



RESTORING HARMONY:  
Choudhry conducts  
a crystal therapy session

Photographs by NARENDRA BISHT

Stress management therapies multiply and turn into a booming industry. But amid this plethora of techniques and magic remedies, what is it that really works?

# STRESS Supermarket



■ by Shefalee VASUDEV

THEY SIT PERCHED ON SUPERMARKET SHELVES and New Age shops. Tranquillity candles, scented pillows, Feng Shui totems, wind chimes, I-Ching coins, aromatherapy products, self-help books. A long product list that caters to an ever-growing industry of stress busters. The alarming increase in stress levels among urban Indians in the last decade has spawned instant remedies, mostly recycled—Old Age spiritualism dressed up as New Age therapy. From yoga, pranayam, kundalini meditation to pranic healing, vipassana, reiki, crystal therapy, aura and chakra healing, every level of stress seems to have a corresponding remedy. Stress management programmes in five-star holiday resorts almost rival the ad spend of corporate houses.

In garages and drawing room housewives are learning how to t... schools are introducing yoga classes for 10-year-olds. Riding this tide of smart spirituality are trendy, expensive personal gurus selling instant chill-pills.

Stress-busting is now a hugely profitable industry. Yoga-meditation sessions cost anything from Rs 200 to a whopping Rs 1 lakh per client per month for personalised sessions. The cost of pranic healing, reiki and crystal therapy have appreciated too, and could put you back by Rs 300-5,000, depending upon the duration of the session and the healer. Holiday retreats offer destressing from Rs 1,200 to Rs 50,000, with massages, spirituality talks and meals thrown in.

Established hospitals haven't taken long to get into the act. Delhi's Apollo Hospital now has a bio-feedback department and

“ Scientific training differentiates a therapist from a quack. ”

AKASH DHARMARAJ, psychotherapist

## WHAT'S on SALE

**Pranayam, Nadi Yoga, Sudarshan Kriya** Interpretations of rhythmic breathing for relaxation. Rs 1,000-1,500 per person for a 12-hour workshop.

**Kundalini Shakti (energy)** coiled in the lower abdomen is provoked through meditation for relieving accumulated tensions. Osho groups conduct and teach this for free.

**Colour Therapy** Learning to choose colours that suit one's personality to harmonise with the environment. Rs 300-1,000 per session.

**Sacred dances** Cathartic movements from Sufi, Gurdjeff or Osho dances to release blocked emotions. Rs 500 for group, Rs 1,000 for individual sessions.

**Chakra therapy** Seven, non-physical chakras of light surrounding the body. Tapped to channelise energy. Rs 300-1,000 per session.

**Crystal and gem therapy** Use of suitable gemstones and crystals to restore mind-body harmony. Rs 300-500. Up to Rs 5,000 if you buy crystals.

**Pranic healing** Healing through transfer of subtle energy from one person to another without touching or using drugs. Rs 150-1,500.

**Reiki** Therapists place their hands on the recipient for Reiki energy to flow through palms to heal physical and psychological disorders. Rs 100-1,000 per session.

**Ayurvedic massages** Detoxifying, destressing herbal massages. Rs 350 to Rs 1,800 per massage.

**Vipassana** Theravada Buddhist silent meditation focusing on introspection for deep insight. Rs 1,000-3,500 per person for weekend workshops.

**Rudraksh** Known to have acupressure-like, electromagnetic properties that harmonise blood flow. Rs 5 per bead to Rs 8-10 lakh for rare ones.

**Aromatherapy** Use of aromatics in baths, candles, pot-pourri for relaxation.

**Oils:** Rs 65-900. **Workshops:** Rs 1,000 per person per day.



## How VULNERABLE are you to STRESS?

The Urgency Index shows how some people get used to the adrenaline rush of handling crises, which leaves them excited, energised—and stressed. Respond to these statements with Never, Sometimes or Always.

- 1 I seem to do my best work when I am under pressure.
- 2 I often blame the rush and press of external things for my failure to spend deep, introspective time with myself.
- 3 I am often frustrated by the slowness of people and things around me. I hate to wait or stand in line.
- 4 I feel guilty when I take time off work.
- 5 I always seem to be rushing between places and events.
- 6 I frequently find myself pushing people away so that I can finish a project.
- 7 I feel anxious when I am out of touch with the office for more than a few minutes.
- 8 I am often preoccupied with one thing when I am doing something else.
- 9 I am at my best when I am handling a crisis situation.
- 10 The adrenaline rush from a new crisis seems more satisfying to me than the steady accomplishment of long-term results.
- 11 I often give up quality time with important people in my life to handle a crisis.
- 12 I assume people will naturally understand if I have to disappoint them or let things go in order to handle a crisis.
- 13 I rely on solving some crises to give my day a sense of meaning and purpose.
- 14 I often eat lunch or other meals when I work.
- 15 I keep thinking that someday I will be able to do what I really want to do.
- 16 A huge stack in my "out" basket at the end of the day makes me feel like I have really been productive.

**SCORE:** Mark yourself 0 for never, 2 for sometimes and 4 for always. 0-25 denotes a low urgency mind-set. 26-45 a strong urgency mind-set and 46+ an urgency addiction. The last two indicate a high tendency to stress, burnout and putting out fires all the time.

