Breathe Your Stress Away
Category : February 1999
Published by Anonymous on Feb. 01, 1999

HEALING

Breathe Your Stress Away

These simple yoga techniques can dispell your confusion

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Stress is a natural and necessary consequence of living. But there's no need for us to be subject to it in abnormal amounts. Any influence that perverts or abuses the expenditure of our energy toward our desired functions is stress. When excessive, it produces undesirable reactions, both physical and mental. Examples of stress symptoms are: overeating, drug or alcohol abuse, excessive smoking, glued to the TV, loss of appetite, boredom, twitches and tics, inability to concentrate, persistent worry and fear, hopelessness, depression, sudden lapses of memory, disturbed sleep, sudden feelings of hyper-elation, frequent colds and illness, aches, muscle cramps and chronic fatigue. It's easy to have any one of these symptoms in a very subtle form and tend to pass it off as not important.

Adequate stress management, or coping with stress, must start by recognizing the underlying symptoms, then doing something about it. Our Hindu yoga practices alleviate stress--a fact which Western medicine is just now recognizing. Hatha yoga teaches us to relax the physical body through

stretching and breath control. Diaphragmatic breathing makes us aware of the condition of our body and mind. In order to strengthen the diaphragm--a muscle of respiration--we may practice "sandbag" breathing. A sandbag weighing five to ten pounds is placed upon the upper abdomen to give a slight resistance to the movement of the abdomen during inhalation or contraction of the diaphragm.

A powerful relaxation method is "Alternate Breathing." The basic technique is to apply slight pressure on the left nostril with the middle and ring fingers of the right hand. The thumb is used to apply a slight pressure on the right nostril. Breathe in through the right nostril, closing it after inhalation is complete and then breathing out through the left side. Then the breath is taken in through the left nostril and the exhalation is out the right. This completes one round. Then you start over.

Breathe smoothly, slowly, with no pause between inhalation and exhalation. Do three rounds of alternate breathing whenever you're overly stressed. Awareness is drawn to breathing, and thus withdrawn from the stressful situation. Alternate breathing may be preceded or followed by conscious, diaphragmatic and even breathing. This is a slow, deliberate inhalation and exhalation of equal length, say a count of four in and a count of four out with no pause at the change from inhalation to exhalation, or vice versa.

Once rhythm is attained, slow down the breath until you're exhaling twice the time that you're inhaling; using a 2:1 pattern. This stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system

(slowing the heart rate), brings relaxation and reduces arousal stimulations. Plus, meditation performed twice daily broadens our consciousness and maintains the state of living in the present. It protects us from reacting negatively to the stress of living in our fast-paced world.

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