

# Stress REDUCTION

BY PATRICIA SHERLOCK

For hundreds of years Cape Cod's pastoral setting has beckoned to the ordinary and famous alike to come shed their cares, unwind and breathe deeply of a simpler life. One of those more famous visitors was 1800s writer and naturalist Henry David Thoreau. Although finding personal inspiration on this beautiful spit of land, Thoreau couldn't shake the notion that most men led lives of quiet desperation.

years, the benefits of mindfulness programs have been increasingly highlighted in national publications such as Newsweek, National Geographic and Harvard Medical School's Women's Health Watch. The March 2006 issue of Consumer Reports recounts a seven-year study published in the May 2005 American Journal of Cardiology linking regular meditation with a 30 percent drop in cardiovascular risk.



Photo by Adam Liss

Today much of the Cape remains bucolic and the happy destination many families dream of all winter; the spot they drive hundreds of miles to get to in the summer - just for the chance to relax and de-stress. In fact, tell someone you live here year-round and their response is likely to be, "Lucky you!"

Why then don't we always feel lucky to live in this enchanted place, or paradoxically as Thoreau described it, sometimes even feel a sense of desperation nibbling at the corners of our lives here?

That's a good question to ask Adam Liss, who teaches Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction on Cape Cod, a program developed at the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in 1979. In the last two

Last November the Dalai Lama, leader of Tibetan Buddhists, lectured at a Washington, D.C. conference of the Mind and Life Institute, which focused on the science and clinical applications of meditation. Liss attended the three-day conference, hosted by Georgetown University Medical Center and Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, where various neuroscientists, brain researchers, contemplatives and psychologists discussed how mindfulness meditation could improve and heal the mind and body in the face of negative physical and mental stresses.

Whether it's the hectic pace of our jobs, family obligations or health issues such as chronic pain, hypertension, heart disease, fatigue, sleep disturbances, digestive disorders, headaches or emotional upheavals,



## STRESS BUSTERS

By Adam Liss

### TAKE A BREATHER.

Literally, stop what you are doing for 60 seconds and breathe deeply with your eyes closed. Make it a habit to stop once every hour for a silent 60-second break.

### DO ONE THING AT A TIME.

Stop multi-tasking for a half hour each day and simply focus on the task at hand. Defer the other things that come up until that time has passed.

### MOVE THAT BODY!

Do some kind of exercise every day even if it is only for 5 to 10 minutes. Go for a short walk, up and down stairs a few times, or just turn on some music and dance. Think of it as preventative maintenance.

### FEED YOURSELF A HEALTHY DIET.

This is more than just the food you eat. Be aware of what you listen to, read and watch. Pay attention to how these things affect you and choose what is healthiest for you.

### PAY ATTENTION.

Pay attention to the person you are with right now. Listen carefully to what that person is saying. And then respond respectfully, honestly and sincerely.

### SPEND SOME TIME

#### DOING SOMETHING YOU LOVE.

Whether it is a hobby, an excursion or a get-together, make time on a regular basis to do that special something that revitalizes your life and feeds your soul.

### GIVE TO A WORTHY CAUSE.

The cause is yours to choose. Pick something that rings true in your heart: an organization or a person, global or local, popular or unnoticed. How much and what you give likewise comes from the heart. Service, experience or prayer; there are many ways to give.

### SMILE.

If you are looking for a good time to start, begin right now. Share a smile. Studies show that smiling triggers happiness by evoking a cascade of neurotransmitters in the body that register good feelings. Smiles are contagious and each smile encourages another.

stress pervades society. It has become part and parcel of everyone's life at one time or another, everywhere - even among those of us lucky enough to be watching the moonlight on Cape Cod Bay.

"Somehow in the rush and busyness of our lives, taking care of ourselves is often relegated to the back burner," says Liss. "But by caring for ourselves first, we can be better able to care for others, be more efficient in our work and our homes and be more compassionate in our communities. Sometimes that means giving up some of the fireworks for a little more peace and tranquility."

Bob Schulte's stress was directly related to his four-hour Cape-to-Boston round trip commute where he works developing business and sales for a consulting firm. Schulte, 47, who lives in Centerville, admits he felt stressed managing his time between work and his family, which includes two teenagers. "I saw an ad for mindfulness meditation in the paper and called on it in January of last year," he says. Shortly after the class began, however, his father passed away in California and he had to drop out. Four months later, he signed up for another session and that time, completed it. "The course helped me to focus and prioritize things that were important to me and to try to let things go that were not that important.

"I'd never meditated before," he continues, "and really enjoyed the sitting med-

**"In our culture, everything is moving at 90 m.p.h. Personally I want to slow down. I now feel calmer and see things more clearly."**

*—Meditation student*

itation and body scan CDs as well as the Yoga. Making time to continue meditating is sometimes a struggle, but I continue with the exercises whenever I can."

