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From left, Tower Cos. employees Chuck Wallach, Jim Schneider, Jim Lewis, Jeffrey Abramson and Linda Schoengold meditate during an employer-paid session. Tower partner Abramson added the classes to the firm's benefits list as a means to reduce stress and health care costs. (Photo credit: Adam Pressman)

More Area Firms Paying Employees to Relax

Transcendental Meditation Seen As Health Care Boon

By Annys Shin, Washington Post Staff Writer

Having a company softball team used to be a good way to get employees to blow off steam and to build morale. But today, companies are just as likely to encourage workers to meditate or hit a yoga mat as they are the outfield.

Over at the Tower Cos. in Bethesda, anyone who has been on the job at least three months can walk over to the Maharishi Peace Palace two blocks away for a four-day course on meditation. The classes are gratis, courtesy of Tower. Employees can even go on company time.

Tower is just one of the growing number of businesses, nonprofit groups and government agencies in the Washington region that offer employees free or subsidized tools to relieve stress, boost productivity and control health care costs.

Tower Cos., which has built a reputation for developing "green" office buildings with recycled materials, was ahead of the wellness curve. Twelve years ago, it began offering

free meditation classes to employees in its headquarters if they promised to meditate twice a day. One of the real estate developer's owners, Jeffrey Abramson, a longtime practitioner of Transcendental Meditation, added meditation classes to the company's health benefits list because he thought it was a good way to contain stress-related ailments and health care costs.

"The missing key to any health care system is prevention," he said.

About two years ago, Tower began offering meditation to employees in its office properties as well.

Abramson said his company has no figures on the impact teaching his employees meditation has had on his company's health care bills because it lacks enough employees for a statistically significant sample size, he said.

"It's hard to quantify someone who is 50 years old, what effect meditation has had, as opposed to the first 50 years of their life," he said. "I can't say we have less heart attacks. We've never had them."

Abramson says he can tell the difference between his employees who meditate and those who do not. "They seem brighter, fresher," he said. "People need tools to enable them to become more successful without negative ramifications. The old model was you work until you drop—that was how you prove your worth. When you look at Americans, so many of them have hypertension. Our physiologies are not designed to operate at a very stressful level."

