



In Pursuit of Peace

USING MINDFULNESS TO REDUCE STRESS

by Gretchen Eichenberg

Photos by Photography by Cecy, photographybycecy.com and Jennifer Pisarcik, icometotheephoto.com

"Go placidly amid the noise and haste, and remember what peace there may be in silence... Beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle with yourself...Whatever your labors and aspirations, in the noisy confusion of life keep peace with your soul."

American poet and writer Max Ehrmann's 1927 "Desiderata" calls us to be calm, quiet and compassionate – even with ourselves. But in a world that seems full of dissonance and disease, the pursuit of things like peace and quiet feels futile and maybe even selfish. After all, there's a worldwide pandemic raging, a divisive political climate, and fears about the condition of the planet, global enemies and even our own futures.

"We are all experiencing a height-

ened level of stress and anxiety as we continue to navigate through the current pandemic," said Kim Damm, owner and instructor at Yoga8.

"The past two years have created a source of trauma that is showing

Mindfulness — taking time to tune out the future and the past — is one way to find peace throughout the day and eventually, for a lifetime.

up in our emotional and physical bodies as grief, depression, anxiety, fear and stress. Our community is overextended with just trying to survive. Many are pouring from an empty cup and this creates a level of stress, exhaustion, anxiety and makes it very hard to

function."

While all these concerns and plenty of others need our attention, humans cannot live in a perpetual state of worry – or even uneasiness, said Cassie Kendrick, Psy.D. of Waco Psychological Associates said.

"Research has provided support for the use of mindfulness in improving psychological, physical, relational, work and educational functioning," Kendrick said. "In my practice, I most commonly teach mindfulness to assist with symptoms of psychological distress and for the purpose of moving toward one's personal values and goals."

Though the topic of mindfulness has popped up on magazine covers and podcast titles in recent years, the concept is not new. In the ancient Buddhist tradition, mindfulness implies awareness, attention or alertness, which often comes through meditation. But living in the present can be expressed in many different forms. It can be practiced at home or work, while taking or walk or performing everyday tasks.

It's personal, said Liz Barton, a vice president and employee experience manager at Extraco Banks who has been practicing mindfulness since her early thirties.

"Mindfulness can be defined in a number of different ways," Barton said. "What fits for me is being present and aware. You can be mindful during most any activity or when in your own thoughts. It is really about focus. It is being intentional, making a connection with God, a person or yourself."

"I believe mindfulness is linked to peace and sanity, frankly," she said. "Quieting the mind and focusing during prayer, reading, journaling or exercising has been very beneficial for me."

An avid runner, Barton makes mindfulness a part of her daily workout.

"Running is a journey, an escape for the mind, physically

and the senses," Barton said. "It has been an important form of mindfulness for years. Running takes me on a short escape from worry or to settle my mind. Sometimes the journeys include my running group and sometimes I am alone. If I'm not listening to music I try to tune into my breathing, clear my mind. During the first part of the pandemic I was more aware of birds, insects, the color of nature. It was very healing."

Barton said practicing mindfulness has changed her outlook and improved her quality of life.

"It is not a perfect routine and not easy," she said. "I find myself reassessing, refocusing and fighting for the time I need. I know when I am taking care of myself and keeping a routine, I am happier, more present and productive. Being mindful ensures that I am able to contribute and meet expectations in relationships with others."

As a human resources professional, Barton began to notice the toll current world circumstances was taking on her employees.

"The stress we are all under is impacting all of our routines and daily lives," she said. "The ways in which we are used to functioning have been disrupted and this current climate is not normal. I see folks seeking answers and respite from what we are being impacted by."

So she decided to do something about it, starting with sharing the practice of mindfulness that has worked for her. That's where her path crossed with Damm's.

