

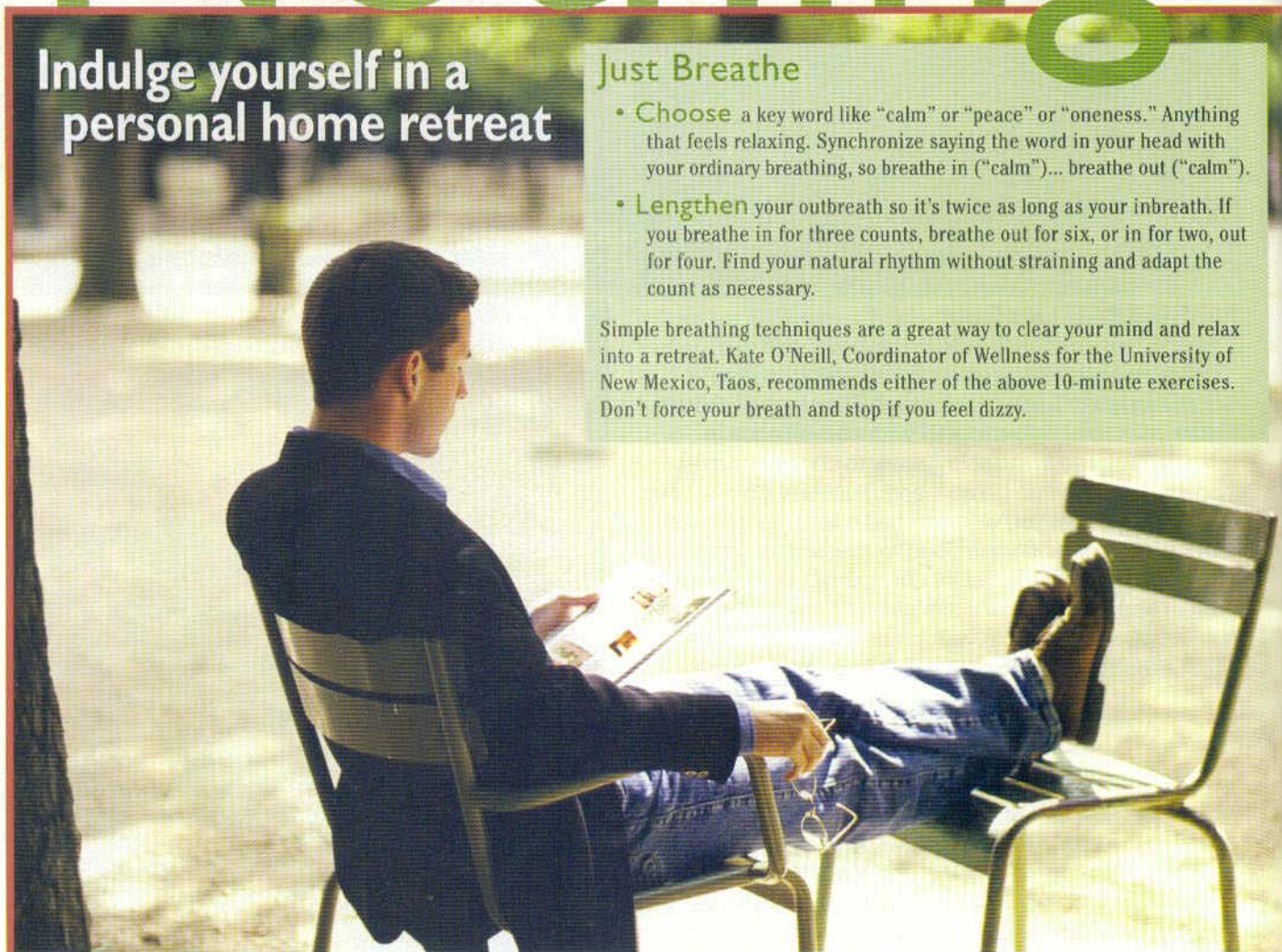
# The Art of Doing Nothing

Indulge yourself in a personal home retreat

## Just Breathe

- **Choose** a key word like "calm" or "peace" or "oneness." Anything that feels relaxing. Synchronize saying the word in your head with your ordinary breathing, so breathe in ("calm")... breathe out ("calm").
- **Lengthen** your outbreath so it's twice as long as your inbreath. If you breathe in for three counts, breathe out for six, or in for two, out for four. Find your natural rhythm without straining and adapt the count as necessary.

Simple breathing techniques are a great way to clear your mind and relax into a retreat. Kate O'Neill, Coordinator of Wellness for the University of New Mexico, Taos, recommends either of the above 10-minute exercises. Don't force your breath and stop if you feel dizzy.



Imagine taking a day all to yourself to just be. One day of solo retreat can recharge your batteries, nourish your soul and send you back into the world with a fresh perspective on life.

"We all need to step outside the frame and look at the big picture periodically," says Tim O'Brien, director for the Institute for Stress Management. "Taking a personal retreat gives you a way to look at where you're headed. Do you like the direction of your life?"

If not, what changes should you make? It's difficult to make good decisions if you don't remove yourself from the normal routine."

