



Power down

It *EASES STRESS*, can help *treat depression* and anxiety, improves *heart health* and is said to *SLOW THE AGEING* process. Isn't it about time you joined the *meditation movement*? By Jody Scott. Styled by Mandy Alex. Photographed by Edward Urrutia.

Fashion folk spend much of their life in the very fastest lane. They are a swift-moving, fickle set forever hunting for that elusive next big thing for us all to faithfully follow. So it's ironic then that the next big thing may actually be all about slowing down.

Take Sass & Bide designer Heidi Middleton, for example, who likes to sit down mid-morning in silent meditation. When she's home, it happens outside on her terrace facing the water. But when she's on the move, it can happen almost anywhere. Even in the midst of New York Fashion Week? "I don't think anyone has managed it pre-show backstage!" she says. "[But] planes, trains and automobiles [a parked car] are all great." Middleton says meditation gives her feelings of calm and clarity. "My stress levels diminish considerably," she says. "I feel like I get my breath back and I have given myself a present."

Kym Ellery credited meditation with keeping her calm amid the chaos in the lead up to her Paris Fashion Week debut. Bassike director Deborah Sams lights a candle and sits down to meditate in her favourite chair facing her garden. And David Jones ambassador Jessica Gomes meditates on long-haul flights to counteract jet lag.

Meanwhile, London-based brand consultant Yasmin Sewell manages to do it in the back of cabs. "I think that now I've been meditating for so long it's much easier for me to get to that blissful feeling very quickly," she says. "It instantly gets me connected, launders all the fatigue and stress in my body. Really, in a nutshell it is the greatest thing you can do to stay healthy, clear, stress-free and young."

Sewell, who has been practising for seven years, believes meditation is making a comeback because it offers us respite from the pace of modern life. "There is so much more information we need to take in every day now that adds to the fullness of our already cluttered and frazzled minds," she says. "Most of us are living on adrenaline, caffeine, social media, internet, work ... it's madness, and I'm not saying I'm not, because I live in that space often. I'm just fortunate to have the tools to help me get back to that blissful place again."

She says the best way to describe what meditation feels like is that "it's like I'm sitting under my thoughts, watching them flying around like planes fly around a busy airport. Watching them but not being in them. This experience feels like my body is being led from my heart and soul rather than my brain. Does that make sense? I know it sounds kind of wacky but really it is quite sublime."

Rafael Bonachela, the artistic director of the Sydney Dance Company, practises transcendental meditation (TM) in the morning

and at the end of each day. "I almost see it as a prevention. My work is so full on, and I love it and there's no other work I would rather be doing because I'm totally driven, but [I thought] maybe I should try something that will smooth the edges, before I get into, like: 'Where's the Valium?'" Bonachela says, laughing. "So I went and I tried it ... it's a three-day course and it's worked wonders."

Artist Joshua Yeldham meditates twice daily. "I rise before sunrise, climb the headland and face the sea," he says, describing his morning practice. His afternoon practice takes place in his studio and helps get him into the zone to paint. "I paint with my eyes open, I meditate with my eyes closed – both practices initiate a deep connection with nature and a community of like-minded people," he says.

Middleton's husband, Nicho Plowman, who teaches vedic meditation, says he's noticed an increase in people outing themselves as meditators. "It might be less of a comeback and instead an increase in those that are practising and also feeling comfortable talking about it openly," he says.

From News Corporation chairman (and publisher of *Vogue* Australia) Rupert Murdoch, who tweeted that he was learning to meditate last year, to Oprah Winfrey, the list of high-profile meditators from both creative and corporate fields is growing rapidly. Many companies are recognising the health benefits and encouraging their employees to meditate by funding courses and even building meditation rooms into their workplaces.

And it's happening on a retail level, too. The ninth annual JWTIntelligence Report listed "mindful living" as one of its top 10 emerging consumer trends for 2014. "Consumers are developing a quasi-Zen desire to experience everything in a more present, conscious, mindful way," the report stated. "Once the domain of the spiritual set, mindful living is filtering into the mainstream, with more people drawn to the idea of shutting out distractions and focussing on the moment."