"After meeting Kim Damm of Yoga 8, we thought a virtual meditation session would be something our employees could benefit from," Barton

said. "At first, not everyone thought there would be interest, but we were wrong. Employees are seeking answers and tools to cope. We all know that stress is not healthy and we are the only ones that can manage this. Life is short and we have to learn to navigate this journey and make the most of it. Employers who want an engaged, connected workforce have to find some solutions."

The company offered an online meditation and relaxation event via Webex and a host of employees joined the experience.

"It was amazing to have 30 plus employees join us for an online session to learn breathing and relaxation techniques," Barton said. "It is clear we need to do this more, offer more tools to help employees navigate through stressful times. Kim led the session and guided us through how to focus on our breathing and just be quiet for a time, be mindful."

For Damm, mindfulness been a transformation. It started about 10 years ago when she found the practice of yoga.

"Before yoga, I was a type A, stressed out, intense corporate worker," she said. "I found myself very angry at life and exhausted. I thought that was

"The stress we are all under is impacting all of our routines and daily lives. The ways in which we are used to functioning have been disrupted and this current climate is not normal. I see folks seeking answers and respite from what we are being impacted by."

the way life was supposed to be. No-one really taught me about the importance of calming the mind. I started practicing yoga and at the end of every class we finish in savasana, a lying down pose where you rest in complete stillness and try to find stillness in the mind."

She said the practice was hard for her and when she first started, she would skip the last part.

"I didn't have time for naps, is what I thought," she said. "But as I grew in my yoga practice, I understood the purpose of that pose and committed to practicing it properly. This is where I started to learn the importance of shutting down the mind. The more I practiced, the easier it got."

Then she took the same philosophy off of the mat and added it in her daily life.

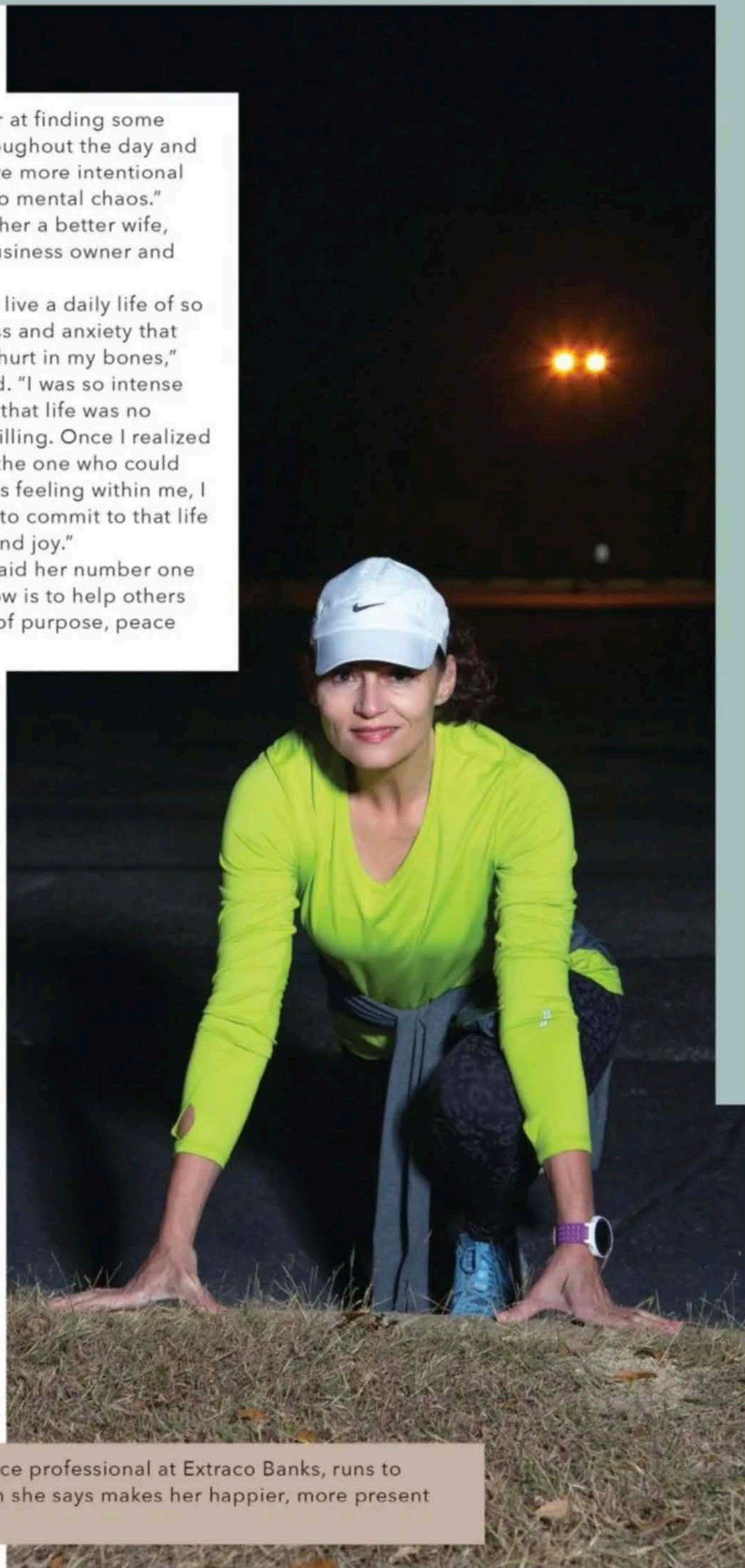
"I would focus on my transitions during the day," she said. "When I would leave one place and head to another, I would sit in my car with my eyes closed and shut down the experience I just had. No matter if it was great, meh, or horrible. I would leave that experience wherever I was leaving. Then I would focus on the type of energy and attention I wanted to bring to the next experience. If I was heading home for the day I would mentally prepare myself to have space to listen, support and be present for my kids and husband and experience that time with them. With the practice of mindfulness

