

Did Somebody Say O-O-H-M?

For people with lupus, meditation can help relieve stress, combat fatigue and even lessen physical pain – in just 10 minutes a day

By: Emily Wojcik

Nanette Greene hasn't always been a Zen guru. "I became interested in Eastern philosophies in my twenties, but didn't know much about it," says the Easton, Conn., yoga and meditation instructor, now 44. But then one day her lupus flared badly—and a happy accident occurred. She was in too much pain to see her own doctor in New York, so she visited a local doctor who ended up teaching her how to meditate.

"As I lay flat on the floor, he showed me how to visualize the sun moving over me, healing me," says Greene, who admits she was a little lost at first. But she repeated the routine every day and, ultimately, her symptoms subsided. Best of all, meditation profoundly changed her outlook on life. "I felt a shift in the way I perceived my own healing. I learned to treat my body with compassion," she says.

Mainstreaming Meditation

Nanette is not alone. Many people with chronic illnesses are finding that meditation helps them cope better. And many more doctors are prescribing the ancient Eastern practice.

"It is part of a holistic approach to teaching patients, where we address both their physical and mental states," says Oscar Gluck, M.D., of the Arizona Rheumatology Center in Phoenix, Ariz. "Meditation is extremely useful in treating chronic illness because it can decrease stress levels and increase the level of endorphins."

Research conducted at the Center for Women's Healthcare, at Weill Medical College of Cornell University, has found that endorphins encourage white blood cells, those foot soldiers of the immune system, to enter the blood stream. Endorphins also can improve a patient's perception of pain.

"There's a strong association between the perception of pain and the way [lupus] occurs. Meditation gives patients some control over their emotional response, which can alleviate symptoms like depression, anxiety and insomnia," Gluck says. There are physical benefits, too. The Mind/Body Medical Institute at Harvard University recently reported a 36 percent drop in clinic visits by patients with chronic pain who practiced meditation for at least two years.

Learning to Let Go

Meditation was first studied in the U.S. during the 1960s. One of its investigators was Herbert Benson, founder of Mind/Body Medical Institute. In his book *Relaxation Response*, Benson studied our instinctive response to stress—that panicky decision to battle an enemy or run away (think "fight or flight"). His assertion: when practiced properly over time, meditation can help quiet the savage human beast.

Though times have changed, our response patterns haven't. Instead of fighting wild animals and natural disasters, we stress over deadlines and rush hour traffic. For people with lupus, long-term stress can instigate or exacerbate a flare. This is a dangerous cycle, because lupus flares can also raise a person's stress levels. For some people, meditation can help get them off that roller coaster. "Meditation is the act of experiencing your feelings as they come, then letting them go," says Greene. "You realize that even pain is impermanent, and that initial pain dissipates."

Living in the Present Tense

So the goal is clear: free your mind and the body will follow. But it often takes practice to engage your spiritual side and kick negativity to the curb.

The first rule of thumb: forget about yesterday—and tomorrow, for that matter—and focus on the here and now.

"Most of the time, our brains are like a tumultuous waterfall—always worrying and obsessing," explains Joe Arak, a meditation instructor at the Shambhala Meditation Center in Hadley, Mass. "Meditation helps to quiet that mental over activity." Meditation should be a peaceful experience. But, believe it or not, some novices get stressed out over it.

"People become obsessed with doing it right," says Greene, who offers meditation workshops at the LFA, Connecticut Chapter, where she also serves as program chair. Her advice: "Don't think of it as meditation. A lot of times I just call it breathing, because you're learning to become aware of your body's natural rhythms, including inhaling and exhaling."

"It definitely takes focus and dedication," adds Arak. "Think of meditation like going to the gym or brushing your teeth. You might see results right away, but it's not meant to be a quick fix. The real benefits come over time."

Playing Devil's Advocate

Still, it's important to note that most of the evidence supporting meditation is anecdotal—and it has its skeptics.

"We still don't understand a whole lot about the mind-body connection," says Neal Birnbaum, M.D., of San Francisco based Pacific Rheumatology Associates. "Alternative therapies may help people, but patients should be careful when they're committing to a new program." He recommends setting a timeframe, whether six weeks or six months, so you can judge for yourself whether meditation is right for you.

And, of course, meditation is just one possible element of a well-rounded self-care plan.

"I strongly believe in combining Eastern and Western approaches. I still have flares, and traditional medicine helps cure the symptoms," says Greene, who strongly believes that meditation has helped lessen her symptoms—and given her a new attitude.

“I’ve learned that I am not my illness,” she says. “I now treat myself with compassion and joy, rather than fear and anxiety.”

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