

A CARER'S UNEXPECTED BENEFITS

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My world came crashing down when Kathy, my wife, was diagnosed with metastatic melanoma three years ago. By the time the cancer was discovered it had already spread, and it wasn't possible to remove it all through surgery. We were initially told that there wasn't much doctors could do. I feared my days with her were numbered.

When she mentioned hearing about The Gawler Foundation, I hoped and prayed it could help, because we were running out of time and options. When Kathy enrolled in the cancer *Life and Living*, I enrolled myself as well, thinking that I was just there to support Kathy. However, I was amazed to find that this course ended up changing my life in amazing ways that I could never have imagined.

The start of the retreat marked the beginning of a major turnaround for me personally. The course covered a lot of excellent material. For me, the segments on meditation were the ones that have left the most lasting impression and have led to very real and tangible benefits. I greatly appreciated the outline of the research supporting the efficacy of meditation and the gentle, practical introduction to the practice itself. Over the months prior to attending the program, I had become more and more depressed. The depression developed gradually.

My ability to effectively support anyone eroded, and I became a boring, humourless 'pain' to myself, and others. I did not feel I could support my wife the way I wanted to. It was like the cancer was taking its toll on both of us, the retreat was exactly what we both needed.

At the end of the program, we walked out of the Foundation as fully empowered people. I had met so many wonderful people on the course, and learnt all about stillness meditation, while feeling very much that I was truly being cared for and nourished, all in beautiful forest surroundings.

When we arrived back in Sydney, Kathy and I found a local, weekly meditation group, and took on an eight-week mindfulness-based stress reduction program to immediately embed our newly acquired lifestyle practices.

Kathy and I attended the five-day follow-up program in October 2011 and have just returned from the seven-day *Meditation in the Forest*. Each time we arrive back home from the Foundation, we both enthusiastically agree, it is the best and most refreshing holiday. But the benefits have gone way beyond improving my capacity to support my partner. Since our first program, my work productivity has increased 150 per cent, even though I now work less hours, I'm 98 per cent less stressed.

Sharing the mindfulness meditation retreat with Kathy was the best thing I ever did. Bringing this practice into our lives moment by moment, gives us a life-affirming foundation from which to communicate and create all our relationships. I am so grateful that I was able to attend the program with Kathy. It would have been very difficult for her to explain what meditation was about, in a way that I would have 'heard' and been able to support and incorporate. I really did need to *experience* it.

Through meditation, my and Kathy's approach to life has changed. The discipline meditation naturally generated has allowed me to 'live in the moment' so much more than before. Now, I catch myself worrying about the future and am able to let those thoughts 'go' and return to whatever is actually happening in the here and now, which is invariably a lot more pleasant than what my imagination had been dishing up. I use the same approach when I find myself stressing about past events.

I am a lot happier now than I have been in a long while. And I believe I am a better person not only for Kathy, but also, most importantly, for myself.