

HEALTH CARE REPORT

Stressed-out folk find different paths lead to a state of calmness

BY CHRISTIE TAYLOR

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Stress has become such a regular part of many Houstonians' daily lives that merely recognizing its pervasiveness may cause heart flutters and sweaty palms. The National Safety Council estimates 1 million employees are absent on an average workday due to stress-related problems. Family, finances and work lead the list of stress-inducers.

Some health care providers and employers offer in-house programs such as wellness workshops and yoga classes. Other stressed-out workers seek different solutions.

They turn to practitioners such as psychotherapist Micki Fine, who teaches a stress-reduction method termed "mindfulness"; feng shui consultant Laurie Levin, who helps people apply principles of the ancient Chinese discipline to relieve stress by altering their environment; or professional organizers who help others avoid feeling overwhelmed.

THE POWER OF THE MIND

Fine, who trained with stress-reduction expert Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of the University of Massachusetts Medical School's Center for Mindfulness, is certified in Kabat-Zinn's method — Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction.

Through daily practice of mindfulness meditation including guided yoga, visualizations and other processes, students are taught less stressful ways of living, Fine says.

A former CPA, she began teaching

mindfulness 10 years ago and now offers eight-week courses, workshops and one-on-one sessions (www.livingmindfully.org).

Her clients come to her wanting to decrease blood pressure, lead healthier lifestyles, manage pain or recover from illnesses and leave with the skills to live more fully and resourcefully, Fine says.

"It's a different way of being aware," she says. "When you bring awareness to your experience and the wandering mind, you can break free from auto-pilot and act with greater control and intention. You become more self-aware, less reactive and less judgmental."

The impulse to feel available and connected all the time adds to stress levels, as people attempt to juggle cell phones, pagers and e-mails, Fine notes.

"With the pace of our society, we feel like we've been shot out of a rocket, 24/7," she says. "We feel like we have to get so much done, and the constant processing of information that technology creates only adds more pressure."

Practicing mindfulness transforms stressful work situations so that a boss who was once impatient suddenly seems more tolerable, or deadlines that once caused panic actually seem manageable, she says.

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Micki Fine
Psychotherapist

POSITIVE ENHANCEMENTS

Methods for decreasing stress may also extend to physically changing the environment. Levin is among a number of feng shui consultants in Houston who educate their clients on how to promote a harmonious flow of energy at home and work (www.laurielevin.com).

Common problems that increase stress levels at work, she says, include spending hours in a building with no

windows, working in rooms with fluorescent lights or sitting in uncomfortable furniture. Feng shui consultants often offer simple solutions such as switching fluorescent lights to full-spectrum lights, placing a plant inside a space with no windows and positioning your desk so that it faces the entrance of a room.

"Often people put up with a lack of beauty and a lack of comfort, but that can really affect your health and overall well-being," Levin says. "If you're in a good mood because of your surroundings, you might be encouraged to stay at the office later. If you're in a bad mood because of an uncomfortable chair or where your desk is positioned, it might affect how you talk to your co-workers and clients."



She offers some businesses suggestions every few months to account for constantly changing office environments and has worked with real estate agents trying to sell homes on the market for a long time, as well as doctors moving into new buildings. Levin offers suggestions that may be implemented independently, but she cautions against making too many changes without first consulting a professional.

"You have to make sure that the enhancements you make are not creating more problems," she says.

Levin's first suggestion to anyone interested in feng shui is to first eliminate clutter. "Clutter is just stagnant energy, especially clutter on the floor, because it just draws your energy downward," she says.

If clearing a year's worth of papers seems way too overwhelming, Levin suggests starting with one file drawer.

"It's therapeutic, and that feeling of accomplishment will spur you on to do more," she says.

CLEARING CLUTTER

Because clutter is a major cause of stress, the thought of clearing it may compound anxiety, says Janie Simon, an education specialist with Faculty Development at M.D. Anderson Cancer Center, who helps employees there get organized. Other professional organizers in Houston (www.napohouston.com) also focus on the challenges and rewards of an orderly life.

STRESS

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"Clutter is basically unmade decisions," Simon says. "It's a reminder of things you still need to do."

To lower stress levels at work, start by being ruthless when it comes to sorting out papers, Simon suggests. When paper comes into your office, toss it out, read it, act on it, file it or forward it on to others, she advises.

"Everyone has a problem with paper, and in our fast-paced work environment it's easy to feel overwhelmed," she says.

It is much easier to initially set up a system for organization than it is to postpone a meeting with the boss because a critical document can't be found, so she suggests keeping folders

with "hot" projects close by.

Keep the things most frequently used close by, and if a stapler or tape dispenser only gets used once a week, put it in a drawer to make more room on the desk, she advises.

Finally, to reduce stress, Simon suggests "dumping your brain on paper" in the form of to do lists. It's much easier to write things down at the end of a work day, she explains, than to wake up at 3 a.m. thinking, "I hope I remember to do that."

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Laurie Levin

Feng shui consultant

PROOF OF PUDDING IS

Glen Carle, a computer consultant for a Fortune 50 company in Houston, attended Fine's eight-week mindfulness workshop to decrease stress at work. His hour-long commute each day resulted in bad moods when he arrived at work and when he got home at the end of the day.



"I used to see driving as a competitive sport," Carle says, "and I'd drink my break-

fast shake, check e-mail and talk on the

phone on my way to work. What I wanted to do was maximize that traffic time."

After attending an eight-week workshop, Carle uses his time in his car to meditate and cultivate a positive mental attitude. That shift has spread to other areas of his life.

"I'm calmer, more relaxed and less worried about outcomes. I don't try to control as much," he says.

Allison Goldberg's consulting business, Image Dynamics, burgeoned following Levin's Feng Shui consultation.

"It had always been successful, but after she came to our house, both my husband's and my businesses skyrocketed," she says. "I did everything she suggested, and just weeks after she was here, I got my biggest speaking engagement yet." ■

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