Got Zen?

Mastering meditation can empower you—and your immune system.

August 1, 2005 By David Thorpe

Most nights, before bed, 44-year-old New Yorker Robin Simmonds spends 10 to 30 minutes sitting in her living room, focusing on her breath. “When I started taking Sustiva,” she says, “it made me panicky and gave me weird dreams. Meditating helps remind me there’s nothing to be afraid of.”

Simmonds, a yoga instructor who leads classes for people with HIV, discovered meditation in the late-’90s while in recovery (HIV had sent her life into a tailspin). The practice has helped her fight opportunistic infections and depression. Ann Webster, PhD, a health psychologist at Boston’s Mind/Body Institute (www.mbmi.org), says meditating can also reduce insomnia, hypertension and neuropathy pain and boost the immune system, largely by reducing stress. When stressed, the body releases hormones that interfere with the production of illness-fighting agents, like CD4s. “That’s why people who push themselves too hard get colds,” says Webster. Simmonds adds that meditating can even make you a better patient. “It quiets my mind, so I can discern better what I’m feeling physically—that empowers me.”

Best known as a Zen Buddhist tradition, meditation offers infinitely varied approaches. (Zen Buddhists generally sit and concentrate on their breath—or, for example, repeat a mantra, like “Om.”) And while meditation is an inner journey, it doesn’t have to be a solo flight. Simmonds teaches yoga at a yearly retreat for HIVers at a Japanese monastery in the Catskill mountains, where participants can join monks in daily meditations (healingandwellnessretreat@yahoo.com; 212.399.7125). Longtime survivor John Lynch, 42, who helps coordinate the Catskill event, says meditating “helped me embrace living with HIV.” Despite a heavy med regimen, he’s in good health. “Meditating can have a deeper healing than just taking a pill,” he says. Om to that.

A Sample Meditation

1. Find a quiet place where you won’t be interrupted. If it helps you focus, light a candle or put on some soothing music.

2. Set a timer for 15 minutes, then sit in a straight-backed chair. Let your hands lie in your lap, and keep your eyes open.

3. Breathing through your nose, concentrate on the sensation of each inhalation and exhalation.

Your breaths may slow—or not!

4. Losing focus? Count your breaths—but return to zero if your mind wanders. Or just notice your thoughts—then refocus on breathing.

5. Need to scratch an itch? Adjust a buttock? Don’t freak. Do what you need to do, then get back to that breath till your 15 minutes are up.

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