***The data are clear: Meditate folks, meditate***

*By Rosa Di Lorenzo, Psy. D., Sacramento Valley Psychological Association, Member of Board of Directors, Diversity Chair.*

I have been interested in the relationship between meditation and brain/emotional/physiological functioning since I was an undergraduate at UC Davis in the late 1990s. Back then, the general attitude towards such self-development practices in the academic community was quite skeptical, much different from what it is now. I recall one Anthropology professor who was also the director of a Vipassana Meditation Center in Davis. I interviewed him for a paper I wrote for my Anthropology of Religion class, and he initiated me in the practice of Vipassana meditation, to enable me to experience first-hand what I was writing about. The experience enhanced my impression that that the practice of meditation was seen more as belonging to specific cultures, interests and beliefs, and there wasn’t much interest in seeing it as a more widely accepted, “normal” self-development tool. However, that is exactly what it already was, for me, and it had been so for many years.

I had already been a regular, daily practitioner of a meditation technique for over a decade and a half, when, as a senior student, I embarked in my honor project, with was to investigate the effects of Transcendental Meditation on mental health. So I asked one of my professors, Prof Robert Emmons, to be my thesis advisor. The reason I chose to ask him is that he had seemed, to me, quite open and interested in transcendental matters, given his area of research, which had to do with personal striving and spirituality. But I was wrong: He refused my project with a passion, arguing that the topic was, basically, unsubstantial, and perhaps, I felt he conveyed, too “new-age.”

Thankfully, another professor, himself practicing the transcendental meditation technique, directed me to the right person, and so I could do what fascinated me then, and still inspires me now: investigate the effects of meditation (in this case Transcendental Meditation, or TM) on psycho/emotional health. Nothing really new, as there were plenty of studies on TM by then, but for me, my little project was a major step towards what I wanted to do more of in the future. I felt l was stepping into cutting-edge investigation areas, in every sense. I also felt like a pioneer. No one I talked to seemed to even know what meditation was. The topic was too abstract, and sort of esoteric. However, I managed to conduct my study (an empirical investigation) and, finally, completed it in time for a December graduation, a long year and a half later. I had felt quite alone during the endeavor, with the exception of the excellent support from my advisor, Prof. John Capitanio. But on many occasions I felt like I dancing to the beat of a different drummer, in an environment where no one knew, or did not appreciate knowing, what meditation really was.

How different things are now! People’s consciousness has developed toward accepting meditation, and the scientific community’s view toward meditation has changed considerably. Many major universities have meditation centers where meditation is practiced and researched, including, of course, UC Davis. When the data started to roll in, psychology opened its arms to this self-development method, which is now incorporated in treatments and is gaining quite a following. Mindfulness-based practices are widely espoused by clinicians, who can see their beneficial effects on their clients and on themselves. Some of these practices, including Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, have gained the respected status of “evidence-based.” As a consequence, trainings in becoming a mindfulness-based provider abound.

But why this explosion in the popularity of meditation over the last decade?

The answer is simple. The research data produced over the years have been pretty clear in pointing out the benefits of meditation, and hence, hardly deniable. Even organizations such as the NIH, NIMH and AHA noticed that meditation techniques work to maintain health, and support research with grants.

Some of the studies I recently reviewed emphasize the positive psychological, social and behavioral effects of meditation of at least two kinds: transcendental meditation and mindfulness meditation. Jon Kabat-Zinn, of the University of Massachusetts's Medical School, and founder of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care and Society, is a pioneer in the field of meditation’s clinical application, and provides abundant evidence of how significantly certain conditions (including chronic pain) can improve when we are willing to regularly sit in contemplative silence for some periods of time. His eight-week-long Stress Reduction program, which also includes yoga and different mindfulness-based techniques (Body Scan and Mindful Eating, for example), is widely respected and deeply appreciated by clients, who report long-lasting benefits not only in their mental health, but in their physical conditions. Mind and body are indeed an inseparable unit.

Transcendental Meditation has been found effective on a number of indicators, including stress, high blood pressure, and ADHD. A new study is recently being completed which has already demonstrated evidence on the efficacy of TM on the symptoms of PTSD in Iraq’s and Afghanistan's veterans. After seeing firsthand what it does to veterans’ mental health, a number of doctors involved wanted to learn the technique themselves. The famous American psychiatrist Norman Rosenthal (who devised the light therapy for SAD) is the principal investigator of several studies on PTSD and meditation. In his book “Transcendence: Healing and Transformation through Transcendental Meditation,” he recounts the experiences of several different patients and friends with a variety of psychological conditions, who found much improvement and healing through the regular practice of TM. Just last month, I read that the American Heart Association endorsed TM for treatment of heart disease, after solid data reporting significant results on heart health. This is a truly significant achievement for people’s health.

The body of literature reporting data on different kinds of meditation, mainly mindfulness and TM, continues to grow. People from all walks of life and levels of education open their minds and hearts to the practice of meditation.

As a psychologist who has meditated for 32 years, and who incorporates meditation and stress reduction techniques into her practice, it is heartwarming and delightful to observe the evolution of the concept of meditation in western people’s minds, and to see the avalanche of data on the benefit of the most established meditation techniques. It is time to collect ourselves, find a quiet spot, plunge into the silence of meditation, and enjoy the healing that comes from it. Meditate, folks, meditate!

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