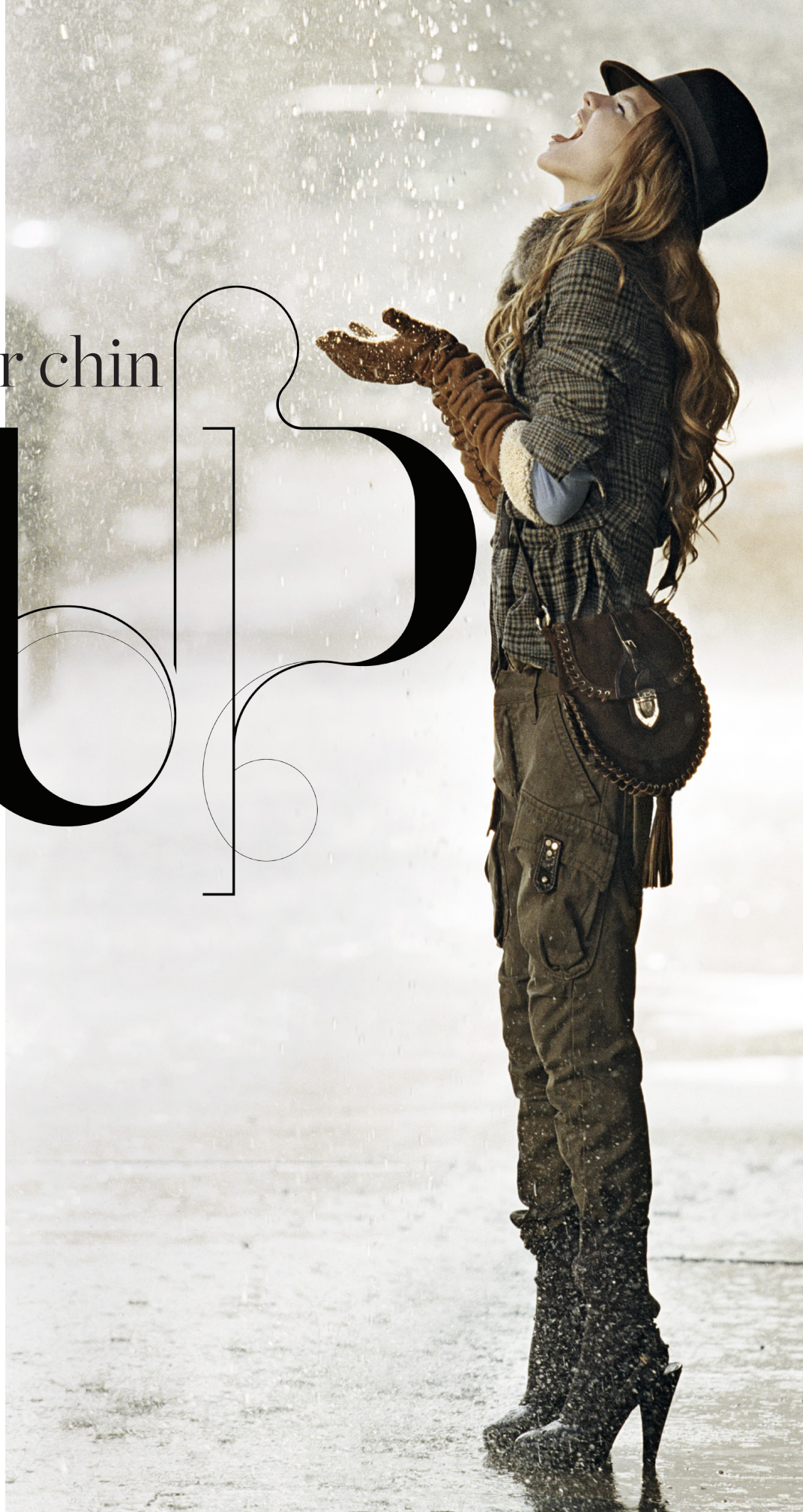


keep your chin

up

A few choice words can turn a downpour of negative thoughts into a sunny day. Learn how to tap the power of mantras.

By Melinda Wenner Moyer



*I embrace life. I embrace life.* I have three big work deadlines and I'm stuck in jury duty with a dying laptop. There are hundreds of people in this room and only one working electrical outlet. Help.

