



the
new
happy

Reaching for a sunnier
life? Look to the women
of L.A. for inspiration!

Denizens of Los Angeles have a reputation for being open to all things novel, which may help explain why they are often the first in the country to adopt **spiritually driven movements** that began abroad (yoga and meditation, for instance). SELF spoke to West Coast women about the unconventional, even a little out-there, techniques they use regularly to infuse **calm, connectedness and contentment** into their routine, and to experts to find out how the rest of us can borrow their strategies to create our own **brand of bliss**. Keep an open mind and you just might end up with a lighter heart! **By Paula Darrow**

THE HAPPINESS STRATEGY

Treat your body as a work of art

"I see so many gorgeous women in L.A. who feel inadequate about the way they look," says Star Oakland, 42, an artist and former massage therapist in Venice Beach, California, who uses ceremonial body painting to improve women's self-image. Oakland, who had leukemia as a child, says the illness gave her a "strong sense of body awareness" early on, which led to a realization: "I wanted to depict the energy I saw coming from the inside of a person on the *outside* of her body, by using paint on bare skin," she explains. "So often, women see themselves in a fragmented way—I hate my hips; I hate my thighs. But painted, the body becomes a single, beautiful form. The flaws go away."

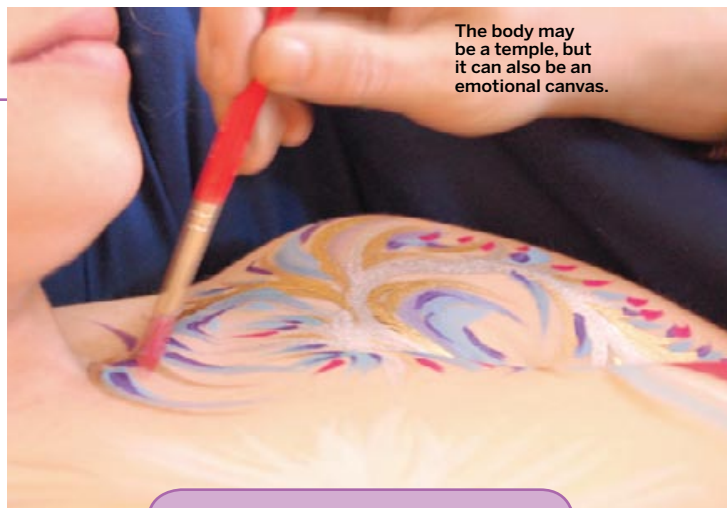
This is not your superficial "fun with temporary tattoos" brand of human adornment. Many women come to Oakland during key life transitions—a divorce, a pregnancy or a difficult medical diagnosis—hoping to alter their outlook. Oakland listens to their story, then paints them intuitively, applying abstract swirls and swaths of pigment to their bare skin, usually from head to toe, using warm water and nontoxic, pH-balanced paint. (To view a gallery of Oakland's inspiring images, go to

StarOakland.com.) The shapes and hues depend on the energy she senses flowing from her subject. And the result, she says, has an immediate positive effect on the way each woman sees herself and her body.

One clothing designer in Santa Monica, California, decided to get painted after she learned her husband was having an affair. "I was feeling insecure about my looks, especially knowing that he'd cheated on me," she recalls. "I'm a pastel person, but Star painted me with reds, golds and blacks that made me feel powerful at one of my weakest moments."

Writer Hope Eliahou, 43, of Topanga Canyon, California, had Oakland paint her at a joyful time, when she was eight months pregnant. "Beforehand, I had felt shy about my belly—I'm not the type to bare everything during pregnancy the way a lot of women here do," she says. "But the body-painting experience helped me think of my belly as an object of beauty, rather than as something I couldn't wait to get rid of."

The body may be a temple, but it can also be an emotional canvas.



A happiness hint you can use

You don't need a paintbrush to feel more sanguine about your looks or life; you just need your brain. Try thinking about your body's accomplishments, not its blemishes, says Margo Maine, Ph.D., author of *The Body Myth* (Wiley). "Instead of critiquing your breasts for being too large or not large enough—instead of doing that kind of dissection—think about what your body has done for you today. Your heart, your glands, your muscles, every bit of you is doing what it has to do to keep you alive and stable. Appreciate that."

