

learning to love silence

Cultivate more stillness in your life—and discover new reserves of energy, creativity and inspiration.

Cell phones, ring tones, voice mail, iPods, CNN, talk radio, traffic, clients, kids, family, friends—our lives can get so noisy that we barely remember what silence feels like. And if we do get a bit of quiet time, our *internal* chatter (“When am I going to get to the grocery store?” “Should I take that Pilates class?” “Why didn’t I tell him what I really think?”) isn’t just loud—it’s exhausting.

While silence can be a powerful antidote to stress, fatigue, overwhelm, indecision, frustration and other common hazards of modern living, it’s not easily found for most people. By learning how to take more time for silence, you can make every day more meaningful, productive and successful.

tips for taking silent breaks

Want to make more space for silence in your life? Try these ideas from fitness professionals:

- Get in the habit of turning off TVs, radios, cell phones, portable music players and the computer. (Surfing the Internet is *not* exploring silence!)
- When traveling, use headphones to block out sound.
- Repeat a familiar affirmation, prayer, poem or mantra to quiet mental chatter. “Peace, harmony, well-being” is an example.
- When you get home from work and are tempted to unwind in front of the television or let off steam talking to friends on the phone, spend 20 minutes being quiet or listening to a relaxation tape.
- Use traffic jams as an opportunity to spend quiet time.
- Breathe deeply, stretch or do a few yoga postures to settle into silence.
- Use “downloading” time at your computer to take deep breaths and tune into silence.
- Practice a Nia technique called RAW—Relaxed (in body), Alert (in mind) and Waiting (in spirit)—as a way to be present in your body.
- Consider participating in a silent retreat.

Benefits for Fitness Pros

Creating time for silence can be especially challenging for multitasking fitness professionals with dizzying schedules, but making that commitment can also be extremely rewarding. “Fitness professionals and health educators are constantly sending out energy to their clients, and it can be particularly hard to turn inward,” says Michele Hébert, a yoga, breath and meditation teacher, and owner of SpaSpirit in San Diego. “But there is a great need to replenish that energy. Through silence, we can tap into the essence of our being, where we can recharge and renew ourselves.”

Silence offers the opportunity to explore the world in a new way. “You get to be connected to the world through your senses,” says Debbie Rosas, co-creator and founder of The Nia Technique, a body-mind-spirit fitness and personal growth program that integrates martial arts, dance arts and healing arts, in Portland, Oregon. “You can hear the world around you. It is such a deep spiritual connection to the moment.”

Silence can also be a great tool for developing listening skills, says Rosas. “Silence teaches us to listen,” she says. “If you can’t be comfortable with silence, your communication will be faulty. In order to be an excellent listener, you need to know how to remain silent in mind and body, emotions and spirit, so that you can really receive what each client is giving you.”

Fitness professionals who regularly explore the experience of silence say the benefits of finding inner stillness within oneself can be profound. “As you become more present, you experience the space between your thoughts, which is pure awareness or ‘spirit,’” says Hébert. “Your mind becomes very present, peaceful and

clear. It can be extremely creative, and you feel refreshed and energized. You can get wonderful ideas, inspiration and solutions to problems. You experience more awareness and understanding of situations, perhaps in new ways. Your sense of direction and purpose can become more clear and focused.”

Not surprisingly, leaders and visionaries often understand and use the power of silence. “Silence is a presence, and many leaders in personal growth and transformation carry that presence. They are so grounded, relaxed and confident—a reflection of the silence in their life. Silence is evident in mastery,” says Rosas.

Ronda Gates, MS, author, lifestyle counselor, and founder and president of LIFESTYLES® by Ronda Gates, based in Lake Oswego, Oregon, adds, “We often notice that wise people don’t speak as much—they are comfortable with silence. People who are successful are often people who take time for quiet.”

Listening to Silence

The experience of silence varies greatly among individuals—and also depends on the level of silence in both the external and internal environments. Explains Hébert, who has held silent retreats and integrates silence into much of her programming, “Stage One is finding a relatively quiet environment and not talking or interacting with other people. Stage Two is finding silence within ourselves. True silence is more than just an absence of speech. It’s being with yourself. Instead of actively sending out energy to others, we’re allowing another energy to build from within.”

“The practice of silence can be similar to the practice of meditation,” describes Hébert. “It’s like diving into a stormy ocean: At first you notice all the turbulence at the surface—all the distractions of your mind—but as you get more relaxed and go deeper, you become less aware of it until finally you don’t even notice it anymore. You sink into your center of being, and then your thoughts are just thoughts; they’re not reality.”

Gates compares the experience of silence to the study of music. “I was taught that the music wasn’t just the notes—it was the silence between the notes. So if I listened for the silence, I would understand the music better. If we listen for the silence in our lives, we understand ourselves better.”

“In the attitude of silence the soul finds the path in a clearer light, and what is elusive and deceptive resolves itself into crystal clearness.”

—Mahatma Gandhi

If you’re an extrovert, you may have a harder time resting in silence, says Gates. “Introverts often already have a very internal life, but that doesn’t mean they know how to quiet their minds, either. Getting truly silent is often one of the hardest things for all of us to do. Ultimately you are letting your mind go and just watching it, observing as if you are outside of it. That puts you in touch with your intuitive self.”

Finding Silence in Your Life

How can *you* incorporate more silence in your life? Meditation, breathing exercises and mantras, as well as yoga, tai chi and other mind-body practices, can all help create a state of deeper internal silence.

However, everyday experiences can also provide opportunities for silence, says Gates. “You can find the benefits of silence on a walk, on a run or while climbing a rock; it doesn’t have to be sitting in meditation. Nature and animals can guide us to stillness. For example, when I’m sitting quietly with my cat and she purrs, I feel the rhythm of her purr and the rhythm of her body, and I feel myself becoming more calm and aware.”

Kate Larsen, PCC, founder of Winning LifeStyles Inc., in Minneapolis, actually schedules silence into her day. “I take time in the early morning, even if it’s just 10 minutes to get me grounded and get my mind prepared for the day. I also turn off the radio at home and in the car most of the time. Most people have noise on all the time and have to turn it off. I work to do the opposite. I take ‘silence breaks’ by walking outdoors without music or a cell phone. And I take a silent retreat at a center about an hour away from my home.”

Gloria Keeling of Santa Monica, California, founder of the Strong, Stretched and Centered mind-body training program and owner of BeFitAfterFifty.com, says, “I create silence by getting up before dawn and walking or sitting on the bluffs by the ocean. There is *no* traffic at 4:30 AM. Or I sit on the deck and watch the moon. I also meditate, and when I am deep inside ‘my space,’ there are no distractions. Noise just flows through me, as my thoughts do. I call it dropping down into [ourselves]—because instead of living up in our heads all the time, we drop down into who we really are.”

Keeling notes that silence can open the door to parts of ourselves we may not want to explore at first. “Silence requires that we feel and remember our deepest truths, which is perhaps why people are sometimes afraid of silence. They don’t want to know what’s inside. One of our truths, for example, is that we’re going to die, and we don’t want to think about that, at least not in Western cultures. But in silence you face your fears and your demons, your anger and sadness—and you get through them to the other side, which is a joyful, more centered place where you know yourself better and can be more present with other people.”

In the end, creating silence in your life is not as complicated as it may seem. It just takes commitment. “The longer we practice silence, the more able we are to do it. It’s like practicing anything,” says Gates. “Someone once asked, ‘How do I learn to pray?’ and the answer was, ‘Pray.’ How do you learn to be silent? Well, you’re silent.”

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