

# Daily stress relief with meditation

By Tracie Stone

If modern medicine offered a single prescription to reduce stress, relieve headaches, boost immune systems, lower cholesterol and improve circulation, concentration and productivity, pharmacies would be overrun. While no magic pill yet exists, there is one holistic, natural practice known to do all of this and more – meditation.

Stress brought on by daily demands triggers our “flight or fight” response, causing the internal release of chemicals and placing our bodies on high alert. While the response may be useful in some situations, continued stress wears on the body causing physical damage. The slow breathing and lowered heart rate induced by meditation brings the body back into a calm state, reversing and preventing many of the illnesses brought on or aggravated by our stressful lives.

According to a study conducted by researchers at Harvard, Yale and MIT, regular meditation may even have a long-term effect on our ability to think, reason, remember and imagine.

For Dr. Debra LeClair, licensed psychologist, life coach and meditation instructor, the practice of meditation is instrumental in gaining greater clarity and managing daily conflict.

“My head just feels clearer. I do a better job of problem-solving and I get things done more efficiently,” said LeClair, owner of Full Spectrum Wellness, a holistic health and learning center on Commercial Street in Manchester’s Millyard.

So what exactly is meditation? Quite simply, it’s the practice of being aware of your immediate surroundings and your current sensations rather than worrying about tonight’s dinner or tomorrow’s presentation. It’s the practice of experiencing the moment.

By breathing slowly, deeply and consciously, and by focusing on a single thought or immediate sensation, participants are able to shut out random and racing thoughts that may initiate or perpetuate feelings of stress.

With its growing reputation, meditation is drawing interest. Yoga instructors now include meditation in their classes, and books, CDs and DVDs on the subject are easy to come by.

LeClair, who has more than a decade of experience in practicing meditation, offers weekly guided meditation classes from her studio. Classes are designed to introduce the basic concept of meditation as well as a variety of meditations that can be done in the privacy of your own home, out walking, even at work.

## ‘Gaining self-compassion’

Although peaceful, there is nothing mystical about a visit to LeClair’s meditation class.

The large comfortable room, is sparsely decorated with a circle of pillows, low seats and meditation stools gathered in the center. Class participants



Julie Lemieux of Candia, mother of an active 2-year-old, finds meditation gives her the tools needed to better handle her busy life. (Photo by Tracie Stone)

are invited to find a comfortable spot and sit in a comfortable position. Most chose to sit cross-legged, placing their open palms up (receptive) or down (accepting) on their knees. Others choose to cup their hands loosely in their laps as Buddhists do.

One practice shared by all participants is a straight posture, said to allow for better breath intake and blood circulation.

A typical hour-long class with LeClair includes three guided meditations, each offering a new thought or mental task designed to allow participants to take control of their thoughts – excising the rambling stress-inducing worries that often seep in during quiet moments.

The class starts first with a “mindfulness of breathing” meditation. Participants close their eyes and breath deeply counting (silently) each inhalation. After 15 or 20 breaths LeClair signals participants to begin counting exhalations with a gentle tap on her Neti pot – a tiny bowl-like

gong.

This particular meditation allows participants to bring a sense of consciousness to a typically involuntary function. The deeper, slower breaths lower the heart rate and blood pressure and really begins to transport participants into a state of relaxation.

Other meditations might include the “loving-kindness” meditation, in which participants are first asked to think about things they wish for themselves – perhaps contentment, more patience, a joyful evening with a loved one or even a really good parking place. Focus changes with the chime of the Neti pot, and participants then begin to concentrate on positive things they wish for a loved one.

LeClair bookends each exercise with a reminder that there is no “bad” meditation.

“It is so about gaining self-compassion,” LeClair said, urging people not to beat themselves up for losing focus during a meditation. “Just let go of the thought and bring yourself back.”

Although each meditation presents its own mental focus, it’s important to remember meditation itself is about being anchored in the present – with all its sounds and distractions. Planes will fly over, dogs will bark, babies will cry. A stray hair may tickle your cheek or a mosquito bite might itch. That’s OK, according to LeClair. When distractions present themselves, address them. Listen to the plane until it’s gone, tuck your hair back behind your ear, and then go back to your meditation.

“Just don’t get lost in the story about the plane or the train of thought it takes you off in,” LeClair said. “Experience it and then let it go.” **NHR**