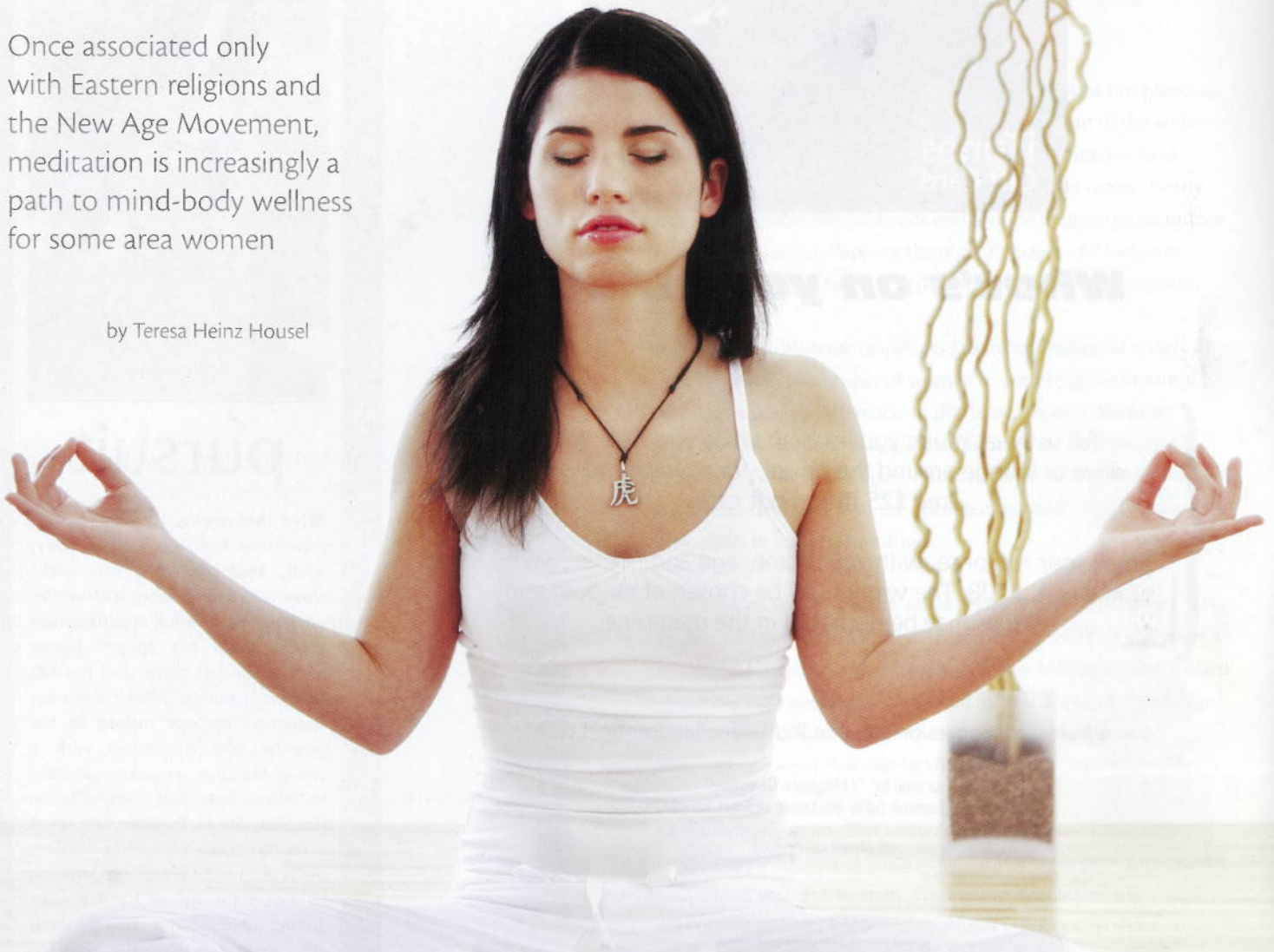


Meditation For Wellness

Once associated only with Eastern religions and the New Age Movement, meditation is increasingly a path to mind-body wellness for some area women

by Teresa Heinz House



Teresa Heinz House

Fulbright Application for Award #1119

Directory to Packet of Clip Samples:

