

Yoga for Stress Reduction

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“Financial tensions, emotional upheavals, environmental pollution, and above all, a sense of being overtaken by the speed of events, have all increased the stress of daily life. All these factors strain the body, causing nervous tension, adversely affecting the mind.” -BKS Iyengar

Understanding stress and it's impact. Some important definitions:

- Homeostatic Balance: The state in which all sorts of physiological measures are being kept at the optimal level.
- Stressor: Anything in the outside world that knocks one out of homeostatic balance (animals). Anything that does, or that one anticipates will, knock you out of homeostatic balance (humans).
- Stress Response: What your body does to re-establish homeostasis.

Based only on anticipation, we can turn on the stress response as robust as if the event had actually occurred.

When we activate the stress response out of anticipation, we seek to prepare ourselves, to mobilize our defenses early, but when we activate this response for no reason, or for something we can do nothing about, we experience the negative symptoms of stress and call it anxiety, paranoia, neurosis, and more.

Thus, the stress response can be mobilized not only in response to physical or psychological insults, but also in expectation of them.

During the stress response the body prepares for action in response to danger. In an effort to survive certain systems are shut down while others are activated. Much like preparing for a tornado headed your way, rather than paint the shutters or mow the lawn, one would instead run for safety, do everything needed to survive.

What the body does to survive:

- Glucose, proteins, fats pour out of our cells, liver, muscles to stoke the systems that'll save your life.
- Heart rate, blood pressure, breathing rate increase to transport nutrients and oxygen to the places that need them.
- Digestion is inhibited. If I'm eaten now, no need to do what needs to be done to eat later.
- Growth and reproduction slows or stops. Again, functions of the future, if I may cease to exist now it makes little sense to send resources to something that may soon be irrelevant.
- Immunity is lowered as there may be no need to defend against future illness or infection.
- Perception of pain is blunted in an effort to avoid shock in the moment of danger when what you need is to run away and not be frozen/shut down.

So why does stress make us sick?

“My stress stresses me out to the point where I'm too stressed to deal with stress.” -Unknown

Stress related diseases are disorders of excessive stress responses. Stress increases your risk of getting diseases that make you sick or if you have one already, stress increases the risk of your defenses being overwhelmed by the disease itself.

Constant mobilization of the stress response will make you experience every day as an emergency. If every day is an emergency:

- Energy is not stored and you will feel fatigued
- Chronic activation of the cardiovascular system will lead to cardiovascular stress and disease
- Vulnerable to infectious disease without the protection of an active immune system
- Reproductive disorders (females less likely to ovulate or carry pregnancies to full term, males have trouble with erections and secrete less testosterone).

Stress then leads to disease in the body and in the mind. This brings us to yoga.

“Peace. It does not mean to be in a place where there is no noise, trouble, or hard work. It means to be in the midst of those things and still be calm in your heart.” -Unknown

Yoga means to yoke, to join, to use. Yoga is the union of the individual self with the universal self. Yoga is thus a dynamic, internal experience which integrates the body, the senses, the mind, and the intelligence, with the self.

The body and the mind are in a state of constant interaction. Yogic science does not demarcate where the body ends and the mind begins, but approaches both as a single, integrated entity. The turmoil of daily life brings stress to the body and the mind. This creates anxiety, depression, restlessness, and rage. Yoga asanas, while appearing to deal with the physical body alone, actually influence the chemical balance of the brain, which in turn improves one’s mental state of being.

BKS Iyengar stated, “The practice of asanas and pranayama is not only the most effective, but also the most natural therapy for stress. Practiced together, they generate enormous amounts of energy in the body, stimulating the cells and relaxing tense muscles. The effect on the mind takes longer to register because yoga deals with the causes, and not just the symptoms of stress. With regular practice, the senses that divert the mind to the external environment are drawn inward, calming the restless mind.”

Because of the interconnectedness of the body and mind it is hard to discuss one without the other however for the sake of organization, please see below.

The body and yoga:

Asanas tone the whole body. They strengthen bones and muscles, correct posture, improve breathing, and increase energy. This physical well-being has a strengthening and calming impact.

Similar to a goldsmith heating gold to remove its impurities, similarly asanas by increasing the circulation of fresh blood through the body, purge it of distress and toxins which are the consequences of irregular lifestyle, unhealthy habits, poor posture, stress and so on.

Asanas balance the respiratory, circulatory, nervous, hormonal, digestive, excretory, and reproductive systems perfectly. The equilibrium in the body then brings mental peace and enhances intellectual clarity.

The mind and yoga:

“You should sit in meditation for 20 minutes a day, unless you are too busy; then you should sit for an hour.” -Old Zen saying

“Yoga Glow”, that feeling after a session of yoga, when the mind becomes tranquil and passive.

The primary aim of yoga is to restore the mind to simplicity and peace, to free it from confusion and distress. This sense of calm comes from the practice of yogic asanas and pranayama. By restoring the body, yoga frees the mind from the negative feelings caused by the fast pace of modern life.

