



## Policy & Practice

### Wellness

#### To Help Employees Focus and Relieve Stress, World Bank Brings Meditation to the Office

Deep breathing, focusing the restless mind, disengaging from fruitless conflict are the hallmarks of meditation practices that some employers are bringing into the workplace to reduce employee stress and raise productivity.

The World Bank, with 10,000 employees in its Washington, D.C., headquarters plus another 4,000 worldwide and 4,000 at the affiliated International Monetary Fund, has been offering meditation classes at its world headquarters for a year now.

"I'm always of the opinion to give things a try and if they don't work, get rid of them," Cherilynn Bennett, manager, health promotion & communications, Joint Bank/Fund Health Services Department, World Bank Group, told BNA Jan. 30.

Meditation classes were definitely a keeper, she said, as they not only jibed with the bank's international culture, but also fit perfectly into its 15-year commitment to health promotion.

World Bank decided to implement meditation programs in February 2005, using Visit Yourself at Work, a Washington, D.C.-based meditation instruction company, as the vendor. World Bank first offered a one-time, one-hour introductory class that included a 20-minute meditation exercise as well as a lecture on meditation. Within two days, 80 employees had registered and Bennett had to double the number of classes to accommodate the interest.

Now Visit Yourself at Work offers meditation classes at World Bank every week: two "continuing practitioner" classes have 15-20 employees each, while five beginner classes feature from 20-40 employees, Bennett said. The classes—like all the World Bank's health promotion services—are not subsidized, but the employer provides the space free of charge and handles registration. World Bank employees pay \$75 for a session of five 45-minute classes.

"This is a high-stress institution," not only because of the nature of the work itself but also because both the World Bank and the IMF are downsizing, Bennett said. "We are here to take care of the staff."

Of the employees who take the meditation classes, 98 percent say they do it to relieve stress. They say they "need something to calm them down during the day other than ... going to the [onsite] gym," Bennett explained.

She said the benefits of meditation are not always quantifiable and are aimed at helping employees "cope, not just in the workplace," but also with their lives outside of the office.

For the employer, the gains are a happier, more focused workforce, Bennett said. "Multi-tasking is not necessarily productive," she said. Meditation helps employees "center themselves and focus on their task at hand, even if that's giving your child your entire attention when you get home."

Meditation also helps employees shrug off "something petty in the workplace," and gives them the "skill to slow down and relax," she said.

Over time, research indicates that meditators experience improvements in their immune systems, resilience to difficult experiences, and a greater ability to cope with stress, Klia Bassing, founder of Visit Yourself at Work, told BNA Jan. 29. Neuroscientists also note meditation causes higher mental activity, heightened awareness, and changes in brain activity that correlate to increased happiness and positive thinking, she said.

Bassing has about 13 employer clients with 400 individual employees taking classes in the Washington, D.C., area.

Among the benefits of meditation, according to Bassing, are: stress reduction; loosening muscle tension; learning to be "in the moment" and to manage thoughts, feelings and emotions; learning to pause; and helping individuals get along better with their families.


By raising awareness of the natural world, meditators develop "the ability to pause before the response," Bassing said. This is one technique that is powerful in defusing office interpersonal conflicts, she said.

For employers, the return on an investment in offering meditation to employees includes lowered health care costs, increased productivity, and improved retention of happier employees, Bassing said.

### **Program Appeals to Executives**

The hard-driving Washington, D.C., culture makes meditation instruction both a challenge and an opportunity for achieving profound change, Bassing said.

Perhaps for this reason, Bennett said the meditation classes attract more high-level executives and managers than any wellness offering the World Bank has provided in the 10 years she has been managing the program.

Bassing said she strives to instill patterns of relaxation and focus in employees and suggests the participants "see how effortlessly they can move through the day." As one client told her, after learning to meditate, "the idiots on the road are the same but they don't seem to bother me anymore." 

*By Lyda Phillips*

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