

Home remedies for stress

Simplifying, putting outside world on hold soothes, enriches all

By Paula Gray Hunker
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From the beginning of human history, man has harbored a warm place in his heart for the concept of home. It is more than a house. It is the place where we find a peaceful nightly shelter from the cares of the world. It is at home that we nurture our souls in the haven of our family so we can re-enter the world each day refreshed.

Yet today, many families allow the hectic pace of the workplace to invade their homes. Then it becomes nothing more than a house filled with ringing telephones, blasting stereos, multiple televisions and family members running in so many directions that the dinner table rarely has its mounting piles of clutter removed.

This unabated frenetic pace is not imagined. A recent study at Duke University proved what women have felt for years — the stress hormone cortisol remains steady 24 hours a day in working women. While the longing for a peaceful home remains, the means to achieve it seems ever elusive as each generation becomes more accustomed to the stressful pace — both within the home and without.

"There is no such thing as a stress-free home," says Jeff Davidson, lecturer and author of 25 books, including "The Complete Idiot's Guide to Managing Stress." But stress can be "reduced by 85 percent by taking action," he says. Modern life has "visibly, countably" increased virtually everything — from the number of gadgets in the house to the list of things to do each day. Each new invention has become an addition, instead of a replacement.

"We now have radio *plus* television; movies *plus* VCRs," he says, adding that this has increased our stress by complicating our choices and adding to the clutter in our lives.

"People are now so stressed that they can't even recognize it. They just think that it's natural to feel this way," says Victoria Moran, author of the recently published "Shelter for the Spirit, How to Make Your Home a Haven in a Hectic World." "We're killing ourselves, and we just don't know it," she adds in a telephone interview from her stress-reduced home in Kansas City.

Women are especially guilty of not being able to "just sit," Mrs. Moran says. "Women make home just another job" and feel guilty if they're not running around "doing something."

Though she says she hopes women can learn from men, who do know how to relax when they get home, she is afraid the guilt may be moving in the other direction, with men feeling bad for not doing more at home.

Home looks like work

In addition to making home feel like work, in many cases home is also beginning to look like work. Multiple phone lines, computers, televisions, Internet access and fax lines have all invaded our homes to blur the line between work and secular and home and sacred.

"We think of the home as a secular, functional place, and it isn't. Primitive people from the beginning of history always knew that the home was a sacred place," says Thomas Moore, author of "Care of the Soul," in a recent interview from his New England home. "We need to find a way to resanctify our homes . . . and regain the awareness that when the family comes together, it is a sacred time."

Mr. Moore in his book "Re-Enchantment of Everyday Life" speaks of this deep longing for the spiritual aspects of home in a culture that emphasizes "work, social engagement, travel and the

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development of a career over the needs of home." He adds, "But the soul always complains when it has been slighted and the emotional sicknesses associated with modern life show that the spirit of home has been violated. . . . Aimlessness, boredom and irresponsibility are common problems, and they may be traced back to a loss of home. All signs indicate that our society is suffering from profound homesickness."

Mr. Moore urges families to re-create a truly sensory life, in which children are not dulled by passive influences, such as television, video games and computers, but are inspired to feel, see, hear and taste life.

An important way to "taste" life is through the family meal, making this daily occasion a way to return the sacred to home and hearth. "You just have to say that some things are sacred," Mr. Moore adds. "Dinner time is sacred. A lot of people don't make those boundaries, so nothing is sacred."

He says we can all take a key from religion, and he offers his experience from 12 years in a monastery, where boundaries are created by keeping a schedule. "People have lost the awareness of the fact that just the simple act of a family coming together to eat together is a sacred act — not just precious or valuable, but deeply sacred. It has the power to help the marriage and hold the family together, just as most religions have intuited that eating is a sacred activity."

Kitchen is the home's heart

Mrs. Moran agrees and adds that the kitchen is often considered the heart of the home. In her book she writes, "Food nourishes the body, home nourishes the soul. When we avail ourselves of the two in tandem, we feel content and cared for on both levels."

She urges families on the go to stay home for more meals, "even if the meal is fresh bread and greens picked up at the grocery." She says "you just don't feel at home in a place where you don't eat." She also says that a house is quickly converted to a home when celebrations are held there. "Too often we go out to celebrate," but a home where people have felt joy changes a house's atmosphere faster than anything else.