

# A Bridge to Self Discovery

04/16/2020

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## Donor's gift establishing the I-System Institute for Mind-Body Bridging will help therapy clients find their answers within themselves

It's Kevin Webb's first few weeks at Utah State University, and books are stacked everywhere in this small room. He brushes off a chair for me.

Into this somewhat-organized disorder walks Derrik Tollefson, department head of Sociology, Social Work and Anthropology, carrying two more boxes. He scans the room for a clear spot on the floor.

Webb's office on the third floor of Old Main is the headquarters, at least for now, of a new program gifted to USU's Social Work Program in late 2019. Mind Body Bridging, as it's called, introduces a compelling and innovative way of conducting therapy. The approach was developed by Dr. Stanley H. Block, a retired psychiatrist residing in Washington State who after 40 years of practicing conventional therapy was dissatisfied with the long-term results his clients experienced.

The psychiatrist structured his therapy method and began to promote it through books and other outreach. But he found himself staring down the immovable mass that is conventional therapy. Convention as in, "But we've always done it this way!"

It seemed there were very few minds open to Block's simple and practical new methods. Oddly enough, though, Block's concept of mind-body bridging took hold in two

modest, rather isolated southeastern Utah communities. Therapists in Blanding and Moab found it was successful in changing the mindset of domestic violence offenders.

Webb was one of those therapists who pioneered the use of the concept within domestic violence offenders he worked with as a clinical consultant. Tollefson, who was also working and conducting research with this population, heard about Webb's innovative approach to Block's research and offered to use his research skills to evaluate the program. This study, published in 2009, was followed by a rigorous clinical trial conducted at another location in the Salt Lake City area resulting in another publication in 2015.

These successful efforts combined with an increasing interest in MBB in Utah prompted the 80-year-old Block to turn to Utah State University to house his vision of an institute that would train therapists and undertake continued research. And, to get the first bricks laid, Block presented USU with \$2.3 million dollars to establish the I-System Institute for Transdisciplinary Studies: Home of Mind-Body Bridging. Webb is the new center's associate director, and Tollefson is its director.

As Block intended, said Tollefson, "we're going to take MBB to the world."

### From a personal vantage point

Mind-body bridging is an evidence-based therapeutic modality, one of innumerable approaches available to counselors and therapists. But this approach — expansive and personal at once — is difficult to describe using flat words on a page. It fares much better when explained via a real-life scenario. Because I have been given the chair of honor, I'll be the guinea pig.

Sitting in the cluttered office, Webb draws an oval on a blank piece of paper and instructs me to write within it a problem or situation that's giving me grief. I don't even hesitate: my 20-year-old son seems to have put the brakes on life, turning his bright energy, kindness and curiosity toward a computer screen and surly purposelessness, isolated 24-7 behind a closed bedroom door.

Next, Webb instructs me to jot down my responses to the status quo. I list, justifiably I think, frustration, anger, regret. OK, maybe something about failing as a parent.

At Webb's direction, I close my eyes, relax my shoulders, and try to subdue the monkey in my mind by tuning into my senses. Even in this closed-off room, I pick up hurried steps down the hall, a burr of an air conditioner, a faraway

squeal from a teenager, or perhaps an unhappy dog. My shoulders drop another inch. I'm comforted by the soft fabric that's covering my arms.

After a bit, I open my eyes and, at Webb's prompting, I pick up the pen to describe what I now think and feel. I write just one word. Sadness.

Such deep sadness for a tampered spirit, for the loss of weeks and months.

What I've just tapped into, says Webb, is my true self, the natural, empathetic me, whose love seeks only to embrace my son, if he'd only accept it.

### **Getting lost in the Identity-System**

Mind-body bringing is based on the concept that one can't heal without its other half. If we slice our finger on a knife, the resulting cut will scab over; the scab soon falls off, leaving little sign of the injury. Our mind is built to heal in a similar way, said Webb, by bringing it and our body into harmony and partnership. But what happens, he said, is "our mind and our body start to work at odds with each other."

Of course, this "map" Webb has helped me create — map is the term for this process of laying out your troubling thoughts — is only one piece of mind-body bridging. But it illustrates the foundation on which this modality is based.

Each of us has what mind-body bridging theory calls the identity system or I-System, a potential bad guy that because of the complex, seeking beings we are, always waits in ambush. In normal conditions, we humans see, perceive and respond. But when the I-system kicks in, we begin to fret, obsess, justify, and we take on these unhappy and hurtful thoughts as our identity. In other words, Webb says, "we begin to over-identify with these things." Our identity baggage gets heavier as we stop at every shiny store window.

What activates the often-harmful identity system is what Block calls a "requirement" or, in other words, a mental rule about the way things "should be." A mental rule, said Webb, is a bit like an expectation of how we think our lives should proceed. In my case, I had anticipated that my son would start college, hold down a job, maybe get a girlfriend (silly, I know). But all that was being thwarted. And I angrily wondered, Why can't he just grow up and quit wasting his life?

The identity system is energized by its two subsystems.

First, the "depressor" takes the violated requirement and adds disappointment, negativity and unhappiness. The result is an unhappy story line that plays over and over in our mind. My story line, for example, insisted that I was a horrible, indulgent parent.

Then, the "fixer" enters the process. "The fixer tries to make it all better," said Webb. "But there's one problem. The fixer can't make it better because no matter what that fixer does, this depressor will never approve. It will never be good enough."

The result "is a vicious cycle of dysfunction in the mind-body state," says Webb, "that tries to make you think you're damaged, that 'Yep, it's all your fault.'"

My own story line starring my reckless, seemingly uncaring son took a turn. The contemplation process helped me re-center my mind by defusing the interference of my identity system. My inner room quieted and lightened, creating a mind-body state that allowed me, as Webb describes it, "to function as you were intended to function."

