

De-Stress With Dr. Bauer

According to the International SPA Association's 2006 Spa-goer Study, the No. 1 reason people go to spas is to reduce stress. To help us put a face on stress and how to handle it, we talked with Dr. Brent Bauer, the director of the Complementary and Integrative Medicine Program at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn.

Stress is as common as breathing these days. How do you know when your stress level has exceeded maximum capacity?

Dr. Bauer: It's amazing how ubiquitous stress is. Some people can take on the world. Others have a house plant that dies and they're in a tizzy. We're all different. But what you want to do is look at the clues: you're not sleeping, you're not feeling refreshed in the morning, you're snapping at your co-workers. Stop and look at your daily life.

There is a lot of talk about complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) to help with stress. What exactly is it?

Dr. Bauer: Skip CAM, that's a medical term. For the layperson, think of it as pillars. One is nutrition, another is exercise and the third is stress management. They become part of your lifestyle.

Will my doctor be receptive to talking about alternative therapies, or will they laugh at me?

Dr. Bauer: Ten years ago, it was a little difficult sell. Now almost every medical school has courses to learn about yoga, meditation and acupuncture. Mainstream medicine is looking at these as ways to manage stress. Most people have gotten away from the pill idea and instead are looking at things that are self-empowering. There is enough medical evidence to show that these things work. A study we did with post-op heart patients showed that the less stressed they were, the faster they were going to heal – five to 10 days faster wound healing.

Besides, um, permanent expiration, what are some real-life examples of what stress can do to your health?

Dr. Bauer: Stress has a lot of effect on the body. It can raise your blood pressure, it increases the thickness of your blood (i.e., clots, heart attack). It reduces your immune function, making you more susceptible to the common cold. So you get a flu shot, but you don't get the bang for your buck if you're under stress. And yes, stress can kill you.

Ouch. But on the up side, there are a lot of ways spas can help reduce stress, right?

Dr. Bauer: The cool thing is there is quite a bit you can learn at a spa and then take it home. Meditation – when you slow your breathing, your autonomic nervous system (which plays a role in our "fight or flight" response and also allows us to rest) slows down and you get a great relaxation response. Also, acupuncture and massage have huge benefits for dealing with stress. Guided imagery is another, and it's inexpensive to do. You're out 10 bucks if it doesn't work for you. It's another tool for your toolkit. Not that any one of these is the right answer. The right answer is to find out what fits for you and incorporate it on a regular basis.