



# Just Say 'Ommm'

**Meditation may be the key to better health, according to some Valley experts. But if the lotus position isn't for you, here are some other ways to help reduce stress.**

BY STEPHANIE R. CONNER



**W**ork. School. Job hunting. The responsibilities of parenthood. The demands of being a caregiver. Whether you're 25 or 65, stress is likely a part of your life. Many of us turn to greasy foods, excessive eating, smoking or alcohol as coping mechanisms to relieve tension. But in the end, those habits combined with the stress itself can lead to a variety of bigger health problems.

Stress can result in decreased longevity, says Rick Swearingen, D.O., medical director at CHW Urgent Care in Ahwatukee, who adds that stress contributes to heart disease, cancer and other diseases.

Here are six ways experts say you can effectively reduce stress.

## Meditate

Meditation may come with a stigma in the Western world, but it's not about changing your belief system, says Sarah McLean, a speaker, trainer and the founding director of Sedona Meditation Training Company. It's more about training the mind toward stillness.

"Our bodies are designed to experience the world outside," she says. "Our senses focus our attention outward.... Meditation is a practice of turning the attention inward."

McLean, who was also founding education director of Deepak Chopra's mind-body health center, stresses that anyone can learn how to meditate, and there are various kinds of meditation.

"Not every type of meditation is good for everyone," she says. Meditation helps you become more aware of your breath, your posture, your thoughts and silence, she adds.

Advocating at least 20 minutes of meditation at least once a day, McLean says that meditation is "nourishing to the nervous system," plus it lowers blood pressure and levels of cortisol (known as the stress hormone) and reduces respiration.

"It's an amazing thing," McLean says, "and, once you learn, it's free."

## Yoga, Tai Chi, Qigong

The practices of yoga, Tai Chi and Qigong can be collectively referred

to as meditative movement. These types of exercise involve movement or body positioning and focus on the breath with the goal of achieving a calmer, meditative state. For some, these practices are more inviting than meditation alone.

"I tried for years to meditate and gave it up," says Linda Larkey, Ph.D., the Scottsdale Healthcare Chair of Biobehavioral Oncology Research at the College of Nursing and Health Innovation at Arizona State University. "Then I discovered these slow, flowing movements with coordinated breathing would take me into a meditative state."

Tai Chi is a form of Qigong, Larkey explains. "Qigong is a little more ancient and a little simpler to learn," she adds. "Tai Chi is a cultivated, choreographed series of Qigong-like movements."

While these movements share some of the benefits of low-impact exercise, Larkey suggests that for some people a balance of regular meditative movement and more vigorous aerobic exercise may be preferred, while for others, the meditative movement practices alone keep them healthy.

Larkey acknowledges that everyone is different and has unique interests and needs. If you want to know which activity works best to reduce stress, she says, "whatever you will do works best."

## Get with a Routine

It's boring, we know. But having a healthy routine is critical for health. Exercise, Swearingen says, helps "dissipate negative energies" and reduce anger. It releases endorphins and contributes to a euphoria-building effect, he says.

He suggests exercising 30 minutes (if not an hour) most days of the week.

"It doesn't always have to be high-impact," he says. "A walking program is a good starting point."

As for diet, Swearingen says, "you don't have to be a saint." Opt for a diet that's low in fat and high in complex carbohydrates, fruits and vegetables.

And while moderate alcohol consumption – think a glass of wine with dinner – is OK, he says, excessive

drinking contributes to increased blood pressure and higher stress levels.

## Talk It Out

Having a good social network is good for stress reduction, Swearingen says. Research shows that whether you're managing the acute stress of a bad day or the long-term stress of an illness, having good friends and loved ones around to talk with can help you manage it.

For larger-magnitude problems, Swearingen recommends working with a therapist or counselor. "Some people are quite capable of dealing with things," he says. "Be there's a threshold."

## Volunteer

McLean says that volunteering – or simply, caring for others – helps reduce stress. And she's not alone. Studies have shown that volunteering increases a person's self-esteem and lowers stress levels.

Plus, volunteering can provide an opportunity to interact with others and to make new friends. And you walk away with the contentment that comes with doing something that benefits others.

## Learn How to Say No

At the end of the day, if your time isn't your own and you're overscheduled, exercise, diet and meditation may not be enough. It may be time to look at your commitments and make them more manageable.

The ability to say no is a learned behavior, Swearingen says: "It doesn't come naturally to everyone."

He acknowledges that it takes some practice, but notes there are plenty of things we agree to do that that we really didn't want to in the first place. That's a good place to start.

"Step back and say, 'No, I can't do that,'" Swearingen says. "That right there takes a lot off the plate."

Once you learn what works best for you, integrate your stress-reduction habits into your lifestyle to limit tension and help you feel your best.

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