



Men and Meditation

From captains of industry to returning war veterans struggling with PTSD, more men are practicing daily meditation—and feeling the benefits

By **Bill Giebler**

“Meditation allows me to be less separate, less in conflict with others and myself,” says Stephen Uvalle, a yoga instructor at Boulder, CO’s Little Yoga Studio. At 50, with spiked brown hair, ear gauges and multiple tattoos, Uvalle is part street tough, part purveyor of loving-kindness.

“It’s allowed me to look at perceived social constructs of who I’m supposed to be as a man,” he continues. “I’m not supposed to be sensitive, I’m supposed to be aggressive...yet that doesn’t feel good in my body. Sitting in those moments of extreme anger, extreme rage—and confronting and facing the stillness that’s behind all of that—has really shifted my consciousness. And I learned that all by just sitting with myself.”

He’s not the only one to notice the benefits. Today we hear about high-tech leaders like Twitter Co-founder Evan Williams, business magnate Rupert Murdoch, TV journalist George Stephanopoulos and Ford Executive Chairman Bill Ford taking a seat. These are not men killing time or playing with trends. They are simply feeling the difference made by bringing daily meditation into their busy lives.

Studies show the effects of meditation on brain function, mental acuity, decision-making and our ability to simply chill out. These are skills of success for all of us, not just corporate heads. But it takes time and discipline to carve out the space for sitting down and doing nothing.

“Men previously looked at meditation like ‘I don’t need it, I can deal with my stress, have a drink with friends,’” says Bhushan Deodhar, head of Shankara, an Ayurvedic skincare line. Deodhar also teaches leadership workshops through the International Association for Human Values (IAHV), the non-profit parent of Shankara. “Men tend to really push their emotions down just to outwardly look very calm, composed and strong. However, internally, there is quite a bit of stuff going on, and I think meditation breathing techniques are really essential to handle negative emotions, frustrations, fears, inhibitions and stress, in a healthy manner.”

Dr. Emma Seppälä has a PhD in Psychology from Stanford, where she is currently the associate director of the Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education. Seppälä has dedicated much of her life to studying the benefits of

meditation, specifically for men with a supercharged machismo response to stress: veterans with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). “As general civilians we don’t mind feeling like victims some of the time. We have the flu and we want people to feel sorry for us,” says Seppälä. “Veterans are not like that at all. They do not embrace victimhood.” She reiterates what Uvalle identified: there’s a value for men in finding the answers within themselves—not, say, asking directions.

Traditionally, “We tell them, ‘OK, go to a therapist, go take this drug, go depend on this thing.’ It’s totally against their nature, because they are people who take responsibility,” she says. “The beautiful thing about meditation and meditation-based practices is that you’re giving them tools, and by giving them tools, you’re allowing them to take responsibility for themselves and not depend on a therapist, not depend on a drug. It’s empowering them.”

Her study involved 20 men recently returned from Iraq and Afghanistan and looked at the effects of week-long Sudarshan Kriya yoga—a blend of simple movement, breathwork and silent meditation—on the symptoms of PTSD. “We measured their symptoms before, after, one month after and one year after, and we saw decreases in PTSD to subclinical levels.” Subclinical means their symptoms no longer registered as

a disorder after just one week of the practice. “We saw the same results a month and a year after,” she continues. So, the decreases in PTSD were maintained. Even more remarkably, they were maintained whether the subject had continued to practice or not. “It didn’t make a difference.”

What was happening for these men was a “decoupling” of wartime memories and their physiological anxiety response. “PTSD is a mind that’s dwelling in the past,” Seppälä asserts, “a mind that’s been hijacked by the past.” Usually, as these memories emerge, these men are “in a state of high physiological anxiety.”

But as they practice the breathing techniques in meditation, “They go into this really deep relaxation.” And while their memories can still emerge when they’re in that state, she says, “It’s a new experience where the body is no longer in a state of anxiety. What they’re saying after the study is, ‘I remember everything that happened, but I can move on now.’”

Meditation is “gentle, low-cost, high-benefit and no known side effects,” says Seppälä. Yet, yoga teacher Stephen Uvalle reminds us that it is not a packaged nugget. “As a culture we chase the fix-it,” he says. “Meditation, for me, is not really chasing anything. It’s residing in this energy that the fix-it moves through.”

DIGITAL FOCUS RESOURCES

Insight Timer, an app that provides a meditation community at a swipe of the phone. It provides personal meditation stats and milestones, accesses a library of dozens of quality guided meditations from a variety of experts like Eckhart Tolle and Jack Kornfield and provides groups and links out to Twitter and Facebook.

Wisdom 2.0, the popular mindfulness-meets-technology conference, is now preparing for its Bay Area winter gathering, February 26 to March 1, this year featuring LinkedIn CEO Jeff Weiner, Facebook Chief of Engineering Arturo Bejar, author and teacher Byron Katie and musician Alanis Morissette among the many presenters. wisdom2conference.com

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