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A Gentle Way to Well-Being

Why Practice Restorative Yoga?

Many people favor a more vigorous yoga practice over a gentle restorative yoga practice, believing the benefits of the more vigorous practice are better. While a vigorous practice is good, it is vital to our wellbeing to indulge ourselves in a nurturing restorative practice.

Stress is a physiological response to what your body-mind perceives as life threatening. Whatever the stressor, the mind alerts the body that danger is present. In response, the adrenal glands, located above the kidneys, secrete catecholamine hormones. These adrenaline and noradrenalin hormones act upon the autonomic nervous system, as the body prepares for fight or flight. Heart rate, blood pressure, mental alertness, and muscle tension are increased. The adrenal hormones cause metabolic changes that make energy stores available to each cell and the body begins to sweat. The body also shuts down systems that are not a priority in the immediacy of the moment, including digestion, elimination, growth, repair, and reproduction.

For thousands of years these adaptive responses have been positive for the survival of the human race. For our ancestors, a stressful situation usually resolved itself quickly. They fought or they ran, and, if they survived, everything returned to normal. The hormones were used beneficially; the adrenal glands stopped producing stress hormones, and systems that were temporarily shut down resumed operation.

Modern man is often unable to resolve his stress so directly, and lives chronically stressed as a result. Still responding to the fight or flight response, the adrenals continue to pump stress hormones. The body does not benefit from nutrition because the digestion and elimination systems are slowed down. Even sleep is disturbed by this agitated state.

In a chronically stressed state, quality of life, and perhaps life itself, is at risk. The body's capacity to heal itself is compromised, either inhibiting recovery from an existing illness or injury, or creating a new one, including high blood pressure, ulcers, back pain, immune dysfunction, reproductive problems, and depression. These conditions add stress of their own and the cycle continues.

The antidote to stress is relaxation. To relax is to *rest deeply*. Rest is different from sleep. Deep states of sleep include periods of dreaming which increase muscular tension, as well as other physiological signs of tension. Relaxation is a state in which there is no movement, no effort, and the brain is quiet.

Herbert Benson, M.D., one of the foremost writers and researchers in the field of stress reduction today, coined the phrase "Relaxation Response" to describe the physiological and mental responses that occur when one *consciously* relaxes. Dr. Benson defines the relaxation response as "a physiological state characterized by a slower heart rate, metabolism, rate of breathing, lower blood pressure, and slower brain wave patterns." Dr. Benson founded The Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine, <http://www.mbmi.org/home/default.asp>, is a world leader in the study, advancement, and clinical practice of mind/body medicine.

Body and mind are indeed connected. A relatively new medicinal specialty called psychoneuroimmunology has emerged. This is another way of saying that body and mind-or psyche, nervous system, and immune system-are connected. This specialist understands that the health of the psyche is reflected in, and partly created by, the health of the body, and vice versa.

Dr. Dean Ornish's scientific study supports the body-mind connection. Dr. Ornish is the author of *Dr. Dean Ornish's Program for Reversing Heart Disease*. He has studied those with atherosclerotic heart disease and concluded that daily periods of relaxation are essential in preventing further deterioration. Ornish has also created a unique lifestyle program which includes diet, yoga, and meditation.

B.K.S. Iyengar, of Pune, India developed the restorative yoga postures.