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“Breathe in deeply, allowing your breath to travel down your spine. Now exhale slowly and let go.” This is not a chant at the end of a yoga class but a key aspect of a facial, which involves not only applying products to the skin but also taking you through a guided meditation. “Combining the two makes it a particularly good anti-ageing treatment,” says Tara Herron, therapist and founder of Yogic Solutions, whose range of treatments involves applying products topically while simultaneously getting you to meditate and think positively so you de-stress. “Our thought patterns are connected to the quality of our skin and we hold a lot of tension in our facial muscles which makes us age. So, when it comes to anti-ageing, what’s going on internally is as important as what you’re applying externally.”

It may sound like a marketing gimmick designed to make one facial stand out from all the others, but treating the mind in conjunction with the skin has scientific basis. So much so that, in America, some dermatologists are beginning to take a similar approach when dealing with patients.

“There is a two-way stream between skin and emotions, in that emotions affect your skin and vice versa,” says Dr Richard Fried, Clinical Director of Yardley Dermatology Associates in Pennsylvania. “We already know, for example, that common problems such as eczema, acne and rosacea become worse when we experience trauma or stress. As a result, there is

a growing area of cosmetic medicine, called psychodermatology, which blends psychology with dermatology because more clinicians are realising that when you treat the skin, you can’t separate the biological from the emotional.”

“WITH ANTI-AGEING, WHAT GOES ON INTERNALLY IS AS IMPORTANT AS WHAT GOES ON EXTERNALLY”

It’s no secret that stress has a huge impact on the skin: it makes it more prone to inflammation which can permanently damage collagen; it makes it harder for the skin to retain moisture, so becoming prone to dehydration; and it reduces the skin’s natural barrier, making it more susceptible to damage from external factors. And, all of this quickens the onset of wrinkles and sagging.

However, according to Fried and others like him, if stress causes us to age, then de-stressing – by practising relaxation techniques like yoga, meditation and t’ai chi – should help to slow or reduce the ageing process. “Alongside the topical agents I use – like antioxidants and retinoids, which have been proven to change the way the skin ages – I also ask patients to do something that brings tension reduction,” says Fried. “There is good data to show that by decreasing stress and thinking optimistically, the skin will function better, feel better and age better.”

So, how does positive thinking make you look younger? On a basic level, when you do things that make you feel happy, your body secretes endorphins, our ➔



CAN YOU THINK YOURSELF YOUNG!

When it comes to slowing the ageing process, creams alone may no longer be enough. According to a growing area of cosmetic medicine, psychodermatology, our state of mind may also have a significant impact on our skin

BY OMEGA DOUGLAS

natural happy hormones, which relax you, softening any hard expressions. On a more scientific level, Herron puts it like this: "When you have anxious thoughts, lactic acid builds up in your system. This creates congestion in your colon, kidneys and lungs. As the skin is the final avenue through which those organs release their toxins, if they're not functioning properly, it will be reflected in your face."

But stress is an unavoidable by-product of 21st-century living and, however much we'd love to, we simply don't have the time to have a massage every day, or the money to resort to retail therapy. For a more consistent endorphin trigger, you need to engage in relaxation techniques like yoga or meditation. If done regularly (ideally for an hour, three times a week), according to practitioners, this will have a lasting effect. "When you meditate, you shift your brain activity from the stress-prone, right frontal cortex to the calmer, left frontal cortex," says Shelley Bloom, meditation teacher at London's Triyoga centre. "This releases everyday tension that would otherwise build up inside and show itself in the face." Katy Appleton, teacher and author of *Introducing Yoga* (Pan, £12.99), agrees. "From my own experience, and anecdotally from people I've taught, I know that after practising yoga your skin looks clearer and you radiate a more youthful glow."

Believe it or not, there is actually a biological reason for that 'glow' yogis talk about. "Under stress, blood vessels constrict, which inhibits blood coming in to sweep away debris, and makes the face less well nourished and rosy," explains Fried. "Relaxation techniques have a stabilising effect on blood vessels which makes skin look healthier and younger."

We also know that relaxation decreases neuropeptides which cause inflammation. So, we no longer say we think these relaxation techniques help. We can now measure at a chemical level that psychodermatological intervention does result in a positive physiological change."

Despite this, most British dermatologists are yet to be convinced that psychodermatology may present a breakthrough in the way we tackle ageing. And, although they certainly advocate lifestyle changes when it comes to dealing with skin problems, 'prescribing'

relaxation techniques alongside proven anti-ageing treatments is an idea yet to take off. "I certainly don't do that," says Dr Ginny Hubbard, independent dermatologist for Olay. "However, it is an interesting area of research."

Nick Lowe, consultant dermatologist and author of *Away With Wrinkles* (Kyle Cathie, £14.99) agrees. "Though the importance of the psyche on the skin has been accepted, in Britain psychodermatology is still relatively new, and is applied more in relation to treating things like acne and eczema. Lots of studies have shown there is a definite correlation between these particular skin conditions and stressful events," he says. "I think it's partly true that our state of mind has an impact on the ageing process, but that impact is largely indirect, in the sense that stress can lead to poor nutrition and smoking. Those, together with sunlight, remain the most important factors in accelerating ageing."

But, whatever side of the anti-ageing fence you're on, there's no getting away from the fact that the cascade of biological events that happens as a result of thinking negatively and feeling anxious weakens the epidermal layer and leaves our skin wide open to the environmental factors that age us. "The bottom line is keeping the skin barrier healthy so you are less likely to be prematurely aged by outside forces," says Fried. "There's no question that doing that holistically, with a combination of relaxation techniques and skin treatments, is the ultimate in anti-ageing."

But for those of us who don't have time to do both, there's good news. Many of the moisturisers currently available certainly go a long way towards protecting us from environmental damage, but researchers believe that the next big development in skincare will be the 'stress protection factor' – ingredients designed to specifically combat the effects of stress. It won't, of course, miraculously conjure up pockets of spare time for us to practise yoga regularly, but the idea is that it will form a barrier which it is hoped will minimise the external damage that happens specifically as a result of stress. "Stress is the new frontier in skincare, and there is an explosion of research focusing on this topic," says Dr Thomas Mammone, Director of Clinique Biological Research And Development. "As researchers, we now believe that skin ages more rapidly during periods of emotional stress and I think in two years we will see products that can directly address these problems."

In the meantime, it may be prudent to invest in a mat and incorporate some regular sun salutations into your skincare regime. ■

MIND OVER WRINKLES

Complement relaxation techniques with products that protect your skin from external stress factors, and you'll glow

▲ Protect skin from environmental irritants with Clinique Superdefense Triple Action Moisturiser, £22



Reduce collagen damage with Staleja's Daily Line Reducer, £155



▲ If your skin has become inflamed and irritated as a result of stress, try Clarins Skin Beauty Repair Concentrate, £31.50



▲ Calm stressed skin and mind with Yogi Solutions Blue Veil Facial Oil, £24



Stimulate the production of endorphins with Guerlain Happyglow Glowing Overnight Treatment, £37

FEELING ANXIOUS LEAVES OUR SKIN WIDE OPEN TO THE ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS THAT AGE US