

Speaking of Stress Management through Yoga and other Strategies

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Stress: In a medical or biological context stress is a physical, mental, or emotional factor that causes bodily or mental tension. Stresses can be external (from the environment, psychological, or social situations) or internal (illness, or from a medical procedure). **Stress:** The different kinds of stress:

Stress management can be complicated and confusing because there are different types of stress — acute stress, episodic acute stress, and chronic stress — each with its own characteristics, symptoms, duration and treatment approaches.

Acute stress:

Acute stress is the most common form of stress. It comes from demands and pressures of the recent past and anticipated demands and pressures of the near future. Acute stress is thrilling and exciting in small doses, but too much is exhausting. A fast run down a challenging ski slope, for example, is exhilarating early in the day. That same ski run late in the day is taxing and wearing. Skiing beyond your limits can lead to falls and broken bones. By the same token, overdoing on short-term stress can lead to psychological distress, tension headaches, upset stomach and other symptoms.

Fortunately, acute stress symptoms are recognized by most people. It's a laundry list of what has gone awry in their lives: the auto accident that crumpled the car fender, the loss of an important contract, a deadline they're rushing to meet, their child's occasional problems at school and so on.

Because it is short term, acute stress doesn't have enough time to do the extensive damage associated with long-term stress. The most common symptoms are:

- Emotional distress — some combination of anger or irritability, anxiety and depression, the three stress emotions.
- Muscular problems including tension headache, back pain, jaw pain and the muscular tensions that lead to pulled muscles and tendon and ligament problems.
- Stomach, gut and bowel problems such as heartburn, acid stomach, flatulence, diarrhea, constipation and irritable bowel syndrome.
- Transient over arousal leads to elevation in blood pressure, rapid heartbeat, sweaty palms, heart palpitations, dizziness, migraine headaches, cold hands or feet, shortness of breath and chest pain.

Acute stress can crop up in anyone's life, and it is highly treatable and manageable.

Chronic stress

While acute stress can be thrilling and exciting, chronic stress is not. This is the grinding stress that wears people away day after day, year after year. Chronic stress destroys bodies, minds and lives. It wreaks havoc through long-term attrition. It's the stress of poverty, of dysfunctional families, of being trapped in an unhappy marriage or in a despised job or career. It's the stress that the never-ending "troubles" have brought to the people of Northern Ireland, the tensions of the Middle East have brought to the Arab and Jew, and the endless

ethnic rivalries that have been brought to the people of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Chronic stress comes when a person never sees a way out of a miserable situation. It's the stress of unrelenting demands and pressures for seemingly interminable periods of time. With no hope, the individual gives up searching for solutions.

Some chronic stresses stem from traumatic, early childhood experiences that become internalized and remain forever painful and present. Some experiences profoundly affect personality. A view of the world, or a belief system, is created that causes unending stress for the individual (e.g., the world is a threatening place, people will find out you are a pretender, you must be perfect at all times). When personality or deep-seated convictions and beliefs must be reformulated, recovery requires active self-examination, often with professional help. The worst aspect of chronic stress is that people get used to it. They forget it's there. People are immediately aware of acute stress because it is new; they ignore chronic stress because it is old, familiar, and sometimes, almost comfortable.

Chronic stress kills through suicide, violence, heart attack, stroke and, perhaps, even cancer. People wear down to a final, fatal breakdown. Because physical and mental resources are depleted through long-term attrition, the symptoms of chronic stress are difficult to treat and may require extended medical as well as behavioral treatment and stress management.

HOW stress affects our health:

Stress: We've all felt it. Sometimes stress can be a positive force, motivating you to perform well at your piano recital or job interview. But often — like when you're stuck in traffic — it's a negative force. If you experience stress over a prolonged period of time, it could become chronic — unless you take action.

A natural reaction

Have you ever found yourself with sweaty hands on a first date or felt your heart pound during a scary movie? Then you know you can feel stress in both your mind and body.

This automatic response developed in our ancient ancestors as a way to protect them from predators and other threats. Faced with danger, the body kicks into gear, flooding the body with hormones that elevate your heart rate, increase your blood pressure, boost your energy and prepare you to deal with the problem.

These days, you're not likely to face the threat of being eaten. But you probably do confront multiple challenges every day, such as meeting deadlines, paying bills and juggling childcare that make your body react the same way. As a result, your body's natural alarm system — the “fight or flight” response — may be stuck in the on position. And that can have serious consequences for your health.

Pressure points:

Even short-lived, minor stress can have an impact. You might get a stomach-ache before you have to give a presentation, for example. More major acute stress, whether caused by a fight with your spouse or an event like an earthquake or terrorist attack, can have an even bigger impact.

Multiple studies have shown that these sudden emotional stresses — especially anger — can trigger heart attacks, arrhythmias and even sudden death. Although this happens mostly in people who already have heart disease, some people don't know they have a problem until acute stress causes a heart attack or something worse.

