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Discusses the therapeutic use of water or hydrotherapy. Reasons for the increase in health spa visits in the United States since 1997; How hydrotherapy reduces stress and relieves pain; Effectiveness of steam bathing in fending off neurotoxicity in the body; Other health benefits of water. INSET: Heat up to cool off.

By Laura Schiff and Hollis Kline published September 1, 2001 - last reviewed on June 9, 2016



Thales, the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher, theorized that water is the material cause of all things--he wasn't too far off the mark. After all, the human body is 75 percent water, and water covers 70 percent of the Earth's surface. Good ol' H₂O is literally the elixir of life. Whether along the sacred shores of the Ganges, in the fabled bathhouses of Rome or at the holy spring of Zamzam in Mecca, humanity has sought for millennia the healing powers of water for spiritual, psychological and physical ablution.

Today, however, the closest thing many of us have to a spiritual aquatic experience is a quick shower before our morning commute. It's no wonder visits to health spas in the United States have increased by almost 60 percent since 1997, according to a recent survey by the International Spa Association. The top three reasons for going? Pampering massage, stress reduction and pain relief. But while massaging your own back may prove next to impossible, you can easily and affordably reap the benefits of stress reduction and pain relief in your home hot tub, steam unit or

All of us are burdened with the physical stress of environmental toxins. Industrial chemicals, pesticides and heavy metals such as arsenic and lead are just a few of the poisons that infiltrate the human body, increasing the risk of cancer and altering psychological health. "The single greatest target organ of chemical injury is the brain," says Allan Lieberman, M.D., medical director for the Center for Occupational and Environmental Medicine in Charleston, South Carolina. "The manifestations of neurotoxicity include alterations in thinking, perception, mood and behavior." One method of fending off neurotoxicity is steam bathing or taking a sauna, which detoxifies the body by opening the pores. This allows up to 30 percent of bodily waste to be excreted through perspiration, which can result in increased mental clarity, greater emotional stability and an overall sense of well-being.

If insomnia is stressing you out, you've got one more reason to immerse yourself in steam. A 1999 study conducted by Harvard physician Cynthia Dorsey, Ph.D., director of the Sleep Research Program at McLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts, found that 30-minute steam baths taken 1.5 to two hours before bedtime improved sleep efficiency in female insomniacs by approximately 10 percent. While the reasons for this are not altogether clear, Dorsey believes that by elevating core body temperature, the 24-hour circadian rhythm of some test subjects may have been temporarily reset to a more harmonious relationship with the sleep-wake rhythm. Dorsey is currently conducting another study in which she aims to determine whether a hot soak works better at inducing sleep than a commonly prescribed sleeping pill.

Flowing water's soothing sounds have long been associated with meditation, a well-known relaxation method. Michael Wenger, dean of Buddhist studies at the San Francisco Zen Center, tells us that, "Moving water is 'white noise,' in which you can hear many things. Each individual may hear a different song in the water. Just listening to the sound--not tying it to anything, just letting sound wash over you--is a way of letting go of your ideas and directly experiencing things as they are." This notion is exemplified in Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*, one of the most important works of 20th-century Buddhist fiction. In it, the title character, while meditating upon the sound of a river and its "many-voiced song," has a life-changing experience, whereupon he ceases to fight against his destiny and thus achieves enlightenment.

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A one-two punch of meditation combined with a hot soak "can really be very beneficial for relaxation, and relieving stress definitely reduces [arthritis] pain," says William Arnold, M.D., a rheumatologist at the Illinois Bone & Joint Institute and chief medical editor of the Arthritis Foundation's Guide

muscle spasms. Studies at Harvard's Mind/Body Medical Institute have proven that relaxation response techniques, such as meditation, hypnosis and massage, have a measurable positive effect on chronic pain management. As Richard Kradin, M.D., director of research at the Institute, says, "Relaxation in a warm bath might have similar effects to other forms of relaxation protocols. It really needs to be studied."

If you're considering "taking the waters" for some rest and relaxation, remember that sauna and steam bathing are not for everyone. Keeping cool is key if you have any type of heart condition, because sharp temperature increases can cause cardiac arrhythmia. Pregnant women and people with high blood pressure or diabetes should also avoid saunas and steam baths. But for healthy individuals, hot baths of 104 degrees (or steam rooms up to 150 degrees) are fine, as long as you get out and cool off after 15 to 30 minutes and rehydrate by drinking a glass of water. Drinking water while you soak can't hurt either. After you've cooled down, it's OK to repeat the process. As it says in the Tao Te Ching, "Like water, the sage must wait for the moment to arise and be right."

Heat up to cool off

"Give me the power to create a fever, and I shall cure any disease," boasted Hippocrates, the Greek founder of modern medicine, more than 2,000 years ago. Since then, many cultures have used heat and steam to implement this principle and induce "artificial fever" and sweating. The most

to circulate hot water. Originally popular with hippies, hot tubs are now a pervasive part of popular culture.

Here are a few highlights along hydrotherapy's path from antiquity to present.

- o Greeks originated the practice of hydrotherapy by indulging in hot baths more than 2,500 years ago.

- o In Rome, "sudatoria" or steam rooms made up one section of the bathhouses, which also incorporated eating, talking, gambling and sports. The letters S-P-A frequently appeared on the walls, an abbreviation for "solus par aqua" meaning health or healing through water. Modern-day spas derive their name from this acronym.

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- o In 200 B.C. India, the steam bath, or "swedana" was developed as part of a purification treatment. Wealthy families of the period incorporated bathhouses into their mansions.

serves as the model for modern Turkish baths.

o Russian hot vapor baths, known as "banya," originated more than 1,000 years ago. Today they retain their function as a health, beauty and relaxation treatment.

o Sweat bathing gained popularity in Finland at approximately the same time as the Russian banya. It remains wildly popular to this day--the country boasts more saunas than cars.

o In Native American cultures, the sweat bath first served as an ancient hydrotherapeutic technique and is still practiced in a similar form today. Sweat lodges are traditionally low, windowless, insulated domes constructed of willow branches. Inside, red-hot stones are sprinkled with botanicals and water, creating an aromatherapeutic steam.

--Hollis Kline

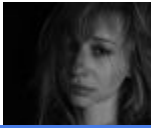
PHOTO (COLOR): While meditating upon the sound of a river, Hermann Hesse's Siddhartha found enlightenment.

Laura Schiff's work has also appeared in such publications as Cosmopolitan, Mademoiselle and Seventeen.

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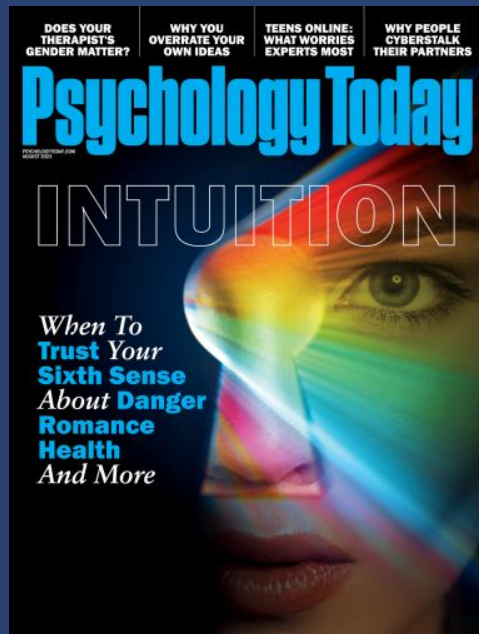


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