*I embrace life. I embrace life.* My husband and I are leaving in three days for a two-week dream trip to Italy. Instead of being excited, I'm annoyed that I haven't listened to any of my Italian-language podcasts, and I'm stressed about which shoes to pack. Stylish or comfortable? Why can't shoes ever be both? *Dio mio!*

It's 4:30 a.m. on a Monday, and I wake up with a hacking cough. As soon as I nod off again, the trash truck starts to make its rounds on our street. Beep. Beep. Beep. I'm never going to get back to sleep. *Argh!* I mean . . . *I embrace life.*

I am trying my darnedest to embrace life's curveballs. Everyone copes differently. Some curse a lot or bite their nails. Others take challenges on without so much as flinching; they're always focused, always positive, always looking like a million bucks. Like Michelle Obama: Surely that woman has 40 bazillion reasons to be stressed, but does she ever show it? No way. Given a choice between pressing "panic" and playing it cool, I'd much prefer to do the latter. In reality, though, sometimes it's not so simple.

Years ago a friend told me about his devotion to transcendental meditation, a type of mental relaxation that revolves around the repetition of a spiritually transforming phrase. He swore that it was a great way to boost one's emotional and physical well-being. Though I dismissed it at the time—who wants to sit still and chant for 20 minutes?—as my life has become more hectic in recent years, I've found myself searching for a way to soothe an increasingly stressed-out soul. What if I just casually repeated a few special words as I went about my daily life? Could that have the same benefits as traditional, by-the-book meditation? I did research, and the more I read, the more convinced I became that it was worth a try.

## Master the Mind Games

The Sanskrit word *mantra* means "to cross the mind," and describes a word or short phrase, repeated again and again, that people in many

cultures have used to rise above intrusive thoughts since at least the first millennium B.C. What's more, a growing body of scientific studies suggests that mantras can actually help you stay focused on your goals, squelch stress and even improve your workout.

On the simplest level, mantras work by redirecting your thoughts from a source of distress to something positive, according to Mark Fenske, Ph.D., a neuroscientist at the University of Guelph in Canada and coauthor of *The Winner's Brain*. "Focusing on a mantra can reduce activity in brain structures associated with negative emotion, which in turn affect your autonomic nervous system," he says, and this results in a slowed heart rate and a lowered stress response.

No mystical mumbo jumbo is required for the effect. It's perfectly fine for mantras to be in your own words (read: plain English), because they serve as personal mini pep talks. "They keep a particular message in the forefront of your mind and remind you throughout the day of what you're aiming for," says Amy Wachholtz, Ph.D., director of health psychology at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in Worcester. They don't have to be complex to work; in fact, short and sweet is best. "The most famous mantra of all time comes from the Little Engine That Could, which kept saying, 'I think I can, I think I can,'" Wachholtz points out. (Naturally, you can say your mantra in your head: Nobody wants to be the crazy lady mumbling lines from a children's book on the elliptical machine.)

## Choose Your Words

"The key to constructing a really good mantra for yourself is to think, OK, what's my purpose?" says Steven Gurgevich, Ph.D., a mind-body medicine expert at the Arizona Center for Integrative Medicine in Tucson. Are you trying to get in shape? Stay focused at work? It's good for your phrase to be results oriented, Gurgevich says, but don't be too myopic: The best mantras address long-term goals so that you can use them for months at a time and really get in tune with them.

Hmm, I thought. What is my purpose? My life has recently taken an exciting, but distracting,

turn: I'm pregnant with my first child. I can't run as far or as fast as I used to; I don't have the energy, sometimes, to do the things I'd like to. My quest for a mantra is less about achieving personal mile markers and more about helping me reach inner calm at a time when fears and anxiety about starting a family are taking over my sanity. What I need is a mantra that oozes Zen. By saying it repeatedly and with conviction, I will begin imagining it as my reality, Gurgevich explains. In other words, it's possible to will yourself to become the image your mantra creates.

