



## BENEFITS OF PRACTICING YOGA

Stress is a killer. It can cause a variety of musculo-skeletal disorders, from back pain, and carpal tunnel syndrome to shoulder and neck tension. It can cause eye strain, chronic fatigue, gastrointestinal disturbances and headaches, and chronic stress is the leading cause of anxiety and depression.

Increasingly, medical researchers are studying ways to cope with stress that do not involve medical or pharmacological intervention, and one of these remedies is yoga. Research shows that practicing yoga has the power to beat stress, along with a myriad of health concerns that are caused by stress.



### YOGA CAN:

- Relieve stress
- Treat musculo-skeletal disorders, from back pain to neck tension
- Relax the body and mind
- Fight pain
- Relieve tension and reduce the risk of injury
- Make you a better communicator
- Promote the act of self-compassion

## WHAT IS YOGA?

Yoga is a mind-body practice that includes both physical and mental components. Practicing the breathing and postures of yoga can relax the mind and body, and help it to fight pain, relieve tension, reduce the risk of injury, improve posture, increase energy and attention span, and even make you a better communicator.

## HOW DOES IT HELP YOUR BODY?

Physiologically, yoga works by preventing the release of the stress hormones cortisol and catecholamines, processes that can have a dramatic effect on the body. Just by learning to control your breathing, for example, you can influence how you feel both emotionally and physically. The parasympathetic nervous system kicks in, and your body begins to make better use of oxygen. Muscle tension is reduced and there is a decrease in the activity of the sympathetic nervous system, which means your heart rate and blood pressure will go down. Another component of yoga that can improve well-being is the element of self-compassion, the state of being aware of and acknowledging your own suffering and adopting an attitude of caring and kindness toward yourself. Moving through the various yoga postures can lead to a greater acceptance of one's unique physical attributes, and create a desire to take better care of yourself.

## WHAT HAPPENS IN A YOGA CLASS?

Yoga classes begin with warm-ups such as head rolls or shoulder rolls, and then proceed to a series of standing, sitting, supine and prone poses. Most of these poses can be adapted to the sitting position. Once the spine is completely warmed up, a yoga class may end with a spinal twist and a deep relaxation exercise. There may be sun salutations, breathing exercises or meditation. Classes are usually places of peace and quiet, with instructors issuing directions in mellow tones, encouraging participants to forge a greater awareness of mind and body.

## WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS RESEARCHERS ARE FINDING?

Yoga is increasingly used in clinical settings for a variety of mental and physical health problems, particularly stress-related illnesses. Further research into the ways in which yoga affects stress may even allow doctors and researchers to help pinpoint the types or aspects of yoga that most improve specific illnesses, thereby customizing yoga routines as a form of treatment. One study suggests there may be a way to use yoga to treat people with HIV/AIDS. Mental health care professionals might prescribe yoga as a psychotherapeutic treatment, alone or in conjunction with pharmacological treatments.

In one study, conducted by researchers in India, 236 school teachers were separated into two groups. One half participated in a 15-day course of yoga training and exercise. The other half continued their usual routine. Participants who practiced yoga showed significant improvement in several areas, including lower blood pressure, reduced anxiety, an enhanced mood, feelings of cheerfulness and improved confidence. The control group who continued with their routine teaching had higher levels of anxiety compared to the yoga group.

Another study tested the effectiveness of yoga in enhancing emotional well-being and resilience to stress among employees at a British university. About 50 employees were divided into either a six-week yoga program of one 60-minute class per week, and the other group practiced no yoga. The study concluded that the yoga group reported marked improvements in feelings of clear-mindedness, composure, elation, energy and confidence. In addition, they reported an increased sense of life purpose and satisfaction, as well as feelings of greater self-confidence during stressful situations. Results showed that even a short program of yoga is effective for enhancing emotional well-being and resilience to stress in the workplace.

## BENEFITS OF INCORPORATING YOGA INTO YOUR WORK DAY

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*Research also shows that workers who practice yoga have fewer absentee days due to illness or physical problems, and they experience less tension and stress. They also tend to have a greater overall feeling of well-being, leading to higher morale and better communication skills.*

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Since workload and other stressors in the work place can be triggers of stress, it might be beneficial to incorporate yoga into the work day, either formally or informally. If there is space available, a yoga class could be taught at lunch time or after work hours. Once employees learn the techniques, they can independently practice them in their own workspaces, just by focusing on breathing, posture and the way they position and move their bodies throughout the day.

### SOURCES AND REFERENCES:

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