HEARTMATH
St Angela’s had long been interested in promoting and supporting the emotional well being of both staff and students. For many years, students preparing for examinations have been taught stress relieving strategies, parents have attended sessions on how they can best help their sons and daughter achieve their potential.

Music is played at the start of examinations, bananas are available for all who want them and we even provide essential oils, particularly lavender.

OVERVIEW AND CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The exciting development of becoming a Heartmath School started with a newspaper article, an extract from which is printed below:

“Two months ago, a visitor to The Holt School in Wokingham - an all-girls comprehensive with good exam results - might have encountered a rather unusual sight. Ninety girls - the entire lower sixth - sitting silently in a large room breathing to a slightly unusual rhythm - five seconds in, five seconds out. A little while later the girls could be seen being encouraged to relive a time when they felt happy or loving and then to conjure up that memory while doing the breathing.

These exercises would not have seemed out of place in a medieval nunnery - in fact the breathing rhythm is the same one you slip into when reciting religious mantras such as Ave Maria - but in a modern school with GCSE and A levels looming? In fact if you are a parent whose child is sitting exams this term, you may wish they had been learning these ancient techniques, combined with the late-20th-century digital twist of laptop and software, in a package known as Heartmath.

It is now being used in half a dozen schools around the country with what seem to be impressive results. Soon one of the key questions at parents' evenings may no longer be: "Do you have good IT facilities?" but "Do you teach Heartmath?"

Independent on Sunday, May 28th 2006

Suitably intrigued, we invited in a representative of the company (contact details in reference section) and it developed from there -

● A meeting for all staff from the school’s “Accelerated Learning” teams was held in June
● The entire SLT and one AST were trained in the use of the techniques in October
● Three members of the SLT and the aforementioned AST had two days training (school based) in November and became accredited Heartmath trainers
● We were then in the position of having four members of staff ready to train the rest of the staff and the students

“A change of heart changes everything”

Doc Chidre, founder of the programme
Technology for maximizing Performance, Learning & Health.

Build the power to balance.

WHAT EXACTLY IS HEARTMATH?

There are four aspects to the interactive learning system:

- Specific breathing exercises
- Particular cognitive thought patterns
- Specially composed music
- A software programme which displays on the screen one's "output", giving a picture of what is going on inside - this data is collected by way of a sensor which is attached to the ear lobe.

The software is known as "Freeze-Framer".
THE THEORY IN A NUTSHELL - AND IN THE FOUNDER’S WORDS:

“Emotions and past experience build a set of familiar patterns, which become imprinted on your neural architecture. Patterns of rhythmic activity within the body also provide input to the brain. This input forms the backdrop of emotional experience.

These patterns include the heart's rhythmic beating pattern; respiratory, digestive and hormonal rhythms; and patterns of muscular tension, particularly facial expressions. The brain continuously monitors these inputs in order to organise perception, cognition, feeling and behaviour. Recurring patterns form a reference pattern against which input patterns are compared.

When the brain finds a pattern that matches the reference pattern, it processes the experience as familiar, and then it triggers the thoughts, feelings and physical responses to reinforce the familiar - even if the pattern is dysfunctional. This is called the maladapted pattern. For example, if you worry a lot, then worrying can become so familiar to your body that when you’re not worrying or anxious you feel uncomfortable.

Once worry or anxiety the familiar reference pattern, the brain keeps defaulting to anxious feelings and thoughts as the path of least resistance. This is how habits are formed. The brain considers the familiar to be more comfortable, no matter how irrational it may be.

The brain automatically strives to maintain a match with mental, emotional and physical anxiety responses and habits, despite their detrimental impact on health, well being and behaviour. Without effective intervention, anxiety can become self perpetuating and self enforcing.

From “Transforming Anxiety - the Heartmath Solution”

Doc Chidre & Deborah Rozman.

For optimum effect, the breathing exercises must be followed to the accompanying music for four twelve minute sessions per week.
The Heartmath programme is a very effective intervention strategy. The diagram below illustrates what can happen to us physiologically and emotionally when we are stressed and what happens when Heartmath is used.

**THE PHYSIOLOGY OF PERFORMANCE**

The more control one can exert over one's inner state, the more one will be in the two quadrants on the left of the vertical axis. The fusion of specific breathing exercise and positive thought will, over time, help create new brain patterns - and this has a powerful impact on one's performance: it is sometimes known as “being in the zone” and has been used successfully in sport for years.


WHAT WE DID AND WHAT WE QUICKLY LEARNED

- We devised a rolling programme to train all staff in the use of the techniques. One of the reasons for the success of this training was that all SLT had been trained and had been quite fulsome in their praise of the techniques.
- We then set about a rolling programme for training the students, starting with the Yr 11 and Yr 13. We quickly realised that whilst it was physically possible to explain and demonstrate the programme to complete year groups that it was not a particularly effective or conducive way of delivering it. The nature of the training session, requiring as it does quiet, trust and confidence - on both the part of the trainer and participant, does not lend itself to cavernous halls and large numbers of people.
- We ran simultaneous sessions for form groups and this proved much more effective; the intimate and familiar environment and being in friendship groups helped enormously.
- We uploaded the power point onto the VLE so that the students could have the instructions when they practised at home.
- We trained our external examination invigilators - so that when they played they music at the beginning of the examinations, they would feel involved and would understand.

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED SINCE

- If the whole student body is trained, as of course one would want to do, it is difficult to have properly devised control groups.
- It is difficult to prove that all students who say they are doing it are actually doing it, and doing it as frequently as the programme demands.
- The programme allows for individual tracking and we are hoping will be particularly beneficial with targeted students. The software is accessible in both our LSU and CSU.
- The entire student body has access to the software in both the main school and Sixth Form libraries.

FUTURE PLANS

- To extend our use of the programme with targeted students as another strand to our interventionist strategy and to analyse the results.
- To train all new members of staff as quickly as possible after they join the school.
- To ensure that the programme remains a priority in the school - this means that staff refer to and use it actively within the classroom.

REFERENCES:

- “Transforming Anxiety - the Heartmath Solution” by Doc Chidre & Deborah Rozman.
- Freeze-Framer 2.0 software.
- British distributors: Hunter Kane.
A morning dose of Heartmath certainly eased me into the day on a positive note

Head Teacher

My digestive problems were certainly helped - I felt much calmer

Deputy Head

I found I was sleeping through the night for the first time in years

Deputy Head

Heartmath helped me enormously as I prepared for my A2 examinations. I have no doubt it had a very positive impact on my results. I will definitely continue to do it at uni!