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 David Davis

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From The Times

September 29, 2007

A cure for heart-ache

Can a holistic technique help Emma Mahony to relax and work wonders on her stress levels?



RECOMMEND?

It works for me: emotional healing

Science tells us that most of our emotional responses are centred in the brain, not the heart, which makes colloquialisms about being "broken-hearted" sound like old-fashioned thinking. But while the heart might not rule the head, the head has a significant influence on the heart, and particularly heart disease. Only last week a paper in *The Lancet* reinforced our knowledge of stress's harmful impact on coronary health.

This comes as no surprise to Dr Peter Gruenewald, a GP and holistic practitioner, who believes that if you can treat negative emotions such as anxiety, you may prevent heart disease. He says that the conventional approach to cardiovascular disease – reducing cholesterol, taking more exercise – only looks at part of the picture because it does not address the patient's emotional state. Hence his technique for improving heart health is half stress reduction and half counselling.

Dr Gruenewald's work at the new Heart Health Clinic in London aims to tackle the problem early, taking a preventive, rather than curative, approach. His technique, called HeartSpheres (see panel, right), involves focused relaxation and breathing exercises to control feelings and to transform negative emotions deep in the subconscious into positive ones.

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As an occasional smoker, over 40, with high cholesterol levels (and in the process of moving house), I was a little nervous at having Dr Gruenewald analyse my heart. He asked about my lifestyle, job and stress levels, and then sent me packing with an ECG

machine strapped to my chest, to monitor my heart activity over 24 hours. I also had to keep a diary throughout this period, making a note of any activity that took longer than 15 minutes.

When I returned to Dr Gruenewald he analysed my ECG read-out, using a measure called heart-rate variability (HRV). Unlike heart rate, which is the number of heartbeats a minute, HRV is the level of change between heartbeats. HRV declines with age, as the heart succumbs to natural wear and tear over the years, but doctors have also recently found that high variability in heart rate reflects a robust capacity to recover from stress, whereas low HRV is a powerful predictor of a number of illnesses, from depression to heart disease.

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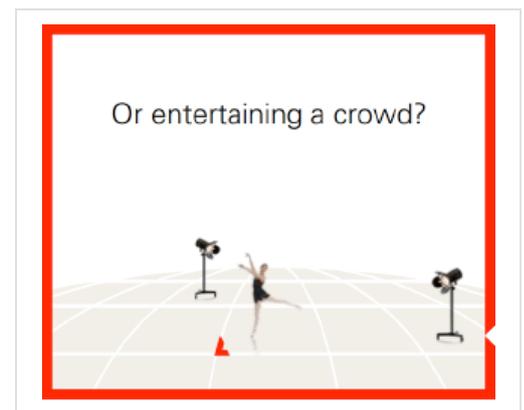


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"The number of studies on heart-rate variability connected to human disease has substantially grown over the years," says Dr Gruenewald. "Between 1988 and 1998 it grew from one in 20,000 of all medical studies to one in every 1,000."

By looking at how his patients' HRV level changes over a 24-hour period, and comparing this with the diary of their activities, and also through talking to them in the initial consultation, he says he can identify the things that people find particularly stressful for them.

He then tries to reduce this stress by giving them breathing exercises and positive visualisation exercises. Practised over a long period of time, Dr Gruenewald believes that this can raise your HRV, making the heart better able to deal with stress and increasing its fitness in the long term.

I was surprised to learn that my HRV level was particularly low when I was asleep, meaning that the quality of my sleep was poor. And although I was healthy overall, I did show signs of mild stress. Dr Gruenewald also said that my chart showed that I was particularly stressed during housework. No surprise there.

I was packed off with a prescription of daily exercises to perform. I had to do ten minutes of breathing exercises three times a day, inhaling and exhaling at a rate of around six times a minute, at the same time visualising white light coming through my body from the top of my head. This was meant to represent calmness. Imagining the light coming through my spine represented confidence, and passing it on to another human being represented love and caring.

The exercises were unexpectedly difficult. I found performing the visualisation and breathing techniques at the same time a bit like patting your head while rubbing your stomach. But I managed to keep them up, and have noticed a difference in my stress levels. I also felt motivated to buy a garden hammock to lie in, practising my breathing as I rock back and forth while staring at clouds. And, I've finally found concrete evidence that I need to hire a cleaner.

What is it? A combination of relaxation and positive thinking techniques to improve the health of your heart.

Claims By tackling stress and negative emotions, which can play a big part in heart disease, this technique claims to keep your ticker in good shape.

Good for Prevention and treatment of heart disease.

Cost £125 for the first consultation, £55 for any following consultations.

Contact heartspheres.com, or call 0844 8002433; hearthealthclinic.co.uk

WHAT'S THE EVIDENCE? DR TOBY MURCOTT

Can relaxation reduce heart disease? There is good evidence that relaxation techniques can help to curb heart problems. A review of research into transcendental meditation and cardiovascular disease published in 2004 concluded that practising TM could reduce cholesterol levels, decrease blood pressure and lower stress.

How about the HeartSpheres technique? There are no published clinical trials. Evidence of its effectiveness comes from individual accounts and case studies.

Is it safe? Meditation and relaxation techniques are considered safe interventions.

Toby Murcott is a former BBC science correspondent

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