

Meditation Gives Your Mind Permanent Working Holiday

Relaxation can improve your business decisions and your overall health

BY KATHLEEN DOLER
FOR INVESTOR'S BUSINESS DAILY

Ever want to just shut off your brain? The stream of thoughts is incessant: the 65 unanswered e-mails in your in box, your son's science project, your co-worker's annoying sighing, the roof gutter repair, the grocery list. The endless static of brain chatter can be overwhelming.

Sure, a vacation would be great, but meditation offers a cheaper and always-available solution. It's a way of slowing down the active mind. Like cleaning out a cluttered drawer, meditation can have a cleansing effect on your brain.

What's more, evidence is convincing Western doctors that the benefits of meditation go way beyond its calming influence. Studies show it can help reduce blood pressure and cholesterol, lower the risk of heart attack and stroke, treat insomnia, anxiety and stress, aid in reducing chronic pain and improve treatment of hormonal problems.

It's easy to learn, and it doesn't have to be spiritual. Clark Strand says it best in his book "The Wooden Bowl": "To meditate is to return to our natural state, the condition of wakeful simplicity that exists when distractions have fallen away."

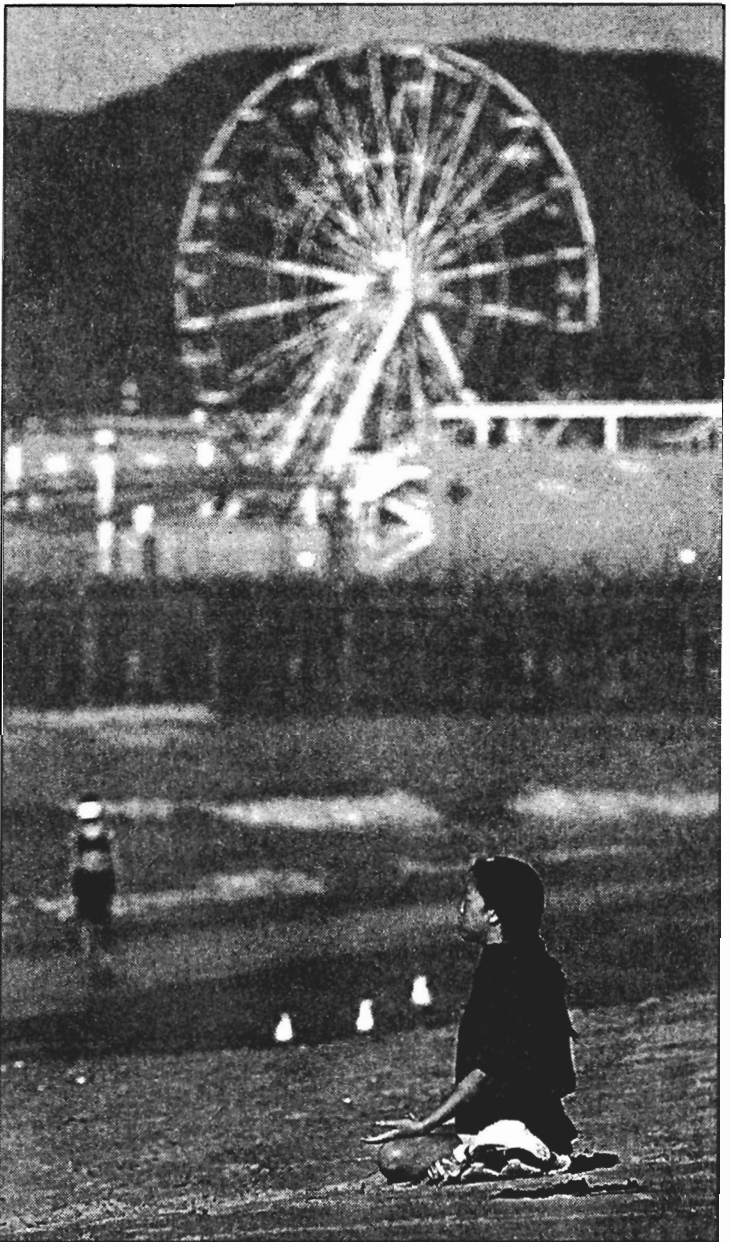
Give it a try: Meditation is about bringing stillness into your life and mind. All you need to get started is a quiet place to practice and five or 10 minutes. Forget the 'stuff' you've heard about pretzel postures, incense and bells. Sit comfortably in a chair, in a quiet place, with soft light. You're ready to begin.

The one constant in all meditation styles — and there are many — is focusing on your breathing. This will help you bring your awareness to one single place.

Counting breaths is one simple technique. Or you may want to focus on the feeling of the breath going in and out at the tip of your nose.

Another helpful technique is to visualize a calming location — a beach, a mountaintop, whatever appeals to you.

Or you may want to repeat a phrase to yourself in your mind. This helps you to focus the brain. If you're practicing meditation to reduce your stress level, one phrase you might use is "I am peace."



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AP

Meditate On These

Three book recommendations

"The Wooden Bowl: Simple Meditation for Everyday Life" by Clark Strand

This simple, short (185 pages) read teaches you how to think about meditation and how to meditate for everyday life.

"The Power of Stillness: Learn Meditation in 30 Days" by Tobin Blake

This guide provides various meditation techniques that you can make part of your daily practice.

"Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life" by Jon Kabat-Zinn

This book discusses how meditation can bring a state of "being" instead of "doing" into your life.

