

Chronic Distraction: *Shocking News*

By Mara Bishop, MS, ThM, CSC

Distraction has its merits. Life can be intense; physical and emotional pain and the stress of daily life often hold our attention, making it hard to focus on anything else. When we distract ourselves in a balanced way, we can temporarily step outside of the confines of our routine thought patterns, set aside our worries, and perhaps be diverted from the sensation of chronic aches and pains. Shifting gears at the end of the day (or whenever we need it) and “distracting” ourselves with a conversation, exercise, a book, a walk in the woods, or even watching a show or playing a game on a phone, can be helpful ways to disengage from life’s stressors.

However, when distraction becomes our way of being, the only way we feel comfortable existing, we have a problem. For many people simply sitting quietly has become deeply uncomfortable. As a society we are accustomed to constant distraction. Silence is rare. Screens are everywhere. The distractions they provide sometimes help us wind down, but often wind us even tighter. The blue light of many electronic screens has been linked to an increased rise in insomnia, especially for children and adolescents, who are even more likely than adults to keep their phone in the bedroom (with the sound turned on) while they sleep.

A study conducted at the University of Virginia found most men would rather give themselves electric shocks than be alone with their thoughts. Participants experienced “thinking periods,” with no distractions, and were instructed to think about whatever they wanted or follow some innocuous sugges-

tions, essentially to do nothing but be in their own company without external distraction for between 6 and 15 minutes. This was so intolerable for 75 percent of the men and 25 percent of the women that they preferred to administer painful shock treatments to themselves—repeatedly.

Being able to sit still, to be mindful, to release our thoughts and meditate in some form, even daydreaming, has been documented to have significant health benefits. Might the aversion to doing so, even in very short doses, perhaps indicate a higher likelihood of chronic problems now or in the future?



reduction in overall risk of heart attack, stroke, and death from any cause compared to the control group after five years. Studies also show that meditation helps increase cognitive function, focus, concentration, and willpower, helping people not only improve standardized test scores, but stave off mental decline later in life.

MANY WAYS TO MEDITATE

If you are chronically distracted, being alone with your thoughts may be an alien and uncomfortable experience. I enjoy helping clients design customized plans for alternative meditative experiences. Sitting still and meditating in a classic sense isn’t for everyone, but there are many formats, lengths of time, and activities that can provide similar shifts. Finding some that are enjoyable and sustainable for you is often not as hard as you may think. If you selectively choose your distractions and include some form of meditative experience, research shows you will likely enjoy greater mental and physical health, now and in the future. **h&h**
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THE BENEFITS OF MEDITATION

Meditation has been shown to help people successfully manage a range of conditions from depression to physical pain, by acting like a “volume knob” to turn down the sensation of discomfort. Chronic conditions like high blood pressure have been successfully treated. One recent study conducted through Harvard Medical School, Beth Israel, Mass General Hospital and the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine at MGH documented more than 50 percent of participants “experienced a clinically relevant drop in blood pressure. . . reductions in both systolic and diastolic blood pressure readings that moved participants below . . . the clinical definition of stage 1 hypertension.”

Chronic inflammation, which has been linked to tumor growth, may also be eased by meditation, according to research from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. A study published in *Circulation: Cardiovascular Quality and Outcomes* that tracked 201 African American men and women with coronary heart disease found that participants who practiced Transcendental Meditation, in addition to receiving normal medical care, had a 48 percent

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