- Pages 1-4: Freelance magazine article on meditation for *I Magazine*, a local Holland, Michigan magazine formerly published by *The Holland Sentinel*.
- Page 5: Editorial on texting for *The Holland Sentinel* (December 4, 2010, p. A11). Written as part of my duties for the newspaper's Community Advisory Board.
- Pages 6-10: Cover, table of contents, and sample student article from Spring 2010 edition of *Box Magazine*, a student magazine that is produced from my class, COMM 356 Advanced Magazine Features Writing and Production. I oversee the magazine's writing, editing, and design (all skills I teach).

Tammy Hillen, a massage therapist and owner of Harbor Health and Massage in downtown Holland, vividly recalls the public response to her new business' first meditation class four years ago.

"No one signed up," she said.

Hillen said that this reluctance primarily resulted from the public's lack of familiarity with meditation even just a few years ago. In the past, many people often associated meditation with the New Age Movement or Eastern religions such as Buddhism, she said.

Now, an increasing number of Holland-area women are turning to meditation for stress management, mental clarity and general relaxation. A burgeoning international market for meditation includes how-to books, guided meditation exercises on audio and video, meditation clubs and classes, podcasts and magazines. As local women turn to these resources, they are also partaking of other creative options such as meditation-focused religious services at area churches.

MEDITATION AS ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE

Local and national experts alike say that public interest in meditation is part of a growing national trend of alternative medicine.

In 1998, *The Journal of the American Medical Association* acknowledged many Americans' increased use of alternative medicine. Noting that Americans spent \$27 billion on herbal remedies, massage therapy and chiropractors that year, the organization devoted its entire November 1998 issue to alternative medicine.

The magazine included a study from Boston's Center for Alternative Medicine Research and Education at the Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center. The research study reported a sharp increase in Americans' use of alternative medicine from 1990 to 1997.

This trend continues to increase. On Feb. 10, 2006, *The New York Times* reported that 48 percent of Americans had used alternative medicine in 2004, compared with 42 percent in 1994. By 2004, alternative medicine was a multi-billion-dollar industry, the *Times* article noted.

Medical researchers are divided about the efficacy of non-conventional treatments for breast cancer, depression and other illnesses. However, local experts say the medical community is increasingly interested in the

connection between mental wellness and physical illness.

"In psychology, understanding of how the mind and body are connected is a topic of great interest," said Dr. Kristen Gray, assistant dean of students for Health and Counseling at Hope College.

"Relaxation is good for everything from being able to deal with everyday life to more clinical benefits. Researchers have found a connection between every major illness and stress."

—Tammy Hillen, owner of Harbor Health and Massage

Gray said that increased knowledge of the mind-body connection is leading many hospitals (including Holland Hospital) to install contemplative gardens and prayer rooms.

Holland Hospital offers services such as massage, art and pet therapy. Ambient music is played in the hospital's café, chapel, lobby and hallways.

In addition, the hospital's in-house television Channel 78 features nature images backed by calming instrumental music.

Many Americans are turning to meditation for stress management.

A recent online survey by the American Psychological Association found that nearly half of the 1,848 people questioned said their stress levels increased in the last five years. Many respondents said they dealt with stress by turning to unhealthy habits such as smoking and eating unhealthy foods.

