



Stress is an insidious thing. Like many people, I didn't think I was stressed. My days were pretty standard: a blur of meetings and mania, punctuated with spurts of fevered typing and teeth-gnashing, then somehow I'd find myself standing in the supermarket staring at the vegetables, wondering how I got there. (Did I just drive?) I would take hours to fall asleep (despite a medicinal dose of merlot) only to wake at 5am, my mind whirring as I filled the notebook next to my bed with unintelligible scrawlings. After my neck packed it in for the fourth time in as many months and left me in a fetching neck brace for a week (not a good look in the *Vogue* office), I wondered if it might be worth addressing the cause, not the symptom, and learn how to chill the hell out.

I kept hearing about a meditation teacher, Gary Gorrow, from various friends who had done his course. Gorrow, who is a favourite of Sydney's most Zenned-out type-As and A-listers including models Gemma Ward and Nicole Trunfio, teaches a style called Vedic or Transcendental Meditation (TM). Although it is said to have originated more than 5,000 years ago in India, the style gained popularity in the 1960s when Maharishi Mahesh Yogi introduced the technique to the Western world and gathered a devoted and decidedly hip following, including The Beatles, Mick Jagger and Mia Farrow. Fast-forward 50 years and TM is still one of the most popular forms of meditation in the world.

Why this style of meditation and not others? As Gorrow explains when I attend his free introductory talk in Paddington, Sydney (he also teaches in Avalon on Sydney's northern beaches), Vedic meditation is not only completely effortless and very easy to learn, but the psychological and physical health benefits are also endless.

"Neuroscientists and psychologists estimate we have in the realm of 60,000 to 80,000 thoughts per day. That's a thought every 1.2 seconds. So our minds are very busy, and we've all lost that ability to find an off switch ... [Vedic meditation] causes your mind to transcend or to go into a deeper level of consciousness," says Gorrow, who explains that this not only eliminates stress but that people who meditate also find they are more creative and productive in daily life. Vedic is also claimed by its proponents to be one of the most scientifically studied forms of meditation. "There have been more than 600 studies conducted during the past 30 years [that] demonstrate its ability to create powerful, measurable changes in the physiology, and it has been found to be more effective than other meditation and ►

ZEN AGAIN

Transcendental meditation is gaining momentum as models, actors and entrepreneurs flock to classes to receive their mantra. Sigourney Cantelo signs up to find out what all the fuss is about.



Mia Farrow, pictured here with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, became a fan of meditation in the 1960s.

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relaxation techniques in promoting mental and physical wellbeing,” Gorrow claims.

Okay, I decide, I’ve heard enough already. Where do I sign?

A week later, the course begins. It is held over four consecutive nights (one private session and three in a group). The \$1,000 fee is admittedly hefty but, judging by Gorrow’s popularity, it seems there is no shortage of well-heeled professionals willing to pay for enlightenment. For my one-on-one session, Gorrow asks me to bring three pieces of fruit and three flowers. Okay, I think, so far, so hippie. We head into the hushed room and he quietly explains that he will first conduct a ceremony of thanks to the fathers of Vedic meditation. We then approach a small shrine, Gorrow places my fruit and flowers at the altar, lights up some incense and sings a short song in Sanskrit. Then we sit back down and he gives me my mantra.

“The literal meaning of the word is *man* for mind, and *tra* for vehicle,” says Gorrow. “So it’s really a medium that allows the mind to go beyond perpetual and incessant thinking, into a deeper domain.”

The mantra is a nonsensical word, a sort of onomatopoeic sound that is deliberately designed so your mind can’t attach any meaning to it. I can’t tell you what mine is, because, apparently, to maintain its sacredness (and ability to make you transcend), it must not be spoken or written. Each person’s mantra is different and is

chosen by the teacher according to a specific set of guidelines (which aren’t revealed to me). We sit down and Gorrow quietly explains the technique, which basically involves repeating your mantra softly in your mind, without effort and in no particular rhythm. He explains that it’s okay if thoughts come up; you simply gently return to the mantra and gradually your mind will “transcend” layers of awareness until you are resting in a deep meditative state, which is said to be five times deeper than sleep. Now, lights-out time.

I sit comfortably in my armchair and close my eyes. At first it’s the usual mental cauldron as thoughts from the day bubble up but, gradually, as I return to the mantra I realise there are just a couple of brief moments when ... *Hey, I’m not having any thoughts at all ... but wait ... that’s a thought in itself, isn’t it?* When Gorrow whispers for me to come out 20 minutes later I tell him that I do feel relaxed, but I was constantly thinking about not thinking. He explains that some thoughts are quite normal and only to be expected, that it’s just stress leaving the body and that every meditation will be different. Once you let go of all your expectations of what it should be, the process gets a whole lot easier.

The next night I head along to the group class. As 6 o’clock strikes, we take our shoes off and head upstairs to a cosy carpeted room furnished with a circle of chairs. Tonight there are no fruit or flowers, but the room smells faintly of incense. Ten of the 20 people who came to the introductory talk have signed up and the group is diverse: there’s a strung-out executive who looks like he plays as hard as he works, a big, burly guy with tattoos and a handlebar moustache, a gentle, holistically minded mother-and-daughter duo and a group of creative girls from an interior design firm (their company is paying to put them through the course).

Vedic meditation is supposed to be practised for 20 minutes twice a day, once in the morning, to prepare for the day ahead and clear the slate, and once in the afternoon or evening, to rid the body of the stress of the day and rejuvenate. During the course, we do our morning practice by ourselves, meet up, discuss obstacles and hone the technique, then do a second one in the evening with Gorrow to guide us.

By the end of day four I’m a bona fide, fully fledged meditator. I can’t believe I can actually close my eyes for 40 minutes a day without spontaneously combusting. I used to have trouble with 10 minutes at the end of a yoga class.

Each day I get up half an hour earlier and Zen out on the couch before breakfast when I’m already dressed for work, so I can just eat and run. The second one is harder to fit in but instead of going for my usual skim latte and Boost Bar run at 3pm, I go and sit in my car and do a quick 20 minutes, or if I can’t get out I’ll do it just before cooking dinner at night. It’s too energising to do just before bed, although ultimately it does help me sleep. I’m out as soon as my head hits the pillow (*sans vino*) and then miraculously wake up a few minutes before my alarm.

Some days my meditations are full of thoughts and I spend the whole time doggedly going back to the mantra. But other days, when I actually nail it, it feels amazing. I realise I am hanging out in a kind of limbo between my thoughts and not really thinking at all. My hands go numb and warm and when I come out I feel refreshed, as though I’ve just woken up from a long, indulgent sleep. And I feel more content. During the day I experience moments of pure happiness when I notice something beautiful. My husband says I’m being nicer (and it has nothing to do with buying shoes). And then there’s the calm. My days aren’t so manic. I’m actually aware of driving to the supermarket, and when I arrive there’s a lot less confusion around the vegetables. Now, if that’s Zen, I’ll take it.

For details of Transcendental Meditation teachers around Australia, visit tm.org.au or call 1300 886 397. For details on Gary Gorrow’s course, visit www.garygorrow.com.

CHILL-OUT CHOICES

Get in the zone for Zen with these ideas for creating a relaxing, comfortable setting.



Archipelago Botanicals Lilac Home soy candle, \$53, from Kit Cosmetics.

Adidas by Stella McCartney yoga mat, \$100.

Linari Estate reed diffuser, \$159, from Saison.