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## Stress management through yoga

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### Introduction

Modern life is full of hassles, deadlines, frustrations, and demands. For many people, stress is so commonplace that it has become a way of life. Stress isn't always bad. In small doses, it can help you perform under pressure and motivate you to do your best. But when you're constantly running in emergency mode, your mind and body pay the price. You can protect yourself by recognizing the signs and symptoms of stress and taking steps to reduce its harmful effects. Exercise has been proven to have a beneficial effect on a person's mental and physical state. For many people exercise is an extremely effective stress buster. Try to delegate your responsibilities at work, or share them. If you make yourself indispensable the likelihood of your feeling highly stressed is significantly greater. Make sure you set aside some time each day just for yourself. Use that time to organize your life, relax, and pursue your own interests. The stress is affecting the way you function; go and see your doctor. Heightened stress for prolonged periods can be bad for your physical and mental health. As yoga combines several techniques used for stress reduction, it can be said to provide the combined benefits of breathing exercises, stretching exercises, fitness programs, meditation practice, and guided imagery, in one technique. However, for those with great physical limitations, simple breathing exercises, meditation or guided imagery might be a preferable option and provide similar benefits. Yoga also requires more effort and commitment than taking pills or herbs for stress reduction. We generally use the word "stress" when we feel that everything seems to have become too much - we are overloaded and wonder whether we really can cope with the pressures placed upon us. Anything that poses a challenge or a threat to our well-being is a stress. Some stresses get you going and they are good for you - without any stress at all many say our lives would be boring and would probably feel pointless. However, when the stresses undermine both our mental and physical health they are bad. In this text we shall be focusing on stress that is bad for you. The difference between "stress" and "a stressor" - a stressor is an agent or stimulus that causes stress. Stress is the feeling we have when under pressure, while stressors are the things we respond to in our environment. Examples of stressors are noises, unpleasant people, a speeding car, or even going out on a first date. Generally (but not always), the more stressors we experience, the more stressed we feel.

### What is stress?

Stress is a normal physical response to events that make you feel threatened or upset your balance in some way. When you sense danger—whether it's real or imagined—the body's defences kick into high gear in a rapid, automatic process known as the “fight-or-flight-or-freeze” reaction, or the stress response. The stress response is the body's way of protecting you. When working properly, it helps you stay focused, energetic, and alert. In emergency situations, stress can save your life—giving you extra strength to defend yourself, for example, or spurring you to slam on the brakes to avoid an accident. The stress response also helps you rise to meet challenges. Stress is what keeps you on your toes during a presentation at work, sharpens your concentration when you're attempting the game-winning free throw, or drives you to study for an exam when you'd rather be watching TV. But beyond a certain

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point, stress stops being helpful and starts causing major damage to your health, your mood, your productivity, your relationships, and your quality of life.



**The Body’s Stress Response**

When you perceive a threat, your nervous system responds by releasing a flood of stress hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol. These hormones rouse the body for emergency action.

Your heart pounds faster, muscles tighten, blood pressure rises, breath quickens, and your senses become sharper. These physical changes increase your strength and stamina, speed your reaction time, and enhance your focus—preparing you to either fight or flee from the danger at hand.



**How we respond to stress affects our health**

1. We do not all interpret each situation in the same way.
2. Because of this, we do not all call on the same resources for each situation
3. We do not all have the same resources and skills.

Some situations which are not negative ones may still be perceived as stressful. This is because we think we are not completely prepared to cope with them effectively. Examples being: having a baby, moving to a nicer house, and being promoted. Having a baby is usually a wonderful thing, so is being promoted or moving to a nicer house. But, moving house is a well-known source of stress.

It is important to learn that what matters more than the event itself is usually our thoughts about the event when we are trying to manage stress. How you see that stressful event will be the largest single factor that impacts on your physical and mental health. Your interpretation of events and challenges in life may decide whether they are invigorating or harmful for you. A persistently negative response to challenges will eventually have a negative effect on your health and happiness. Experts say people who tend to perceive things negatively need to understand themselves and their reactions to stress-provoking situations better. Then they can learn to manage stress more successfully.



