

# Stress and Yoga

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Stress is one of the leading causes of disease. Prolonged exposure to stress can lead to physical ailments such as insomnia, chronic muscle tension, digestive disorders, ulcers, high blood pressure, and heart disease. Mental and emotional consequences include memory loss, inability to concentrate, anxiety, hostility, and depression.

Stress is subjective. What is stressful to one person might be stimulating to another. The difference is in perception or one's inner conditioning. Yoga is one of the best tools for managing stress because it encourages you to focus internally. Yoga conditions your mental "muscles" along with your physical muscles to help you prevail under pressure and to respond more gracefully and effectively. At the same time, yoga helps eliminate and soothe the damaging effects of stress.

Anyone can practice yoga. Some of the **physiological benefits** of yoga practice include:

- Better health
- Improved sleep
- Normalization of weight
- Decrease of physical tension
- Greater flexibility and strength
- Increased vitality, endurance, and resiliency
- Improved circulation and digestion
- Improved posture

Some of the **psychological benefits** include:

- Decrease of anxiety, hostility, and depression
- Improved memory, attention span, and ability to concentrate
- Calmness
- Improved mood and sense of well-being
- Greater self-awareness, self-acceptance, and self-actualization
- Improved balance

Yoga promotes a healthy interaction between the mind and body — an important benefit given that so many common physical ailments are attributed to stress and to one's mental or emotional state. For example, recent studies show that a majority of common back ailments are triggered not by physical abnormalities or by heavy lifting, but by chronically tight muscles caused by stress. Emotional stress causes the back muscles to become tense and more vulnerable to injury. Gentle yoga stretches help reduce physical tension directly. Simple breathing

techniques and encouragement to stay aware in the present moment help alleviate the mental and emotional distress that causes such tension.

The mind-body interaction works in both directions. When you are physically tense, the mind becomes more easily agitated and critical. When muscles relax, as they do in yoga practice, the mind becomes more tranquil. The result is greater clarity, a healthy change of perspective, and the ability to respond to challenges more creatively and with calm and ease.

Much of the stress people feel today results from feeling disconnected or powerless. The greater pressures of balancing work and family responsibilities can easily overwhelm anyone. Yoga's emphasis on inner focus helps you connect with and develop an inner strength. Yoga helps you slow down to appreciate and create a balance among all aspects of your being — physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. As you become more relaxed, you can find more peace and joy in life and bring more peace and joy to others.

Yoga practice does not require a large, time-consuming commitment. A few minutes a day can go a long way. Attending a yoga class once or twice a week can provide you the support you need to learn and maintain your practice. Finding a well-qualified teacher is important. To find a teacher in your area, ask your health care professional or visit the Massachusetts Yoga Alliance website at <http://www.massyoga.com>.

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