

WELLNESS/LIFESTYLE

BY MICHELE HEBERT

FIT TO MEDITATE *Is it possible to achieve levels of "fitness" in the way you think, feel and perceive the world?*

"In the practice of meditation our minds become peaceful and leave the worldly nature of ourselves."

—Walt Baptiste, *Meditation Master*

Did you know that in a typical day you think approximately 60,000 thoughts? What is even more astounding is that 90 percent of those thoughts are repeats of yesterday's thoughts. (Most of us would like to think we are constantly expressing creative thoughts and ideas, but apparently this is not the case!) Psychology reveals that the majority of our thought patterns and beliefs are formed at a very early age and repeat themselves over and over throughout our lives.

Thoughts and thought patterns, once "thought" to fall only into the realm of mental health, have proven active players in the realm of physical health (or overall wellness) as well. It is now known, for example—beyond a scientific doubt—that the nervous system, the immune system and the endocrine system "talk" to each other extensively. "The concept of separate systems no longer holds," says Candace Pert, PhD, former chief of brain biochemistry at The National Institute of Mental Health.

Fitness and Meditation

Your thoughts and emotions are constantly affecting the trillions of cells in your body. When you are in a calm and relaxed state, chemical messengers such as serotonin and endorphins are released from the brain into the rest of the system, creating a sense of well-being



and harmony. When you are in a state of mental or emotional stress, however, the famous "fight or flight" response kicks in and the entire system prepares to defend itself. This in itself is not negative. However, repeated activation of the stress response exhausts the adrenal glands, lowers immune function and can result in stress-related disease (dis-ease).

Meditation seeks to introduce a new level of "fitness" to how you think, feel and perceive the world around you. As a fitness professional, your role in helping your clients achieve higher levels of health and fitness is expanding. With the stresses and anxieties created by today's culture, many of your clients (and you!) could benefit greatly by incorporating a simple meditation practice into the daily routine.

Your understanding of meditation—the research behind it, the techniques and the benefits—can expand your awareness of your clients' (and your own) potential for greater health and happiness. Understanding can also help you create new alliances with health care professionals already making use of various meditation techniques. (New research in mind-body medicine is having a profound impact on concepts and approaches to health care.) In addition, your knowledge in this area will prepare you to answer clients' questions and provide referrals.

Mounting Research Supports Meditation

Herbert Benson and Miriam Klipper, in the landmark book *The Relaxation Response*, found that the human nervous system cannot be in a state of stress and a state of relaxation at the same time. The question Benson asked in his 1975 Harvard research study was, "Can we influence our own physiologic reaction to stress through controlled mental practices?" He found that we could. His studies with meditators concluded that simple meditation practices of 20 to 30 minutes resulted in a marked decrease in the body's oxygen consumption—almost twice the decrease

produced by sleeping. Brain-wave patterns were also different. The findings seemed to indicate that the body is in a deeper state of rest during meditation than during sleep.

Today, leading hospitals and clinics

I N B R I E F

Meditation may be the exercise that completes your clients' (or your own) state of wellness.

across the country are introducing meditation programs as a result of remarkable research findings on the physiological effect of meditation.

In San Diego, California, Sharp Health-Care has recently formed the Sharp Institute for Human Potential and Mind Body Medicine. Meditation is a recommended part of its program. At the neighboring Scripps Clinic, I teach a course in meditation in a health club setting at the Shiley Sports and Health Center.

The University of Massachusetts Medical Center has had a very successful meditation program for several years

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at its Stress Reduction Clinic directed by Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD. This program has been given national coverage for its success with patients suffering from chronic pain. Kabat-Zinn reports that meditation can be used to increase relaxation, lower blood pressure, decrease pain, reduce the secretion of stress hormones and decrease the amount of excess stomach acid in people with gastrointestinal problems. "Somehow," he says, "the patient's inner resources for healing are being tapped."

Fitness research expert Ralph La Forge, MS, director of health promotion at the San Diego Cardiac Center, finds that in his experience in clinical cardiology, "Those who practice meditation formally or informally manifest fewer physical symptoms . . . specifically less chest pain and [fewer] palpitations."

Besides the tremendous physiological benefits, meditation can bring a sense of mental clarity and peace of mind. Meditators in the University of Massachusetts Medical Center's eight-week program viewed themselves as "in control" and better able to handle stressful

situations than they had been before meditating. Reportedly, psychological problems—such as anxiety, depression and hostility—were greatly reduced through meditation, and life was seen "as a challenge rather than an obstacle."

What Is Meditation?

"We meditate, not to tune out, but to tune in; not to get away from it all, but to get in touch with it all."

—Deepak Chopra, MD

Meditation is often thought of as a mystical practice from the East. The truth is that meditation has been practiced throughout the ages in many cultures and is not necessarily a religious activity. Through practice, we can learn to move into a place of deep peace. The goal of meditation is to achieve union with the essence of who we really are in the deepest part of ourselves—in other words, to achieve "pure awareness," or consciousness.

