

How to overcome stress with meditation

'Stress is the body's natural reaction to a potentially dangerous situation and if we remain in a stressful state, it can have a corrosive effect on both body and mind,' says Tammy Parlour (pictured), who has been practising meditation for 24 years and teaches it at her martial arts school, Chang's Hapkido Academy.

'As well as affecting how we think, it raises cortisol levels within the body, increases heart rate and can compromise the immune system,' says Parlour. 'Meditation can counteract the stress response by slowing heart rate, improving oxygen consumption, rebalancing hormones, settling the mind and boosting energy levels.'

According to Parlour, martial artists traditionally practised meditation techniques as part of their daily training, as a way of overcoming the fears and anxieties they might experience in battle.

'Though we may never be confronted by a physical attack, the majority of us are regularly struck down by fear, stress and anxiety,' she says. 'Simply sitting quietly by yourself and bringing your attention to your breath can help you find

stillness within and cope better with the turbulence outside.

'Focusing on your breathing will bring you into the present moment, where you can better regain a sense of perspective on troubling situations. Fast-paced, demanding lifestyles can benefit from taking the time to stop and recalibrate that meditation practice offers.'

'Our body is a reflection of our mind and when the mind truly relaxes at a deep level, the body follows.'

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Body Matters

Edited by Vicki-Marie Cossar and James Day

Suffering in silence isn't the answer

Profound fatigue, relentless diarrhoea, weight loss and pain. Not something you'd bring up in conversation with your mates but these are the symptoms of Crohn's disease – something that affects almost a quarter of a million people in Britain.

Not to be confused with irritable bowel syndrome, inflammatory bowel disease is a chronic inflammatory condition that affects the gut. 'There are two main types of IBDs,' explains Dr Jeremy Sanderson, consultant gastroenterologist for Guy's Hospital in London. 'Crohn's disease, which is the more malevolent version, can affect any part of the digestive system from the mouth to the anus. It's like having mouth ulcers all along the gut and all the layers of the lining of the bowel can be inflamed. Then there's ulcerative colitis, which isn't as severe and only affects the colon [the large bowel].'

Most likely to be diagnosed between the ages of 16 and 29, Crohn's is a disease which hits youngsters just when they are starting out in life and can leave them with huge physical and emotional scars.

'When you have Crohn's, there's a massive quality of life impairment that comes with it,' says Sanderson. 'Partly because it's young professional people who are affected and the last thing they want is to lose faith in their bowels.'

Suzi Clark from Crohn's and Colitis UK says there's a really high level of ignorance about the disease. 'People don't like to talk about diarrhoea,' she says, 'but we know Crohn's affects both men and women and it's more prevalent in Scotland.'

According to Sanderson, Crohn's is partly genetic and partly environmental. 'Some people are genetically predisposed to get it and a lot of our research is looking into what genes might promote the disease – the current theory being it's something about the way the gut handles bacteria,' he says. 'However, there are also environmental factors such as smoking, which we know worsens Crohn's but is, strangely, somewhat protective against colitis. Diet is another and we know stress plays a role in flare-ups. There must also be environmental factors that indicate why Crohn's is more common in certain areas.'

Sanderson goes on to say that Crohn's is very much a western disease. 'We didn't have it in the country

Inflammatory bowel disease:
The condition affects almost a quarter of a million people in Britain and is most common in young professionals

BY VICKI-MARIE COSSAR

pre-industrialisation,' he says. 'If you go to the Asian subcontinent, these conditions are very rare.'

He thinks it's because, as westerners, we are ridiculously clean. 'In developing countries, you still have lots of infectious diseases of the gut,' says Sanderson. 'Someone exposed to gut infection at a young age develops an appropriate response and a tolerant balanced immune system. Minimising this exposure leaves the gut less able to respond properly. If you add in antibiotics and genetics, then you can see why someone is predestined to get it.'

The only way to diagnose an IBD is by a colonoscopy and, once detected, there is no cure. Medication and surgery can control it but, ultimately, it's a long and painful process of having to deal with it.

To look at Rick Parfitt Jnr (pictured), son of rock legend Rick Parfitt of Status Quo, you'd never think he was diagnosed with Crohn's at the age of nine. 'My Crohn's came on during a time when my mum and dad were splitting up and I think that was possibly a contributing factor, as my stress levels were really high,' says Parfitt Jnr. 'Crohn's was in its infancy back then and no one really knew what it was so, like many others, I was misdiagnosed many times.'

The external symptoms of Crohn's can be anything from swollen joints to dramatic weight loss. 'People are diagnosed with everything from arthritis to eating disorders, when in fact the problem is IBD,' says Clark. 'We believe GPs only have half a day's training on IBD and the fact the range of symptoms can vary with individuals means it's quite a complex disease to diagnose.'

Crohn's eats away at the intestinal wall, which then scars and closes, leaving the sufferer in a lot of pain. The only way round it is invasive surgery to cut out the bad bits. Parfitt Jnr has had three major operations, each time to remove part of his intestine. 'Between 50 and 70 per cent of patients with Crohn's disease will