I am better at finding some peace throughout the day and my days are more intentional opposed to mental chaos."

It made her a better wife, mother, business owner and athlete.

"I use to live a daily life of so much stress and anxiety that it actually hurt in my bones," Damm said. "I was so intense and angry that life was no longer fulfilling. Once I realized that I was the one who could change this feeling within me, I was ready to commit to that life of peace and joy."

Damm said her number one mission now is to help others find a life of purpose, peace and joy.



Liz Barton, a human resource professional at Extraco Banks, runs to practice mindfulness which she says makes her happier, more present and productive.



Kim Damm, owner and instructor at Yoga8, incorporates mindfulness into her daily routine.

"I use to live a daily life of so much stress and anxiety that it actually hurt in my bones. I was so intense and angry that life was no longer fulfilling. Once I realized that I was the one who could change this feeling within me, I was ready to commit to that life of peace and joy."

"We all have it within us," she said. "We just need to be taught how to reach it. The practice is not easy but a daily practice of being aware and present becomes part of who you are and it becomes easier to course correct when heading down that mental spiral."

So, how do you get started practicing mindfulness? Kendrick, Damm and Barton offer the following tips from their experience:

Embrace silence.

Find a quiet place, get in a comfortable position, close your eyes and just sit. "When I am coaching my new clients, I tell them to start with sitting in silence for two minutes each day, notice what [thoughts] are coming up during that time, jot them in down in a journal and move on," Damm said. She said the practice of sitting in silence becomes easier and you can go a little longer each time.

Focus on your breath.

If closing your eyes and being quiet for two minutes seems daunting, try a technique called box breathing. "You inhale for four [counts], hold your breath for four, exhale for four and hold at the end for four," Damm said. "Do that for two minutes. It gives your mind a break."

Recognize the transitions.

As we go throughout our daily routines, it's good to acknowledge the end of one task and the beginning of another. "You can also do the box breathing in between transitions," Damm said. "Stop and breathe. Let go of where you are coming from and set an intention on what energy and space you would like to bring to the next task."

