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## Teachers get a lesson helping stressed teens know some 'inner bliss'

By Linda Borg, Journal Staff Writer

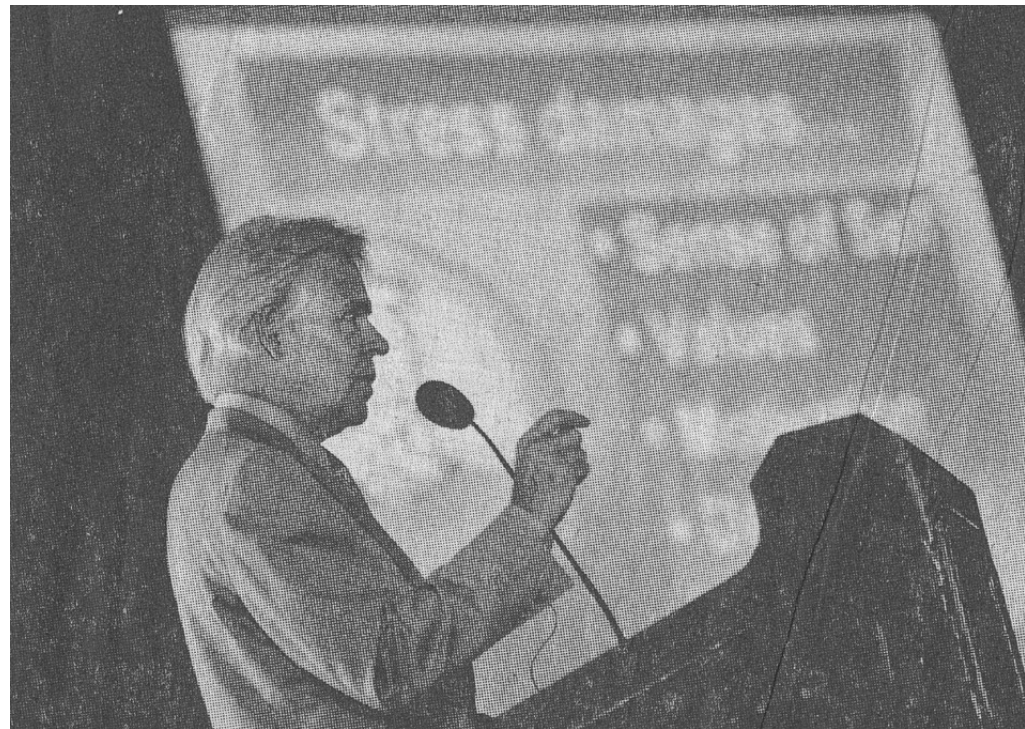
PROVIDENCE -- Shootings were part of the daily routine in the Washington, D.C., neighborhood where George Rutherford was a school principal.

After he was asked to identify the bodies of two students who had been killed in a nearby shoot-out, "Doc" Rutherford knew something had to change.

That's when he discovered Transcendental Meditation, a form of silent meditation introduced to the West by the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and popularized 40 years ago by the Beatles.

Within days of introducing the technique to his students, Rutherford said the change in their behavior was nothing short of extraordinary.

"That same week, I didn't have to stop one fight," he said. "Our test scores went up. Our attendance went up. Our school became a safe haven."



**Dr. Alarik Arenander, Director of the Brain Research Institute in California, talks about the effects of stress on the brain and how Transcendental Meditation helps alleviate stress.**

For many years, TM was the province of hipsters and college students. Now, TM is being pitched as a salvation for stressed-out teens, a natural alternative to the mood-altering medication taken daily by millions of children.

Yesterday, more than 100 teachers from Providence, Smithfield, Woonsocket, Narragansett, Portsmouth and Worcester, Mass., gathered in the Biltmore hotel to hear a half-dozen practitioners discuss the benefits of meditation.

The conference was sponsored by the Rhode Island Committee for Stress-Free Schools and was called "Improving Academic Achievement: Preventing and Treating Stress, Anxiety, Depression and Learning Disabilities."

In an age when teachers are desperate to find ways to bring order to chaotic classrooms, when adults are fearful that anti-depressants might cause more harm than good, TM offers a natural stress-buster, said Bob Roth, a member of the National Committee for Stress-Free Schools.

TM is not a religion; it doesn't ask the practitioner to change his lifestyle. By focusing on a sound or thought, it allows the mind to achieve a deep stage of relaxation. Children are taught to meditate twice a day for 10 to 15 minutes. In the news clips shown yesterday, a group of middle school children sit in a gym in total silence, their eyes closed. Afterward, several children say that

meditation has helped them concentrate, curb their anger and improve their grades.

"America is swimming in an ocean of stress," Roth told the audience. "Ten million children are on anti-depressants. Between 4 and 5 million children have been diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. The number-three cause of death among teenagers is suicide."

Yesterday, proponents avoided saying that TM could cure children with depression or attention deficit disorder. But a couple of research scientists said that studies have already shown that TM reduces anxiety and improves everything from creativity to self-esteem.

In fact, the National Institute of Health has awarded more than \$20 million to study the benefits of TM. Two studies conducted by the University of Michigan have found that TM helps the emotional development of African-American adolescents.

Alarik Arenander, a neuroscientist who specializes in adolescent brain development, uses the following computer analogy:

"Most people's brains function at the dial-up level."

A healthy or coherent brain operates like a high-speed Internet connection.

IN THE BALLROOM, the lights dimmed. Several middle-school children appeared on the video screen. They all talked about how anxious they were before they began

practicing meditation and how much more focused and happy they are now.

TM is not cheap, however. Adults pay \$2,500 to learn the technique. In a time of diminishing resources, when many schools can barely afford art and music, TM might seem like a luxury that urban districts can't afford.

But its proponents stress that they will help schools find corporate sponsors. General Motors and Daimler Chrysler sponsored the program in a Detroit charter school, where hundreds of teachers and students have mastered the technique over the past nine years.

Toward the end of the conference, twin sisters Amelia and Donielle Freeberg, addressed the crowd. Both are seniors at the Maharishi School in Fairfield, Iowa, where everyone does TM as part of a "consciousness-based" curriculum.

"I feel a deep sense of peace," Donielle said. "Every day, this happiness grows deeper."

Amelia said that TM has had a balancing effect on her life.

"It allows me to not get caught up in the whirlwind," she said. "When I meditate, I'm left with silence and that quality of inner bliss remains with me."

Teachers who are interested in starting a TM program in their schools are invited to a follow-up meeting at 7 p.m. next Thursday at the Providence Public Library.