**Perception of stress affects heart attack risk** - people who believe their stress is affecting their health in a big way are twice as likely to have a heart attack ten years later, according to researchers at the University of Western Ontario. First author, Dr Hermann Nabi, believes that doctors should bear in mind patients' subjective perceptions of stress when deciding on treatment.

In another study carried out at Pennsylvania State University, the investigators found that stress was not the problem, but rather how we react to stressors. It appears that how patients react to stress is a predictor of their health a decade later, regardless of their present health and stressors. Lead researcher, Professor David Almeida said "For example, if you have a lot of work to do today and you are really grumpy because of it, then you are more likely to suffer negative health consequences 10 years from now than someone who also has a lot of work to do today, but doesn't let it bother her." Psychological stress may play a role in breast cancer aggressiveness - in 2011, scientists from the University of Illinois at Chicago explained that stress may be associated with cancer aggressiveness among minority populations. Principal investigator, Garth H. Rauscher, Ph.D., said "We found that after diagnosis, black and Hispanic breast cancer patients reported higher levels of stress than whites, and that stress was associated with tumor aggressiveness."

**The Effects of Stress on Your Body, Your Thoughts and Feelings, and on Your Behaviour**

Effect on Your Body	
A Tendency of Sweat	Back Pain
Chest Pain	Hypertension
Cramps and Muscle Spasms	Loss of Libido
Childhood Obesity	Lower Immunity against Disease
Erectile Dysfunction	Muscular Aches
Fainting Spells	Nail Biting
Headache	Nervous Twitches
Heart Disease	Pins and Needles
Stomach Upset	Sleeping Difficulties

Effect on Your Thoughts and Feelings	
Anger	Irritability
Anxiety	Problem Concentrating
Brain out	Restlessness
Depression	Sadness
Feel of Insecurity	Fatigue
Forgetfulness	

Effect on Your Behaviour	
Eating Too Much	Alcohol Abuse
Eating Too Little	Higher Tobacco Consumption
Food Craving	Social Withdrawal
Sudden Angry Outbursts	Frequent Crying
Drug Abuse	Relationship Problems

**Maternal stress and bullying later on at school**

If a mother experiences severe mental stress during her pregnancy, there is a greater risk that her child will be bullied at school later on, researchers from the University of Warwick, England, reported in the Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry.

The researchers had gathered and examined data on 14,000 moms and 8,829 children. They evaluated mothers' post-natal period, family adversity, anxiety and depression during pregnancy, as well as bullying incidences among their children aged from 7 to 10 years.

They found that mental stress during pregnancy impacted on the child's chances of being bullied later on.

Lead researcher, Professor Dieter Wolke, said "Changes in the stress response system can affect behavior and how children react emotionally to stress such as being picked on by a bully. Children who more easily show a stress reaction such as crying, running away, anxiety are then selected by bullies to home in to. The whole thing becomes a vicious cycle, a child with an altered stress response system is more likely to be bullied, which affects their stress response even further and increases the likelihood of them developing mental health problems in later life."

**Diagnosis of stress**

A good primary care physician (GP - General Practitioner) should be able to diagnose stress based on the patient's symptoms alone. Some doctors may wish to run some tests, such as a blood or urine, or a health assessment. The diagnosis of stress depends on many factors and is complex, say experts. A wide range of approaches to stress diagnosis have been used by health care professionals, such as the use of questionnaires, biochemical measures, and physiological techniques. Experts add that the majority of these methods are subject to experimental error and should be viewed with caution. The most practicable way to diagnose stress and its effects on a person is through a comprehensive, stress-oriented, face-to-face interview.

**Stress Management through Yoga**

Practicing yoga is not only an effective stress reliever, but also a way to ease symptoms of anxiety. By transferring focus and attention to the body and breath, yoga can help to

temper anxiety while also releasing physical tension. Anxiety is the most common mental illness in the U.S., affecting roughly 40 million adults nationwide, or about 18 percent of us.

Yoga is a practice, not a competition. Start where you are and proceed with caution. To avoid injury, listen to your body and don't push further than feels good.

