

WEDNESDAY 25 JANUARY 2012 **BusinessDay**

Health News

PSYCHOLOGY

See the real world

more clearly

Mindfulness is an international buzzword in health. If it isn't at the top of your new year's resolutions list — or didn't even make it on your list — you might want to put it there, writes Marika Sboros

ARE your stress levels rising? Do you feel as if the pace of life is growing ever more hectic and chaotic as the first month of 2012 draws to a close? A dose of mindfulness can help.

Mindfulness is an international buzzword in health. If it isn't at the top of your new year's resolutions list — or didn't even make it on your list— you might want to put it there.

Mindfulness is more than just a nice idea, a clever technique or yet another self-help fad. It is a powerful mental practice that is thousands of years old. It is steeped in Eastern traditional healing systems, and is slowly but surely seeping into the practice of modern medicine.

Medical specialists who prescribe it, say it is a simple, effective tool that you can incorporate into daily life easily. It has a growing body of modern scientific, medical research over more than 30 years to back up claims for its benefits.

Research shows mindfulness can bring long-term changes in mood and levels of happiness and wellbeing. It can prevent depression, affect brain patterns underlying day-to-day anxiety, stress and irritability positively, and

Dr Mark Williams, Dr John Teasdale, a research scientist the cognition and brain sciences unit at Cambridge University, and Canadian Dr Zindel Segal, professor in the departments of psychiatry and psychology at the University of Toronto.

It is proving helpful for anyone struggling to keep up with the demands and speed of modern living and working.

If you are one of those, then dip into the pages of Williams's new book, *Mindfulness, A Practical Guide To Finding Peace In A Frantic World* (Piatkus), co-written by UK feature writer and biochemist Dr Danny Penman.

The book's foreword is by Dr Jon Kabat-Zinn, a US molecular biologist and emeritus professor of medicine at the University of Massachusetts Medical School and a pioneer of mindfulness in health and healing.

Kabat-Zinn is founding executive director of the university's Centre for Mindfulness in Medicine, Healthcare, and Society, and founding director of its renowned Stress Reduction Clinic. The clinic serves as a model for mindfulness-based clinical intervention programmes at more than 200 medical centres and clinics



reduce the key indicators of chronic stress, including hypertension (high blood pressure).

Other research shows that regular meditators make fewer visits to doctors and spend fewer days in hospital. Mindfulness meditation also improves memory, creative and reaction times.

Still, although there are scientifically proven benefits, like many people, you may be wary of the word meditation.

Mindfulness is often spoken of as being at the heart of Buddhist meditation, which is true. However, it is not a religion; you don't have to be an ascetic, live in a cave, and contemplate your navel to practise it and derive benefits.

The essence of mindfulness — attention to the present moment — is universal and ancient. It lies at the heart of a very modern psychological aid: mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT). MBCT was developed by Oxford University clinical psychology professor

across the US and globally.

Kabat-Zinn teaches mindfulness and mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) in venues around the world. He is author of scientific papers on the clinical applications of mindfulness in medicine and healthcare and books for the lay reader, among them *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body*

 Learn to recognise and observe negative thoughts, and then simply watch them disappear

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT: Take a break from unconscious habits of thin-

and Mind to Face Stress, Pain and Illness (Delta).

He has trained groups of CEOs, judges, members of the clergy and Olympic athletes (the 1984 US Olympic men's rowing team) and US congressional staff in mindfulness.

In the foreword, Kabat-Zinn says mindfulness is "profoundly nurturing and life-transforming for those who undertake it", and can be "worldtransforming".

It requires a degree of "stick-to-it-ness and discipline", he says, while at the same time "being playful and bringing to each moment ... a certain ease and lightness of touch — a gesture of kindness and self-compassion, really".

It is very important to have good guidance along this path, Kabat-Zinn says, "for the stakes are actually quite high".

He recommends that you put

yourself in the experienced hands of Williams and Penman, and give yourself over to their guidance in the programme they map out.

He describes the programme as a coherent structure — "an architecture within which you can observe your own mind and body and life unfolding and a systematic and trustworthy approach for working with whatever arises".

It is a form of architecture you can trust, Kabat-Zinn says, as it is "strongly evidence-based, arising out of the curricula of mindfulness-based stress reduction and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, fashioned into a compelling and commonsensical eight-week programme for anyone caring about his or her own health and sanity, especially in this increasingly fast-paced frantic world".

That all sounds well and good — and vague and amorphous.

But just what does the programme consist of?

Well, for starters, it revolves around a simple form of meditation that was little known in the West until recently. It involves focusing attention on the breath as it flows in and out of the body, then “staying in touch with the different sensations of each in-breath and out-breath”.

That might sound simple enough, but that’s not the same thing as saying it’s especially easy. It can be very hard to keep the attention where it is supposed to be. That’s where the training and practice come.

For a foundation, Williams takes you through the basics of how the mind works, and how it can easily and quickly draw you into bouts of unhappiness, stress and irritability.

Part of mindfulness training,

he says, is learning to recognise memories and damaging thoughts as they arise, and to remember that they are just that — memories.

He describes them as “like propaganda”: “They are not real. They are not you.”

Learning to recognise and observe negative thoughts as they arise, letting them stay a while, then simply watching them disappear creates the conditions under which an “extraordinary thing can happen”, Williams says: “A profound sense of happiness and peace fills the void.”

Mindfulness meditation harnesses an alternative way in which the mind can relate to the world, he says. It is not about opting out of the real world and all the challenges it presents.

Mindfulness does not negate your brain’s natural desire to solve



You don’t have to be an

ascetic, live in a cave, or contemplate your navel to practise it and derive benefits

problems. It just gives “the time and space to choose the best ways of solving them”.

Mindfulness operates on two levels, Williams says. First and most important is the core meditation programme, a series of simple daily meditations lasting from three to 30 minutes that you can do almost anywhere, though

he advises that it may be most helpful to do them in a quiet spot at home.

The programme also encourages taking breaks from unconscious habits of thinking and behaving that “stop you from living life to the full”.

For those with a still skeptical bent, two chapters cover in detail the wealth of scientific research underpinning MBCT and its benefits. You can bypass those for later reading, and get straight to the nitty-gritty of the programme.

Meditation is not complicated, says Williams. It is not about success or failure.

It is definitely not about “accepting the unacceptable”.

It is simply about “seeing the world with greater clarity, so you can take wiser and more considered action to change those things which need to be changed”.