



MAKE A SPLASH

Xerox Color. It makes business sense.  
Business color that's innovative,  
reliable and affordable.  
Now that's brilliant!

Technology | Document Management | Con

BusinessWeek online

Close Window

AUGUST 30, 2004

THE EXECUTIVE LIFE -- FITNESS

## Meditation

**New research shows that it changes the brain in ways that alleviate stress**

In 1999 a Harvard University Magna Cum Laude named Kaleil Isaza Tuzman quit his job as a French-cuffed arbitrageur at Goldman Sachs ([GS](#)) to found a startup called govWorks with his childhood best friend, an experience that was captured in the riveting documentary *Startup.com*. As the company unwinds, we see the once-smooth Tuzman kick furniture, burn through girlfriends (not to mention \$60 million), and, in the company's last gasps, send a two-sentence letter of termination to the best friend -- all before he was 30.

What we don't see, however, is that Tuzman had let his longtime meditation practice slide. When he was at Goldman, Tuzman often closed his eyes on the trading floor to meditate -- a Zen man in Zegna. But when he plunged into govWorks and its 20-hour days, he slacked off. "I have regretted letting it lag for years," says Tuzman. "Because if I had stayed disciplined, I have a feeling I would have been able to see some of the harbingers and perils that I didn't see at the time." Today, Tuzman, now CEO of Recognition Group, is back at his 20-minute-a-day practice, sometimes shutting his office door and sitting ballet-dancer straight in his leather swivel chair.

For decades, researchers at the National Institutes of Health, the University of Massachusetts, and the Mind/Body Medical Institute at Harvard University have sought to document how meditation enhances the qualities companies need in their human capital: sharpened intuition, steely concentration, and plummeting stress levels. What's different today is groundbreaking research showing that when people such as Tuzman meditate, they alter the biochemistry of their brains. The evolution of powerful mind-monitoring technologies has also enabled scientists to scan the minds of meditators on a microscopic scale, revealing fascinating insights about the plasticity of the mind and meditation's ability to sculpt it.

Some of those insights have emerged in the lab of Richard Davidson, a professor of psychology and psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Throughout his career, Davidson has pondered why people react so differently to the same stressful situations, and for the past 20 years he has been conducting experiments to find out. With the blessing of the Dalai Lama, who is supporting U.S. neuroscientists in their quest to crack the mysteries of meditation, Davidson has been placing electrodes on meditating Buddhist monks as they sit on his lab floor watching different visual stimuli -- including disturbing images of war -- flash on a screen. Davidson and his team then observe the monks as they meditate while ensconced in the clanking, coffin-like tubes of MRI machines.

What the researchers see are brains unlike any they have observed elsewhere. The monks' left prefrontal cortexes -- the area associated with positive emotion -- are far more active than in nonmeditators' brains. In other words, he says, the monks' meditation practice, which changes their neural physiology, enables them to respond with equanimity to sources of stress. Meditation doesn't lobotomize meditators; it simply allows them to detach from their emotional reactions so they can respond appropriately.

"In our country, people are very involved in the physical-fitness craze, working out several times a week," says Davidson. "But we don't pay that kind of attention to our minds. Modern neuroscience is showing that our minds are as plastic as our bodies. Meditation can help you train your mind in the same way exercise can train your body."

Davidson's research didn't stop with the monks. To find out whether meditation could have lasting, beneficial effects in the workplace, he performed a study at Madison (Wis.) biotech company Promega. Four dozen employees met once a week for eight weeks to practice mindfulness meditation for three hours. The result, published last year in the journal *Psychosomatic Medicine*, showed that the employees' left prefrontal cortexes were enlarged, just like those of the monks. "We took typical, middle-class Americans trying to cope with the demands of an active work life and active family life who reported being relatively stressed out," says Davidson. "And what we found out is that after a short time meditating, meditation had profound effects not just on how they felt but on their brains and bodies."

These results matter at a time when companies lose an estimated \$200 billion annually in absenteeism, subpar performance, tardiness, and workers' compensation claims related to stress. In fact, stress-related ailments account for upwards of 60% of all doctor visits, according to the Mind/Body Medical Institute. President Herbert Benson, an associate professor at Harvard Medical School, notes that stress does amp up performance to a certain level. But sustained too long, it erodes productivity. "If businesses were clever, what they would do is simply put time aside [and have] a quiet room for people to carry out a meditative behavior of their choice," says Benson.

Some are already doing so. AOL ([TWX](#)), Raytheon ([RTN](#)), Nortel Networks ([NT](#)), and even ultra-staid law firm Cleary, Gottlieb, Steen & Hamilton offer their employees meditation classes. At some companies, the practice gets advocacy from the top. Medtronic's ([MDT](#)) former CEO, Bill George, who has meditated twice a day for 20 minutes for the past 30 years, says: "Out of anything, it has had the greatest impact on my career." (Life offers many opportunities: George meditates from the time his plane taxis to when the steward offers him a Diet Coke ([KO](#)).

Former Aetna International Chairman Michael Stephen also started meditating in 1974 and says it helped transform him from an impatient, demanding know-it-all into a more effective leader. Ex-Monsanto ([MON](#)) CEO Robert Shapiro is such a devotee that he brought in teachers to help his execs learn the practice. And McKinsey Managing Partner Michael Rennie, an avid meditator, has studied the beneficial effects of meditation in corporations.

Health insurers are starting to realize that meditation, like preventive health and exercise programs, may help them control costs. Cigna ([CI](#)) is so intrigued with the new meditation findings that it has hired Davidson's partner, Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, to study the ways in which meditation may be able to reduce costs for everything from chronic fatigue to irritable bowel syndrome.

Of course, as with exercise, it's natural to face difficulties adhering to a schedule or to go through periods when you question the payoff. That's why it's important to find a teacher, a Zen center, or some other authority to turn to in such moments, much as one turns to a personal trainer to help maintain or heighten the challenge of an exercise regimen.

The point is: Don't just do something -- sit there.

By Michelle Conlin

[Advertising](#) | [Special Sections](#) |  
[MarketPlace](#) | [Knowledge](#)  
[Centers](#)

**Xerox Color. It makes business sense.**

[Terms of Use](#) | [Privacy Notice](#) | [Ethics Code](#) | [Contact Us](#)

**The McGraw-Hill Companies**

Copyright 2000- 2007 by The McGraw-Hill Companies Inc.  
All rights reserved.