Arguably the voice of her generation, Lena Dunham, the creator and star of *Girls*, revealed last year that she began practising TM when she was nine years old after being diagnosed with an obsessive compulsive disorder. "It gathers me up for the day and makes me feel organised and happy and capable of facing the challenges of the world, both internal and external," she said, speaking at an event in New York for the film director David Lynch's eponymous foundation, which teaches meditation to homeless people, prisoners and war-veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Meditation, it seems, is the new yoga. And while the practice is some 5,000 years old, it's being embraced as an antidote to our hyper-connected times. ▶

"IT'S LIKE I'M SITTING UNDER MY THOUGHTS, WATCHING THEM FLYING AROUND"

The West's fascination with meditation famously kicked off in 1968 when the Beatles studied TM at the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's ashram in Rishikesh, India. That pilgrimage has been described as possibly the most momentous spiritual retreat since Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness, and inspired a generation to say *om*.

But Meditation 2.0 is more medicinal than spiritual. It's not about sitting on a mountain getting mystical. Whatever technique you choose (and there are many), this time around meditation is about slowing down for a brief daily session to let go of the stress that gets trapped in your mind and body. It's a tool to help us cope with the chaotic pace of the information age we live in.

"We are living in increasingly busy, demanding times, and it is a natural instinct in all of us to seek stillness, somewhere, somehow," says Plowman. "It is all very well to 'head for the hills' when we feel stressed or fatigued. However, eventually we need to come back to where the action is, and meditation is a wonderful tool to help us engage in the space."

The meditation and mindfulness trend speaks of our desire to stop multi-tasking (albeit temporarily) and learn to uni-task again. Tuning out of social media or turning off our screens and setting aside 20 minutes once or twice a day to tune into consciousness is resonating with a crystal-free crowd, who ironically refer to the ancient practice in tech-savvy sound bites.

Talk-show host Ellen DeGeneres summed it up neatly when she said: "[It's] kinda like when you have to shut your computer down. Just sometimes when it goes crazy, you just shut it down and when you turn it on, it's okay again. That's what meditation is for me."

Rebooting your hard drive, unplugging, recharging, upgrading your operating system, switching off and dialing down the volume have become common metaphors for meditation.

Sydney-based vedic meditation teacher Tim Brown even compares the non-meditating brain to a computer without a modem: offline and disconnected.

But just as the omnipresence of technology is fragmenting our attention, it is also providing some solutions. Former Buddhist monk Andy Puddicombe's popular Headspace app conveniently offers a free Take 10 starter program with 10 days' worth of 10-minute meditations, and there's a Headspace channel on Virgin Atlantic flights. Then there is Buddhify, which offers short, guided meditations for every occasion, while Omvana promises to boost your creativity and help you bliss out at the same time. For children there is a meditation app called Smiling Mind.

Stereopublic is an Australian public art project that describes itself as a "sonic health service". The website and app crowd-sources calm spaces where city dwellers can escape for a few minutes of either sitting in silence or listening to meditative compositions.

Meanwhile, Lululemon launched whil.com, which motivates visitors to turn off their brain for 60 seconds by visualising a dot.

There are also plenty of workshops and retreats to bring like-minded souls together. Tim Brown and fellow vedic meditation teacher Gary Gorrow founded Conscious Club, which hosts monthly events in Sydney, and soon Melbourne and Canberra, featuring live music, guest speakers, films and a group meditation. "Everyone just wants to have shared experiences and experience something that is meaningful, enriching and enlightening," says Gorrow.

The Stillness Project is an online meditation event that will launch on Google Hangouts on June 17. Bondi-based founder Tom Cronin is hoping it will be the world's largest group meditation experience: "We have all the technology, all the information, all the gadgets and hyper-stimulation, but one thing is missing: stillness."

In his latest book *Success Through Stillness: Meditation Made Simple* (Penguin), music entrepreneur Russell Simmons says: "I can honestly say that without that stillness, there's no way I'd be where I am today. Not only professionally, but personally and spiritually too. After over 30 years in the entertainment industry, I still wake up as excited to go to work every day as I did the first day Rick Rubin and I opened Def Jam Recordings."

