Managing stress through yoga

If you're experiencing high levels of stress, you'll be relieved to know that there are simple and effective stress management techniques available. Let's take a closer look at yoga, and how it fits into your stress-relief toolkit.

Yoga has steadily increased in popularity in the past decade. Likely you've seen people toting yoga mats to and from gyms, and noticed products like magazines, clothing and props being sold everywhere from airports to specialty shops. It could be tempting to dismiss yoga as a fad; however, research shows yoga to be an effective complementary treatment for depression and anxiety, overall mood, and especially stress.

What is yoga?

When we talk about yoga today, we usually are referring to a physical practice that includes the following:

***Asana* – physical postures**

Yoga poses simultaneously stretch and strengthen the body. There are many of these postures, each targeting a different muscle or muscle group. They range from the extremely simple, to the pretzel-like shapes often associated with yoga. After a yoga practice, people often report discovering muscles they never knew they had!

***Pranayama* – breathing exercises**

Breathing is an important aspect of a yoga practice and part of what makes it uniquely helpful for stress management. While students are practicing yoga postures, they are often asked to breathe evenly through their nose. A yoga teacher may also incorporate simple breathing exercises into the beginning or end of a class.

Relaxation

One of the reasons yoga is sometimes referred to as "moving meditation" is because the yoga practitioner is asked to focus on the present moment during practice – much like in mindfulness meditation. So it could be said that if you're sweating buckets in downward dog but thinking about where you'll park when you pick up the dry cleaning, you're not fully doing yoga!

Where to begin

The best way to get started in yoga is to find a Yoga Alliance registered instructor. You can go about this a number of ways:

- If you belong to a gym, see if they offer yoga classes and pick up a schedule.
- Give your local studio a call and describe your fitness level and needs to find the level that's right for you. Dedicated yoga studios usually offer more variety and very experienced teachers.
- If going to a class isn't possible, yoga videos are a great way to practice at home. You can find DVDs at your bookstore or library, and websites such as MyYogaOnline and DoYogaWithMe offer virtual classes that range from 10 minutes to over an hour.

As with any form of exercise, if you have any chronic health conditions or injuries, talk to your doctor to make sure yoga is right for you.

If stress is affecting your daily life, yoga may be worth a try. If you're someone who likes recording and noticing changes, keep a stress log and rate your stress level each day on a scale of 1-10. Take a look after a month of yoga practice, and see if anything has changed.