

Master Daily Stress: A Guide to Find your Bliss (even in the midst of family/workplace drama)

WHAT IS STRESS?

Firstly, let's debunk one myth: stress is not necessarily a 'bad' thing. Without this brilliant ability to feel stress, humankind wouldn't have survived.

Stress is primarily a physical response. When stressed, the body thinks it is under attack and switches to 'fight or flight' mode, releasing a complex mix of hormones and chemicals such as adrenaline, cortisol and norepinephrine to prepare the body for physical action. This causes a number of reactions, from blood being diverted to muscles to shutting down unnecessary bodily functions such as digestion.

Through the release of hormones such as adrenaline, cortisol and norepinephrine, the caveman gained a rush of energy, which prepared him to either fight the Saber Tooth Tiger or run away. That heart pounding, fast breathing sensation is the adrenaline; as well as a boost of energy, it enables us to focus our attention so we can quickly respond to the situation.



In the modern world, the 'fight or flight' mode can still help us survive dangerous situations, such as reacting swiftly to a person running in front of our car by slamming on the brakes. The challenge is when our body goes into a state of stress in inappropriate situations. When blood flow is going only to the most important muscles needed to fight or flee, brain function is minimized. This can lead to an inability to 'think straight'; a state that is a great hindrance in both our work and home lives. If we are kept in a state of stress for long periods, it can be detrimental to our health. The results of having elevated cortisol levels can be an increase in sugar and blood pressure levels, and a decrease in libido.



When your body goes into a state of stress, you may feel agitated and aggressive towards others; this can be due to our bodies' natural reaction which is "fight". This can be a helpful reaction to ward off predators, but in unnecessary situations, it can negatively affect relationships and ruin reputations. Some of us avoid our stressors, removing ourselves from the situation instead of tackling it. This can be a sign of the "flight" survival instinct; a function that can save our lives if we find ourselves in dangerous surroundings. However, in everyday life, this natural instinct can lead to a stressful situation escalating, and increase our stress levels when you realize that the stressor isn't going away and you need to face it. For some people, becoming stressed sets the stage for emotional responses that may be over the



top for the situation, including angry outbursts or behavior outbursts such as destroying or throwing objects, aggression towards self or others.

Unknown by many, there is a third mode that stress can cause; **freeze**. That “Deer in the Headlights” response. The energy by the perceived threat gets “**locked**” into the nervous system and we ‘freeze’. This response sometimes reveals itself when we breathe. Holding our breath and shallow breathing are both forms of freeze. The occasional deep sigh is the nervous system catching up on its oxygen intake.

WHAT CAUSES STRESS?

When you experience stress, you may develop a wide variety of physical, psychological and behavioral symptoms. These symptoms are not a sign of disease because stress is not a disease; they are brought about by your body’s sympathetic nervous system (Fight/Flight response), which is designed to give you extra energy and speed to cope with a threat.

When under stress you may experience a pounding, speeding heart. This is not a sign of heart disease, but is in fact, caused by stress hormones stimulating your heart to pump harder and beat faster to get extra oxygen to vital muscles and organs so you can fight or run away. Once the stressful event has passed, the levels of stress hormones in your blood stream are supposed to fall again and your heart is supposed to return to its normal rhythm. Are you in fight or flight mode more often than not? The heart and the rest of your body’s organs and systems should be able to cope with this speeding up and working harder; they are designed to be able to do this. However, we live in stressful times and these systems may not work correctly under the constant stimulus of the of the Fight/Flight response, which increases the levels of stress hormones in the blood stream. Long exhales and restorative poses signal the parasympathetic nervous system (Relaxation) to reduce the levels of stress hormones in the blood stream. You’ll learn more about this later.

One of the problems with stress is recognizing it. Once you are aware of it you can act.



However, stress can be stealthy, it can slowly creep up on you without you being immediately aware of it. There are numerous signs and symptoms of stress and not everybody develops the same symptoms. Research has indicated that, although there are common symptoms of stress, individuals vary in the symptoms they present

and you may have mainly physical symptoms such as muscle pain/tension, others may present with symptoms such as crying or anger. Learning the signs and symptoms of stress can help make you become more conscience of the problems stress can cause in your life. You may experience chronic headaches, indigestion, sleeping issues or even unhealthy weight gain or loss.

Some people may wonder if learning Stress Management skills is worth all the effort. Research has shown that an individual who learns Stress Management gains a tremendous number of

benefits when compared to people who haven't learned Stress Management. Techniques like exercise, improved nutrition and relaxation, all help, not only to reduce your stress, but also reduce your risk of developing several common health problems. The psychological and physiological benefits include: Increasing feelings of control, improved quality of life, lowered blood pressure, improved sleep patterns and a stronger immune system.