Chronic stress:

When stress starts interfering with your ability to live a normal life for an extended period, it becomes even more dangerous. The longer the stress lasts, the worse it is for both your mind and body. You might feel fatigued, unable to concentrate or irritable for no good reason, for example. But chronic stress causes wear and tear on your body, too.

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Stress can make existing problems worse. In one study, for example, about half the participants saw improvements in chronic headaches after learning how to stop the stress-producing habit of “catastrophizing,” or constantly thinking negative thoughts about their pain. Chronic stress may also cause disease, either because of changes in your body or the overeating, smoking and other bad habits people use to cope with stress. Job strain — high demands coupled with low decision-making latitude — is associated with increased risk of coronary disease, for example. Other forms of chronic stress, such as depression and low levels of social support, have also been implicated in increased cardiovascular risk. And once you're sick, stress can also make it harder to recover. One analysis of past studies, for instance, suggests that cardiac patients with so-called “Type D” personalities — characterized by chronic distress — face higher risks of bad outcomes.

What you can do:

Reducing your stress levels can not only make you feel better right now, but may also protect your health long-term.

In one study, researchers examined the association between “positive affect” — feelings like happiness, joy, contentment and enthusiasm — and the development of coronary heart disease over a decade. They found that for every one-point increase in positive affect on a five-point scale, the rate of heart disease dropped by 22 percent.

While the study doesn't prove that increasing positive affect decreases cardiovascular risks, the researchers recommend boosting your positive affect by making a little time for enjoyable activities every day.

Other strategies for reducing stress include:

- **Identify what's causing stress.** Monitor your state of mind throughout the day. If you feel stressed, write down the cause, your thoughts and your mood. Once you know what's bothering you, develop a plan for addressing it. That might mean setting more reasonable expectations for yourself and others or asking for help with household responsibilities, job assignments or other tasks. List all your commitments, assess your priorities and then eliminate any tasks that are not absolutely essential.
- **Build strong relationships.** Relationships can be a source of stress. Research has found that negative, hostile reactions with your spouse cause immediate changes in stress-sensitive hormones, for example. But relationships can also serve as stress buffers. Reach out to family members or close friends and let them know you're having a tough time. They may be able to offer practical assistance and support, useful ideas or just a fresh perspective as you begin to tackle whatever's causing your stress.
- **Walk away when you're angry.** Before you react, take time to regroup by counting to 10. Then reconsider. Walking or other physical activities can also help you work off steam. Plus, exercise increases the production of endorphins, your body's natural mood-booster. Commit to a daily walk or other form of exercise — a small step that can make a big difference in reducing stress levels.
- **Get help.** If you continue to feel overwhelmed, consult with a psychologist or other licensed mental health professional who can help you learn how to manage stress effectively. He or she can help you identify situations or behaviors that contribute to your chronic stress and then develop an action plan for changing them.

- **Rest your mind.** According to APA's 2012 Stress in America survey, stress keeps more than 40 percent of adults lying awake at night. To help ensure you get the recommended seven or eight hours of shut-eye, cut back on caffeine, remove distractions such as television or computers from your bedroom and go to bed at the same time each night. Research shows that activities like yoga and relaxation exercises not only help reduce stress, but also boost immune functioning.
- **Yoga for Stress Relief:** Dating back over 5000 years, yoga is the oldest defined practice of self development. The methods of classical yoga include ethical disciplines, physical postures, breathing control and meditation. Traditionally an Eastern practice, it's now becoming popular in the West. In fact, many companies, especially in Britain, are seeing the benefit of yoga, recognizing that relaxed workers are healthier and more creative, and are sponsoring yoga fitness programs.

Overview of Yoga:

Yoga, which derives its name from the word, "yoke"—to bring together—does just that, bringing together the mind, body and spirit. But whether you use yoga for spiritual transformation or for stress management and physical well-being, the benefits are numerous.

Yoga's Effects on the Body:

The following is only a partial list of yoga's benefits:

- reduced stress
- sound sleep
- reduced cortisol levels
- improvement of many medical conditions
- allergy and asthma symptom relief
- lower blood pressure
- smoking cessation help
- lower heart rate
- spiritual growth
- sense of well-being
- reduced anxiety and muscle tension
- increased strength and flexibility
- slowed aging process

Yoga's benefits are so numerous; it gives a high payoff for the amount of effort involved.

What's Involved With Yoga?:

The practice of yoga involves stretching the body and forming different poses, while keeping breathing slow and controlled. The body becomes relaxed and energized at the same time. There are various styles of yoga, some moving through the poses more quickly, almost like an aerobic workout, and other styles relaxing deeply into each pose. Some have a more spiritual angle, while others are used purely as a form of exercise.

What Are The Benefits Of Yoga?:

Virtually everyone can see physical benefits from yoga, and its practice can also give psychological benefits, such as stress reduction and a sense of well-being, and spiritual benefits, such as a feeling of connectedness with God or Spirit, or a feeling of transcendence.

