

Herald Sun

The business of meditation

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MEDITATION is now moving into the boardroom with studies showing that it improves concentration, workers are now being encouraged to tune in and chill out.

Once a week, a handful of Blake Dawson lawyers and support staff take the lift to a hushed conference room in Sydney's George Street.

They are not meeting for a tough legal pitch.

They are there to do a voluntary lunchtime group meditation. They're not alone.

Businesses such as NAB, Victoria Police, Diabetes Australia, Origin Energy and the CEO Institute have also run meditation sessions.

These are corporate heavies who are as far away from ohm-chanting, saffron-robed monks as you can get. What's going on?

Growing calm

Meditation is a growing business trend that may be coming soon to an office near you.

It is cropping up in human resources programs across the country to promote calm as we work overtime, skip lunch, do meeting marathons, save our annual leave, lose sleep over job security and monster mortgages, and multi-task like mad in the global recession backwash. *Source: The Daily Telegraph*

With all those pressures to contend with, we've become a mighty anxious lot.

So anxious, in fact, that one in five Australians took medication to alleviate stress in the past fortnight, according to 2008 data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

What's more, workplace stress costs the national economy \$10.11 billion annually through absenteeism or sluggish productivity, and leads to the loss of 3.2 days per worker each year, according to research by health fund Medibank Private.

Bosses are starting to realise that investing in stress-reduction programs, such as meditation, makes fiscal sense, too.

After all, employers are responsible for implementing stress management in the workplace under the Workplace



Health and Safety Act 2004, and if they don't look after staff, it can hurt them in the hip pocket.

The average cost of a stress-related work claim in 2009 in Victoria, for instance, was a hefty \$51,000, says WorkSafe Victoria.

Stress busting

Kate James, director of corporate coaching company Total Balance, works with banks, advertising agencies, government corporations and not-for-profit organisations in Sydney and Melbourne.

She says meditation at work is on the rise.

"I get double the enquiries for meditation sessions compared to five years ago," she says. "The global financial crisis had an impact, and people are now looking at alternatives for happiness and wellbeing.

For personal clients, I've had to add workshops to meet demand."

The fact that results can be seen after just one session makes meditation a popular stress-reduction technique, James says.

"Even just 10 minutes of meditation at the start of the day is great for recharging energy and improving concentration."

She says you don't need to be spiritual, recite a mantra or meditate in a group. Once the basics are in place, you can meditate alone for free whenever you like. She says you get better at meditating by simply doing it.

Anyone can benefit, including the toughest, most self-sufficient staff.

"Those working in the law are well known for their mental resilience, but meditation can help them manage stress and maximise wellbeing," explains Kate Wisdom, Blake Dawson's wellbeing coordinator.

"Meditation sessions are about positive psychology, a preventive approach to stress."

Office yoga

Like meditation, workplace yoga can have a destressing effect. Thuy Ly, a business analyst with Axa, attends a weekly 60-minute yoga class with about 20 colleagues.

The class has been taught on-site for the past 18 months.

"It takes me away from my desk and away from thinking about my to-do list," she says.

"As I sit in front of a computer most of the day, I'm conscious of ways I can improve my sitting posture.

"Yoga releases tension by stretching my muscles and it's helped me understand the importance of taking a break to improve concentration."

Given that we spend up to a third of our waking lives at work (yes, that much), it pays to keep stress levels down.

Left unchecked, job stress has been shown to be a substantial contributor to mental illness, cardiovascular disease and musculoskeletal problems.

It can also lead to headaches, an upset stomach, rashes, insomnia and high blood pressure.

Something to particularly watch out for if you work in industries recording the highest levels of stress, such as education, the police force, finance, hospitality, transport, retail and marketing.

Three-minute meditation

Close your eyes. Breathe in through your nose, then exhale slowly through your mouth. Repeat until your pulse slows.

As soon as your mind wanders, draw your attention back to your breath. Imagine blowing away thoughts as they enter your mind.

Australian study

In a 2009 study, Dr Ramesh Manocha, a Sydney GP and researcher at the School of Women's and Children's Health at the University of NSW, found that after eight weeks of silent meditation, occupational stress was reduced by 26 per cent.

"The way you think and feel can influence your health," says Dr Manocha.

"Organisations are beginning to realise this and are investing in human resources to promote staff mental wellbeing. Workers only need two 10-minute sessions of meditation a day to see health improvements.

The groundbreaking thing is that meditation is no longer seen as a tie-dyed, hippie concept. It's now mainstream and more accepted."

"My focus is better"

Nikki Prentice, an assistant general counsel at Blake Dawson's Sydney office, participated in a voluntary five-session introductory meditation course offered by her firm in 2009 and can now achieve sharper and longer periods of concentration.

"I'm better at recognising and letting go of distracting thoughts and am better at prioritising the task at hand," she says. "I can focus on research or drafting for longer periods before feeling the need to check my email."

Restraining from that oh-so-addictive constant email checking syndrome?

And being on the ball for longer periods at work thanks to meditation, rather than thanks to a mid-afternoon sugar hit or caffeine high?

Plenty of us, it seems, could do with a bit of help on that front.

A worthwhile outcome for a few sessions of learning to breathe in a more relaxed manner and sitting still for 40 minutes or so.

Prentice was as surprised as anyone that meditation has helped her to beef up her mental stamina.

She knew that meditation could come in handy for unwinding and destressing, but to find that meditation is also helping her to achieve her goals in such a tangible way has been an added bonus.

Prentice was no meditator before her course. In fact, she had only had "a very basic taste of meditation" courtesy of yoga classes before embarking on the introductory course.

Instead of finding it a drag and becoming annoyed at having to squeeze it into a crammed appointment schedule, she found the sessions an enjoyable respite from the working day.

Yet she is quick to add that getting the mind 100 per cent sharp by meditating is an elusive concept. "It would take a lot of practise to experience mental silence," she concedes.

Still, for her, there's no doubt the meditation course has given her a desirable skill for her career toolkit: a better ability to focus.

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