

Escape! It's Our Annual Health and Relaxation Issue

Featured This Month:

Get Away Without Going Anywhere

What's the Best Child Care Option for Your Family?

Internet Jurisdiction: Whose Web is it, Anyway?

by Harriet L. Russell

Get Away Without Going Anywhere

Stressed? Feel short on time? "To do's" building up? When will you ever get your personal projects done? When did the kids grow up, anyway? Time bound consciousness is a common state of mind. Don't worry. Yoga and meditation can help. Stress reduction is a result of stress management. Learning to live with stress and learning to reduce stress are both related to how we think. How we think determines how we act, or react.

There are three factors in our lives that contribute to who we are in this world. They are heredity, environment, and lifestyle. Heredity cannot change. What we are given is what we have. Environment is difficult to overcome also. Lifestyle, however, we can change. In our daily habits lies the potential for lifestyle changes. How we eat, exercise and deal with stress can be modified. The situations we put ourselves in and our attitudes about life circumstances can also be altered.

Practical Techniques for Everyday Stress

What are the practical ways that yoga can help us solve day to day problems in life that can cause stress? On a physical level, yoga goes beyond just toning and strengthening muscles. Standing postures correct structural alignment and strengthen the spine. Twists massage the internal organs. Forward bends lower blood pressure and relax the nervous system. Inverted postures purify the lymphatic system. Yoga postures and breathing strengthen and balance the immune, hormonal, digestive and nervous systems.

Yoga also improves our mental state, increases concentration, builds self-esteem and helps us to deal with stress in a positive way. Mental and emotional

improvements include clarity of mind, greater awareness, increased concentration and focus, a more positive attitude, less mood swings, improved self esteem, "groundedness" and stress reduction.

When the body and mind are synchronized, a spiritual dimension comes forth: improved intuition, a deeper "knowing" inside, an openness of heart, a feeling of greater love and compassion for oneself and for others, a connection to the divine or to God in whatever way that expresses for each individual.

Chair Yoga for the Office

How can you take care of your body and mind while sitting at a desk or computer for hours on end? When I worked on Wall Street, I used to stretch while in my chair. Pretend to look at someone behind you, grab one side or back of the chair and twist first to one side, then to the other. While seated, you can arch the back opening the chest and then round the back, releasing. Do this several times. Stretch your arms overhead and interlace the fingers. Or just stand up and stretch your arms overhead for a moment. Lift the shoulders into a shrug and then release them (and the tension) suddenly. Moving the head up and down then side to side gives a good neck stretch.

Take a Deep Breath

Take a deep breathing break in the non-smoker's lounge. Get fresh air in good weather at lunch time. Mental anxiety caused by thinking or worrying too much, creates tension in the shoulders. Notice when you feel tension in the shoulders. It is usually a result of too many "should's" you put on yourself. What should be is projection or expectation. What is,

however, is reality. Facing reality with a deep breath brings us into the present and provides clarity.

Here is a simple breathing exercise that oxygenates the blood, increases lung capacity and cleanses toxins and allergens out of your system. It also takes the mind away from mental worry by focusing on breathing. It can be done seated or lying down.

Locate three parts of the torso: belly, lower lungs, upper lungs. You may place a hand on one part, moving it to another, until you get familiar with the technique. Do not force the breath. Do not hold the breath at the top of the inhalation nor at the bottom of the exhalation. Let it be a circular breath with smooth and even transitions. Breathe into the belly, gently filling it, then move the breath into filling the lower lungs, then all the way up under the collarbones into the upper lungs. Exhale slowly with one long breath. Repeat 6 times. Then breathe regularly.

You may use this as the only practice and repeat it over and over, or add on the following two steps. Breathe into the entire torso with one full breath. Exhale slowly in three parts, from the upper lungs, to the lower lungs, to the belly. Repeat 6 times. Then breathe regularly. Breathe into the belly, the lower lungs, then the upper lungs in one long smooth three-part deep breath. Then exhale slowly from the upper lungs, lower lungs, and belly. It is like a glass of water, filling in from the bottom to top, and pouring out from the top to the bottom. Repeat 6 times. Then breathe regularly.

If you keep your eyes open, no one will ever notice you are doing this while seated

in your chair. What a stress buster! It is great to use in heated discussions, as it improves your ability to listen because you are better able to remain calm.

Competition is stressful. Stay focused on what you are doing in the moment and don't worry about how it was yesterday, or how it will be in the future. Keep your eye on the goal, but be open to whatever results actually happen. An attitude of acceptance is key stress management.

Relaxation

Relaxation is a vital part of stress management. At the end of the posture practice or any exercise work out, lying down in relaxation pose brings the final integration of body and mind. The quiet allows for awareness of our inner self. Given time to reflect, we can discover the spiritual side of our nature. We awaken refreshed, rejuvenated, and renewed.

If you have your own office, ask not to be disturbed for 20 minutes and close the door. Lie down on the floor with your feet slightly apart and your arms at your sides with palms facing upwards. You may do the three part breathing, a tension and release exercise, or a body scan. You may combine them together as well.

