

# STATE OF MIND

HARNESSING THE MENTAL TO HELP MANAGE THE PHYSICAL BY LAILA ELISE



**W**e've all seen videos of monks that can walk across hot coals without seeming to feel any pain, but can we actually apply that same principle to the problems we encounter in our own daily lives? Can merely imagining being in a cold infinity pool drinking a frozen piña colada really help keep us stay relaxed and cool while we are uncomfortably sweaty and anxious, waiting for a delayed subway train in 90-degree heat and humidity? While it might not be quite that simple, there are proven ways in which we can use the power of our minds to help manage our physical symptoms and reactions for a better quality of life and relationships.

## ELICIT A PHYSICAL RELAXATION RESPONSE

Dr. Ellen Slawsky, assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, says that practicing a combination of mind-body skills can increase the

effectiveness of things like pain and anxiety management. Our body's stress response is physical – rapid heart rate and shallow breathing – which puts our systems on high alert. We can counteract this reaction and the subsequent panic or uneasiness it causes by consciously eliciting a physical relaxation response instead.

Initially, Dr. Slawsky recommends closing your eyes and concentrating on deep breathing. Slow, deliberate breaths can remind your body to remain calm and generate a more stable response to a stressful situation. However, because everyone handles uncomfortable situations differently, she advises us to experiment with several techniques until we find something that works for us. Practicing classic meditation, mindfulness, yoga, tai chi, and positive thinking are also great methods that are more than capable of bringing both our bodies and minds back to center.

## REMEMBER THE MIND AND BODY ARE ALWAYS WORKING TOGETHER

Our minds and bodies exist harmoniously and everything they do is intertwined. There is no separating one from the other; they work together. Our body mirrors what we are feeling on the inside, and understanding the relationship between the two is an important first step in mastering the concept of "mind over matter."

For example, when we are worried about something major in our lives (medical issues, finances, etc.) it evokes a physical reaction. Our muscles become tense, our breathing shallow and sporadic, and our heart rate increases. Those physical symptoms cause us to be even more worried, reinforcing the cycle. The moment we can use our mental strength to interfere – to consciously tell our bodies to instead produce a soothing reaction – we unlock the real powers of the mind. **■**