

HeartMath device can help lower stress with biofeedback: an Alternative Paths ...

For a while on Nov. 5, a ballroom in the Renaissance Cleveland Hotel filled with the sounds of about 100 heartbeats.

The effect wasn't quite the rhythmic drum-circle thumping that you might expect. In fact, the pings, gongs and flashing lights coming from hand-held biofeedback devices made the room look and sound a lot more like a video arcade.

Attendees at the American Holistic Medical Association's "Holistic Health Now" conference crowded the afternoonsession by California-based device maker HeartMath, which makes software that trains individuals to change their heart rhythm to reduce stress.

The HeartMath hand-held device we all had a chance to play with is pretty simple. The emWave Personal Stress Relief System is a small, iPod-size case, with a jack for an ear sensor that you clip to your earlobe. When you turn the system on, your pulse registers as a flashing light, and the pings and gongs start sounding as different lights come on.

The idea behind HeartMath, like other forms of biofeedback, is that by giving you a window onto your body's physiology, you can learn to change it. In this case, the emWave's pulse monitor is also measuring heart rate variability, or HRV, the intervals between consecutive beats of your heart.

Research has shown that a decrease in HRV, or a decrease in the heart's ability to fluctuate from its average heart rate, is a strong predictor of increased mortality after a heart attack. A decrease in HRV also has been associated with a number of disease conditions like diabetes, depression and obesity.

HeartMath's software, a program that feeds your pulse into your computer through a USB connection, lets you see a graph of your HRV in real time, so that you see what effect breathing, relaxation and even positive and negative emotion have on it. On the smaller hand-held device, these effects translate into different colored lights.

Cardiologist Bruce Wilson, medical director of HeartMath, explained that the connection between HRV and disease conditions is stress.

"We all view stress as the 'thing'-- the unruly teenager, the traffic jam, the board meeting -- the thing that stresses us." But, he said, "our bodies do this, it's not an external thing acting on us."

The body's response to stress, turning on the "fight or flight" system -- called the sympathetic nervous system -- can be a good thing in small doses. Usually, the opposing parasympathetic nervous system, "the rest and digest system," puts the brakes on and balances it out. But too much stress for too long tips the scales, and balance is lost.

Regaining/gaining that balance is where HeartMath says it can help. When we all turned our emWave hand-held devices on, a little light at the top turned red. The goal, we were told, was to change that light to blue or green, and then keep it there. The lights measure what HeartMath calls coherence -- a combination of your emotional and physiological state that the company calculates using a proprietary mathematical formula.

Higher coherence, they say, reflects synchronicity among your mind, emotions and the rest of your body, and can reduce stress.

Sound difficult to achieve? It really wasn't. After a few minutes of instruction, which mainly involved slowing down my breathing and focusing on something that made me feel appreciation (I thought of my brother, my dog and my best friend), I noticed that my pings had changed to a lower-toned, more pleasing gong.

Sure enough, the light had turned green. And as soon as I stopped thinking appreciative thoughts and started thinking about the cool toy in my hand, the light turned red again. Biofeedback, like meditation, does take practice.

HeartMath isn't alone in using HRV biofeedback to enter the wellness market. The Stress Eraser, another hand-held device available since 2005, and other software-based systems like Wild Divine, the Andrew Weil/Deepak Chopra/Dean Ornish collaboration, use similar techniques to teach you to change HRV.

The Cleveland Clinic's Wellness 360-5 shop has been selling HeartMath products, including the hand-held emWave Personal Stress Relief System and the company's software, since the store opened on the main campus in September.

The products retail for \$199-\$299.

get involved with these types of biofeedback, the better.

"I think that it's clear that if you can train patients to increase their HRV, they will see some improvement in the way they feel and in their quality of life," she says.

Moravec, who says her mother uses HeartMath, has started studying the effects of HRV biofeedback on conditions like coronary artery disease, multiple sclerosis and Type 2 diabetes.

James Castle, president and CEO of the Ohio Hospital Association, said he was "captivated by the idea" when he learned about HeartMath eight years ago.

And he plans to keep pushing it to others.

"I think it can make an important difference in the lives of the people who work in health care," says Castle, who uses the HeartMath software almost every morning.

"My experience is that my day just goes better if I do take the time to do that, to get up a little bit earlier and spend a little quiet time."

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