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The perfect antidote to the desire economy

Complementary therapies are popular, but are they good value, asks Nick Kettles

27 March 2004

In a desire to equate the latest must-have with enlightened living, yoga has recently been used by advertisers to sell clothes, cereal and cars. Richard Hammond, at London advertising agency Spirit, says: "Well-being is one of the mega-trends in the high street now."

According to Virgin Money, UK women spend an estimated £670m a year on yoga and other holistic therapies and products; media reports put that figure at well over £1bn. Michael Fox, CEO of the Prince of Wales Foundation for Integrated Health (PWFH), says: "You can't ignore the complementary sector, it's not a cottage industry anymore."

But is the appetite for alternative therapies simply fuelled by the "status anxiety" which drives so much of our consumption? The same Virgin Money research revealed one in 10 admitted taking up yoga and Pilates to copy celebrities like the actress Gwyneth Paltrow.

No men were polled to see if they had taken up yoga to be like Sting; but Mudimo Okondo, 41, who spends about £1,000 a year on seminars and courses, says his motivation is more sincere: "In the past material things were an end in themselves, but today I only consume what I need to fulfil my well-being. I frame success more in terms of my interpersonal relationships."

Gerd Lange, director of the Institute for Integrative Breath Therapy (InBreath), says motivations differ: "There is a lifestyle choice for people who are disenchanted with mainstream life. Some want to make professional life easier and others want new inspiration."

Teresa Hale, founder of London's Hale Clinic says: "People are realising that, while it's good to have material security, it doesn't solve every problem. People in the 50-plus age group are

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often looking for rejuvenation. The young are usually working hard and want some peace."

Many are also looking for a broader approach to healthcare. The PWFH notes a consistent use of complementary medicine (CM) for a number of conditions including musculo-skeletal problems, indigestion, depression and asthma. Sheffield University research reveals more than half of GP practices provide access to CM ranging from integrated NHS provision to direct practitioner referrals.

The many therapies sheltering under the "well-being" umbrella represent an enticing pull on our disposable income. Whether you want to follow the crowd, escape it, or find a new perspective on healthcare, it is important to understand what you are buying and who from.

In 1987 the Hale Clinic offered 15 therapies; today that figure is 35. The PWFH officially record 155 different "professional" organisations. But what to choose from the smorgasboard on offer?

Among the best known are those therapies which claim to release bodily stress and restore mental clarity, such as massage, aromatherapy, reflexology, yoga, and tai-chi. And among the alternatives to conventional medicine are osteopathy, chiropractic, acupuncture, homeopathy, and herbal medicine. Then there are the more arcane healing arts such as crystal healing and chakra balancing.

Costs vary. Christine Letter, co-director of The Life Centre in Kensington, says cost should depend on the practitioner's experience: "But they should also be someone with whom you have a personal rapport. I'm happy to spend £100 a session with the right practitioner."

But finding an experienced practitioner might not be as easy as it seems. Mr Fox says: "There is huge market variability ranging between the very skilled and those who really shouldn't be practising at all." The Institute of Complementary Medicine (ICM) estimates there are 40-60,000 practitioners in the UK.

Ms Hale warns not to equate a glamorous location with a practitioner's experience. "Spas and hotels often spend a fortune on decor and less on quality of therapists."

People should also beware of practitioners passing off a range of skills, when only qualified in one: beautician courses often include aromatherapy but some provide only a few days' training in that discipline. On a more positive note some practitioners are qualified in more than one discipline. Michael Endacott, director of the ICM, says: "You may find an osteopath trained in massage, counselling and nutrition."

So having found the right therapist or teacher, how should you assess value for money? If your motivation is purely physical, any benefits should be readily identifiable.

If, however, you are seeking to resolve the latent fears that many therapists will tell you are the root cause of stress, you might need longer. Indeed, the nature of "holism" suggests physical, mental, emotional and spiritual all interconnect. Will better posture improve your self-esteem, as practitioners of the Alexander technique contest? Mr Fox suggests assessing each therapy's merits on the information available, and not being swayed by those "who have sought to caricature the sector as a whole".