The practice of yoga stimulates and changes emotional attitudes, converting apprehensiveness into courage, indecision and poor judgement into positive decision-making skills, and emotional instability into confidence and mental equilibrium.

“Practice the Pause” or create space between stressor and stress response:

According to Pantanjali, the aim of yoga is to calm the chaos of conflicting impulses and thoughts. Pantanjali writes, “The practice of yoga destroys the impurities of the body and mind, after which maturity in intelligence and wisdom radiate from the core of the being to function in unison with the body, senses, mind, intelligence, and the consciousness.”

Bad habits are essentially repetitive actions based on mistaken perception. The mind can be a secret enemy and a treacherous friend. It influences our behavior before we have the time to consider causes and consequences. Yoga trains the mind and inculcates a sense of discrimination, so that objects and events are seen for what they are and are not allowed to gain mastery over us.

Monster in the Bedroom example

When we practice mindfulness:

- * It slows the automatic response. Practicing mindfulness can help people to begin to recognize their habitual patterns of mind which have developed out of awareness over time, allowing practitioners to respond to their life in new rather than habitual ways.
- * Mindfulness helps us accept what is without judgement and helps us respond skillfully to challenges.

Practice the Pause with:

Presence: Be here now! The more present, the less you miss. The tiny details in life, the sensation of the hand in yours, the smell, taste, texture of the food you eat, the facial or body cues of the person your speaking with, the sensation on the skin when a cool breeze blows.

- * Being present through breath
 - * Develop concentration

- * Paying attention to all 5 senses
 - * Develop attention
- * Paying attention to your body
 - * Develop awareness Understanding: Taking a larger view, putting yourself in the shoes of others.

Acceptance: Recognition without needing to change or manipulate anything. Simply observe the breath, the body, the environment, the interaction.

Again, how stress works:

- * The automatic nervous system triggers a “fight or flight” response
- * Through repetition, pathways are formed creating automatic responses to environmental triggers eliciting both a cognitive and physical response
- * An interpretation of this information then informs the emotion attached to the situation
- * Calm nervous system, rational response vs. triggered nervous system, irrational response

When we think in repetitive ways we form Samskaras, imprints or impressions left on the mind. Repeated thoughts and actions can rewire your brain, and the more you do something, the stronger those new neural networks become. Almost 2,000 years ago, Patanjali was onto this when he suggested that the key to success in yoga is dedicated, uninterrupted practice over a long period of time. The resulting neural networks or samskaras, as yogis call them, get stronger and stronger as you stay with the practice. Slowly but surely, these healthy grooves of thought and action help guide people out of the ruts in which they’ve been stuck.

- * By slowing our automatic responses down, we provide opportunities to rewire our mind and body for improved emotional regulation while sending a message of calm to quiet the sympathetic nervous system, allowing for rational, informed problem-solving to be employed.
- * Research tells us that with regular practice of strategies that connect the mind and body, the brain has the ability to rewire, even in the aftermath of trauma.
- * These strategies include therapeutic breathing, restorative postures including yoga asanas, meditation or mental focus, and learning to stay present in the moment.

Using yoga to reduce stress:

Choose your practice based on your intention. There are SO many resources available within the melting pot that has become modern day yoga.

Explore the various types and limbs of yoga from pranayama, and asana, to mediation and mindfulness. Discover which aspects of the practice you gravitate toward and why. Develop a yoga toolbox of sorts so that when you have a job, you’ll have the tool to get it done.

The simple answer to using yoga for stress reduction is this, there’s really no way to do it wrong. You simply have to do it and the more you do it, the more you will know yourself and what you need. Yes there are specific programs or types of yoga utilized more frequently for use in calming like Restorative Yoga or Yin Yoga there are even programs like Yoga Therapy designed specifically for reducing stress however there is no real one sized fits all approach that will be right for everyone. I share this important point because many of us are subject to what I call the

“sposdas”, the pressure from outside us that communicates we are supposed to be doing things a certain way. And if you tell yourself that a restorative yoga class is what you are supposed to do to reduce stress and your body is screaming at you to move, move, move, you may find yourself in that restorative class feeling more agitated and tense than you did before you walked in the door. SO, listen to yourself and give YOU what YOU need.

In general, yoga practices that will calm the mind and body will include:

- Restorative Yoga
- Yin Yoga
- Yoga Nidra
- Various Meditation and Mindfulness techniques
- Pranayama
- Mudra

Understand also that yoga practices that stimulate the body and mind can also be incredibly helpful in reducing stress:

- Kundalini Yoga
- Vinyasa
- Power Yoga
- Yoga Sculpt
- Yin Yoga
- Pranayama
- Mudra

One final recommendation, combine and alternate stimulating practice with calming practice to model self-regulation. For example, develop an asana sequence that moves from active to passive postures, stimulating to calming types of pranayama, or focused to free form meditation or mindfulness practice.