

Breaking down stress: Mindfulness, breathing and yoga can beat back stress' side effects

December 11 2013, by Diane Toroian Keaggy

The car needs gas. What's for dinner? The boss looks like a banana in that yellow sweater. Every day, some 50,000 to 70,000 thoughts move through our brains. Some are meaningful; most are mundane. But for those who suffer from chronic stress and anxiety, the conveyor belt of daily thoughts can be terrifying.

"I see students who go from, 'If I don't stay up all night, I won't get an A' to 'If I don't get an A, I won't get into graduate school' to 'If I don't get into graduate school my hopes and dreams will be ruined,'" said Ginny Fendell, mental health promotion associate at the Habib Health and Wellness Center at Washington University in St. Louis. "You see people propel themselves so quickly into this life of failure with just their thoughts. And your body doesn't differentiate between real and imagined, so your heart rate increases and your fight-or-flight reaction gets activated. You are experiencing a physical stress reaction to something that hasn't even happened."

Stress is not a deadline or a holiday. It's how we react to a deadline or a holiday. In other words, whenever the demands of a situation exceed our ability to cope, we experience stress – that surge of adrenaline and cortisol that makes our hearts race and our stomach seize. This hormonal fight-or-flee reaction was the body's gift to our early ancestors, who needed to act fast when confronted with a raging bush fire or hungry hyena. Today, however, stress has evolved into a chronic condition. And

this constant state of stress is taking its toll—not only on our emotional well-being, but our bodies as well.

"Stress can lead to conditions ranging from insomnia to [irritable bowel syndrome](#) to panic attacks to headaches," said Thomas Brounck, PhD, director of [mental health](#) services at the Habib Center. "The bad news is most of us are never taught how to cope with stress. The good news is it's never too late to learn."

Developing good sleeping and eating habits, exercising regularly, getting a massage—all of these practices, and many more, can help. But experts also believe the simple act of being present, or mindfulness, also can counteract stress, especially during the stressful holiday season.

"Let's face it, when most of us get stressed, we're thinking about something in the past we can't change or something potentially in the scary future," said Kathryn Liszewski, a research scientist on the faculty at Washington University School of Medicine who has written about stress in her book, *Why Worry? Stop Coping and Start Living*. "Learning to live and appreciate the present moment is an antidote to stress. But it also requires living mindfully and changing unproductive habits."

Fendell offers a mindfulness bootcamp, free to all WUSTL students, where participants learn simple meditation and breathing techniques. Research shows that meditation can slow down both our heart and respiration rates.

"Students want a natural tool; they don't want to take a pill," Fendell said. "But they also want a quick, easy strategy that works. So learning to drop into the present through your breath is something that's really effective. The great thing about it is, your breath is always with you; you don't need to light a candle or to sit cross-legged in a special room."

Fendell meditates for 30 minutes twice a day. That may seem like a long time, but she considers it "mental hygiene."

"You wouldn't skip taking a shower or brushing your teeth," said Fendell, who has been meditating for 28 years. "Even with all of the things we have to do, there are some things we just get done and, for me, meditating is one of those things. It's like hitting control-alt-delete on your computer; it refreshes everything. That doesn't mean I don't experience stress; I just don't let it accumulate."

Liszewski, who writes under the name Kathryn Tristan, suffered from crippling stress for years. She was like so many of the students Fendell sees today—quick to let her thoughts take her to a terrible place.

"It started for me in college. Young people don't always realize when the stress is building up," Liszewski said. "I kept adding more and more, and one day, I suddenly started feeling afraid, and my heart started racing. It was my first panic attack."

She changed her diet, added exercise, learned how to challenge negative thoughts and reconnected to her spirituality. Breathing also played a role. Today, she practices diaphragmatic, or belly, breathing as well as meditation. Other simple strategies, such as smiling or focusing on what is right about a situation, also reduce her stress.

"Whether you're happy or not, studies show the act of smiling can reduce stress," Liszewski said. "It's a stimulus-response thing—when my muscles move this way, I have these emotions. It doesn't take long to change your biochemistry once you are aware that you can do so."

Fendell acknowledges some stress is good—it can motivate us to take care of pressing problems. And yes, sometimes it's not just our thoughts that are terrible; it's real life. She tells students not to stress out about

their [stress](#).

"Have a little bit of self-compassion for your emotions," Fendell said. "We, as adults, believe we are supposed to have total control over our emotions and thoughts. We don't. We can only control our behavior."

Kathryn Tristan's 5-minute mental marinade

- Place both hands over your heart and close your eyes.
- Slowly take five very deep breaths.
- Think of five things are that right about your life and for which you are grateful.
- Focus on someone you love or something you love to do and marinate in that feeling a few minutes.
- Take five more deep breaths, open your eyes and enjoy feeling totally refreshed.

Provided by Washington University in St. Louis

Citation: Breaking down stress: Mindfulness, breathing and yoga can beat back stress' side effects (2013, December 11) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-12-stress-mindfulness-yoga-side-effects.html>

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