

WE

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magazine for women

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Cooling Off Our Body from the Stress of Life

By Dr. Julie Chen

Mind-body exercises can be exceptionally useful for providing respite to our body and mind as we battle the effects of chronic stress on our body's physiology. What falls under this category of 'mind-body exercises'? Some of you may already be doing these exercises in a structured capacity, while others of you may be doing them in small increments throughout your day without even realizing it. This is a broad terminology that encompasses activities such as meditation, prayer, music therapy, breath work, progressive muscle relaxation, self-hypnosis, imagery, and journaling, just to name a few.

The benefits of instilling mind-body exercises into our daily routine are far-reaching. When our body undergoes chronic stress, we are at greater risk for many health issues such as, but are not limited to, worsening of autoimmune diseases, cardiac disease, insomnia, and fatigue. The elevation of our sympathetic system and increase in inflammatory chemicals associated with chronic stress is damaging to our health. Therefore, by intentionally implementing periods of relaxation, we are able to temper the damage by employing the effects of the parasympathetic system as a counter-balance.

We may not be able to control our environment and the triggers of stress, but we can engage ourselves in deliberate interludes of relaxation to ensure that we are not on a constant upward spike of anxiety and strain. Our body is negatively impacted by persistent elevations of stress hormones. Therefore, it is imperative that we employ these numerous techniques on a daily basis to 'cool down' our body and mind.

An easy technique that can be employed in public locations and at home is breath work. You may even perform the technique with your eyes open, thus seeming inconspicuous and unobtrusive to those around you. The easiest of the breath work techniques would be to double the exhalation time compared to the inhalation time. For example, you may breathe in to a count of four and exhale to a count of eight. It may be helpful to initially utilize a ticking watch or clock to make certain that you breathe slowly. When you breathe slowly over a period of time, your mind and heart naturally will slow down thus countering the heart racing and anxiety associated with the effects of stress.



Another useful technique is journaling. Studies show that the effects of journaling may far exceed the time you spend doing it. In one study, patients who engaged in journaling benefited from the calming effects for several weeks even though the journaling was done only for three days. This study indicates that the benefits of mind-body exercises, even in short durations, could potentially alter the negative impact of persistent stress for durations beyond the time spent performing them.

Therefore, since these exercises are relatively benign and the benefits may be significant, it would be worthwhile to employ them on a regular basis. After all, just like we look forward to vacations especially during the hot summer months to 'cool off' from the stress of work and the scorching temperatures, our body and mind also needs some 'cooling off' time. And when it comes to our body, because it is a machine, you'll definitely reap greater health results if you 'cool down' your body every day instead of waiting for the stress to boil over before realizing your body and mind needs a rest.

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