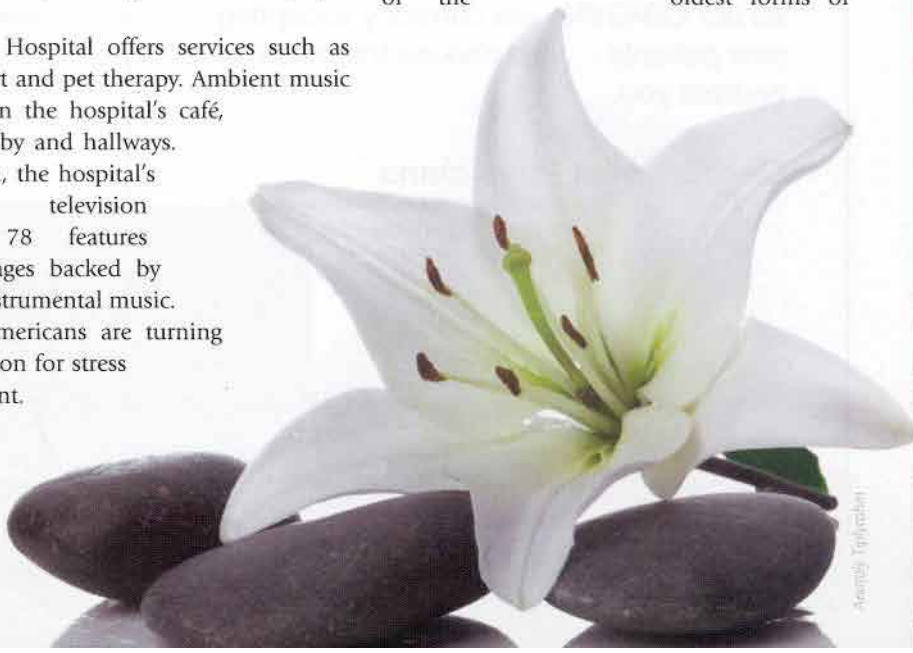
"Relaxation is good for everything from being able to deal with everyday life to more clinical benefits," Hillen said. "Researchers have found a connection between every major illness and stress."

MEDITATIVE RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

The word "meditation" is derived from the Latin *meditatio*, which originally referred to physical or intellectual exercise. The word's meaning gradually evolved into the modern meaning of "contemplation."

Meditation practices today are quite diverse in their philosophical and religious approaches. However, they all share a common goal of using specific techniques such as slowed and mindful breathing, background music, and repetition of songs, mantras or words to focus and control the person's attention.

"Concentration meditation," which involves focusing on an object such as a prayer, is practiced across many religions from Judaism to Islam. Hinduism's practice of yoga is one of the oldest forms of



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meditation. In Buddhism, meditation is key for developing wisdom and clarity. The Muslim prophet Muhammad is said to receive revelations of the Quran while meditating. In addition, Christian monastic orders and convents have used meditation since the fourth century.

Many Christian churches today offer services with a contemplative emphasis. In Holland, Grace Episcopal Church has an hour-long contemplative prayer and meditation service every Monday afternoon.

Bob and Linda Elder, Holland residents and Grace Episcopal members, initially helped organize the service that began about three years ago. They still actively participate.

"The early Christian community used quiet silence to listen to God rather than talking to God," Linda said. "More and more people value meditation because society has become so stressed out."

Elder said that over the centuries, however, fewer Christians practiced meditation. "Some people are frightened by it because they say it is New Age, and use that as a defense because meditation requires them to be quiet and away from distractions," she said.

In addition to its contemplative prayer service, Grace Episcopal joins other Holland churches, such as Hope Church, in having regular Taizé services of prayer, song, and meditation.

MEDITATION FOR RELAXATION

Despite its religious roots, meditation doesn't always occur in a temple, chapel or mosque.

Many people today use meditation outside of cultural or religious settings for relaxation. Holland-area residents can take meditation classes at local yoga studios, gyms and spas. They can even join more informal meditation groups found in the event listings of local free cultural, entertainment and health magazines such as *On the Town* and *Natural Awakenings*.

A common form of general meditation is "mindfulness meditation," in which the person tries to maintain an open focus by sitting silently and focusing awareness on an object or a process such as a breath, sound or mantra.

Some area organizations take this general relaxation approach to meditation. Harbor Health and Massage offers a weekly stress relief and relaxation class on an as-needed basis. The hour-long class typically runs for three to four sessions, Hillen said.

Hillen said that no one enrolled in the initial meditation class because of its association with religion. "We changed the name to a 'relaxation' class and people signed up," Hillen said. "We don't teach religion, but teach a stress relieving perspective."

