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Meditation Benefits Abound for Schoolchildren, Study Finds



A Medical College of Georgia pilot study using meditation to help lower blood pressure in teens was so successful that the project has been extended to five high schools and a middle school.

Dr. Vernon Barnes, a physiologist at the Georgia Prevention Institute with over 30 years of experience in teaching and applying meditation techniques,

conducted the pilot five years ago, teaching meditation to students with high-normal blood pressure at a Richmond County high school.

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The results, published in a 1999 edition of Psychosomatic Medicine, cited lower blood pressure and other improvements among participants. The success spurred the GPI to expand the project to include 156 high school students and 80 middle school students in Richmond County. The study is funded by the American Heart Association and the National Institutes of Health.

For the expanded study, all students in the six participating schools were tested for high-normal blood pressure. Half of those with the condition--a leading risk factor for hypertension--were invited to join in daily 10- to 15-minute meditation classes. The other half, a control group, received health education to lower blood pressure but no meditation training. The students who received meditation training also were instructed to meditate at home each evening.

"Blood pressure typically goes up with age, and the blood pressure of the control group did go up," Dr. Barnes said. "The blood pressure of the meditation group went down."

The blood pressure was tested during both normal conditions and stressful conditions, such as a virtual-reality driving simulation and a stressful interview. The improvements of the meditation group held up in all conditions, Dr. Barnes said. Also tested were other indicators of cardiac health, such as the volume of blood pumped from the heart with every beat.

Although the results were dramatic, Dr. Barnes insists that meditation is anything but complicated. "It's a very simple, natural technique," he said of the mind-quieting process in which students sit quietly with their eyes closed. "Meditation gives you a chance to get to know yourself better on a very deep level. The students seem to take to it like ducks to water; it's a welcome break, and they see the benefits."

As was true of the pilot project, Dr. Barnes found that the benefits seeped into virtually every area of the participants' lives. "Meditation seems to improve the students' concentration at school," he said. "The ability to sharpen the mind is built into the technique. We have noticed that absenteeism and tardiness have decreased, and the meditation participants displayed fewer behavior problems."

The students cited anecdotal benefits such as better grades, improved interpersonal relationships, more restful sleep and headache relief. They mentioned the meditation techniques helped calm them during stressful times and increased their energy levels overall.

"I've been getting better grades," one participant wrote. "I feel more

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confident about myself. I feel great.”

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Another wrote, “I’ve noticed that I am doing way better in my school work. I also have noticed that ... I am way calmer and more peaceful with my sister. I like school now that I can relax more.”

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The meditation study is one of many initiatives within the Georgia Prevention Institute targeting childhood risk factors for leading causes of death in the Southeast including hypertension, coronary heart disease and type 2 diabetes.

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Please email comments, suggestions or questions to:

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