Get moving.

Making time for any sort of

exercise – whether a challenging run or a stroll through the park – is a vital path to mindfulness. "Running helps me burn off the crazy," Barton said. "It is a healthy escape for me. Early during the pandemic, I focused on an online running challenge. I ran with a group virtually, earned badges for meeting milestones and found a positive activity to focus on. It is vital for my health to stay active and gain lift from the natural endorphins and serotonin running and exercise provides." Damm also recommends adding some intentional movement to your day. "It could be a 20-minute walk outside," she said. "I like to call these mental health walks. So many people exercise because they want to be skinny or fit, but it is different to move for your mental health. Get the heart pumping, blood flowing, spend some time mental dumping the junk that sits in your mind."

Enjoy nature.

Nothing gets us back to the basics like spending time in nature. Take a walk, breathe in fresh air, feel the sunshine on your face. "Nature is so healing," Damm said. "Look at the trees, listen to the bird chirps, skip, dance, be free."

Limit social media.

Regulating time spent on social media is important for mindfulness and mental health. "In a world full of so many pressures, the stresses of everyone's 'best self' on social media can definitely throw us in the comparison game, causing us to focus on everything but the present moment," Damm said. Be mindful of how much time you spend here versus in the real world.

Meditate and pray.

It may be important to note

that mindfulness is different from meditation, Kendrick said. "Mindfulness is a way of approaching our experience," she said. "It can be done for a few minutes once or throughout your day, formally or informally, depending on what best suits you. Meditation, or a formal meditation practice, can assist in more mindful living, however, formal meditation is not necessary to engage in mindfulness." Barton said prayer and making time to journal are important tools for her. "Prayer reminds me that I am not in control," she said. "I have to let go."

Celebrate the ordinary.

Many activities we engage in throughout a normal day can be done in a mindful way and can be utilized to practice mindfulness, Kendrick said. "We can eat mindfully, shower mindfully, walk mindfully, or, in a nod to the CDC, wash our hands mindfully – for 20 seconds of course," she said. "Mindfulness is readily incorporated into most any activity. That's one of the things that makes it so great."

For anyone who may wish to start practicing mindfulness, Barton suggests finding out what form of mindfulness practice is right for you.

"Experiment, network, ask others," she said. "Find your own jam. Some people hate to run, others are self-conscious when it comes to practicing new activities. We all have to make the time for ourselves to figure out how we are wired and, when there is a short circuit, what is going to help hit the reset button."

Kendrick said to start with the basics.

"Learn a few basic techniques such as a simple counting

breath or how to engage in an everyday activity mindfully," she said. "Either set aside a few minutes to practice each day or determine where you might incorporate mindfulness informally into your daily routine. Just five to ten minutes each day can help someone begin the journey of living mindfully."

Starting small and investing in yourself is key.

"These practices need to be

intentional and scheduled," Damm said. "If the things that are coming up [during your practice] need to be addressed, then I highly recommend a therapist, too. You don't have to go through this alone."

Kendrick said normal stressors have the capacity to affect our peace of mind to a mild degree, but in today's world many people are experiencing more than what is normal.

"We would even say that anxiety is a normal response to everyday stress," she said. "However, when people face extraordinary or persistent stressors, such as those brought about by a global pandemic, death of a loved one, significant changes in relationships, work, education, living or school situations, these stressors can begin not only to affect, but to disrupt, [their] peace of

The only moment that we truly ever have is the moment we are currently experiencing.



Cassie Kendrick, Psy.D, suggests starting small and experimenting to find out what works best for you.

Speechless Spirituality

Embracing the Sound of Silence

mind. When this happens, previously normal anxiety or other difficult emotions can become prominent in a person's everyday life."

Learning to be more mindful can help.