Calm.com

Meditation information and classes online

clarityseminars.com

David and Karen Gamow offer meditation seminars. They specialize in training workers at Silicon Valley-area corporations.

anandapaloo.com

Ananda Sangha of Palo Alto, Calif., teaches classes in yoga and meditation based on the teachings of Paramhansa Yogananda. She takes a nonsectarian approach.

expandinglight.org

The Expanding Light Yoga Retreat in Nevada City, Calif., offers yoga and meditation retreats (also based on the teachings of Yogananda.)

noetic.org/jons/medbiblio/index.htm

This is a paper by Michael Murphy and Steven Donovan of the Institute of Noetic Sciences called "The Physical and Psychological Effects of Meditation."

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one single piece.

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Your mind will wander. Expect it. Just keep bringing your focus back to the breathing and the relaxation of just inhaling and exhaling and being present in the moment.

Try not to judge yourself with questions such as "Am I getting it?" That's not the point.

"Progress in meditation is directional. Don't picture some arbitrary end point," said David Gamow, a meditation trainer and principal of Clarity Seminars. "Neither should you focus on how far you must go to get where you want to be. If you are moving in the right direction, that's great."

Gamow and his wife, Karen, have trained hundreds of people in the high-stress world of Silicon Valley, including workers and managers at firms such as Sun Microsystems, Cisco Systems, Maxtor and Oracle.

Don't try to do too much too soon. Gamow added: "Better to do a little every day for a month than to burn out. Meditation (like life) is a long-distance race, not a sprint." When you feel you've done as much as you can for a day, stop. Keep it reasonable and enjoyable, and then you'll continue to do it.

You also may want to read a meditation book, listen to a tape, take a class or attend a retreat. All will help you reinforce your practice. But again, don't overcomplicate what you're doing.

Author Strand advised: "Medita-

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tion ought to decrease the drivenness of our lives, not make it worse. That is why I say meditate for its own sake, as a hobby, without losing the lightness of your approach."

■ **Medical benefits and reduced stress:** As mentioned above, the medical benefits of meditation are compelling and varied. In one of the most significant recent studies, researchers found meditation may reduce atherosclerosis and the risk of heart attack and stroke. The findings were published in the American Heart Association Journal, Stroke in March 2001.

This was the first controlled study to suggest that stress reduction can reduce atherosclerosis without changes in diet and exercise. The research team included folks from UCLA, Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science in Los Angeles and Maharishi University of Management, College of Maharishi Vedic Medicine in Fairfield, Iowa.

Atherosclerosis is a hardening of the arteries due to the buildup of fat deposits in the artery wall. In a study of 60 men and women over seven months, participants practicing meditation showed a decrease of .098 millimeter in arterial wall thickness, as measured by ultrasound. During the same period, a group that didn't practice meditation showed an increase of .054 millimeter in wall thickness. Researchers said a decrease in arterial wall thickness approaching .1 millimeter would indicate an 11% decrease in

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anandapalootha.org

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natural-meditation.org

Get online courses in meditation at this address.

the risk of heart attack and a 7.7 to 15% reduction in the risk of stroke.

Finding a way to reduce stress and anxiety is what brings many people to the practice of meditation.

"I feel different — more relaxed and more in control. This program has been a powerful experience," said a manager at NASA who took a Clarity Seminars class in meditation.

■ **Better decision-making:** When we are stressed, we tend to react instinctively . . . and sometimes not thoughtfully. Anger comes to the surface because we may be feeling fearful, threatened or just tired. Meditation helps people train their brains to react more deliberately instead of instinctively. This can result in calmer decision-making.

"My doctor ordered me to take this course . . . (and now) I'm able to handle so much more than I used to, with much less stress and anger," said a manager at 3Com who took a meditation seminar from Clarity.

Feeling in control reduces anxiety. In a study by the University of Massachusetts, 20 out of 22 anxiety-prone people showed a 60% improvement in anxiety levels after an eight-week course in meditation.

Up to 40% of U.S. workers describe their job as "very or extremely" stressful, said the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. Problems at work account for more health complaints than any other type of stress. And the American Institute of Stress says 60%-80% of on-the-job accidents are stress-related.

So it's not surprising that companies are discovering the benefits of meditation in helping their work forces to better handle stress, and many are offering stress reduction and meditation seminars.

Calmer workers make better decisions and are better team players. In the 2000 "Attitudes in the American Workplace VI" Gallup Poll, 80% of workers said they felt stress on the job, and nearly half of those said they needed help in learning how to manage stress. 42% said their co-workers needed such help.

A Promising Treatment For Hypochondria

A breakthrough study found that psychotherapy can help hypochondriacs deal with their fears. But the treatment has its limits: A quarter of the patients quit after being told the problem was in their heads.

Hypochondria is a mental, not physical, illness. Getting sufferers to believe that is part of the challenge in treating them.

"Most hypochondriac people never will go to a psychiatrist," said study author Dr. Arthur Barsky of Harvard's Brigham and Women's Hospital. "They'll say, 'I don't need to talk about this. I need somebody

to stick a biopsy needle in my liver, I need that CAT scan repeated.'"

The study involved 102 patients assigned to receive psychotherapy and 85 who got routine medical care.

Among those who completed the six therapy sessions, almost 57% showed significant improvement in symptoms and quality of life after a year, compared with 32% of the comparison group.

Hypochondria involves persistent, unfounded fears about having a serious disease and affects about 5% of patients who seek help from primary-care doctors. AP