Liss explains that learning mindfulness means learning how to live our lives more deliberately, consciously choosing our actions and behaviors rather than just reacting to life or running on autopilot. His mindfulness meditation course consists of eight 2-hour classes plus one all-day session. Participants learn to let go of obsessing over the past or worrying about the future by focusing on being present in the moment.



*Photo by Adam Liss*

It is also about learning to be as aware of emotions and sensations as the sometimes more overwhelming and unrelenting thoughts. This is done by focusing on breathing in a sitting or lying down position and letting go of distractions and concerns. Meditation practice trains people to stay in the moment, be gentle with themselves, and stabilize their minds. When thoughts occur (which is normal) students are encouraged to acknowledge them non-judgmentally, then gently and firmly return their awareness to the breath. Students also receive CDs instructing them in yoga

relaxation exercises and mindfulness practices they can do at home.

Meditation has been part of many cultures and religions for centuries. More and more, medicine and health professionals are espousing its value in enhancing the overall quality of daily life and are becoming increasingly open to the ways in which it benefits physical and mental states.

Barbara McGargee of Dennisport was facing bilateral knee surgery last spring when she signed up for Liss' course. She was undergoing a series of rabies injections,

after being exposed to contaminated blood while helping a friend who was attacked by a rabid raccoon. "I needed to learn a better method of relaxing and I think I did," the 75-year-old retiree says. "The night before my surgery, I listened two or three times to my meditation tapes from the class and the next morning a number of the hospital staffers told me I was one of the calmest pre-op patients they had ever seen."

Liss, 52, believes that when people begin to connect with their feelings and emotions they also begin to gain insight into how they often automatically react to life instead of respond to it. "There's a difference between reacting and responding to situations, and for better or worse, the behavior we choose impacts our physical and emotional well-being.

"For example," he explains, "if we are anxious, can we make the time to simply experience [feel] our anxiety? This is a skill that we really can develop with guidance and practice. Feeling and accepting our emotions lets us view the thoughts and stories that surround them with less charge. We can then start making the kinds of healthier choices that lead to more peace and balance."

Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of the UMass Stress Reduction Clinic, has written a best-selling book on the subject titled *Full Catastrophe Living, Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain and Illness*. In it he points out that feelings must be

acknowledged – at least to ourselves – because if they are ignored or repressed they yield no resolution or peace. “Strange as it may sound,” he writes, “the intentional knowing of your feelings in times of emotional suffering contains in itself the seeds of healing.”

“Working mindfully with your emotions begins by acknowledging to yourself what you are actually feeling and thinking in the present, even for short periods; to sit...breathing with it, feeling it, not trying to explain it or change it or make it go away. This in itself brings calmness.”

Although not a Buddhist, Liss relates to that part of Buddhism which calls for giving service to others, having compassion in a non-judgmental manner and seeing the wonder that exists in the world. He quotes Vietnamese Buddhist monk and author Thich Nhat Hanh. “People usual-

ly consider walking on water or in thin air a miracle. But I think the real miracle is not to walk either on water or in thin air, but to walk on earth. Every day we are engaged in a miracle which we don't even recognize: a blue sky, white clouds, green leaves, the black curious eyes of a child - our own two eyes. All is a miracle.”

A 53-year-old secretary from Yarmouth says that one of the most helpful things about being in the class was knowing there were others out there beside herself who are trying to do things differently in their lives. “In our culture, everything is moving at 90 m.p.h. Personally I want to slow down. I now feel calmer and see things more clearly.” She says Liss “teaches with kindness, encouragement and patience, creating a very safe place for students.”

In addition to working in construction and teaching his own mindfulness class-

es, Liss teaches *Kick Butts!! Stop Smoking* classes. The smoking cessation classes are part of a program sponsored by Cape Cod Health Care's Center for Health Education, as part of the Cardiovascular Initiative.

Whether Liss is working with smokers or those who have too many stresses in their lives, his low-key teaching style resonates with integrity and respect for his students. Wherever people are in their lives at the moment is just fine with him. He emphasizes that in meditation there is room for curiosity, acceptance, humor, openness and loving-kindness. His students get the chance to just settle into their lives and enjoy their everyday activities by being as mindful and present as they can.