"I like to think of mindfulness as focusing one's attention in a specific way for an intended purpose," Kendrick said. "Mindfulness is not a foreign process to any of us and is actually a normal part of the human experience. We've all had the experience of tuning in to something we are doing or attending to something in an intentional way. In these moments, we were engaging in our experience in a mindful way. When we practice mindfulness, we simply intentionally approach our experience by tuning into everyday moments."

Mindfulness is about living life in the present moment. It is a practice of being conscious and aware of the experience you are currently having and living.

"If we are living in the past, we are living a life of memories and past experiences," Damm said. "This can cause stress, regret, fear. If we live in the future, we are living a life of imagination because there is no way to predict the future. This can cause anxiety. The only moment that we truly ever have is the moment we are currently experiencing."

"When we can focus on the here and the now, we can bring ourselves to a space of peace," Damm said. "A strong mindfulness practice helps allow ourselves to self-regulate and live a life of less stress and anxiety and find more peace." ■

It is a noisy world but mindfulness requires getting comfortable with a certain degree of silence. Some people, like the Cistercian Monks of the Immaculate Conception, even immerse themselves in complete silence as a way of life. Wacoan Mary Helen George discovered the peace and tranquility of a life of silence when she began visiting the monastery – Abbaye Notre Dame de Lérins – off the coast of France 15 years ago.

"I stayed within the cloisters of a twelfth century abbey perched on a tiny island in the Mediterranean," George said. "And it was during that week that I learned to embrace the sound of silence. Little did I know that, from then on, I would carry with me the peace that comes with silence."

George returned to the monastery several times to experience a spiritual silence and solitude she called "refreshing."

"There was no chatter, no mechanical noise, no whir of a car's engine," she said. "Instead, there was the beautiful sound of monks chanting at 4:30 a.m. as they started their day, of songbirds chirping, of waves lapping on the shore. There was suddenly more room in my head and my heart for gratitude. As I observed the monks in their silent and simple contemplative lifestyle, I felt myself growing more calm, observant, grateful. I felt that I was living in the moment."

By eliminating unnecessary chatter and noise in her life, George said, she can rejoice in the sounds of nature and live wholeheartedly in the present.

Closer to home last fall, Wacoan Len Brown took part in a silent retreat, sponsored by CrossTies, the local ecumenical faith community that founded the Talitha Koum Institute. The weekend of silence and prayer was held at Cederbake Renewal Center in Belton, on the edge of the Texas Hill Country, led by writer and spiritual director Katherine Dinsdale of Lawrence, Kansas.

"I have been studying St. Benedict

for a while and learning about the beauty of life in a monastery," Brown said. "St. Benedict emphasizes the importance of silence over and over again in his Rule of Life, which made me curious. When I received an email about a silent retreat coming up, the invitation came at just the right time, before the busy holiday season began. I think it was just what I needed...a step away from the noise around me and even within me."

The group hiked trails, created art and cooked meals together, but in silence. During meal times, there were readings and thoughts to ponder, presented by Dinsdale.

"It was challenging to be silent for an entire weekend in some ways and refreshing in other ways," Brown said. "Being in a group and not talking felt strange at first. We even had to prepare a meal and clean up with others and not speak at all."

But Brown found that they were able to communicate sufficiently enough to accomplish the task without using words.

"Not talking or using my phone to text was, ultimately, a relief," she said. "The quiet allowed me to notice how busy and distracted I had been, and explore the nature around me as my activity."

She said the fruit of being in silence often comes after the experience, not necessarily during the quiet time.

"There is such power in silence, I believe," Brown said. "It is so easy to get caught up in the swirl around us, and much of it is good stuff. But we really weren't intended to live in the swirl all of the time."

Brown said if she doesn't step outside the swirl regularly, to be still and mindful of what is really going on within her and to make a point of opening herself to God, she can lose sight of her purpose.

"And sometimes my purpose simply needs to be to listen well to those around me without trying to fix or change anyone or anything, simply to listen," she said.