In this natural state, he said, "You have a thought, and you deal with it as best you can. You don't try to control anything you can't, and you recognize your response is the best you can do. In this mind-body state, you're empathetic and sad."

Webb offers this analogy of a sponge. If you compress a sponge tightly in your hands, it can soak up only a bit of water. But loosening the tight grip — in other words, removing the grip of the identity system, the depressor, and the fixer — allows the sponge to swell to twice its size. "Look at how much room you have now, how much more expansive," he says. "It's not the nature of the problem that's changed, but your ability to deal with it. This is resilience." And, he adds, this is the core concept of mind-body bridging.

### **Creating practitioners and trainers**

Block's generosity allows the establishment of the I-System Institute for Transdisciplinary Studies, an intellectual, research and educational center within the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. The institute has the go-ahead from USU's Board of Trustees as well as the Utah State Board of Regents.

Initially, the institute will train master's-level students and licensed therapists, said Tollefson, a licensed clinical social worker himself who also heads the sprawling Department of Sociology, Social Work, and Anthropology. Once these professionals are certified in "I-System"

methods, they can practice it themselves and train their clients. The specialized training will also be offered to bachelor's-level licensed substance abuse counselors. Already, three graduate-level courses have been added to the Social Work Program's curriculum.

Under Tollefson and Webb's guidance, the center will instruct social workers and therapists nationwide and pursue an ambitious plan to conduct research and introduce the benefits of mind-body bridging to human services agencies, public schools and even the business world.

As the institute grows, said Tollefson, "we see ourselves becoming essentially a training and research clinic, based here on campus, where we'll conduct mind-body bridging-related interventions and evaluate those interventions."

### **A mind shift away from shame**

Kevin Webb, now employed by USU, is the natural choice to nurture the new institute. He was introduced to the modality as a clinical consultant while assisting with the domestic violence offender treatment program in San Juan County. He soon found success with the use of mind-body bridging among such populations as children and adults, as well as domestic violence and other offenders.

By then, Block, who practiced psychiatry in California and Maine, had been using the program for some 20 years. He had authored the book *Bridging the I-System* and was on his second edition of *Come to Your Senses*.

In his work with addicts and offenders, Webb was impeded by their resistance to change — specifically the unknown territory that comes with it. "We tend to glob onto things we know," he said of his clients — actually, all humans. "And we become quite stuck. Eventually, our identity system not only defines us, it confines us."

Domestic violence offenders replay a story line that tells them they're not the one with the problem. Indeed, said Webb, "They begin to think they're the victim."

The I-System offers long-term results for offenders because it resets their perspective of their criminal wrongdoings, allowing the authentic change that can only come from within.

"The best solutions to any problem reside within the skin of the person who owns the problem," said Webb. "When they get into their natural mind-body state, they see their solutions. And if they don't, they're able to have conversations about them."

Webb finds it useful to create his own personal "maps" when he's stressed or angry. "I know my identity system has become active when I have body tension and my mind is cluttered," he said. When that story line begins to roll, he added, "that's a signal to me that I'm off track. I need to address it, defuse it, and get back to natural functioning."

Webb says he sometimes is asked by acquaintances why he even works with these "terrible people who've done terrible things." But he's found, he says, that shame and labeling are ineffective ways to change people.

"I look at the individual and say, 'That's not who they are'. When you help that person discover who they are, it's wonderful," he said.

"I have yet to work with one person, abuser or non-abuser, that when they start to see who they truly are, who their natural functioning self is, is a magnificent individual."

### **A passion for helping**

Block and his wife, Carolyn Bryant Block, have a passion for "wanting good for the world," said Tollefson. But they were unsure how to go about condensing and perpetuating 40 years of Block's work — and then turning that vision into reality. "They truly want to help bless people's lives," he said.

Block not only presented a monetary gift of over \$2 million to the university, but also all of his intellectual property, said Tollefson. USU now owns the copyrights to the Blocks' published books, as well as the many workbooks they've created.

"The money is one thing, and it is, of course, very important," he said. "But what's even more important is that the institute now owns the intellectual property" that will allow it to flourish.

Their mission, as defined by the Blocks, is to disseminate mind-body bridging concepts around the globe, said Tollefson. "We'll train clinicians who know how to practice it on the mental health side. We'll train teachers how to use it in their classrooms. We'll train students at universities and secondary and elementary schools to use it," he said.

"If I was to put his mission in a nutshell, it would be to take mind-body bridging and share it with the world."

Story by Janelle Hyatt

## More about the I-System

[I-System Home Page](#)



The generous gift by Dr. Stanley Block, a retired psychiatrist in Washington, and his wife Carolyn Bryant Block, is the Foundation for the I-System Institute for Transdisciplinary Studies, which is housed at USU and designed to help people worldwide. (Photo courtesy Derrik Tollefson)

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### Taking MBB worldwide

The new I-System Institute for Transdisciplinary Studies has three goals, said Derrik Tollefson, department head for Sociology, Social Work and Anthropology and the institutions director.

### Continuing research:

As the institute grows, said Tollefson, “we see ourselves becoming essentially a research clinic on the campus where we’ll be doing mind-body bridging-related interventions and evaluating those interventions.”

### Outreach to schools, the community, and business:

Outreach to public schools K to 12 in a program called “Resilient Minds, Resilient Schools.” For community, a program called “Human Resilience and Flourishing.”

A “Productive Mind” program designed for corporations and other facets of the business world.

## **Clinical training and certification in the Mind-Body Bridging methodology:**

Designed for master's-level students and licensed therapists, as well as bachelor's-level licensed substance abuse counselors.

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