

Yoga offers more than stress relief

COPLEY NEWS SERVICE

If an exercise existed that could prevent disease, help lose weight, create physical and emotional balance, and tone muscle and build strength — while at the same time opening one's spiritual being — would you try it?

Yoga, with roots originating more than 2,000 years ago, is proving all of the above to be true. Yoga creates strength, flexibility and confidence through an integrated program of stretching, meditation and breathing. The practice of yoga reaps benefits that are physical, mental, emotional and even spiritual. Its practitioners have found that it eases pain and can prevent some common health problems from occurring.

Yoga can be useful to those suffering from back pain, stress, heart disease, depression and arthritis. Remember, it's best to consult a physician before starting any new exercise regime. When you're ready to start, get in touch with a professional yoga instructor, or try some of the many books and videos on the market that specialize in yoga's benefits.

Back pain

As anyone who has suffered from it can attest, back pain affects almost all kinds of

bodily movement. Many times it hurts just to sit.

Among the main focuses in yoga are strengthening one's core and striving for balance. This begins in the center of your body, of which your back is a part. By stretching the muscles that make up and support your back (especially the abdominal muscles), you can create strength that will relieve the daily stress your back and spine endure. Strong abs and back muscles in turn improve posture, and that allows you to breathe easier by releasing the pressure that slouching can cause on your lungs and heart.

Stress and heart disease

It seems as if stress is out to get us at work, at home, when shopping and, especially these days, while filling up the gas tank. Stress anxiety leads to loss of sleep, increased heart rate, a weakened immune system and constricted breathing. Many of these effects are also symptoms of heart disease. Being able to cope with stress is vital to good health.

Yoga helps reduce stress by focusing on one's breathing

and relaxing muscle tension. Certain meditations can be done to slow the mind down, just as certain stretches can be done to release muscle tension. Yoga teaches your body to forget about the past and focus solely on the present.

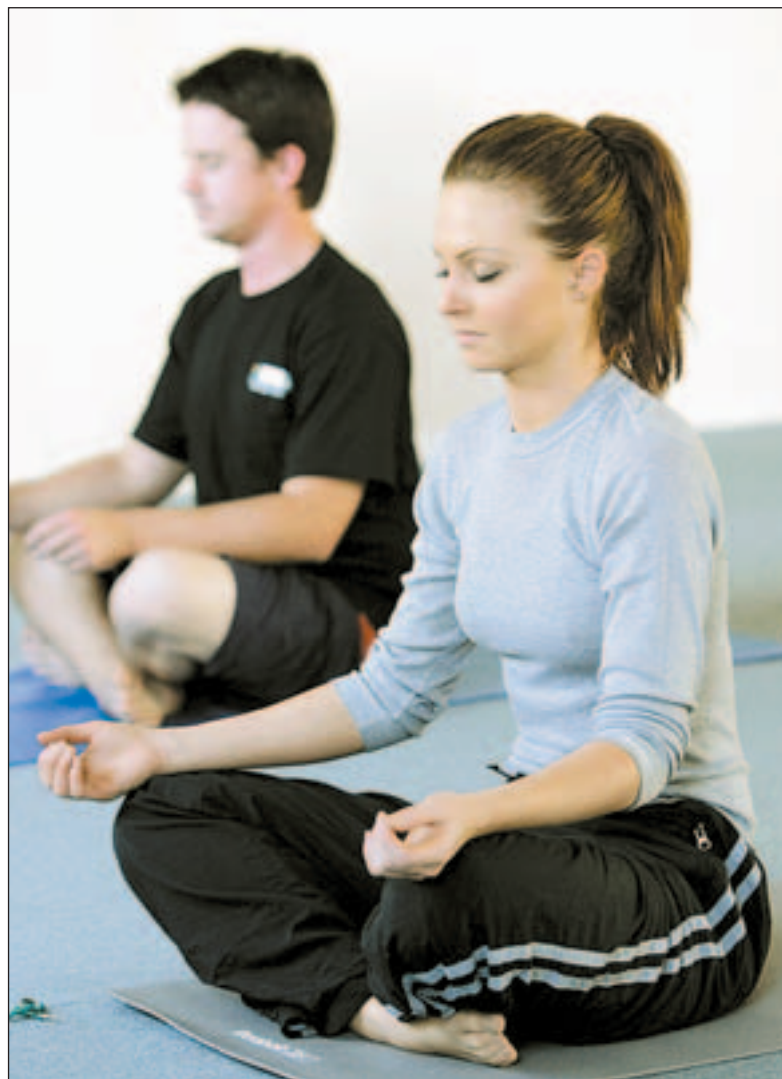
Practicing meditation can bring a new perspective that releases many of one's daily worries and renders them insignificant. And this can be done in as little as 10 minutes.

According to Patricia Rockwood of the American Yoga Association, "Meditation's goal is to think nothing." She suggests two tricks that can help one more easily reach this state of mental silence so that one can hear their intuitive, spiritual voice. The first is to bathe prior to meditating, a symbol of washing away stress. The second is to consciously try to relax the muscles in the thighs, face and stomach where most of our tension is stored.

"Some days are better than others," Rockwell explains. "But the idea is to build continuity."

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Consult your doctor before starting yoga, especially if you have previous injuries or other health conditions.

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