

**SECOND ANNUAL NEW YORK WOMEN'S HEALTH CONFERENCE
ONE'S HEART CAN TRANSFORM EVERYTHING
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On the morning of Feb. 3, approximately 1,500 members and guests all bundled up with scarves, hats and earmuffs hurried through the door of the SGI-USA New York Culture Center, where they found not only heat, but a warm welcome and beaming smiles. Here they arrived at the 2nd annual Women's Health Conference sponsored by the SGI-USA New York women's division. The conference's theme was "Creating Emotional and Mental Well-being From a Buddhist Perspective."

The conference offered a full day of lectures and workshops. The morning session started with a presentation titled "The Buddhist Perspective on the Fundamental Cause of Illness." The extensive discussion ranged from the historical Western view of the relationship between women and mental health to Buddhist concepts of the six causes of illness and the nine consciousnesses.

The informative studies were then highlighted by two faith experiences by SGI-USA members, both of whom overcame mental illness. The presentation constantly emphasized the balance between attaining spiritual strength and obtaining correct information based on common sense and a never-give-up spirit. As one of the presenters, Dr. Brenda Aiken-Thompson, asserted: "Being healthy is our responsibility. You cannot afford to flirt with illness. We all have a mission. We may occasionally become ill; but we should never allow illness to defeat us."

In the special lecture titled "Depression, Nichiren Buddhism and Empowerment," Kathleen Olesky used the Buddhist concept of the nine consciousnesses to provide an in-depth explanation of the relationship between one's mind and depression. Specifically, she stressed that becoming a bodhisattva and helping others are crucial to one's mental health. She explained that bodhisattva practice helps one transform the causes of one's suffering into acts of self-liberation and value creation. Ending her lecture, she quoted SGI President Ikeda, who has said, "One's heart can transform everything."

After lunch, the participants chose from 16 different workshops conducted in two concurrent sessions. They included workshops emphasizing the traditional psychiatric approach, as well as holistic, alternative and complementary approaches to mental health care; music and art therapies; and seminars on marriage and relationships, addiction, domestic violence and self-esteem issues. Many of the workshop lecturers were non-members teamed up with SGI-USA members who specialize in the health care field.

The "Coming Into Your Wiser Self" workshop focused on dispelling the myth that growing old necessarily means growing infirm and obsolete. "We do not degenerate because we grow old," said presenter Annie Sigel. "We grow old because we degenerate." At the outset of the workshop, Ms. Sigel asked the more than 200 participating women if they had any fears about growing old. The women responded by expressing dozens of fears, including the fear of growing unattractive and of not having enough money to live on when they are old. Ms. Sigel urged the women to shift their thinking about aging. Rather than think about it as growing weaker, less attractive and less powerful, she encouraged them to think of it as gracefully gliding into their wiser selves.

"All of us," said Ms. Sigel, "have unful-filled dreams and hopes." But rather than telling ourselves that those are things we did not accomplish in our lives, she asked the

audience to add the word *yet* after each unfulfilled ambition. She said the conscious mind places limitations on us, but by giving voice to an unrealized ambition by saying we have not accomplished it “yet,” we validate that it is something we will accomplish in the future.

Ann Jacobs, executive director of the Women’s Prison Association, presented the powerful workshop “Families in Crisis.” “Women in prison are not who you think they are,” Ms. Jacobs explained. “The lives of the Women’s Prison Association’s clients are not so different from many women generally.” She noted that 75–80 percent of the women incarcerated are mothers and that 70 percent have custody of at least one minor child.

Although incarcerated women presently make up less than 10 percent of the prison population. But the number will likely increase, according to Jacobs, who cited the statistics in an introduction to the topic. She called the impending increase “a function of the war on drugs which results in apprehension followed by speedy conviction.”

The WPA does its part to curb the trend by offering such programs as the Hopper Home Alternative to Incarceration Program. This program targets the individual client and provides a drug-free residence, plus direct services based on gender and education in how to acquire independent life skills, break the cycle of domestic violence and survive in society.

“From the moment you are made a leader in the SGI, your whole experience—in addition to getting benefit and showing actual proof—is about caring for other people, and it has to come from the heart,” said Dr. Katherine Golar, the featured speaker at the workshop on “Hormonal Changes and Mental Health.” She is an internist and director of the Brownsville Multi-Service Family Health Center in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Dr. Golar has been practicing in the SGI-USA for 17 years, and she credits her Buddhist practice with helping her develop a compassionate practice of medicine with a focus on the happiness, growth and health of human beings.

A necessary component for achieving wellness, said Dr. Golar, is for patients to have some sort of spiritual foundation to their life. “You hear people in all parts of medicine talking about the importance of spirituality,” she said, “so it has entered the official dialogue.”

As a practicing physician, she does not advocate any particular spiritual practice for her patients, but does encourage them to seek one out. “We recognize that any division between mind, body and spirit is artificial,” she said, “and that true health results from care given to all these areas of our lives.”

“I have been touched by everything that I heard today and I’m really excited,” commented Denise Royal, an SGI-USA member. “The highlight for me was one of the experiences, talking about never giving up on looking for solutions to overcoming problems. It woke me up to my power and potential.”

Megan HERNs, an SGI-USA member and college student, also had a revelation through this conference. “Seeing depression from a Buddhist perspective is very refreshing and eye opening,” she said. “Buddhism is not just a philosophy or a religion. It also relates to daily life, science and medical issues. This conference made me rethink the way I live.”

Nicole Williams, a non-member who was looking for insight into how to deal with her diabetes, said, “I would like to deal with my diabetes spiritually, not just physically.” She then noted that the conference “helped me dig a little deeper into myself and not just rely on medication to heal.”

For Maria Guerrier, the benefit of creating a bond among women was the highlight of the day. “Women together, women empowering each other,” she said. “This is wonderful.”