

Rhythm and blues

Rising stress levels may be the greatest threat to health, happiness and peace in Western nations. This means that research into its causes and treatment are of vital importance to society. For 15 years, such work has been thoroughly pursued at the HeartMath Institute in Boulder Creek, California, south of San Francisco.

HeartMath was one of the first organizations to point out the importance of “heartbeat variability,” the rhythm of periods between heartbeats. The more regular this rhythm is, researchers found, the more beneficial the effects on the hormonal system. An irregular rhythm stimulates the production of dangerous stress hormones; an even rhythm, on the other hand, fosters health. HeartMath has produced a remarkable series of rigorous scientific studies (see *Ode*, June 2005) showing that positive emotions have a beneficial effect on the heart rate. At a tense moment, transfer your attention to a cherished memory or a loving experience, and your heart rhythm will change in a flash.

So how can you tell if your heartbeat is even? For this, HeartMath has developed tests and



games that use computer software and a sensor you attach to a finger or ear. The method is simple, effective and persuasive; the only hitch is you need a computer to do the recommended stress-reduction exercises, and often there's not one nearby when you need it.

But HeartMath has come up with a solution: a new invention called the emWave. It's a simple instrument you hold in your hand, placing your thumb on a sensor that measures your heart rate. An indicator tells you whether it's “coherent” and healthy. If not, the desired rhythm can be achieved in short order using HeartMath's exercises. The institute's portable relaxation meter helps users fight stress and promote health and mental clarity at any time and place. A big step forward, then, for HeartMath, whose motto is “A change of heart changes everything.”

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The emWave costs \$199 and is available at www.heartmath.com.