Source: First Things First by Stephen R. Covey and A. Roger Merrill (Simon and Schuster)



SIPRA DAS



BREAKING FREE: Dance movements can release blocked emotions

premier institutions like AIIMS study the effects of holistic therapies. Psychotherapist Akash Dharmaraj, who has merged her scientific knowledge with holistic techniques, says that in the past two years there has been a 50 per cent increase in the number of help seekers. Gita Ramesh, managing director of Kairali Ayurvedic Health Resorts, popular for its herbal massages, also talks of the ever-increasing number of people looking at destressing and detoxification. Dr R.M. Nair, director, Babu Nature Cure Hospital and Yogashram in Delhi which offers naturopathy therapies, says at least 10 patients a week report in with stress-related symptoms. Mumbai-based corporate trainer Zarina Godrej feels that "stress management is a do-or-die need because most executives are choked with repetitive work patterns, unrealistic deadlines and brewing tensions".

As the giant wheel of stress-busting goes round, a significant question is being asked. What is scientifically valid and what is mumbo-jumbo? Dharmaraj feels that an approach combining psychological guidance works better than isolated therapies. The fact that meditation, yoga or prayer make conflict management easier is not just a presumptive theory. American cardiologist Herbert Benson's book *The Relaxation Response*, which expounded the power of prayer or concentration on remembered wellness from the past to survive crisis, disease or emotional stress, had a worldwide influence on mind-body theories. Indian studies too corroborate this. Last year, Dr Vinod Kochupillai, professor and head of medical oncology at AIIMS, led a team to study the electrophysiologic evaluation of trained practitioners of sudarshan kriya and of pranayam (breathing processes to induce relaxation). Called the "EEG, Baer, P300

## “ Holistic therapies are more a matter of faith than cures. ”

DR DEEPAK TALWAR, physician

Study", it was conducted by AIIMS in collaboration with Bangalore's Ved Vigyan Mahavidyapeeth. It reported a distinct fall in stress levels when these techniques were employed.

Modern science now leans towards the mind-body union; psychoneuroimmunology is the new branch of medicine merging the two. The body's reaction to stress is like that of a fire station responding to an emergency. Faced with a stressful situation it goes into turbocharge mode. Blood pressure and muscle tension increase and the adrenal glands release the stress hormone cortisol. On average, blood flow to the body increases by 350 per cent. The build-up of negative repercussions starts the vicious cycle: lower pain thresholds, higher anxiety, blood pressure and hostility—all stressors.

**T**HERE seem to be plenty of anecdotal evidence on the positive effects of yoga, pranayam and meditation. Filmmaker and radio commentator Shharyu Chopra, 40, swears by nadi yoga. "Two years ago, a personal crisis made my life a big mess, but it was nadi yoga that altered my approach, helping me sort out my emotional dilemmas," she says. Anaesthetist Sunita Mehta, 64, turned to sudarshan kriya after she woke up one morning unable to move a limb. She claims she hasn't "touched a pain killer in the past four years since." Crystal therapist Mandira S. Choudhry says reiki and crystal therapy form the single biggest transforming experi-

ence of her life. Geeta Chandra, creative director of Moonbeam, a Delhi-based centre for holistic healing, feels that total well-being is connected to spiritual evolution and stress-relieving products support the empowerment that originates from faith.

"People who repose faith in a system or a healer respond best to such therapies," says lung specialist and critical care physician Dr Deepak Talwar. Dr Lalita Shekhar, physician at Apollo Hospital concurs. "Yoga has proven benefits," she says, "though therapies with scented pillows, colours or crystals are a matter of belief." Shekhar adds that Apollo's bio-feedback department has reported positive results: "Bio-feedback is not a cure, but there is a 30-40 per cent improvement in stress-related disorders."

Since the most effective solutions for stress-busting are in

EVERY BREATH YOU TAKE: Nadi Yoga has many followers



the medicine cabinet of the mind, the least common denominators remain the same. Conviction, willingness, belief and practice. In that order. Nine-year-old Prateek Vishwanathan, a Chennai student, suffered from migraine since birth. "His doctor taught him to pray, chant and concentrate on happy memories during attacks," recalls his mother. Now he has fewer migraines and less intense ones. "Faith healing works," agrees Talwar, but only for stress-related and psychosomatic problems. "It cannot wish away viral infections," he adds.

Successful destressing is a continuous, lifelong process. Unfortunately, there are many quacks parading around. "Quackery comes in when an insufficiently trained person becomes a healer," says Dharmaraj, who feels that scientific training is the crucial differentiating element between a therapist and a quack. "Anybody can become a reiki healer," she adds, but if that person is not trained to handle emotional outbursts that follow a reiki session, it may lead to problems.

A timeless zone of peace within oneself lies at the basis of most stress-relieving therapies. "Stress-busting is a by-product of meditation. The larger benefit is self-realisation," says Swami Chaitanya Keerti of the Osho meditation group. Self-realisation is great, but idle introspection is not, as it can itself be stress inducing. And as the stress managers say, ambitions are worth living for, but not dying for. ■