During the relaxation classes, Hillen or another staff leader, plays soft music while participants sit on mats on the floor. People can lie down or sit up while focusing on their breathing, guided imagery or progressive muscle relaxation.

"We encourage people to sit up the first time because many people fall asleep," Hillen said, laughing.

Gray, who hosts a daily 30-minute meditation relaxation session every afternoon at Hope College, said that relaxation exercises are useful for managing daily stresses as well as illnesses like chronic anxiety and depression. The stress reduction class includes techniques such as gradual muscle relaxation from the toes to the head, slowed breathing exercises, some yoga

positions, and meditation while sitting with an upright, relaxed posture.

"We work on understanding the body's place in anxiety," Gray said. "Knowing that they [participants] can impact the physical response to stress can be very helpful for people."

EVERYDAY MEDITATION FOR LIFE

Some Holland-area women experience mindful meditation in even more informal and everyday ways. Knitters, gardeners, painters, regular walkers, and runners have long described the mental clarity and peacefulness they experience while doing their repetitive or focused activity.

Holland resident Rachel Bishop started running regularly in 1983, when she ran for five miles about five times a week.

"I don't run to get in shape anymore," Bishop said. "Running helps me feel a whole lot better. If I haven't run in awhile, I notice a difference in my attitude."

Bishop has taken pilates and yoga classes, but she treasures her regular runs as quiet time. She runs several miles three times a week to Lake Michigan from her home on Holland's north side. Bishop said that seeing trees and sand dunes puts any worries she may be having in perspective.

"The lake's waves are sometimes intense and sometimes completely still," Bishop said. "I even run in the rain. It brings me back to

nature and how important it is to be mindful of my surroundings."

Bishop's experience reflects the flexibility of meditative practices to adapt to each person's needs and values. Her workout is centered around contemplative prayer. Bishop runs alone and does not listen to music while exercising, preferring to let the silence calm her thoughts and focus her mind.

While running the to Lake Michigan, Bishop always observes the landscape's subtle seasonal changes. Once at the lake, she climbs wooden steps to reach the top of the dune. She gazes out over the water while saying a silent prayer. Then, she walks a mile along the beach before running back home—finding quiet meditation during her daily activities. ②

Meditation podcasts?



Many people who practice meditation have traditionally relied on audiotapes, videos, classes, and books for guidance. However, an abundance of meditation options have appeared on the Internet in recent years.

Even a quick Web search reveals hundreds of online meditation programs. Many of them are podcasts that can be streamed or downloaded for future use.

The podcasts reflect the gamut of philosophical, spiritual and cultural approaches. They range from highly polished and professional programs to homemade ones. Among the many professional programs available online is a regular meditation broadcast produced by teachers at the California-based and Buddhist Deer Park Monastery.

Although some professional podcasts are free, others are available on a subscription basis. For example, the popular weekly

"Meditation Station" podcast is produced by fitness and meditation expert Stin Hansen. In 2006, her podcast received the iTunes People's Choice Award for having one of the highest subscriptions.

Even though it was not originally created specifically for meditation, National Public Radio's "Hearts of Space" ambient music program is favored by many practitioners. The weekly hour-long program, which is hosted by Stephen Hill, also has an extensive online archive of past programs that can be accessed with a subscription.

Many other online programs are free and a number are homemade. Just one of many examples is the "Wynyfryd's Meditation Room" podcast, based out of Denver. The program typically features Wynyfryd's guided narration over a background of ambient music. Often, her narration invites listeners to imagine a contemplative scene such as an ocean cove.

Sometimes Wynyfryd uploads her podcasts monthly, but the frequency depends on her available time. The demands of her father's recent illness prevented her from creating any new podcasts for months.

Her podcasts have a relaxed and personal tone no doubt enhanced by their homemade nature. A software engineer and college professor, Wynyfryd creates her program out of a desire to share her passion for meditation with others. In fact, her father listened to her recorded meditations while in the hospital.

"I'm not a highly-trained professional meditation guru," she said, "but I do meditate regularly and find having it recorded is very helpful."