**Anjali Mudra (Salutation Seal)**

Practicing Anjali Mudra is an excellent way to induce a meditative state of awareness. Most of the time, we perform it with our hands in the centre of our heart chakra. This represents the balance and harmony between the right and left side reunited on our centre. This balance can be not only physical but also mental and emotional, and the idea is to bring us to the center to prepare ourselves for meditation and contemplation. Start this sequence by practicing this mudra while seated in a comfortable cross-legged position with your eyes closed.



**Sukhasana (Easy Pose)**

This pose provides a gentle massage to the spine and belly organs while acting as a powerful stress buster. This pose is often paired with Cow Pose on the inhale for a gentle, flowing vinyasa. Marjaryasana also benefits overall health by stimulating the digestive tract and spinal fluid. For proper alignment, place wrists directly under the shoulders and knees under the hips.



**Marjaryasana (Cat Pose)**

This pose provides a gentle massage to the spine and belly organs while acting as a powerful stress buster. This pose is often paired with Cow Pose on the inhale for a gentle, flowing vinyasa. Marjaryasana also benefits overall health by stimulating the digestive tract and spinal fluid. For proper alignment place wrists directly under the shoulders and knees under the hips.



**Bitilasana (Cow Pose)**

Cow Pose is an easy, gentle way to warm up the spine. This pose is often paired with Cat Pose on the exhale for a gentle, flowing vinyasa. In addition to relieving stress and calming the mind, this pose also: massages and stimulates organs in the belly, like the kidneys and adrenal glands, and creates emotional balance. For proper alignment, place wrists directly under the shoulders and knees under the hips.



**Uttana Shishosana (Extended Puppy Pose)**

This pose is a cross between Child's Pose and Downward Facing Dog. It lengthens the spine and calms the mind and

invigorates the body. This pose also relieves symptoms of chronic stress, tension, and insomnia.



**Paschimottanasana (Seated Forward Bend)**

Paschimottanasana can help a distracted mind unwind. Seated Forward Bend is a basic yet challenging pose with several benefits in addition to relieving stress and anxiety. Additional benefits include: stretches the hamstrings, spine, and lower back, improves digestion, relieves symptoms of PMS and menopause, reduces fatigue, stimulates the liver, kidneys, ovaries, and uterus. Keep the feet flexed and lower your forehead toward your knees.



**Janu Sirsasana (Head-to-Knee Forward Bend)**

A forward bend for all levels of students, Janu Sirsasana is also a spinal twist. This pose calms the brain and helps relieve mild depression anxiety, fatigue, headache, menstrual discomfort and insomnia. You can do this pose with both arms reaching for the extended foot, or by rotating your torso sideways and extending the outer arm over your head.



**Salamba Sirsasana (Supported Headstand)**

Standing on your head in proper alignment calms the brain and strengthens the body. Headstand can help ease anxiety by reversing the blood flow and forcing you to focus on the

breath and the body in the present moment. This pose also gives the heart a rest by saving it from pumping blood back up from your lower body, as it has to do when you are standing.

This pose can be practiced against a wall if you are a beginner. Make sure the weight is resting on your forearms and shoulders rather than your head and neck. Proper alignment in this pose would allow a piece of paper to slip through your head and the mat.



### **Balasana (Child's Pose)**

Child's Pose is a perfect counterbalance pose to supported headstand. Try sitting on the knees and bending forward with arms forward or by your side. Resting your forehead on the ground in this pose will help to relieve additional anxiety. It is a restful pose that can be sequenced between more challenging asanas. This pose can also be done with arms alongside the body rather than over the head. Do what feels best to you.



### **Savasana (Corpse Pose)**

Savasana is a pose of total relaxation, making it one of the most challenging asanas. Shavasana gives the nervous system a chance to integrate that in what can be thought of as a brief pause before it is forced once again to deal with all the usual stresses of daily life. Lie on your back with your eyes closed, arms by your sides and palms facing up. Allow your ankles to fall outward. Allow your body to melt deeper into the mat with each breath. Stay in this pose for a minimum of 5 minutes.

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