

The World of Stress and Tools for Relief

Positive impact can be found through yoga, breath work, and meditation to relieve today's profound stress. When left unchecked stress reduces our longevity and negatively impacts our quality of life.

Stress Today and Our Reactions to It

The body is a unique instrument made to protect itself against threats from aggressors and predators. Such threats are rare today, but we still have stress in our lives and sometimes react to occurrences as if they are life-and-death situations.

Even though we are seldom attacked by a predator we likely face many demands each day that may feel like our body is being attacked. Demands that seem to be steady and constant and are more connected to employment, financial obligations, others' opinion of ourselves, and caring for loved ones just to name a few. We seem to treat these occurrences as threats to the very core of our being. We all have stresses but usually not life-threatening yet the body reacts as if the event may impact our existence.

A look at the body responses

With perceived threats, like an argument over a dented fender, the hypothalamus alerts the body. The body prompts the adrenal glands, then cortisol and adrenaline are released. These actions increase blood pressure, and heart rate, which helps us have more energy in threatening situations allowing us to attend to the immediate danger. Cortisol increases glucose (sugar), enhances the brain's use of glucose, and increases the tissue-repairing substances in the body. (life-saving when we are chased by a lion) It also slows functions that would be nonessential or harmful in the fight-flight-freeze situation. It reduces the immune system responses and slows down the reproductive system, digestive system, and growth process. Even one's mood, motivation, and fear are altered.

These factors are designed to enhance our response to a full attack on our body. However, the everyday stresses can activate the same triggers which then overload our body when the true need is not there.

When Our Stress System Takes Over in Our Everyday Lives

We seem to be hardwired and programmed to protect ourselves so that we may continue to live. It could be this, hardwiring has simply been transferred or diverted to less threatening occurrences such as arguments, concern about others' thoughts,

paying our mortgage on time, and getting along with family and friends. Maybe it's a way for the body to continue to protect itself but transfer to more minor instances which should not take such a high level of response.

Our body's response system to stress usually resets itself once a perceived danger has passed, returning the hormones to normal levels. The hormones cortisol and adrenaline levels drop, bringing the heart rate and blood pressure back to typical levels, and other systems go back to their regular activities. Then we generally flow back into a state of rest and relaxation.

But when these irritants are always in your life you always feel that fight-or-flight reaction. Like someone is after you, and the fight-or-flight reaction stays with you.

Over time our body's response to stress continues with the exposure to cortisol and other stress hormones that continue to irritate and wear on the body and mind. Thus you have a larger risk of your health being put in jeopardy, with possible symptoms such as:

- Reduced immune system
- Stress and anxiety
- Reduction of one's focus
- Takes you out of present moment mindfulness
- Headaches
- Increase in blood pressure, and other heart problems
- Gaining weight
- Muscle tension and pain
- Sleep problems
- Problems with memory

So with all of this evidence of the body's response and how it wears the body down it is important to search for new tools to help you manage the stressors in your life. We cannot eliminate these stressors but we certainly can influence them greatly and reduce their occurrences as well as reduce their impact on our bodies.

The fight or flight mode with all of its hormonal releases wears heavily on our body. However, the relaxation mode gives us comfort, relaxes, helps reduce stress, and helps us rebuild. But when our everyday situations continue to "seem" to attack our bodies we stay in the unhealthy fight-flight-freeze condition.

When stress continually stays with us and we have cortisol flowing throughout the body it can interfere with and damage our physical and emotional structure. This puts us at risk from a health standpoint per the above list of possible problems.

How Can We Achieve Less Stress in Our Lives?

Tools are available to bring us to rest and relaxation and help us find peaceful, happy, and healthy ways to live.

Stressful encounters find their way into our lives and we cannot eliminate them. However, we can identify them and then influence and reduce them to ensure they do not dominate our lives. There are tools available to help us move to rest and relaxation more frequently and help us live more relaxing and happier lives.

The eight limbs of Yoga have been building one's body and releasing stress and anxiety for over 2000 years. Not only reducing the negative impact of stressors in our lives but very positively building a mental and physical framework between the mind and body to alleviate and enhance our life situation beyond where we are today.

Included in the eight limbs of yoga are meditation, breath work, and Asanas. Fully participating in any of these limbs will build positive lasting change within each individual who practices.

I offer this quote from Jennifer Young Director of Healthy Living at Kripalu Yoga Center.

