I N N E R  L I F E

Drinking in it, soaking in it, listening to its music…water can soothe in all its forms

Ah, water . . . Sometimes just the thought of it can sweep us along in a current of happy memories, leaving stress on a distant shore. But that relaxed feeling is not just due to pleasant images of sunny childhood afternoons playing in sprinklers or of breezy family vacations at the beach. Recent scientific studies show that the stress-relieving, mood-improving, tension-reducing power of good old H₂O also has to do with the way it affects body chemistry and neurology. Whatever the method, water works wonders—so dive in and de-stress!

SOAK IN IT
You already knew a bath helps you unwind. Now there’s proof: Dr. Becker recently studied the effect immersion in varying temperatures of water—cool, neutral and warm—has on healthy adults. After about 24 minutes, the central nervous system patterns of some of the subjects in warm water were essentially identical to those of people who are relaxed and focused, says Dr. Becker. “Other studies have found that it decreases depression and anxiety,” he adds. The way it works is a matter of speculation. It may be that buoyancy plays a role, or that warm water gives us the same sensation we experienced while floating in the womb. Whatever the reason, a relaxing bath—even just a footbath—can also improve your sleep, which may in turn lead to more energy and less stress. A 1999 study in the Journal of Physiological Anthropology found that women who took either a 20-minute bath or soaked their legs up to their knees in hot water for 30 minutes were able to fall asleep more quickly and had better-quality sleep compared with those who did neither. “I wish women would stop thinking of baths as a luxury and instead make them an essential part of their lifestyle to alleviate stress and reenergize,” says Kathleen Hall, Ph.D., founder and CEO of the Stress Institute, in Atlanta.

DRINK IT
Though you may not need to down a full eight glasses a day, too little water can have negative effects on your body and mood, resulting in more stress. “Once you start to feel thirsty, you’re already somewhat dehydrated,” says Debra Board-, ley, Ph.D., R.D., a professor of public health at the University College of Medicine. “And we know from research that if you’re even mildly dehydrated, you’ll feel more tired and drained and less able to concentrate.” A 2001 study found that mild water restriction (10 fluids or food from midnight to 11 a.m.) had a negative effect on self-measured alertness. Another study found that after just 15 hours without water—think one long, sleepless day—the subjects reported decreased concentration and alertness as well as more headaches. Your weight and activity level, the air temperature and humidity all affect fluid needs and some people simply take longer to dehydrate than others. Dr. Boardley says some general tips to avoid dehydration include drinking a glass of water with each meal, staying well hydrated before and after exercise.

SPASH IT
Wish there was such a thing as antistress spray? Set thee to a waterfall. The air at the bottom of waterfalls contains a significantly higher amount of negative ions, electron-packet molecules that have been shown to have an antidepressant effect. A 2006 study done at Wesleyan University found exposure to negative ions alleviated depression within 15 to 30 minutes. Although, Mami Goel, Ph.D., a psychiatry professor at the University of Pennsylvania, thinks one possibility is that negative ions increase the amount and activity of serotonin (a chemical that regulates mood) in the brain. No time to venture out into nature? The next time you’re near splashing water, stop, relax and breathe in deeply. Or try simply taking a shower. Researchers at the University of Huntsville (Alabama) found that just a five-minute warm shower led to a significant anxiety reduction in study participants.

LISTEN TO IT
Another group of patients received the same care but no ocean sounds. The ocean group subsequently reported better quality of sleep, fewer awakenings and deeper sleep overall. The steady rhythm of breaking waves or the ever roar of running water may be why it’s so soothing. Our brains respond positively to repetitive sounds, according to David Swanson, Psy.D., a clinical psychologist in Los Angeles. For example, “if you’re at the beach, the waves come in sets and have a consistent rhythm, so it’s relaxing,” Dr. Swanson adds. For instant indoor stress relief, by listening to a CD of natural ocean sounds or a tabletop fountain.

by Abigail Cuffey & Judy Kirkwood

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