Tension and Release

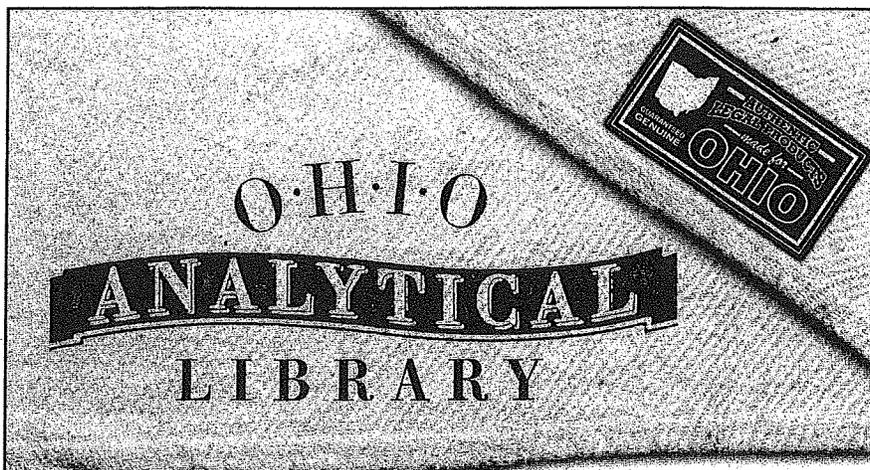
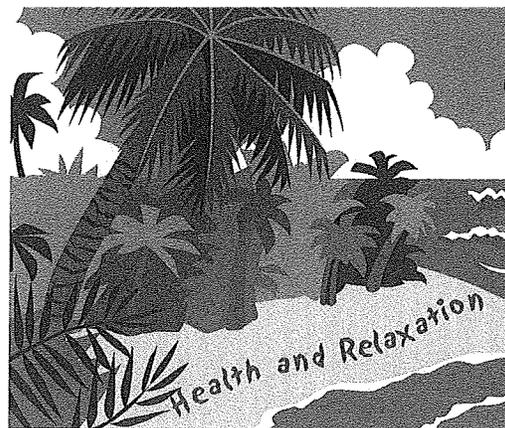
Tighten your fists and arms and shrug your shoulders up towards the ears, lifting only 1 inch off the ground. Then release suddenly. Repeat twice more. Tighten your buttocks and legs and flex your feet, lifting only 1 inch off the ground. Then release suddenly. Repeat twice more. Tighten your face and squinch your eyes. Release. Repeat two more times. Relax into the ground and practice the same three part breathing described above to continue to the calm the mind.

Body Scan

With your body relaxed now, begin the body scan. Without moving, focus the mind on the soles of your feet, then your ankles, calves and knees, thighs and hips and the belly. Keep scanning up your body into the lower back, the upper back, the

shoulders and neck. Relax your arms and your hands and feel the tension just wash away from your face and head.

The focus itself will bring relaxation. Breathe normally and evenly. Each breathe in brings in fresh energy, each breath out rids the body of tensions and toxins. Breathe in rejuvenation and exhale into deeper relaxation. Feel the body melt into the ground, but keep the mind alert yet relaxed. As a beginner, you may fall asleep! That's quite all right. As you practice, you



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will be able to go into a deep state of relaxation without falling asleep.

A Meditation Exercise

I remember while working on Wall Street how much my meditation practice helped me with the stressful lifestyle in New York City. I would search at lunchtime for a quiet bench outside between the skyscrapers so that I could do my meditation practice.

Meditation is a great stress reliever. Just sitting still and closing your eyes will begin to calm the mind. Meditation is Awareness of what is in the moment. Nothing more. Nothing less. Just what is.

It is just being aware of what is already happening in the moment. It is called "witness consciousness." Just like watching a movie go by. Thoughts will come and thoughts will go. Do not try to capture a thought and create a story from it. Do not force unpleasant thoughts to go away. Just let them come and go.

On a physical level, meditation lowers the blood pressure and expands the breath capacity. Meditation changes the chemicals in the brain. On a mental level, the mind goes into a state of calm but not to sleep. When the mind dips into the realms of calm, we connect to a source greater than our individual self.

After meditation, there is a marked clarity and focus, and peacefulness. With practice, intuitive abilities increase. The effects cumulate and continue to affect us throughout the day.

For beginners, it is sometimes difficult to sit still. Try some stretching beforehand so you will not be stiff and uncomfortable while sitting. You can try a walking meditation, if you like, before sitting down. Sit up straight so that you can breathe fully and not fall asleep. You may sit in a chair without crossing your legs or arms. Do not lean back, and keep your feet flat on the ground. Or you may sit on the floor with crossed legs or kneeling sitting on your heels.

It can be difficult to begin to meditate without focusing the busy mind first. There are many focusing techniques: 1) listening to the breath 2) noticing sensations like temperature changes, tingling and tension 3) focusing on a candle or picture of a loved one or religious figure that inspires you 4) repeating or listening to a mantra phrase 5) listening to relaxing music that does not have words or a melody to follow 6) visualizing a white healing light surrounding you or increasing within you. This is good for pain management. Twenty minutes of meditation

or the deep relaxation is equivalent to two hours of sleep...a real power nap!

In conclusion, consider what you eat, how you breathe, and how you deal with stress. The ways you take care of your body and mind are directly responsible for your overall health.

Harriet Russell is CEO/Director of Bhumi's Yoga and Wellness Center in Westlake. For information on lectures and corporate stress management seminars, call (440) 899-9569.

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