

## More Area Firms Paying Employees to Relax

Yoga, Meditation Seen As Health Care Boons

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Having a company softball team used to be a good way to get employees to blow off steam and to build morale. But today, companies are just as likely to encourage workers to hit a yoga mat as they are the outfield.

In Silver Spring, for instance, employees of Discovery Communications Inc. can enroll in a 10-week yoga class taught by instructors from Takoma Park-based Willow Street Yoga. Discovery reimburses employees for part of the cost of the class. The company also offers massage therapy on site.

Over at the Tower Cos. in Bethesda, anyone who has been on the job at least three months can walk over to the Maharishi Peace Palace two blocks away for a four-day course on meditation. The classes are gratis, courtesy of Tower. Employees can even go on company time.

Discovery and Tower are just two of the growing number of businesses, nonprofit groups and government agencies in the Washington region that offer employees free or subsidized tools to relieve stress, boost productivity and control health care costs.

"Discovery's goal is to create programs that encourage our employees to maintain physical, emotional and mental wellness, ultimately resulting in lower health care costs," said spokesman Michelle Russo.

Four years ago, when yoga teacher Karin Wiedemann founded Urban Yoga Studio in Washington to bring the benefits of yoga to corporate offices, she had a staff of one -- herself. And she said that although companies were intrigued by the idea of offering yoga, they often would not take the next step and commit to hiring her.

By contrast, today, Wiedemann contracts with five yoga instructors who teach employees at several corporate and business clients, including the Washington office of the law firm Piper Rudnick, the National Park Service and the Service Employees International Union.

Her phone is ringing more, too; Wiedemann said she receives about five calls a month from prospective clients. Would-be clients are also increasingly savvy consumers, asking questions such as whether her teachers are insured and where they received their training. She charges \$200 an hour for her services.

"Yoga is more popular as a way to reduce stress. The stereotype of who does yoga has really changed a lot," Wiedemann said.

The wellness trend may be entering the mainstream in Washington, but it is nothing new in New York or San Francisco.

For example, women's clothing maker Eileen Fisher Inc. in Irvington, N.Y., began offering employees "wellness accounts" several years ago. Each of the roughly 500 employees who work there is given up to \$1,000 toward massages, yoga, reflexology and other calming activities. Practitioners are sometimes brought on site to lead classes or provide services on company time.

Studies of similar wellness programs at corporations have shown that they can help curb health care costs. In 2002, the Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine published a report that found that a wellness program at Coors Brewing Co. produced a return of \$6.15 for every dollar invested over a six-year period. The same report found that office furniture maker Steelcase Inc. received a return of \$5.80 for every dollar it spent on its wellness program over five years. Equitable Life Insurance reaped a \$5.52 return, and Travelers Corp., now part of Citigroup Inc., got a \$3.40 return for each dollar they invested over their first year.

Ian Mitroff, a professor of business policy at the University of Southern California, said part of the popularity of meditation and yoga may be their link to a deeper desire for spirituality. "Yoga and meditation are not just stress relief. They have a spiritual aspect. People spend the majority of their waking hours at work. They're looking for meaning and purpose," he said.

Tower Cos., which has built a reputation for developing "green" office buildings with recycled materials, was ahead of the wellness curve. Twelve years ago, it began offering free meditation classes to employees in its headquarters if they promised to meditate twice a day. One of the real estate developer's owners, Jeffrey Abramson, a longtime practitioner of transcendental meditation, added meditation classes to the company's health benefits list because he thought it was a good way to contain stress-related ailments and health care costs.

"The missing key to any health care system is prevention," he said.

About two years ago, Tower began offering meditation to employees in its office properties as well.

Abramson said his company has no figures on the impact teaching his employees meditation has had on his company's health care bills because it lacks enough employees for a statistically significant sample size, he said.

"It's hard to quantify someone who is 50 years old, what effect meditation has had, as opposed to the first 50 years of their life," he said. "I can't say we have less heart attacks. We've never had them."

Abramson says he can tell the difference between his employees who meditate and those who do not. "They seem brighter, fresher," he said. "People need tools to enable them to become more successful without negative ramifications. The old model was you work until you drop -- that was how you prove your worth. When you look at Americans, so many of them have hypertension. Our physiologies are not designed to operate at a very stressful level."