To guide me, he suggests I follow a few rules. First, avoid the word *not*. "You don't want to use language that could be interpreted subconsciously in a negative fashion," Gurgevich says. (Rather than "I am not weak," say "I am strong.") Second, assume the best of yourself. Instead of "I'll try to be healthy," say "I will be healthy" or, better yet, "I am healthy." Finally, pick a phrase that has a nice rhythm to it, so that reiterating it creates a hypnotic drumbeat in your head, drowning out everyday stresses.

After some pondering, I settled on "I embrace life" as a simple phrase that captures my desire to stay calm and healthy during this crazy time: I embrace my own life, and the one growing inside me.

## Reap the Benefits

*I embrace life.* It's 12:30 p.m. and I'm sitting in a jury-selection room with no windows. I'm starving! But I'm nervous about leaving for food, because then I'll have to give up the electrical outlet for my laptop, and I just know someone else will steal it. I have piles of work to finish and there's nothing I can do but worry . . . and use my mantra. After doing a few mental reps, I remember my pledge to be calm in the face of turmoil and laugh at the occasional absurdity of my world. Somehow everything will get done.

Research suggests that the soothing effect I'm starting to notice is due to a physiological change in how I react to difficult situations. In 2007, Jill Bormann, Ph.D., a researcher at the Veterans Affairs San Diego Healthcare System, trained stressed-out hospital workers to repeat spiritual mantras like *shalom* ("peace" in Hebrew) and *om prema* (Hindu for "universal love") to themselves throughout the day. Five weeks later, they reported feeling less anxiety and anger than previously. "We cannot change our outer

## Steal This Mantra!

FITNESS editors share the song lyrics they play on mental repeat to get psyched.

"Ain't nothin' gonna break my stride. I got to keep on movin'." ("Break My Stride," Matthew Wilder)  
—*Elaine Roake, photo director*

"Take it easy, take it easy. Don't let the sound of your own wheels drive you crazy." ("Take It Easy," Eagles) —*April Franzino, associate beauty editor*

"I'm not afraid to take a stand. Everybody come take my hand." ("Not Afraid," Eminem)  
—*Betty Wong, editor in chief*

"What you waiting, what you waiting for." ("What You Waiting For?" Gwen Stefani)  
—*Lisa Haney, senior editor*

"I'm walking on sunshine, whoa oh. And don't it feel good." ("Walking on Sunshine," Katrina and the Waves) —*Kathy Green, managing editor*

circumstances, but we can change our reactions to them," Bormann explains.

Outside of a work environment, evidence points to mantras as having a positive effect on workouts as well. Water-polo players threw the ball farther when they repeated "I can" to themselves during the task, a Greek study found. Other research shows that reciting positive phrases helps tennis players improve their forehands. In the same way that visualizing ourselves doing a particular activity helps us get better at it, Gurgevich says, repeating affirmative words sends a message to our subconscious, boosting performance.

Yet mantras are more than mental tricks; they can produce significant physical effects, too. They slow the body's release of the stress hormone cortisol, according to Bormann's 2009 research on HIV patients. Research also shows that reciting mantras is a heart-smart move: Scientists discovered that repeating yoga mantras or a rosary prayer slowed respiration, enhancing heart-rate variability.

## Practice Makes Perfect

I've been using "I embrace life" for a couple of months now. At first, I admit, a lot of times I just plain forgot to recite it. Like when I was driving my husband back to a friend's house after an out-of-town wedding and got exceptionally lost. It was late. I had to pee. As I argued with my tipsy copilot—who, despite offering plenty of directional advice, later confessed that he could see the street signs only if he closed one eye—plenty of things crossed my mind. Why did I ever agree to this? Did I just hear a hiccup coming from the passenger seat? Damn it, I need a toilet now! But "I embrace life"? Not part of the equation.

After a few weeks, though, I found myself relying on my phrase in nerve-racking moments. I recited it while struggling through an exercise video, and suddenly I wasn't just a shaky-thighed rookie; I was a woman working hard to keep her body healthy for the life growing inside it. I repeated it, again and again, while sitting in the waiting room at the world's slowest doctor's office and while wrestling a pizza slice out of my dog's mouth on our daily walk.

It's not quite second nature yet, but it has become a kind of background music for my life—an upbeat sound track that keeps me calm and gives everything I do a deeper meaning. It seems to be working, so I'm embracing it! ■



I am  
**STRONG**