If you think you're too busy to carve a whole day out of your schedule, think again. "If that's what you are saying to yourself, it's a clear indication that's exactly what you need to do!" claims Jennifer Loudon, author of *The Woman's Retreat Book* and creator of Comfortqueen.com, a Web site packed with retreat tips. "The more burned out you are, the more you are going to be replenished by just a day."

The idea of a retreat is to reconnect with yourself without being distracted by the usual demands and the people around you, so pick a date when your housemates are away and you can have some solitude. Prepare in advance by spending a few hours cleaning up your space, shopping for food and gathering any items you might need.

## Take Your Own Sweet Time

Your retreat might include a walk in nature, meditation, life assessment or other activity. Now's your chance to paint that watercolor, listen to a favorite piece of music without juggling three other jobs at once or simply spend some time rediscovering what it is to simply be.

If the idea of a completely unstructured day is too daunting, make up a rough timetable for yourself. Otherwise, just go with the flow! Whichever approach you choose, turn off the phone, avoid email, the Internet and newspapers and break out of your regular routine. Sleep on the other side of the bed, sit in a different chair, try foods you don't normally eat or take a different route for your jog.

Finding an "intention question" will help you get the most out of your retreat, suggests Jennifer Louden. For example: What do I seek? What are my values in life? Is this the right job for me? How can I be healthier?

"It's not about getting an answer in one day, but just keep bringing your attention back to that question and see where it leads you," explains Louden. "What does it lead you to eat? What does it lead you to draw or write or sing? Where does it lead you to go in your hike? It becomes the aim that guides your actions and allows you to return to a more holistic and intuitive way of being."

A ritual to open and close your retreat will help ground and focus the day. This can be as simple as taking a stroll around the block. As you cross the threshold home, say "I'm now on retreat." At the end of your day, retrace your steps to close the retreat.

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## One at a Time

Stand with your knees slightly released, arms at sides. Feeling the balance of this posture, tune in to your breathing and allow yourself to feel the breath as it enters and leaves your body. Be aware of your entire body. Allow your eyes to be open and be aware of the space around and in front of you. Then lifting your right foot, think "lifting." Moving your foot, think "moving" and placing your foot in front of you think "placing." Bring the same awareness of this process of lifting, moving and placing to your left foot, and then continue very slowly walking forward, mindful of each part of each step. You may notice as you continue to walk that you are distracted by thoughts, other sensations in the body, emotions, sounds or sights. Simply acknowledge the distraction and return to awareness of lifting, moving and placing. You may also coordinate your breathing with your stepping, inhaling on one step, exhaling on the next.

Melissa Blacker of the Stress Reduction Clinic at University of Massachusetts Medical School suggests walking meditation to help you slow down and enhance awareness. Try it outside, in a quiet area where you won't feel self-conscious!

## Retreat Eats

- Eat fresh, whole foods and cut back on processed foods to obtain the maximum nutrient value. Opt for an orange rather than orange juice, and munch an apple instead of applesauce (although applesauce is still better than cheesy puffs!)
- Drink plenty of water to flush out your system and avoid excess amounts of sodium that can cause bloating.
- Follow the Five-a-Day plan—five fruits or vegetables a day. Snacking on fruits and veggies will provide some of your daily RDA/nutrients without the added sugars, salt and excessive calories that may slow you down.
- Limit meat to six ounces a day. Bake, broil or grill to keep food light and reduce fat content.
- Avoid empty carbohydrates/calories such as sweets, bakery goods and desserts. These have little nutrient value, and sugar can make you feel sluggish after the initial rush.

Sandy Palmer, director of clinical nutrition at Mercy Medical Center, Baltimore, says following these guidelines will help re-energize your body.



"Light candles, read poetry or take a bath, and as the water goes down the drain say, 'I'm washing away everything I want to let go of, I'm now on retreat,'" says Loudon. "It's a matter of taking something simple and making it symbolic."

If life-assessment is an important focus for your retreat, O'Brien advises writing out the headings "Spiritual, Mental, Emotional, Physical, Financial, Social, Family," then thinking about each category.

"What is most important to you?" asks O'Brien, "What would you like to accomplish in each category? Where do you have problems? What are the causes of those problems? How can you correct negatives and enhance the positive aspects of your life? Then write out several realistic, manageable goals you'd like to realize before your next retreat." Because once you've taken one retreat, it's a safe bet you'll be scheduling another.

#### Assess to De-stress

"While stress is difficult to define, all of our research confirms that the perception of having little control is always distressful," says Dr. Paul J. Rosch, president of The American Institute of Stress. "In many instances we create our own stress by faulty perceptions you can learn to correct."

"Think in bigger terms," agrees Tim O'Brien, director of the Institute for Stress Management. "Why do you work? What do you see as your contribution to the world or society or your family, or all of them? Emphasize the happy parts of life and view the challenging parts as opportunities to get them straightened out and thereby add to your overall happiness. We'll never have everything exactly as we'd like, but we can get to the point of general happiness and feeling that what we do is important and makes a difference."

Use O'Brien's goal-setting tips to help take control of your life:

1. List several specific, realistic goals and a time frame in which to achieve them.
2. Write out all the steps for each goal, like a recipe. The more steps you can define, the easier the goal will be to accomplish.
3. Write out a game plan for realizing each step of your goals.
4. Commit to realizing them.

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