Making the case for daily meditation, Brown says modern life can be like sitting in the front row of the cinema. No matter how good the film, it will be too noisy and overwhelming to enjoy from the front row. "The best solution is not to leave the cinema, the solution is to get back a few rows in the conscious cinema," says Brown. "If we can do that the whole movie can be going on, we can be in the chair, engaged by the experience but not consumed and overwhelmed by it ... the back row (aka the mountain top) is no good, it's all disconnected and disengaged and you can't hear it properly. You have to find that sweet spot right in the middle of the cinema." And that, he says, is what meditation can do. "The ultimate goal is to be able to enjoy that all the time," he says. "Not intermittently, not for a few days after a good holiday. It is conscious real estate."

And there it is, another thoroughly modern metaphor that makes meditation relevant for overworked urbanites who are always keen to discuss real estate.

Jacqui Lewis, the founder of the Broad Place meditation centre in inner Sydney, says meditation actually facilitates multi-tasking by increasing our capacity to cope. Practicing what she preaches, Lewis

combines teaching meditation with her role as "captain" of the brand and marketing agency she also founded, Folke Army. Sporting a gamine pixie crop, stylish threads and a bright smile, she's not at all what you probably imagine a meditation teacher to be. "I still love it when people walk into my intro talk and I greet them and they exclaim with surprise: 'Wow, you look really, really normal', as they were expecting some bindi- and hessian-pants-wearing woman," she says.

"This definitely is not a hippy technique. No chanting, crystals and wearing of unattractive Thai fisherman pants here."

The Broad Place is also a revelation. I've mentally prepared myself for patchouli and patchwork cushions. However, inside the inner-city terrace house it's a Zen oasis of Japanese black-stained floors, white walls and a few aesthetically-soothing Eames chairs.

I've come to learn vedic meditation. Just like TM, the vedic practice involves sitting still for 20 minutes, with your eyes closed and repeating a mantra silently to quieten the mind and ultimately lead it beyond thought to a place of deep relaxation. I've also been told that it can flood your body with blissful feelings that linger for hours.

"Vedic meditation offers instant results," says Lewis. "You don't have to practise for an hour or two a day, for months on end to start to get results. Busy people with busy lives need efficient and effective techniques. To be our most vibrant selves, we absolutely need to replenish our bodies and minds and there are lots of ways to do so ... nourishing exercise is important, holidays are brilliant, excellent diets and holistic practitioners help, but who can do all that every day? Vedic meditation is successful as people can fit it into their

routine no matter where they are in the world, no matter what they are doing, and get immediate results. The benefits are vast."

To be honest, with three small children and an often travelling husband, I'm keen to sign up for anything that will give me an excuse to sit in silence twice a day. I figure any other benefits will be a bonus.

First I must undergo an induction ceremony: the curious list of items I've been instructed to bring includes fruit and flowers. The mandarins I hastily grabbed from the fruit bowl have seen better days. But they're in better shape than the sad yellow rose buds in cellophane that I plucked from a bucket outside an inner-city petrol station en route. To make matters worse, I have just received a ticket for doing an accidental illegal right turn. I'm feeling less than Zen, to say the least.

However, soon after arriving, I'm sitting silently repeating my mantra (a meaningless Sanskrit-sounding word that I'm not allowed to tell anyone) and almost instantly I can feel my mind calming down. Occasionally I hear little cracking sounds pop from the vertebrae in my neck (apparently this is stress releasing from my *kundalini*). There are also some delightfully deep but fleeting moments of suspended animation when I do become utterly thoughtless until I start to think: "Wow, I'm doing it, I'm thoughtless", which is, of course, a thought and so I start all over again.

Six months later, I'm still practising at least once, sometimes twice a day. That lovely sensation of diving deep down beyond thought (known as transcendence) is happening more frequently and random thoughts like "what's for dinner" are getting easier to dismiss. But the best part is how restorative it feels. After each meditation, I open my eyes feeling deeply refreshed, even though I'm actually sleeping less now and waking at 5am craving my morning meditation. I'm also sleeping much more deeply.

