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Stress relief through meditation gains focus

Joanne Graham felt so stressed recently at work that she was having trouble prioritizing and could feel a headache coming on. Graham, a benefits analyst at Dunkin' Brands in Canton, didn't really feel like going to a lunchtime seminar that day on meditation that she'd signed up for. But she and a colleague dragged each other there, and returned refreshed after an hour of learning to settle and focus their minds.

"It was amazing how focused we were when we got back," says Graham, who'd never tried meditation before the session last month. "When we came back, the two of us were so calmed down and pumped to get back to work."

Ancient meditation techniques are finding new appeal among employees who have grown tired of the frazzled, pressured tenor of work today. More than half of employees say they typically have to work on too many tasks at once, and nearly 30 percent often or very often don't feel they have the time to process or reflect on their work, the Families and Work Institute reported last year.

Statistics on workplace meditation aren't available, but anecdotal evidence suggests that it's catching on as an antidote to stress and burnout, especially because companies are more open in general to cost-saving alternative health practices. More than 60 percent of companies offer wellness programs, up from 53 percent in 2001, and one-third of workplaces offer acupuncture or coverage for this treatment, up from 18 percent five years ago, according to the Society for Human Resource Management.

Along with Dunkin' Brands, local companies such as Harvard Pilgrim Health Care, Reebok International Ltd, Delta Dental Plan of Massachusetts, and Flir Systems Inc., a maker of thermal imaging cameras, have offered meditation classes to their employees.

MAGGIE JACKSON

Balancing Acts

"Meditation just doesn't sound so weird anymore," says Iris Sokol, the president of Fitness Works at Work, a Sherborn firm that operates fitness and wellness programs for Dunkin' Brands and other companies. "Meditation is now looked at as another tool to deal with stress."

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IRIS SOKOL, *Fitness Works at Work*

About 20 employees – from a security guard to a manager or two – gathered at noon in a nondescript Dunkin' conference room to hear Richard Geller, an eerily calm workplace meditation consultant, teach ways to concentrate and be "mindful."

Some at first joked nervously, but then grew attentive as Geller slipped off his shoes, played lilting Native American flute music, and talked them through simple techniques such as focusing on their breath or the energy between the palms of their hands.

"Forget about this room and the person sitting next to you," said Geller, a former software developer who heads MedWorks Corporate Meditation Programs of Brookline. "Focus on your breath like your life depends on it."

When Kathy Scurti, an associate brand manager, fretted that she couldn't stop a flood of thoughts from distracting her and was getting a headache from the effort, Geller gently corrected her. The aim is not to empty your mind,

he said, but instead to focus on one thing and then placidly watch intruding thoughts drift by. Trying to stop your thoughts completely by meditating "is like trying to put out a fire with gasoline," he said.

Other employees noted the experience was "hard work," but many found it soothing and there were requests for more classes.

It's hard to say whether one or more meditation seminars will make the 600 employees at Dunkin' Brands' headquarters more productive, but the company's 18-month-old fitness center, as well as a greater emphasis on employee wellness, is apparently helping keep healthcare costs down, says Melinda DelCioppio, the benefits manager. Health insurance premiums at the company rose just 6 percent this year, one of the smallest hikes in recent years, she said.

For individuals, too, even a small dose of wellness can have an effect. In the two weeks since attending a meditation seminar taught by Geller at Harvard Pilgrim, employee Jeri Bryant has been meditating daily for half an hour in a darkened room before bedtime. She says the technique is helping her sleep through the night more often.

"It has worked and I have noticed," says Bryant, an asthma health educator who is using meditation to combat the stresses of a long commute and an intense work day.

Graham, meanwhile, is hoping to meditate regularly, perhaps at her desk or at home on Friday afternoons. "Maybe we should do this every other day, stop for a minute and slow down," says Graham, a few days after the class. "Fifteen minutes of meditation made me able to do hours worth of work."

Maggie Jackson's Balancing Acts column appears every other week. She can be reached at maggie.jackson@att.net.