



Wellness News

Andrea Soos

Moving the Body to Calm the Mind: Yoga for Stress Reduction & Well-Being

It's part of the human condition to experience stress, and as a yoga instructor, it gives me solace to know that this 2500 year old mind/body practice was conceived by those seeking focus, clarity and well-being in their lives so long ago. Navigating life's complexities is challenging, and when we add the demands of our personal and professional lives to the mix, compounding stressors can be of real concern, especially in high-intensity careers like law. The negative effects of stress can include sleep disturbances, an inability to relax or unwind, muscle tension, ruminating thoughts, anxiety, depression, drug or alcohol addiction, decreased immunity and other health issues which can undermine our well-being and quality of life.

Modern science verifies how yoga and other body-centred practices can help to relieve stress by eliciting a 'relaxation response' and balancing the nervous system. Apart from MRI studies which show increased brain activity in the pre-frontal cortex (which regulates the parasympathetic 'rest/digest/reflect/redirect' nervous system), other research shows that such practices stimulate the release of inhibitory neu-

rotransmitters that reduce limbic brain activity in the amygdala, our emotional control centre which also mobilizes our sympathetic 'fight/flight/freeze' nervous system.

Physical activity in general is known to lift mood and reduce stress. What makes yoga different? The word 'yoga' can simply mean 'to be aware' or 'mindful'. When we practise yoga, we purposefully pay attention to how we are moving, how we are breathing, and what we are feeling. In doing so, we cultivate a direct experience with what is happening right now. The gift of focusing on the body is that it is always present – it's our mind that can go off on tangents into the past, the future, along habitual patterns of thought and looping narratives. The body offers us a visceral and tangible focus to which we can tether our attention. A moving body gives us lots to notice and feel!

To take this a step further, yoga is about our relationship with our experience. How are we practising? The Sanskrit word that is commonly used for yoga poses is 'asana', which can be translated as 'finding ease and stability'. The slow, mindful movements involved in yoga are practised without force or strain, and help to gradually increase mobility and stability in the bigger, weight-bearing joints (like the

hips & shoulders) while engaging in relaxed, easy breathing. Moving this way enhances our body awareness or 'interoception', allowing us to recognize areas of stiffness and instability due to non-optimal movement patterns, the effects of old injuries and sneaky compensations. We can't change what we can't feel, so noticing restrictions and imbalances is very good news! By not pushing through pain or tension, we can effect positive change to our tissue, carve out new movement patterns & neuropathways, and build strength underpinned by good function.

Strengthening and tuning up our biomechanics is particularly important as we age. Not only does this help to prevent injury in our yoga practice and in other activities, but allows us to maintain and even improve our stamina, posture and balance. It's also important to know that tissue can continue to change at any age, and that it's possible to enjoy pain-free movement and pursue physical activities we love with yoga as intelligent cross-training! I've had the pleasure of watching people of all ages move for over 20 years, and am convinced it's never too late to experience the benefits of moving mindfully.

I've also seen how practising with ease and stability not only influences our movement habits, but illuminates our habits of mind. When we learn that we can choose to move without pain or tension, we also learn that we can choose how we think, and with this agency we can redirect our mind when we're aware that it's stuck on a particular thought, favourite personal story, or recent argument with opposing counsel. 'As does the body, so does the mind'.

How to get started? Many people are introduced to yoga by attending group classes at a local studio. For those

who prefer working one-on-one with an instructor, private sessions are also available. Customized movement programs can be devised to suit your individual needs and provide guidelines for practising on your own at home (and even at work!).

It's encouraging to know that practising 'little and often' can go a long way in making significant changes to both your body and mind. Setting aside just a few minutes to move and breathe mindfully can help you down-shift into the parasympathetic stream of your nervous system and take a momentary time-out to undo tension and gain perspective.

Can't get to the studio? Here is a simple breath awareness exercise you can practise anytime and anywhere to help you de-stress. Find a comfortable seated position or lie down on the floor with your knees bent. Feel where your body makes contact with the chair and/or with the ground. Sense the body being supported, the spine long, the jaw relaxed, the face expressionless, the eyes closed. Bring your awareness to how your body breathes on its own without changing or directing your breath in any way. Feel the passive inhale and exhale. Notice how the exhalation becomes longer than the inhalation as the body relaxes. Follow each exhale to its end, and note the pause at the end of the breath. Feel how the inhale arises passively from the pause at the end of the exhale.

Following the exhale allows you to focus on the parasympathetic 'rest/digest/reflect/redirect' phase of the breath, and is an effective way to deepen your breathing without adding stress or tension.

Finding quiet pauses between each breath always reminds me of T.S. Eliot's words about being 'at the still-

point of the turning world'. I'm also convinced that clarity, creativity and well-being all spring from this place.

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Andrea Soos is the owner of Andrea Soos Yoga Studio, offering classes, workshops and private yoga therapy sessions (www.andreasoooyoga.com). She can be reached at info@andreasoooyoga.com or 905.627.9310.

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