



mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

movement

Spring is here at long last. As I write, the skies are a brilliant cloudless blue and pear trees, redbuds, and forsythia are starting to blossom everywhere. The weather is warm today and everywhere people are outdoors, walking, riding bikes, and doing yard work. This weather makes even the most lethargic among us feel like moving!

The benefits of being active are legion. Movement benefits the body, mind, and spirit. Besides the benefits to our physical health, cardiovascular exercise triggers the release of endorphins that contribute to our mental health. Some studies have shown that regular cardiovascular exercise can be as effective as medication in treating depression. Some kinds of movement (Yoga, Tai Chi, Qi Gong) help to focus and calm our minds. Finally, in movement we can release our passions. Running, biking, dancing, swimming, playing tennis, gardening, and other activities can be just plain fun.

Focused, sustained activity may be one of the biggest stress reducers available to us. Besides the release of tension stored in our muscles, physical activity takes us out of our overactive minds. It is difficult to worry while dancing (except of course for concern over your partner's toes). Often, our physical activity gets us outside and back in touch with nature, another natural stress reducer. Finally, sometimes when we engage in intense activity we may find ourselves in what some describe as "flow"—a heightened state of awareness and connection with the world. Flow can occur when you are so involved in what you are doing that you lose self-consciousness and totally identify with the activity. Some describe this as a spiritual experience.

This winter was long and hard both in terms of weather and world events. Over the last few months I think our normal levels of tension and stress have been bumped up. The ice storms brought power outages and schedule disruptions for all of us and significant hardships to some. Financial worries due to the floundering economy and job losses for some have upped the tension. Many people are finding themselves feeling more irritable and impatient. Many of us are feeling a bit worn and ragged.

World events have also been troublesome. Talk of war, terrorism and snipers have all taken their toll. As I write this brief column my mind is drawn to a different kind of movement, the movement of American troops in Iraq. As a member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), one of the traditional peace churches, I worked and prayed that this conflict might be avoided, though I understand that many felt that war was the only solution. Some of us will have lost loved ones in the conflict. All of us will have experienced the concern that comes with engagement in a war.

It is always important to take care of ourselves, but it is especially important when our lives are more stressful than usual. Making time for joyful movement is a crucial element of self care.

By the time you read this column, I hope that the war will be over, our troops will be on their way home and the people of Iraq will be on their way to a safe, peaceful, and free existence. I hope that each of us will be breathing a sigh of relief and looking forward to summer vacations and fun. Whatever comes, I hope that each of us will take care of ourselves and take time to appreciate the beauty of this world, the preciousness of love of our family and friends, and the pleasure and freedom of being able to move.