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HEALTHY HEART ISSUE

TRIGLYCERIDES:
THE HIDDEN MENACE

HOW TO KEEP YOUR
CHOLESTEROL IN CHECK

Rhythm Method

Emotional rewards seen from breathing to your heartbeat.

People who seek a contemplative place through meditation have long embraced the idea of focusing on a steady rhythm to help them get there. Slow breathing has been an old favorite and, by and large, the standard metronome used to pursue such a respite from worries and a harried life.

Now some practitioners are also turning to a seemingly obvious, yet overlooked, source of a meditative beat—the heart. Pura and Susanna Bair of the Institute for Applied Meditation in Tucson, Arizona, have developed *Heart Rhythm Meditation* (HRM), a meditative practice that combines awareness of a heartbeat's rhythm with the smooth, steady pace of breathing.

"Our object is to have people have a conscious relationship with their hearts. When you do that the heart begins to speak: It begins to guide you, it reminds you about what's really important, what your real wish is," says Pura Bair. "Sitting in silence is not effective if you can't drop down into your heart, and the key is being aware of your heartbeat."

The Bairs, who have been meditating for 35 years, are positioning their spin on meditation as a more practical method than traditional forms that put people in a disassociated state. The couple considers such meditations "upward" forms because they create the sensation of being lifted from the body versus an inward focus, in this case to the heart.

"I found that upward meditation was an amazing experience that was not at all useful in daily life," Bair says.



"It makes one detached and indifferent. That's not something you want while you have things like a job, a relationship, children, a mortgage."

The Bairs outline their HRM method in their book *Energize Your Heart In 4 Dimensions* (Living Heart Media). The title is a reference not to the two ventricles and two atria of the physical heart, but to the organ's spiritual height, depth and width, forward dimension and inner dimension, all of which the Bairs say suggest emotional attributes and behavior. A full heart, for example, is brimming with "quiet" self-confidence and a sense of freedom. The ultimate goal is to energize your heart as an integrated physical, emotional and spiritual whole.

Hearts become damaged, Bair says, when those dimensions are askew. "Things aren't fair, things aren't

the way they ought to be, and that sort of saps our idealism," he says. "The forward dimension gets blocked by failure. Wounding and rejection causes the width of the heart to shrink; one pulls back." (A heart can also become metaphorically shallow, crushed or hollow.) "The best protection for the heart is to send its energy out," Bair says, "to have more of an influence on the world than the world has on you."

An appendix of what the Bairs term "exercises of life" includes a list of pragmatic practices to encourage that kind of positive living. One says, "Take the worst part of something and transform it so it becomes the best part, whether you are renovating your business, home or personality." Another simply advises, "Do not spare yourself in the work which you must accomplish."

Rock Steady

Synchronizing a meditative breathing pattern with your heartbeat acting as a natural timer will make your breathing more stable and regular than ever, the Bairs assert. One meditation encourages that you start with a basic count of six heartbeats: Breathe out for six, in for six and then hold your breath for 12 beats. Adopt an 8-8-16 count if that seems too short, 4-4-8 if too long.

One tip the Bairs offer in case your breathing overwhelms the sensation of your heartbeat: Try breathing in short puffs between heartbeats; during the small pause after each puff, you should be able to feel your heartbeat.

Dr. Katharine Burleson, a Minneapolis cardiologist who endorses HRM, says she knows of no data to show that the meditation has an impact on cardiovascular function—which is why her testimonial on the Bairs' book cover refers to the "spiritual" heart, not the physical one. But she says the HRM method has some apparent physiological benefits.

"The goal, which is very valid physiologically, is that if you start synchronizing the breathing rhythm with the heartbeat rhythm, you put the body in a very efficient energy utilization state. All of a sudden you're very aware of two very important processes to life," explains Burleson, a former assistant professor of medicine at the University of New Mexico. "When you become aware, your breath rate naturally slows because you're breathing deeper and you don't have to breathe as often. That's some of the physiology behind it."

HRM also has a fan in Howard Glasser, who developed the Nurtured Heart Approach, a system that rewards positive behavior in challenging children. Glasser, executive director of the Children's Success Foundation in Tucson, says he feels more refreshed after meditating with HRM and would recommend the meditation to children.

"It's like a magic link that felt like it's given me access to another level of knowing," says Glasser, "another level of freedom, another level of energy."

—Allan Richter and Lisa James

For more information on Heart Rhythm Meditation, and to learn more about the Institute for Applied Meditation, visit www.EnergizeYourHeart.com or call 888-310-7881.