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East meets west in stress control

Binge-and-purge approach no way to tame an old killer, Dutch expert claims

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Did you know that stress makes you fat and old, damages your brain cells and wears out your immune system?

That eventually it can lead to high blood pressure, heart attacks and even death? Yes, you know all this so you dutifully go to yoga classes, soak in bubble baths, spend the night drinking or hike up a mountain to relieve your tensions, right?

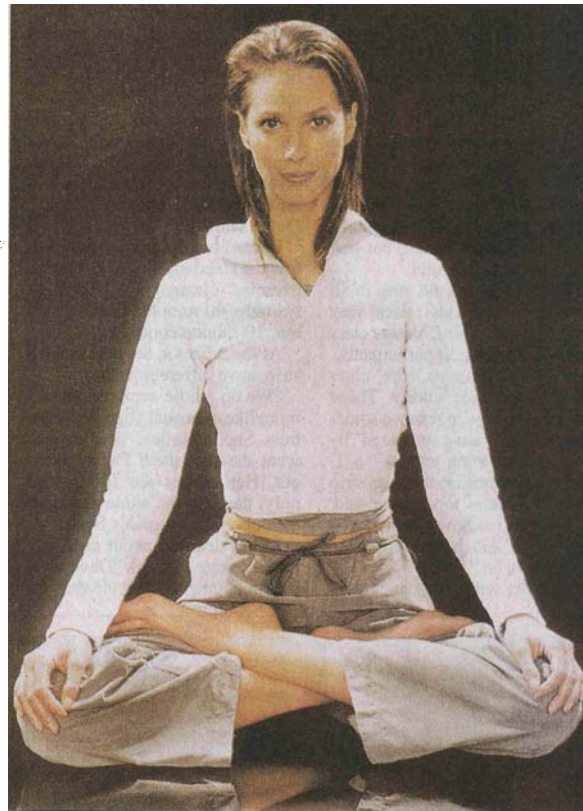
"Wrong," says Willy Linssen, president of the Heartware Group and organizer of the "HeartMath, Power to Change Performance" seminar.

"This is managing stress in exactly the wrong way. You build up stress during the day due to a bullying boss or fighting kids and you try to relax in the evening or weekends. But as soon as you are back at work or on your own with your children, the stress starts kicking in again. The binge and purge approach is no solution. It is like a fireman trying to put a fire out without protective clothing. What you need to fight stress is some sort of inner armor."

At a seminar conducted by the Dutch stress management expert, the participants seem to be hanging on to every word: Would there really be a solution for the stress they are experiencing?

Kim Tae-won, president of a company that supplies plastics for the semiconductor industry, explains his problems: "In general, the changes in Korean society worry me. There is a big gap between the younger and older generation. Sometimes I don't understand my younger employees. I feel a lot of pressure in my job. The competition is fierce. The margins get lower and we have to increase the volume constantly. There is more work all the time."

David Martin, a senior systems analyst from the United States, experiences a contrary source for his stress: "I feel frustrated because a



Simply try some yoga exercises to reduce stress in your life. Wrong, say the developers of HeartMath, a novel program that offers a new way of coping with life's pressures and reducing stress.

lot of the work I do disappears on a shelf. There is not much challenge and I get a bit bored. But I don't want to waste any more negative energy on this situation. I know I can't change the circumstances. Therefore, I want to learn some coping skills."

Then one of the participants gets a revealing experience when she is asked to attach a finger clip to have her heart rate monitored. At first her heart rhythm appears regular, but when she is told to count

backward from 300, deducting 13 every time, it suddenly shows an erratic pattern.

"When your heart rate becomes jerky, a lot of bad things happen in your body," Linssen says. "You start producing the stress hormone cortisol and you block the most important part of your brain. This explains why people in situations of stress often tend to make mistakes and jump to conclusions. They are simply not able to access the rational part of their brain."

Martin finds it curious to relate to this logic. "This is new to me. We in the States always think that mind and body are separate. Now I see that they influence each other mutually. When your body and heart rhythm is calm, this has an effect on the functioning of your brain and rational performance."

Dr. Ha Young-mok, a trainer at Heartware Group and translator into Korean of the book "The HeartMath Solution," explains: "For Koreans the HeartMath method sounds familiar. The whole concept of traditional Eastern philosophy is based on the concept of yin and yang, body and mind together."

After hearing all the statistics and scientific research to prove the negative effects of stress on your health, the participants were keen to know how to break the downward spiral. The solution seems simple: When under pressure chill for a moment, focus on your body and try to relive some positive feelings.

"For me the first step is the most difficult. Americans are so used to wearing their emotions on their sleeve," Martin said.

Linssen agrees: "You need to practice it regularly. When your boss comes to your desk and you know from previous experiences he'll ask you to finish that report by tomorrow, don't stress out. Take a breath, disengage your negative feelings. After a moment you will soon feel more balanced already."

The charismatic trainer admits, though, that managing your time is important as well: "If you have only five minutes to solve a problem, you can almost be certain that things will get out of hand."

According to Linssen, a big advantage of the HeartMath method to relieve stress is that you can practice it anywhere and it is not time consuming: "You can't very well say to your boss: I am sorry. I feel stressed out. I need to go out hiking up Mount Nam, can I leave

for three hours?"

Martin said he came to the seminar with some reservation but was pleased with the outcome.

"I came here with a healthy degree of skepticism, but this seems to work. In a way, the method resembles meditation and praying. With a prayer you disengage yourself as well. You give up your emotions and problems to God. Instead, with HeartMath you fill the void with your personal, positive feelings. That makes it interesting for me. I already feel a change in myself."

Linssen agrees: "One little change can be the beginning of the way upward. The longer you practise, the more benefits you will feel: better balance between work and home, a surge of creativity and more energy."

Ron Wirahadiraksa, chief financial officer of LG.Philips LCD, backs up this story as a living example. A picture taken a couple of years ago shows him to be definitely more overweight. But after practicing HeartMath, this busy executive felt he had so much more energy that he needed an outlet for it.

"Working harder than I did already was not possible. I decided to go to the gym and work out regularly. As a result, I lost over 10 kilos."

Moreover, Wirahadiraksa feels more calm and relaxed at work: "Instead of rushing to my e-mails first thing in the morning, I now take the time to read the newspapers and reflect."

And at home?

"It works there as well. In general, I feel that the quality of my life has gone up."

For more information:
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The Korean translation of "The HeartMath Solution" will be available towards the end of March at Duhnyouk Publishing Co, www.ddd21.co.kr — Ed.



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