

TheNational



Calming influence

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Until recently, the simple fact of daily life was a constant source of stress, worry and anxiety for Tracey Davison. The 36-year-old nursery schoolteacher, who lives in Abu Dhabi, juggles her job with looking after her own two children, aged four and 18 months. "I was getting very stressed out with kids crying and screaming all the time," she says. "I was also having some problems in my marriage and we are trying to move house. That's when friends mentioned meditation."

Davison, from Glasgow, says that she is back in control of her life after taking up Raja yoga, a form of meditation aimed at managing the thought patterns which contribute to stress and anxiety. Now, she and her sister Jennifer, a horse trainer, attend weekly hour-long sessions; she also meditates by herself each day. "It just allows you to take a step back and think about things," she adds. "Things happen and I think I could really blow up with people or just be sarcastic, but now I think to myself that I don't have to do that. I normally worry about things a lot, but now I'm laid-back, and I realise that I can't solve everything in one go. My sister has seen a huge difference in my attitude."

She now meditates for 10 minutes every morning. "I set my alarm to go off before the kids wake up. It allows you to reflect and prepare, and it refreshes you for the day. I now feel that I'm in total control, relaxed and focused. I tried yoga before but it wasn't nearly as intense or beneficial. Now it's only the days when I don't have time to meditate that I start to feel a bit stressed."

Davison's teacher is Sona Bahri, who arrived in Abu Dhabi after running a Raja yoga retreat centre in Australia. Bahri now teaches meditation to private and corporate groups in Abu Dhabi through the Sharanis Spa in Khalifa City.

Born in Mumbai and brought up in Italy, England and Chile, Bahri started to study meditation at the age of 16, when her family returned to India. "Learning yoga helped me be a much more peaceful, calm person, and it gave me a lot more perspective on the way I behaved. I got a lot of benefit from it as a student, because meditation helps to increase your attention span and focus."

Unlike typical forms of yoga, which use breathing exercises and a variety of different postures, Raja yoga is practised with the eyes open and is designed to be effective anywhere.

Bahri says that, with the frenetic pace of life in the UAE, there is increasing demand for her services. She now conducts on-site workshops with employees from several large schools and companies. "At the moment, Abu Dhabi is in a state of rapid growth and change, which brings with it stress and uncertainty," she explains. "The development is great but it also brings deadlines and pressure to perform."

Bahri also says that while people spend a lot of time and effort on their appearance, some are only just beginning to acknowledge the need for a deeper understanding of stress. "We tend to think that if we can look after our bodies that everything will be all right. But no matter how much you polish your car, if the driver is not OK there is still an issue deal with."

With the negative effects of stress on the mind and body now recognised by doctors and health care professionals, Bahri says: "These days meditation is being recommended for people with lots of different issues. Your state of health is directly linked to your state of mind, and if you look at things like high blood pressure, ulcers and migraines, a lot is now attributed to stress. However, even if stress has not yet shown up in your life in terms of a health issue, it may have shown up in a different way."

In her workshops, the stress of how to relate to other people has become the major issue that her students focus on. "Relationships, including work ethics and social difficulties, are a big issue here because there are so many cultures coming together," she says. "We all want to understand each other better but it's tricky to put yourself in someone else's shoes and see things from their perspective."

Bahri also understands that expatriates often experience added pressure thanks to working in an unfamiliar environment and frequently being away from their families. "When you're thrown out of your comfort zone it requires a lot of patience and a lot of positivity and strength to adapt," she says.

The first thing Bahri teaches students is how to gain control of their thoughts. "The initial step in meditation is to be able to look within and recognise what is going through your mind," she says. "Then you can gently put those thoughts aside for a moment



Yoga and meditation can provide valuable coping tools for people living in a rapidly changing society, claims Sona Bahri. Lauren Lancaster / The National

and pick up just one: 'I am peace.' Meditation gives you the strength to put a stop to negative and wasteful thoughts and to look at life from a different perspective. It helps you to connect with and experience that peace. Once you make this a regular thing, it becomes easier to create that state of mind even in very difficult situations."

Stressful lives are, Bahri says, "like riding a horse without holding the reins. Raja yoga helps you to pick up those reins and tighten your grip". In her workshops, she tries to look at the areas of people's lives where they can "create positivity" instead of indulging negative emotions such as anger. According to Bahri, such destructive feelings have become normal simply "because people don't know how to react in any other way".

The biggest obstacle to effective relaxation, she says, is that people rarely make time for themselves: "Meditation is actually a way of having time out for yourself. We spend so much of our days with people, with family, at work, watching TV and give so much energy to the outside world. Yet when you ask people how much time they spend with themselves, it's often not even a minute a day."

It is Bahri's belief that today's society discourages introspection and that many people even associate it with depression or self-indulgence. In reality, though, she says that it is simply a way of acknowledging your feelings and dealing with them.

Because people are so caught up in what is going on around them, Bahri argues, they spend a lot of time thinking about things of very little importance, or going over the same thoughts again and again.

"Meditation brings you into the now, which means you can put a stop to thoughts of the past and the future and attend to the task in hand with your full energy. It helps people in their jobs, it helps students with their studies, and it helps mothers not to worry too much," she claims.

Sharon Moore, the managing director of Sharanis Spa, says that the running of meditation workshops by companies in Abu Dhabi also proves that employers are recognising the importance of looking after and retaining their staff.

"Employees who practise meditation are more productive because they know how to deal with their emotions. It's often a very challenging and stressful environment here and some people work so hard that they eventually end up leaving the country. No company wants that. Meditation is quite a new culture here so it's great to see businesses setting an example."

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