More practically, Ms Letter says value should ideally mean not becoming dependent on any one practitioner: "There is a natural progression from relying on their regular support and guidance, to applying that awareness in your everyday life."

Many prefer to take a more intensive approach to improving their "well-being" through self-development courses, most embracing some form of popular psychotherapy to transform the unconscious "internal programming" blocking their lives.

Paul McKenna, the hypnotist, is currently offering a seven-day neuro-linguistic programming practitioner training course for £938. And up to 10,000 people will pay £475 upwards for the privilege of attending a series of three-day seminars in London by the motivational guru Anthony Robbins.

A more staggered approach is available from InBreath, who offer 25 residential training days over a year in small groups, for £2,500. Drawn to healing? Then Reiki should offer a gentle introduction over a weekend, from about £150.

By contrast, the benefits of meditation are ultimately reliant on the individual's willingness to practise the technique alone. A basic course in transcendental meditation will cost £1,280, which includes three months of follow-up meetings. Ascension and vipassana meditation techniques have fewer celebrity endorsements, but are cheaper and more accessible.

Desire is the motor of any economy. We desire more wealth, status, the next car. Yet, within an increasingly secular society, it seems many are recognising a desire for more equanimity in their lives. Ms Hale says: "Where people went to church 100 years ago, today they go to spas to find peace and tranquillity, and look for meditation or a spiritual teacher for something deeper."

'I became so much more productive'

Seven years ago, while working as a marketing director, Priya Hallam, began having regular massage to reduce work-related stress.

Mrs Hallam, 34, a mother and now a company director, said she noticed the effect immediately. "I became more productive and made less mistakes," she says. "But I liked it so much I started exploring other therapies to deepen the process."

After trying everything from chanting, crystal healing, and silent retreats at the Samye Ling Tibetan centre, she hit on Ascension meditation. After a month she knew it was for her: "It's given me the spiritual focus I've always been looking for. It's cultivated a great sense of peace and contentment previously missing in my life, and gets deeper the more I practice."

FACT FILE: ALTERNATIVE THERAPIES

*** OSTEOPATHY**

They say: System of treatment recognising that much pain and disability stems from functional abnormalities in the bodily structure.

Benefits claimed: Helps problems including repetitive strain injury and arthritis.

Effectiveness: The BMA recognises osteopathy as a clinical discipline.

Typical Cost: Hourly from £30-60.

Contact: General Osteopathic Council 020 7357 6655 or log on to www.osteopathy.org.uk.

*** REFLEXOLOGY**

They say: A method of treatment stimulating reflex areas found in the feet corresponding to different body parts.

Benefits claimed: Not a "cure-all" but minor disorders have been successfully treated.

Effectiveness: As long as the practitioner hits the right spot.

Typical Cost: Hourly from £20.

Contact: British Reflexology Association www.britreflex.co.uk or 01886-821207.

*** AROMATHERAPY**

They say: Systematic use of essential plant oils to improve physical and emotional well-being.

Benefits claimed: Muscular pain reduction and stress release.

Effectiveness: Improved well-being from an experienced practitioner.

Typical Cost: Hourly from £20.

Contact: Aromatherapy Consortium, 0870 7743 477,
www.aromatherapy-regulation.org.uk.

* INTEGRATED BREATH THERAPY

They say: A simple breathing technique combined with psychotherapy.

Benefits claimed: The release of bodily stress and transformation of unconscious fears and anxieties.

Cost: Individual from £50; groups from £10.

Contact: www.inbreath.info 01424-444517.

* ACUPUNCTURE

They say: Good health is dependent on "Qi" moving freely through channels beneath the skin.

Benefits claimed: Inserting fine needles into these channels stimulates the body's healing response.

Effectiveness: Set for statutory regulation.

Cost: Hourly from £25.

Contact: British Acupuncture Council www.acupuncture.org.uk or
0208 7350400.

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