THE HAPPINESS STRATEGY

Become part of a circle

Most people when they hear the word *prayer* think of religion. But that's not necessarily the case in L.A., where gatherings known as healing circles are an increasingly common way for women to pray in a decidedly nonsectarian fashion, for just about anything: a cure for a loved one who is ill or even a fix for the ailing economy. "People who have some kind of spiritual practice tend to be happier," says Sonja Lyubomirsky, Ph.D., author of *The How of Happiness* (Penguin). A compelling potential bonus: They may be healthier, too. A report in *Demography* notes that people who regularly attend some form of religious service outlive folks who don't by an average of seven years.

Every circle differs. The leader might start off with a blessing, then lead the group through a guided visualization about a particular topic. (Lisa Cianci, 46, a breast cancer survivor who has been participating in circles for three years in Topanga Canyon, says lately her group has been concentrating on "financial abundance.") Another day, the leader might ask everyone to turn their thoughts to a person who needs support. If someone is dealing with an illness, everyone might lay their hands on one another and focus on healing. Maria Madden, of El Segundo, California, who participates in a circle monthly with five other women ages 35 to 40, described a ritual meant to help her group's members achieve their goals and dreams: "We hiked to a grotto, wrote our intentions for the year on slips of paper, placed them in a box and hid it in the cave. A year later, we came back, opened the box and saw that other hikers had added their own trinkets and wishes to the pile."

"For me, a healing circle offers an opportunity to embrace whoever your god is and whatever gives you faith," Cianci says. "It's a safe, sacred place to share your energy."

A healing circle's focus "is on love, compassion and kindness," says Williams-Carter.

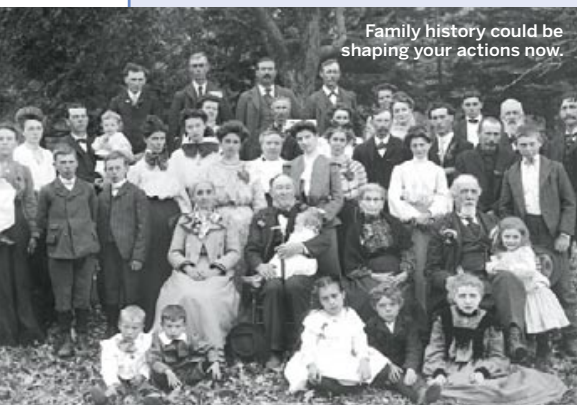


A happiness hint you can use

A healing circle's sense of connectedness is key, so even if you're not seeking spirituality, belonging to a group (maybe a knitting circle rather than a healing one) can be a good source of support. "One of the sad conditions of our times, especially in big cities, is loneliness. People are starved for human connection," says Hazel Williams-Carter, who runs a circle in L.A. "We're like a family," Madden says of her group. "Having a circle of strong women around me is so important."

THE HAPPINESS STRATEGY

Pay attention to your past for a brighter future



Family history could be shaping your actions now.

In traditional psychotherapy, a patient might look to her childhood and parents for explanations of her behavior. But in an out-of-the-box practice taking hold in Southern California, family-constellation therapists consider traumas as far as

several generations back, "the effects of which may have carried over to the present," says John L. Payne, author of *The Healing of Individuals, Families and Nations* (Findhorn Press), who conducts family-constellation workshops worldwide. "Let's say a woman comes to me and says, 'I'm 38; I want to get married, but every time I think I meet the one, he breaks it off,'" Payne theorizes. "A mainstream shrink might say, 'Tell me about your father.' But I may discover her grandmother was engaged to her great love, but he died. Out of unconscious loyalty, the 38-year-old may be holding back: 'Grandma couldn't have her love, so I can't have mine.'" To heal, the client must address emotions "within the family field," Payne says. In a group setting, the client arranges other participants, who represent her constellation of relatives, around the room. Then everyone adjusts their position based on intuition. Afterward, the client

might also be offered a "healing sentence" to repeat—along the lines of "Beloved grandmother, give me the courage to find my own great love"—to release her entanglement with Grandma's fate. (Hey, we said some of this stuff was out-there!)

A happiness hint you can use

At least one mainstream therapist SELF consulted sees the appeal of family-constellation therapy. If nothing else, says Lisa Thomas, a marriage and family therapist in Denver, "the better you understand your family, the more you'll understand yourself." If you're thinking of seeking help to sort out negative feelings, consider consulting a specialist in family therapy (find one on TherapistLocator.net) who is trained to take into account a patient's entire web of family relationships.