Certain poses can be done just about anywhere and a yoga program can go for hours or minutes, depending on one's schedule.

What Are the Drawbacks of Yoga?:

Yoga does require some commitment of time and is more difficult for people with certain physical limitations. Some people feel self-conscious doing some of the poses. Also, yoga classes can be expensive, although it is possible, albeit perhaps more challenging, to learn from a book or video.

How Does It Compare To Other Stress Reduction Methods?:

As yoga combines several techniques used for stress reduction, it can be said to provide the combined benefits of breathing exercises, stretching exercises, fitness programs, meditation practice, and guided imagery, in one technique. However, for those with great physical limitations, simple breathing exercises, meditation or guided imagery might be a preferable option and provide similar benefits. Yoga also requires more effort and commitment than taking pills or herbs for stress reduction.

The following yoga techniques can help calm an unsettled mind.

1: Move your body and relieve your mind of stress with Asanas.

These yoga postures can help achieve a happy and healthy mind and body. Asanas help release tension and negativity from the system.

- Dhanurasana (Bow Pose)
- Matsyasana (Fish Pose)
- Janu Shirsasana (One-Legged Forward Bend)
- Setubandhasana (Bridge Pose)
- Marjariasana (Cat Stretch)
- Paschimottanasana (Two-Legged Forward Bend)
- Hastapadasana (Standing Forward Bend)
- Adhomukha Shwanasana (Downward Facing Dog)
- Shirshasana (Headstand)
- Shavasana (Corpse Pose)

Note: *At the end of the yoga posture session, lie down in Yoga Nidra to give your mind and body a few minutes of through relaxation. The technique is helpful in flushing out body toxins, a primary cause of stress, from the system.*

2: Breathe right with Pranayamas to relieve anxiety

Taking your attention to the breath can help free the mind of the unnecessary clutter of thoughts that breed anxiety. Try the following breathing practices:

Kapal Bhati Pranayama (Skull-Shining Breathing Technique) Bhastrika Pranayama Nadi Shodhan Pranayama (Alternate Nostril Breathing) – effective in releasing stress from the system (where the exhalation is longer than the inhalation) Bhramari Pranayama (Bee Breath)

3: Meditate to enjoy the gift of a relaxed mind

Meditation can be an excellent technique to relax a distracted mind, give you a sense of calm and peace, and also observe with daily practice how your mind works to keep you involved in small, petty things around. It can also help you not worry too much or get anxious of the unknown future.

You might have often heard the term 'adrenalin rush'. This happens when we get too anxious about a potential threat. For instance, while taking an adventure ride. At such a time, the level of adrenalin hormone goes higher, leading our heart to beat faster, making the muscles tense and our body sweat profusely. Scientific research has shown that regular meditation practice can help significantly reduce the level of this stress hormone.

4: Apply yoga philosophy in your life; stay happy and enjoy every moment

Knowing and applying the ancient yoga knowledge in daily life, which talks about some simple yet profound principles (yamas and niyamas) of yoga, can be the secret to happy and healthy living. For instance, the Santosha principle (niyama) teaches the value of contentment. The Aprigraha principle can help us overcome greediness or the desire to keep possessing more, which can be a reason for stress and anxiety. Also, the Shaucha principle talks about cleanliness of the mind and body. This rule can particularly help if you tend to get too anxious about catching infectious diseases.

The yamas and niyamas of yoga will also help us eat nutritious food and live a healthy lifestyle which greatly helps to overcome anxiety and stress. To understand the yoga philosophy, you may consider reading Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's Commentary on Patanjali Yoga Sutras.

5: Pray, keep faith and smile!

Prayer is the best form of reassurance and support to keep you anxiety-free. Developing habits of daily prayer, chanting or singing bhajans (devotional songs) fill you with positive energy and also help still the mind. They also instill a sense of deep faith that all happens for the best and that there is a higher divine power that takes care. Moreover, make a conscious effort to smile more and more. It will instill confidence, calmness and positivity instantaneously. Try it out right now!

6: Think about what you can do for others

When we constantly remain stuck in 'me and mine', it makes room for stress and anxiety. We keep worrying about what will happen to us. Rather, shift your attention to how you can be of some use to others around you. Energizing yourself with some service activity can give you deep satisfaction and immense joy.

7: Know the impermanence of the world

When this realization sets in that everything around us is temporary and would change, we become relaxed and settled from within. A feeling of 'this too shall pass and not remain forever' arises in us and frees us from anxiety. Meditation can help us see this founding principle of life.

8: Remember a similar past situation when you could overcome anxiety

This fills you with immense courage that you can pass even this situation. Keep reminding this to yourself often.

9: Keep positive company around you

When you spend more time with positive-minded people, you are influenced by similar thoughts, which reflects in your overall attitude to life. Only a positive mind can breed joy, peace and relaxation.

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