“This moment really is the only one you have,” he says smiling. **CHA**

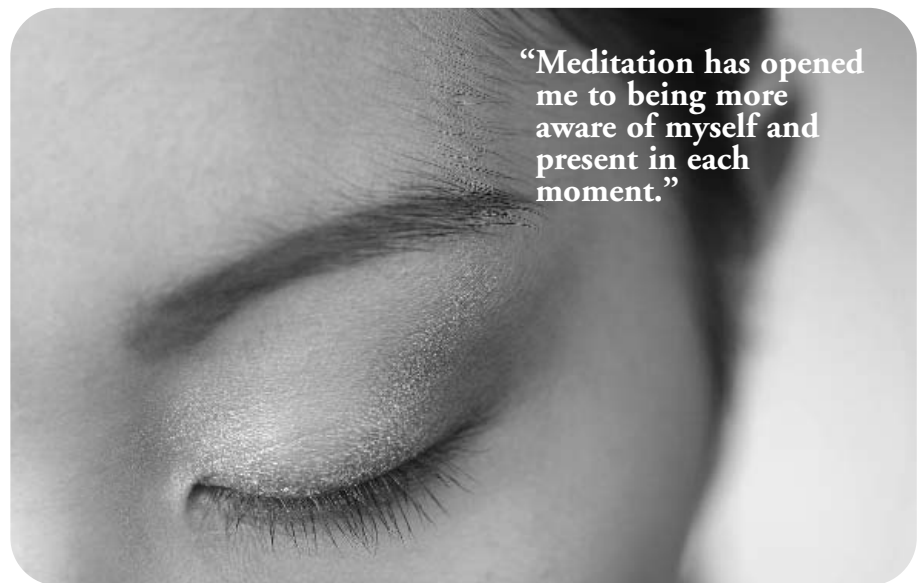
## Overcoming my Fear of Flying

BY PATRICIA SHERLOCK

My flying terror surfaced shortly after the birth of our first grandchild. My husband had to get back to work after a week at our daughter's in South Carolina. I stayed longer, ostensibly to help out but really to “ooh” and “aah” over our beautiful grandson. On my return flight leaving Charleston, the captain announced we had lost our hydraulics. Our landing gear would not come down. We spent 40 minutes dumping fuel over the Atlantic, then made an emergency landing at Charleston.

The airport was cleared of other planes and was eerily still. As we approached the runway, flashing red lights, ambulances, fire trucks and rescue workers in silver suits all came into view. It was like being in a movie. Everyone on the plane was amazingly quiet and calm as we hit hard, skidded out of control on the runway; smoke but no flames coming from underneath the plane's belly. When we finally screeched to a stop, the doors could not be opened right away for fear of sparks, leaving us sitting in the dark for some time before being allowed to disembark.

Getting off that plane was all I wanted. Almost giddy with relief, I spent one



more night at my daughter's house. It wasn't until the next morning as I boarded another plane, that I momentarily held up the line of passengers behind me because suddenly I could not make my feet go forward.

After that experience, I flew to Colorado, New Orleans and Switzerland. But each I flew time it took all my resolve just to make myself get on the plane.

On Sept. 11, 2001, I watched in horror

as two airliner-turned-missiles crashed into the Twin Towers. What I didn't find out until later was that a friend of ours had been killed in those attacks. From then on I was miserable each time we had to fly; dreading it weeks ahead of the actual flight.

To my shame, I was horrified to find myself studying other passengers. Based on their ethnicity and appearance, I profiled them in my mind as possible terrorists.



"Everyone on the plane was amazingly quiet and calm as we hit hard"

My anxiety continued to grow over the next couple of years. Then one day, I noticed an ad for a class called Cape Stress Reduction, a mindfulness-based meditation course. Although I could have been the poster child for the class, I waited almost a year before I signed up for the course.

Understand, I am a very private person. Stoic. I should have been able to handle this on my own. Think positive thoughts. Rationally talk myself out of it. Only I couldn't. I'd developed a phobia about even admitting I had a phobia, making me more reluctant to discuss my fear in front of strangers. But as I discovered during the first session, I needn't have been apprehensive.

I was a bit skeptical that meditating and concentrating on my breathing could actually change anything. Sometimes my mind would be filled with 10 other

things I thought I could be doing instead. But as the course progressed and I began to understand the sensations - tightness in my chest, rapid breathing, shortness of breath - allowing it all to be present, the strength of those emotions and reactions gradually weakened and released.

I had been trying to think logically, deny, rationalize, ignore. None of that worked. But when I was willing to feel as in, "Wow! It's like a huge chunk of fear that's stuck in my chest; it's so hard to breathe," the more I practiced the more its hold on me gradually diminished. Several weeks later I realized that I could fly. The paralyzing part was gone and my feet would carry me forward.

Oh, there still are some times when I might feel anxious getting on a plane, but by recognizing it and saying to myself, "There's that fear again," I know how to work with it, breathing and letting it pass. I learned that while feelings are constantly changing, the more we resist acknowl-

edging them, the less likely they are to move through. For me, acceptance of those feelings became the key to disarming their power.

Slowly I began looking forward to meditating, in the sessions and at home. Meditation left me more peaceful, centered and in touch with my body and who I am. When I felt frazzled, doing the meditation practice had a calming effect. Today, almost a year after the course ended, meditating has become something I try to make time for most days. Whenever I do, it feels like a gift I've given myself.

Looking back, the entire course was a most positive experience; a thought echoed by the other participants in my particular session.

As if overcoming my fear wasn't enough, I've reaped an added bonus from meditating. Meditation has opened me to being more

aware of myself and present in each moment, and it has opened my eyes in a way that allows me to see others and what they're going through with more kindness, gentleness and compassion.

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