

Awareness - Yoga for Stress Relief

We all know the feeling of stress. But what causes stress? Our thoughts cause stress. More accurately, our thoughts create the stress reaction within us. Stress does not exist outside of us. Without our thoughts we would not experience stress. Most simply put, stress is a psychophysical reaction to an external or internal stimulus.

There is good stress and there is bad stress. Good stress promotes survival, so we need good stress. An example of good stress is stepping off a curb of a busy street, then look towards oncoming traffic only to realize that you are in the direct path on an rapidly approaching bus! When confronted with danger such as this, the Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS) engages. Blood pressure increases, the heart beats faster, blood clots more easily, white blood cells stick to the walls of the capillaries and the stress hormones of adrenaline and cortisol are released. The objective is to get us pumped up and out of harm's way. When the harm passes, in this case the bus, the Parasympathetic Nervous System takes over and things go back to normal. Good stress happens in the present, from external conditions existing in the moment.

A core concept of stress management is awareness or mindfulness. Stated another way, it is learning to be in the present moment. I saw a sign during a recent trip that said "Today is a gift to you; that's why it is called the present." How true. Most of the time there is little to worry about in the present moment. How are you right now? Probably pretty good. The mind, however, seldom wants to stay in the moment. Like a monkey, it wants to jump around and look to the past and look to the future. Anywhere but the present.

The past is easy to deal with - there is no way to change it. Stress control begins with the abandonment of all hope for a better past. It is pointless to stress over thoughts like "why did this happen to me?," or feel guilt over specific shortcomings of our past. The bottom line is that it does not make any difference at this moment. Because you cannot change it, why waste precious time dwelling on the past?

Worry and anxiety about the future is bigger problem. The comforting fact is that most of what we worry about does not occur. As Mark Twain once said, "the biggest disappointments in my life - never happened." Write down what you have worried most about in the past, and you will see that the vast majority of

items on the list, never occurred.

What makes this type of stress so bad, i.e. stress caused by dwelling on the past or on the future, is that our stressful thoughts continue to keep the Sympathetic Nervous System engaged. When the switch does not get turned off, harmful effects eventually ensue. Bad stress fuels type 2 diabetes, heart attacks, depression and stroke. There is no direct evidence that it causes cancer, however it certainly impedes the healing process.

The purpose of an awareness practice is to keep you in the present moment. Because when you are in the present moment you are not stressing over the past or worrying about the future. You are enjoying the beauty of the moment, which takes on us on the path to a much happier existence.