“Behind our programs is a driving principle: Most of the symptoms and chronic diseases we attribute to the natural and inevitable processes of aging are not inevitable or natural at all. Instead, their root causes can usually be understood, prevented, treated, and reversed by addressing lifestyle factors, behavior, and stresses.”

Note these stressors, and root causes as brought out by Jennifer Young, can be relieved, reduced, or even eliminated through such tools as meditation, breath work, stretching, and letting go of past negative experiences still in our mind. It is also helpful to build different attitudes toward the origin of our stress that can help build positive lasting change in our health.

A Few Tools to Reduce or Manage Stress and Anxiety.

Meditation

In simple terms, meditation draws us inward and is one of the few times our mind, body, and soul can connect without interfering with outward pressures and thoughts of our modern-day world. It allows us to look inward and discover who we truly are regardless of outside influences, desires, or direction. Over time it allows us to become deeply connected to the true self.

Breathwork

Breath work can bring us swift temporary results, taking us back to a state of rest and relaxation within three deep breaths. Breath can activate the vagus nerve, which helps bring us into the parasympathetic nervous system. This reduces the hormones cortisol and adrenaline, so our body has less wear and tear.

As an example of short-term results ujjayi breath (that ocean-sounding breath in the back of the throat) immediately brings our mind inward as we listen to the sound in the back of the throat. From here it's easier to drop into meditation as we let go of outside thoughts and feelings and move inward to our true essence.

Another example can be found in the dentist's office. As you all probably recall the dentist needs us to lay back, open our mouth wide leave it open for a long period of time, try not to swallow often, and let them clean or drill sometimes creating pain. The breath can be your savior. Close your eyes and allow them to do their work, as you take a deep slow inhale, and then exhale as you feel the muscles relax. Let go of the tension, and allow your mind to be on the inhale and the exhale, not what the dentist is doing in your mouth.

This relaxation is temporary and lasts only a few moments after taking your last focused deep breath.

Long Term Breathwork

If students practice breathwork over the years, they can slowly and surely create long-term reactions. Such as using coherent breathing, kapalabhati breath (often referred to as the skull cleansing breath) or dirgha breath can create long-term positive effects. A few positive impacts that may occur if you use the correct breath are:

- Reduction of toxins in the body
- Can positively impact one's emotional state
- Reduced amount of cortisol in the body
- Relax our system which increases blood flow
- Help open the alveoli in the lungs and help them regain their elasticity.
- Increase the level and flow of energy found in the body
- Help overcome addictions
- Boosts the immune system
- Can have positive effects on diaphragm function and lung capacity

Healthy students can also practice breath-holding exercises. (not recommended without an advanced teacher direction) that helps one to reduce their egos.

*About 70% of the cleansing of the toxins in the body, is released through breathing, and approximately 30% is released through the bladder and bowels. So if you do not breathe fully your body must work overtime to get rid of the toxins.

Asana's

These are the physical forms used in yoga and simply stated are ways to stretch the body, engage the tendons and muscles, and all the structures that hold and support our physical body. They can range anywhere from morning stretching as you lay in bed, or attending a yoga class to fit your level of fitness.

This stretching helps break up fascia which grows every night and is used to bind our muscles, tendons, and organs together to keep us solid. However, if the fascia grows without it being stretched sometimes we become inflexible and stiff. This stretching form of exercise also engages the vagus nerve signaling the body to relax and again brings us away from fight and flight and pulls us toward rest.

Samskara's

We can also let go of samskara's residing in our mind.

Past experiences ("samskara's ") can remain within our memory for years and many times as far back as our childhood. They can come to the conscious mind when we remember an event similar to the original occurrence or randomly float to the surface and be recognized. Some of these experiences could be serious such as child abuse in early years or a wonderful day at the beach with friends. Micheal Singer's book [*Untethered Soul*](#) thoroughly explains how these hidden memories can negatively impact the self, drain energy from the body, find them, and slowly release them over time. Thus freeing the self from an unwanted memory and saving one's energy for more desired activities.

SUMMARY

When you place 8.5 billion individuals on the planet, that by itself would create stress for all sentient beings. Then add to that our high-achieving concept and search for material items found in many of the material-advanced nations stress and anxiety are sure to follow. Thus stress and anxiety seem to be a part of our lives. As so well stated by Jennifer Young "their root causes can usually be understood, prevented, treated, and reversed by addressing lifestyle factors, behavior, and stresses."

The tools listed above can go a long way to help every one of us improve our quality of life and longevity of life. With proper focus on our root causes and the use of the many tools available to us, we can positively influence and impact our lives to live a more healthy life with less frustration and illness.