THE HAPPINESS STRATEGY

Throw a baby shower that's about more than gifts

Munching pink- and blue-frosted cupcakes while a mother-to-be unwraps endless blankets and bibs? Nice enough. But for women in Los Angeles (and, increasingly, across the country), a modern twist on the blessing-ways ceremony, a Native American tradition, may provide a more meaningful shower experience. Originally an occasion to summon female ancestral deities to help make a baby's passage into the world a safe one, the gatherings these days afford assembled friends and family members the chance to voice their personal wishes for the mother and baby.

Although all blessing ways differ, the central idea is that each guest presents the expectant mother with a carefully chosen charm or bead (a tiny silver bike to acknowledge a love of cycling the mom hopes to pass on to

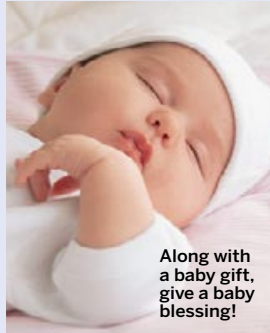
her child, perhaps) while delivering a blessing or offering advice for the mother and baby. These can be recorded in a keepsake album and the beads or charms strung on a cord that the mother can take with her to labor and delivery to recall the good intentions of her loved ones when she needs them most.

Friends of Diana Willensky Thompson, 44, incorporated bead giving in the shower held for her in Tujunga, California, a couple of years ago.

"The idea of playing silly games didn't appeal to me," she explains. "This way, I learned so much about the guests and their perceptions of children and motherhood."

Blessing-ways facilitator Stefany Koslow, of Fort Lee, New Jersey, agrees: "Compared to ordering a present online, you put so

much more thought into selecting a bead and thinking about what to say to your friend. Becoming a mother is probably the biggest change a woman can go through. Gathering people to guide you is a way to get strong for what is about to transpire."



Along with a baby gift, give a baby blessing!

A happiness hint you can use

Don't want to forgo gifts entirely? Consider combining the traditional shower activities with a suggestion that each invitee bring a wish for the baby or future mother, to be read out loud. If you're not expecting a baby, consider imbuing any celebratory gathering—a wedding shower, a birthday bash—with a heartfelt ritual to add to your feeling of fulfillment. "Rituals affirm friendships," says Lyubomirsky. "And the happiest people have good relationships."

THE HAPPINESS STRATEGY

Surf your way confident

Overcome doubt. Find camaraderie. Feel braver. That's the promise of the all-women's surf classes run by 27-year-old Mary Osborne, coauthor, with Kia Afcari, of *Sister Surfer: A Woman's Guide to Surfing With Bliss and Courage* (The Lyons Press). Osborne, who gained fame on MTV's *Surf Girls*, wants women to have a profound experience, one in which they face their fears—of surfing, of the ocean, of anything—without worrying about being mocked.

Susan Edlinger, 59, a student of Osborne's and an executive and life coach in Woodland Hills, California, began surfing 12 years ago after her sister died of breast cancer. "As women get older, it's easy for us to become more cautious, especially when it comes to physical challenges. But I didn't want my life to get narrower. I wanted to break out of my comfort zone, to honor life, not shy away from it." The confidence she gained from tackling the intimidating sport of surfing is immeasurable, she says. "Whenever I start worrying about saying or doing the wrong thing," Edlinger says, "I think to myself, If you can get through a 10-foot wave, you can certainly do this!"

What is it about surfing that feels so empowering? Partly, Osborne says, "you're being active in nature and having so much fun, you don't realize you're working out. That's blissful

right there." But surfing isn't simply about getting in shape. "There are no cell phones in the water," Osborne says. "You can stop, take a deep breath and pay attention to the moment. You're alone with your thoughts, focusing on the elements."



Brave the waves; feel confident about life.

What Osborne describes is "a state of flow, when you're so immersed in an activity that you forget many of the things that normally occupy your attention," explains David Feldman, Ph.D., assistant professor of counseling psychology at Santa Clara University in California. "Flow happens when you're working on something that's intrinsically rewarding and when there's a good match between your abilities and the challenge. It's why runners lose track of time in a

marathon." Achieving flow can make any activity more enjoyable, but its real boon, according to Osborne, is that afterward, "you can go back to your life with a clearer, calmer mind."

A happiness hint you can use

Instead of the same old, same old at the gym, pick an outdoor sport you have a knack for but that isn't so easy it bores you. "Seeing yourself get better at something—faster, stronger—provides a terrific sense of self-worth, with positive spillover effects for hours afterward," Lyubomirsky says.

Additional reporting by Rachel Resnick