What is this state of pure awareness? Great thinkers, philosophers, psychologists, spiritual teachers and scientists have written volumes and spent lifetimes considering this timeless subject. In the literature, the term most frequently used to describe the essence of our being is *spirit*. Spirit is defined as the animating force of life.

But where is the spirit? How do we identify with our own spirit? The outer circumstances of daily living seem to hold us on a continual treadmill of endless activity, compounded by that treadmill of our own repeating thought patterns formed early in life.

Many great teachers throughout the ages have said that spirit can be found in the space *between* our thoughts. To find that place, we must slow down and look inward.

Looking Inward and Letting Go

The challenge of moving into pure awareness is to let go of any attachment to our thoughts. This chattering mind of ours seems to carry on an incessant one-way conversation with itself. Most often our thoughts are focused on the past or future—what has happened or what we think or hope will happen.

We rarely live in the richness and full-

ness of the present moment, and yet the present moment is what is real. Being in the present moment is what the Buddhists call *mindfulness*.

Sogyal Rinpoche is a Tibetan monk who has been teaching meditation in the Western world for 20 years. In his best-selling book *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, he tells the delightful story of a fellow meditation student in Tibet who kept asking his master teacher over and over how to meditate. Finally the master replied, "Look, it's like this: When the past thought has ceased and the future thought has not yet risen, isn't there a gap?"

"Yes," replied the student.

"Well, prolong it," the master instructed. "That is meditation."

Mindfulness in Meditation

Thoughts that arise in meditation are not necessarily looked upon as distractions or items to be dismissed. In *Mind Body Medicine: How You Can Use Your Mind for Better Health*, Jon Kabat-Zinn notes "When thoughts or feelings come up in your mind, you don't ignore them or suppress them, nor do you analyze or judge their content. Rather, you simply note any thoughts as they occur as best you can and observe them intentionally but nonjudgmentally. . . ."

This is called *mindfulness meditation*. Kabat-Zinn explains that this "noting of thoughts" allows the meditator to step back and feel less caught up in them. "Observing without judging, moment by moment, helps you see what is on your mind without editing or censoring it without intellectualizing it or getting lost in your own incessant thinking."

The ultimate goal of this technique is to be more aware of whatever is happening in your mind and body at the time it is happening and to accept that present moment. According to Kabat-Zinn, this allows you "to open yourself up to experiencing life much more completely, and makes it more likely that you will be able to respond effectively to any situation that presents itself . . . to navigate life's ups and downs—what Zorba the Greek called 'the full catastrophe'—with grace, a sense of humor and perhaps some understanding of the big picture." ▶

Practicing Meditation

There are a variety of meditation techniques and variations, including those taught in specific Yoga practices, those taught exclusively through fellowships or by spiritual teachers and those readily available techniques practiced in health care environments or found in books such as *The Relaxation Response*. The more available techniques can easily be self-taught or learned in guided meditation, relaxation or stress reduction groups.

The following three general suggestions will assist in the practice of most meditation techniques:

1. Sit with the spine erect. You can sit in a chair or in a simple cross-legged position on the floor or a pillow. An initial awareness of a straight spine helps in proper alignment.

2. Seek out a quiet environment for a calming effect that is ideal for meditation. This quiet spot may be found in your home, in a place of worship or in nature.

3. Let go of the need to control the experience. A receptive attitude is key to meditation.

In meditation a variety of concentration practices help to quiet the chattering mind and lead to a state of heightened awareness. Three techniques that are commonly used and particularly useful to our modern Western minds include:

- watching the breath
- concentration on an object
- reciting a mantra

Watching the Breath. This technique is also referred to as *mindfulness meditation*. Sit quietly observing your breath. Thoughts will move through your mind, but your object of attention is your breath. Follow your breath as it flows in and out. Notice the space between the in breath and the out breath. When your mind wanders (which is very natural), simply bring it back to the breath. Approach this practice as a calm observer. Watching the breath is a wonderful practice to help achieve the realization that you are not your thoughts, but something that goes beyond your thoughts.

Object Concentration. Focus your gaze on an object. An object of inspiration, such as a flower or the ocean, is helpful. Many people gaze lightly into

a candle flame. The goal is to bring the mind to one point of focus in the present moment.

Mantra Meditation. *Mantra* is a Sanskrit word that means "control of mind." In mantra meditation, you repeat a word or series of words to help you gain control of your restless mind. The selected mantra does not have to be of foreign origin. In fact, in my meditation classes I teach mantra meditation using the simple but powerful words, "peace, harmony, well-being," or "joy, peace, bliss," from the Walt Baptiste method of Yoga.

All these concentration practices will naturally lead to a meditative state of heightened awareness. The length of each meditation session is up to you. Although some schools say 20 minutes is desirable, the session length is not as important as daily practice. Just as you train your body through a consistent program of exercise, in meditation you train your mind through consistent practice, and you open up to new levels of mental clarity, physical health and spiritual inspiration. ■

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