

MENTAL, EMOTIONAL & SPIRITUAL HEALTH

- Addiction Treatment
- Churches/Synagogues
- Divorce Support
- Grief & Bereavement
- Hospice Services
- Mental Health Services:
 - Counselors
 - Life Coaches
 - Older Adults
 - Psychologists
 - Psychotherapists
- Retreat Centers
- Social Service Organizations
- Spiritual Organizations

Healthy thinking, healthy emotions and healthy spirit are equally important to having and maintaining a healthy body, says Ruth Haring, Ph.D., Executive Director of The Sambodh Society and the Sambodh Center for Human Excellence in Kalamazoo. "To be healthy is to engage all of your faculties. That's your natural state and inheritance," she says.

For overall good health, Haring recommends, "Meditation. That's the first source of health, because when you become more reflective, you can stop traumatic experiences before they begin, and you learn to respond instead of react." She cites, as an example, the practice of mudra meditation, which employs simple hand gestures. "Each of the points you touch from finger to finger or finger to thumb has a different effect on the brain. This simple technique changes the chemistry of your brain and, consequently, affects your mental and physical health," she says, crediting Hindu yogis' recollections of their deep meditation experiences.

Swami Tapasananda, President of Lakeshore Interfaith Institute in

DON'T JUST DO SOMETHING — SIT THERE

Ganges, has observed that monks and nuns who devote a significant part of each day to prayer give the impression of being brighter, more at ease with themselves and look and feel younger. He, himself, has been meditating for 40 years and says, "Meditation and spiritual living are the most important part of my life. They improve mental health and peace of mind and are great for stress reduction."

These local points of view are supported by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which lists meditation, along with acupuncture, aquatic therapy, gentle massage, deep breathing, biofeedback, tai chi and yoga as "alternative therapies" for chronic fatigue syndrome. The American Heart Association reports that meditation can reduce the risk of heart attack and stroke. And health insurance statistics show significant reductions of coronary disease and cancer among people who meditate.

For people who haven't tried it, meditation might conjure an image of Buddhists sitting cross-legged and intoning "om." However, meditation, in various lengths and degrees, is a part of every major religion. Traditional Christians employ images and icons of spiritual figures, such as Christ and the Blessed Virgin, to focus prayerful devotion. Jewish practitioners distinguish scriptural study from meditation, known as hitbodedut, utilized, according to the Talmud, by sages an hour before and after services. Muslims kneel and bow chant-filled intonations that invoke the many names of Allah either in local mosques or as part of annual pilgrimages. Sufis whirl in dizzying dervishes in order to shift from a human viewpoint to that of the Divine. Indigenous shamans enter into long periods of fasting and bodily deprivation to reach a stage of inspiration. Traditional tent revivalists as well as mega churches of the modern charismatic faiths utilize ritualistic hymns with an energetic beat to enthuse their congregants.

New Thought churches incorporate a guided meditation and peaceful, abstract music as part of their Sunday celebration. Quakers sit for an entire hour in "silent anticipation" for a message from God that will "quake" them enough to stand and share it with others.

But the advocates of meditation extend far beyond churches and the Sabbath. In recent decades, professional sports teams, correctional facilities, businesses and organizations have also discovered the benefits of meditation. John McConnell, who created the Earth Flag, espoused more than 50 years ago, that wars would end if people across the world would sit in silent prayer and meditation for only one minute each day. In like fashion, transcendental meditators have utilized silent prayer to reduce violent crime by as much as 25 percent in crime-ridden cities around the world.

On the individual level, meditation takes people away from activities that are counterproductive to good health. "Meditators tend not to party, have sober diets, and watch little or no television," says Tapasananda. "The most cloistered monks and nuns of all religions tend to live longer, healthier lives. Fasting and ascetic practices seem to enhance health because bad things are omitted from their lifestyle." Referring to the animal world, he notes that calm critters, like tortoises, live longer than predators, such as ferrets.

"Television bombards us with violence," adds Haring. "While some people might not notice this, a reflective person does. Meditation opens up a whole new way of managing information. Through self control and by becoming reflective, it becomes possible to tune out the arenas in our world, such as advertising, that are trying to manipulate us. And that has a direct positive bearing on our health." She also states that meditation is a means through which a person can self-assess the body's internal systems. "With meditation, you tune into your body and

control your emotions. There's so much benefit," she says.

The medical community identifies some of the specific benefits of meditation as decreased respiratory rate, lower heart rate and blood pressure, reduced anxiety and muscle tension, resolved phobias, and diminished effects of chronic situations such as allergies, arthritis, headaches, and pre-menstrual syndrome. Meditation enhances the immune system, helps with post-operative healing, and even builds self-confidence and alters negative mood behaviors.

So, the next time stress begins to build from too much work, too much noise, too much TV, too much violence or too much of anything, don't just do something – sit there!

SOURCES:

The Sambodh Society,
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Lakeshore Interfaith Institute,
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