Yoga is not a miracle cure that can free you from all stress, but it can help minimize it and strengthen your nervous system for better coping mechanisms. The worries of modern life deplete your reserves of bio-energy, because you draw on your vital energy from the nerve cells. This can exhaust your energy reserves and lead to the collapse of mental and physical equilibrium. Yogic science believes that the nerves control the unconscious mind, and when the nervous system is strong, you face stressful situations more positively. Yoga poses improve blood flow to all the cells of the body, revitalizing the nerve cells. This flow strengthens the nervous system and its capacity for enduring stress.

During stressful situations, your diaphragm may become stiff and tense (like any other muscle) and unable to do its job of altering its shape to assist in the process of inhaling and exhaling. Yoga poses address this problem by developing elasticity in the diaphragm, so that when stretched it can handle any amount of stress, whether physical, emotional or intellectual.

The practice of poses and breathing techniques helps to integrate the body, breath, mind and intellect. Slow effortless exhalation during practice of a pose brings calmness to the body cells, relaxes the facial muscles and releases all tension from the organs of perception: the eyes, ears, nose, tongue and skin. When this happens, your brain, which is in constant communication with the organs of action, become invalid and all thoughts are stilled. Then invading fears and anxieties cannot penetrate to the brain. When you develop this ability, you perform your daily activities with efficiency and economy. You do not waste your valuable bio-energy. You enter a state of true clarity of intellect. Your mind is free of stress and is filled with calm and tranquility.



Breathe

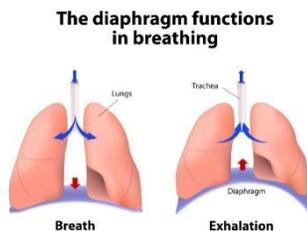
When you were growing up, did your Mom ever tell you when you were angry or upset to take 10 breaths? Didn't you usually feel a little calmer afterwards? Even though Mom may know best, taking long slow breaths has been scientifically proven to affect the emotions, the heart, the brain, digestion and even the immune system. Mladen Golubic, MD, PhD, a physician in the Cleveland Clinic's Center for Integrative Medicine, says "that breathing can have a profound impact on our physiology and our health." Breathing techniques are a method to train your body's reaction to stressful situations and dampen the production of harmful stress hormones.

Some people may find it difficult to understand the link between the way we breathe and its effects on stress, as we have been breathing since the first moment we were born and take 20,000 breaths a day,

so we must have been breathing correctly as we are still alive. Yet research has shown that the way you breathe can have a powerful influence on how stressed you feel. When you suffer stress one of the changes brought about by the fight/flight response is to speed up the amount of breaths you take switching from slow, abdominal breathing to faster, shallower, stressful, chest breathing. This is vital and healthy in the short term however if you are constantly triggering the fight/flight response you can begin to habitually breathe with your upper chest even though the stress may be over. This style of breathing sends signals to the brain that you are under stress when you may not be.

Yogic breathing is a mindful, controlled, extended process of exhalation and inhalation. The autonomic nervous system is the part of your nervous system responsible for control of your bodily functions not consciously directed, such as the heartbeat and digestive processes, as well as our breath. Of these, the breath is the only thing you can consciously control, and by doing so, you can directly impact your body's physiology and stress levels.

Belly Breathing Or Diaphragmatic Breathing



Diaphragmatic Breath (Adham Pranayama) is one of the most basic breaths as well as the most calming. "...diaphragmatic breathing is considered by many to be the simplest and most effective form of controlled respiration in the reduction of excessive stress." (George S. Everly, M.D. Co-Founder and Chairman Emeritus and International Critical Incident Stress Foundation at Johns Hopkins Center for Public Health Preparedness).

If you watch a baby breathe, you will see their little belly move up and down. As you grow older, you start to breathe more into your upper chest and during stressful situations, your breath becomes shallower and faster. In order to calm down, your breath needs to become longer and deeper. By using your abdominal muscles, you change the shape of your diaphragm to allow the lungs to fill and empty completely. The diaphragm is a muscle and like any muscle it can get tight and stiff. This happens sometimes when you are stressed. It is shaped like a dome and resides up under your ribcage. When you use your abdominal muscle on an inhale it flattens the diaphragm to allow the lungs to fill completely and when you exhale it rises to push the stale air out of the lungs.