ever Mindful Mothering Conference brought together activists whose life's work expands on and demonstrates the possibilities for wellness through mindfulness in pregnancy, birth, motherhood and conscious parenting.

Presenters at the conference included **Cassandra Vieten, Ph.D.**, who is a licensed clinical psychologist, and director of research at the Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS); co-director of the Mind-Body Medicine Research Group at California Pacific Medical Center Research Institute in San Francisco; and co-president of the Institute for Spirituality and Psychology. mindfulmotherhood.org

Lisa Reagan, PATHWAYS associate editor and co-founder of Families for Conscious Living, connected



Conference and museum attendees try out the pregnancy vests.

PHOTO BY JOY ROSE

"If you think of your life as a garden, how do you cultivate this living soil and then decide what to grow? In practical reality, your being, your state of mind, your emotions and spirit, all of you, projected through a beautiful body of animated earth, can be tended through the tools and practice of mindfulness. As a cultural creative and holistic parent, you realize that your choices today take root and grow into wellness tomorrow. With awareness of your 'soil/soul,' when you decide what seeds you would like to bring into your life's garden, you are making an informed choice. Mindfulness + Informed Choice = Conscious Living, and Awareness + Action = The Healthy Life You Want."

—LISA REAGAN

the dots between our cultural stories of motherhood through her training in the IONS Worldview Literacy Project. Surrounded by displays and images of Victorian and suffragette women who railed against misogynistic cultural "stories," the Museum of Motherhood was a perfect setting to encourage mothers to personally and collectively use mindfulness skills to become aware of old stories and to write a new ones that support personal and planetary wellness. Lisa also encourages families to read and share these "new" stories as they are told in PATHWAYS, of course! familiesforconsciousliving.org


Lu Hanessian's presentation, "The Gift of Mindful, Imperfect Mothering: How Our Mistakes, Fears, and Conflicts Can Help Us Raise Authentic, Connected and Resilient Kids" addressed self-acceptance for our imperfections in the journey. Hanessian is the founder of Parent2ParentU. She has written three books, including *Let the Baby Drive*, for new parents. letthebabydrive.org

Karen Brody addressed "Mindfulness in Pregnancy, Birth and Beyond," and asked, "How do you find and keep your internal power switch on, no matter what, from pregnancy through birth, and into motherhood?" Brody is a mother of two boys, one with severe learning challenges. She is the author of *Birth*, a critically acclaimed play performed around the world since 2006 as part of BOLD, a global movement to make maternity care mother-friendly. She is also the founder of the My Body Rocks Project and FEAR to FREEDOM Birth, a new groundbreaking childbirth preparation method. boldaction.org

Jeanne Ohm, D.C., executive director for the International Chiropractic Pediatric Association (ICPA) and executive editor of PATHWAYS, presented the meta-view of mindful mothering with the philosophical chiropractic tenet, "Get the Big Idea and All Else Follows: Awak-

ening Our Inner Guidance for Mindful Living." "From conscious pregnancy to daily family living, mothering is our greatest opportunity to discover our personal paradigm for living," she said. "With continued connectivity to this major premise, we are able to receive clear guidance and trust that we are making the best, mindful choices for our families." icpa4kids.org

Participants in the conference also enjoyed a free session with **Jessica Zucker, Ph.D.**, a mothering expert and a clinical psychologist based in Los Angeles, who specializes in women's health. Jessica is a contributor to *The Huffington Post*, PBS's *This Emotional Life*, *Kindred's* online magazine and PATHWAYS. drjessicazucker.com

PATHWAYS is happy to collaborate with the Mindful Motherhood project to bring this online program to our Pathways Connect groups. Wellness practitioners can earn continuing education credits through the facilitator-training portion of the program, while parents may take the online version of the program individually or with a group. If you are interested in sponsoring or participating in the eight-week program, contact Lisa Reagan for more information at lisa.reagan@pathwaystofamilywellness.org. 



Lisa Reagan is the associate editor for PATHWAYS TO FAMILY WELLNESS and the cofounder of Families for Conscious Living. Lisa is a trained Worldview Literacy Project facilitator and is happy to speak to your group about the Worldshift to Wellness.