Meditation Matters

Meditation eases anxiety and depression and improves the health of people with HIV—without any co-pay.

November 1, 2008 By Rachel Rabkin Pechman

Soon after Heidi Nass was diagnosed with HIV in 1996, she began practicing meditation. “A bout of depression taught me that the brain can be both friend and foe,” she says. Her job directing education, outreach and advocacy for the University of Wisconsin’s HIV/AIDS program in Madison keeps her busy, but she still finds time to meditate. “It makes me feel blessed,” she says. It also makes her feel healthier, and one new study may suggest why.

Past research has shown that meditation can decrease blood pressure, relieve anxiety and depression, and improve immune function. Now, researchers at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) say their small study suggests that mindfulness meditation (one type of meditation) may slow CD4 cell loss in people with HIV.

The researchers aren’t sure how meditation does this, but they have some ideas. “We know that people who are stressed seem to have accelerated declines in immune system function,” says David Creswell, PhD, lead author of the study, “so meditation’s ability to alleviate stress could improve the body’s ability to produce CD4 cells.”

Designing a rigorous study of any behavior is notoriously difficult, and this one has its doubters. But it is beyond doubt that people with HIV have been benefiting from meditation for years. As C.M. of Toronto wrote to *POZ*, “I’ve been HIV positive for 15 years. Of course I meditate!”

Meditation can provide a sense of control over your well-being. In life with HIV, where it can be hard to feel in control, meditation can complement your meds—and it needn’t cost a thing.

Starting Out

If you don’t see yourself sitting cross-legged in a dark room chanting and burning incense, don’t fret. Meditation takes many forms, so it’s likely you can find one that suits you. But first, what exactly is it?

“Meditation involves focusing the mind’s energy,” says Robert Schmehr of the Integrative Medicine Service, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center. “Normally we focus outward,” he says, “but in meditation we learn to focus our awareness inward, finding new options for self-

regulation.” Types of meditation include:

Mindfulness Meditation: “This method brings you directly into the present moment by making you aware of your breathing, the sounds around you and the sensations you’re experiencing,” says Joan Borysenko of Mind/Body Health Sciences in Boulder, Colorado. Studies have shown that mindfulness helps the body achieve a relaxation response—the opposite of the fight-or-flight response that stresses the immune system. To practice mindfulness meditation, it helps to sit or lie in a quiet place. Experts recommend starting with five minutes of meditation twice a day, working up to 20 minutes per session. Researchers at UCLA found that study participants who both meditated and brought mindfulness into day-to-day experiences were especially successful at modulating stress.

Transcendental Meditation (TM): It doesn’t require silence—you can do it on a plane or a bus—but TM does require classes to learn the technique. “It’s extremely simple but subtle, and the teachers give people proper guidance,” says David Sands, MD, former medical director at Maharishi University of Management’s Institute for Natural Medicine and Prevention in Fairfield, Iowa. A teacher assigns you a mantra (a specific Sanskrit sound for you). The theory is that by concentrating on a mantra, which has a vibrational quality, you can “transcend” the mind’s surface levels to reach the subtlest level of thought—pure transcendental consciousness. “[Then] the body achieves a very deep state of rest, deeper than sleep,” says Dr. Sands, “and the physiology is vitalized.” TM is practiced for 15 to 20 minutes twice a day.

Centering Prayer Meditation: If you consider yourself religious, this may be the form for you; it focuses on a prayer word. “The intention is to join with a larger conscientiousness, to be receptive to the divine presence,” says Borysenko. Whenever you feel your mind becoming active, you repeat your prayer word until your mind calms down—with the goal of ultimately feeling at peace. Ideally, this is practiced for 20 minutes twice a day.

The Kelee: The Kelee aims to still the mind by slowly bringing your attention (conscious awareness) from the top of your head down below the surface of your mind, into your chest and back up. “Unlike other meditations, you’re not visualizing and thinking—the Kelee focuses on feeling this progression,” says Daniel Lee, MD, of the University of California, San Diego’s Owen Clinic, who is studying this method in people with HIV. Dr. Lee expects to show that the Kelee, done for 10 minutes twice a day, can alleviate anxiety and stress and improve immune response.

While researchers continue to study meditation, it’s key to choose a form that appeals to you—one that you’ll want to practice regularly—and create your own personal ritual.

For Nass, meditation provides hope and is a key part of her treatment plan. “We’re locked into the notion that HIV is beyond our control—that all we can do is take whatever pills there are,” she says. “When I meditate, I take control of my own life.”

MASTERING MEDITATION

Eight great resources to guide you toward your own meditation practice

These websites and books will help you find a class or learn to meditate on your own. You can also join meditation classes at many community centers, yoga studios—even some AIDS organizations.

General Meditation information:
meditationsociety.com, the Meditation Society of America

Mindfulness Meditation:
Wherever You Go There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life, by Jon Kabat-Zinn (mindfulnesstapes.com; P.O. Box 547, Lexington, MA 02420)
Minding the Body, Mending the Mind, by Joan Borysenko, PhD (joanborysenko.com; 393 Dixon Road, Boulder, CO 80302; 303.440.8460)
Mindfulness in Plain English, by Henepola Gunaratana (vipassana.com, or read it free at realization.com)
8 Minute Meditation, by Victor Davich (8minutes.org)

Transcendental Meditation:
Science of Being and Art of Living: Transcendental Meditation, by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (tm.org; 888.532.7686; or tminfo@tm.org)

Centering Prayer Meditation:
Centering Prayer: Renewing an Ancient Christian Prayer Form, by M. Basil Pennington (amazon.com)

The Kelee:
The Silent Miracle: Awakening Your True Spiritual Nature, by Ron Rathbun (thekelee.org; P.O. Box 373, Oceanside, CA 92049)

WALK EASY
If sitting quietly isn't your cup of tea, try walking. Walking meditation is a form of mindfulness meditation. Walk very slowly (similar to tai chi) and focus on coordinating your breath with your footsteps (two steps per inhale, say, and four per exhale). Other moving forms of meditation include faster walking and even concentrative jogging. To learn more, check out *Walking Meditation* by Nguyen Anh-Huong and Thich Nhat Hanh (soundstrue.com; 800.333.9185). An instructional DVD and CD are included.

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