Brown says requiring less sleep is a side effect, because 20 minutes of meditation is the equivalent of three to four hours of sleep.

Sleep, meditation and mindfulness are recurring themes in *Thrive*, the latest book by media mogul turned mindfulness maven Arianna Huffington, who says we are entering a new era in which our definition of success is changing. In *Thrive*, Huffington argues that it is no longer enough to succeed in money and power.

"The architecture of how we live our lives is badly in need of renovation and repair," writes the founder of the *Huffington Post*. "What we really value is out of synch with how we live our lives." Huffington believes we need to cultivate a life of "wellbeing, wisdom and wonder", which she has dubbed "the third metric" of success.

"Meditation, yoga, mindfulness, napping, deep breathing, once upon a time, might have been thought of as new-agey, alternative and part of a counter culture," she writes. "But in the past few years we've reached a tipping point as more and more people realise that stress-reduction and mindfulness aren't only about harmonic convergence and universal love - they're also about increased wellbeing and better performance."

There is also mounting evidence that it can help make us less stressed, healthier and more productive. Some studies suggest even a brief daily practice can help treat depression, insomnia, chronic pain, anxiety, inflammation, boost immunity, improve heart health, lower blood pressure and slow the ageing process. Other studies suggest meditation may have a positive effect on gene expression.

Dr Elise Bialylew is a Melbourne-based doctor, mindfulness coach and the founder of Mindful in May, a month-long online campaign that teaches people to meditate. Participants create more focus, calm and clarity, while the funds they raise go to building safe drinking water projects in developing countries. She explains: "It's a clear mind for you and clear water for others."

"Many of us are suffering from what Dr Edward Hallowell, a specialist psychiatrist in ADHD, coined as attention deficit trait," Dr Bialylew says. "It is a condition induced by modern life in which you've become so busy attending to so many inputs and outputs that you become increasingly distracted, irritable, impulsive, restless and, over the long term, underachieving. In other words, it costs you efficiency because you're doing so much or trying to do so much, it's as if you're juggling one more ball than you possibly can."

Dr Bialylew says to explore how to bring more mindfulness into the digital age, leaders in the field of science, technology and meditation are coming together at extraordinary gatherings like the Wisdom 2.0 conferences held annually in San Francisco, New York and Dublin. The events, which include group meditations, are attended by executives from companies such as Facebook, Twitter, eBay, PayPal, Google and Microsoft, along with neuroscientists and wellness experts.

She says meditation teaches us how to use our inner technology of attention to re-sculpt our brains for the better. "We know through the science of neuroplasticity that just two months of regular mindfulness meditation can have significant benefits. When regularly practised, meditation has been shown to increase our immune function, grow our prefrontal cortex [required for strategic thinking and problem solving], and possibly even protect against DNA damage caused by ageing [through increasing the level of a protective enzyme, telomerase]."

Research suggests that 10 minutes of meditation, five days a week can improve our attention and focus. "There is a rapid growth of scientific research, revealing what the Buddhist monks have known for generations but couldn't measure with machines," she says.

For example, research by Harvard neuroscientists has shown that an eight-week meditation program can actually change the structure of the regions associated with learning, memory, sense of self, empathy and stress. "Although the practice of meditation is associated with a sense of peacefulness and physical relaxation, practitioners have long claimed that meditation also provides cognitive and psychological benefits that persist throughout the day," the study's senior author Dr Sara Lazar said in a 2011 press release.

But scientists still can't say exactly how or why meditation works and what other potential benefits it may deliver. That may change soon though if US President Barack Obama gets approval for "the next great American project", a \$100 million initiative he has proposed to study a still little-understood frontier: the human brain.

The BRAIN (Brain Research through Advancing Innovative Neurotechnologies) initiative would aim to speed up the development of technologies that will help researchers create dynamic brain imaging in order to learn how individual brain cells and complex neural circuits interact.

Comparing it to the Human Genome Project to map DNA, Obama said: "As humans we can identify galaxies light years away, we can study particles smaller than an atom, but we still haven't unlocked the mystery of the three pounds of matter sitting between our ears." And who knows where that might lead ... ■

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