

Stress, Yoga & Meditation from a Yoga Teachers perspective

A yoga teacher for many years, I have seen countless students arrive in the studio completely depressed and unable to handle the stress in their lives. They are ready for a change because they have let stress become a priority in their lives. Stress itself, is neither inherently good nor bad. Instead, how you perceive and react to it determines how it will affect your health.

My prescription for the reduction of Stress is always the same:

- 1) Always Breathe deeply
- 2) Practice Yoga whenever you can
- 3) Meditate whenever you can

The key is to transform your relationship to the stress so that it no longer overwhelms you.

All of us exhibit stress and strain in the weakest areas of our bodies. Most commonly we feel stress in the form of headaches, shoulder tension, lower back tension, panic attacks, heart palpitations, insomnia and overeating. But I tell my students to be aware of other symptoms where stress could be a factor. Stress can show up in our bodies as digestive/elimination problems, excessive sugar, salt intake or skin breakouts. Stress can show up in our thoughts and feelings as impatience, irritability or anger. It can also play a part in our behavior. Has there been conflict in your relationships? Maybe a lack of intimacy or uncontrollable crying spells? Depending on the level of stress in our lives it can make us feel insecure, sad and even depressed to the point where we no longer know how to cope with day to day living.

It is sad that the need for anti-stress practices has become increasingly urgent. Americans now work nine full weeks more per year than our peers in Western Europe. And even if we get time off, we don't always use it: At least 30 percent of employed adults don't take all their vacation days, according to a 2005 Harris Interactive poll (www.yogajournal.com). At the yoga studio we see more and more people coming to try a yoga class because they are just plain overscheduled, overworked, and overwhelmed. So what can we do about this?

Our students are discovering that mind-body practices like yoga and meditation can be hugely helpful in shifting the way they react to stress.

The practice of yoga teaches you to tune in to what your body is telling you and to act accordingly. The physical part of yoga (asanas) can get help us with those body aches and pains by moving and stretching in new and different ways. Yoga can help rid the body of toxins that cause excessive build up in the joints that make us feel exhausted, give us panic attacks that ultimately cause these negative/hurtful behaviors and feelings.

The practice of Pranayama (controlling the breath) also affects our state of mind. Pranayama is used in yoga to help clear and cleanse the body and mind. It is also used in preparation for meditation, and in asana, to help maximize the benefits of the practice, and focus the mind.

Meditation is also an important spiritual practice in many religious and spiritual traditions; it can be practiced by anyone regardless of their religious or cultural background to relieve stress and pain. In a yoga class we will sometimes practice “concentration” meditation which involves focusing attention on a single object. Objects of meditation can include the breath, an inner or external image, a movement pattern (yoga), or a sound, word, phrase or prayer that is repeated silently.

The yoga texts are always reminding us to be mindful in everything we do. In a mindfulness meditation practice, it involves becoming aware of the entire field of attention. The yogi is instructed to be aware of all thoughts, feelings, perceptions or sensations as they arise in each moment. Mindfulness meditation practices are enhanced by the yogi’s ability to focus and quiet the mind in all aspects of life. For yoga teaches us that we cannot just practice in a class, we must practice every moment; at the grocery store, at the dinner party, with our spouses and with ourselves.

In a yoga class we will focus on all of the above practices within the class structure. In a Restorative class you may find more time spent sitting listening to the breath or being guided in meditation where as in an Ashtanga or Vinyasa Flow class you may find more time spent listening to the breath and focusing on meditation within the movement.

So how can we live with stress and have it no longer overwhelm us? As you learn to separate the urge to act from the reaction, you begin to find that something like a canceled meeting, sick child or an irritable co-worker may not rattle you as much as it once did.

Consider another yoga teaching, that of balance and moderation in all things. Consider how you might simplify your life to rid yourselves of your current stressors. Ask yourself, can you take a less demanding job and can you live with less money, less material things? Figure out what’s really essential in your life and dump the rest.

We have the power over stress. We can take back our relationship to it instead of letting it overpower us. We can let it transform our lives with negativity or we can take our lives back; moving from the darkness into the light.

You decide. I only ask that you take a yoga class, breath a little deeper and take a moment to close your eyes and just sit, if only for a moment.

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