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Calming the Mind, Healing the Body: Can alternative therapies help college students improve their health?

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A Nation under Stress

In 1991, sociologist Juliet Schor analyzed the amount of time workers spent “on the job” relative to time spent on leisure activities. Her book *The Overworked American* criticized a system that required employees to put in more and more hours at work and, as a result, to enjoy fewer and fewer hours at home. According to Schor, the resulting struggle to balance work and home lives led to a decrease in quality “family time” and a dramatic increase in stress (5).

Unfortunately, not much has changed in 18 years: recent studies indicate that stress and its attendant physical maladies are on the rise. A 2008 poll conducted by the American Psychological Association revealed that a full 80% of Americans are currently worried about money and the economy, a problem that shows no signs of abating. These emotional and psychological concerns are affecting the nation’s physical well-being, with respondents indicating that their stressed mental state has led to sleeplessness, headaches, and muscle soreness. Furthermore, being “stressed out” causes people to develop often unhealthy coping mechanisms such as poor eating habits, further exacerbating the downward spiral of stress and physical malaise (Park).

University students are certainly not immune to the many pressures that can lead to ill health and self-destructive coping strategies. The college years, while a time of excitement and discovery, are also fraught with worry as students learn to deal with a multitude of life changes and new responsibilities. Interviews with college students cite a variety of factors that made freshman year particularly stressful, including homesickness, increased workload, time management issues, sleep disturbances, and roommate conflicts (Rauf, Mosser, and O’Hagan). Other students may find balancing employment, family, and school work particularly challenging. These issues can severely interfere with learning objectives: in an American College Health Association survey, students indicated that the stress in their lives was the leading issue getting in the way of positive academic performance (*Healthy Campus 2010*).

Stress can also lead to many of the health problems that plague students on college campuses, including “fatigue, hypertension, headaches, depression, anxiety, and an inability to cope” (Dusselier, Dunn, Wang, Shelley, and Whalen 16). Students may handle these pressures by turning to strategies that will ultimately only exacerbate stress levels and ill health, such as alcohol and tobacco (Dusselier, Dunn, Wang, Shelley, and Whalen 16).

Clearly, there is a correlation between mental state and physical well-being. Unfortunately, many of the factors that lead to stress are difficult to eliminate: exams and paper deadlines will not disappear, and students will continue to feel nervous in the face of academic and social pressures. Several questions arise: Is it possible to develop strategies that can be employed to mitigate the effects of stressful lives? If it is true that a stressed mind leads to an unhealthy body, then can a relaxed mind lead to a healthy body? By actively working with the power of the mind to calm itself, is it possible to improve psychological and physical well-being?

Mindfulness

According to many ancient healing traditions that employ the concept of “mindfulness” to enhance well-being, the key is not in evading the cause of anxiety, but in controlling one’s *reaction* to the stressful situation. “Alternative” therapies such as meditation and yoga encourage practitioners to harness the deep power of their own minds to achieve a state of calm that then allows them to view problems in an entirely new light. From this place of equilibrium come the necessary resources to confront problems constructively, thus alleviating the negative effects of a busy lifestyle. This deep sense of calm is available to everyone, at any time, in the present moment, if we can train ourselves to truly *live in the moment*.

The concept of mindfulness has its roots in Buddhist philosophy, but today it is practiced by people of all traditions, often in a secular setting. It is being non-judgmentally aware of the present as it unfolds, being con-

scious of thoughts and feelings as they enter the mind moment by moment (Kabat-Zinn 2). It isn't as simple as it sounds. The mind is rarely at peace, hopping from one random thought to another, rarely dwelling in the present but instead remembering the past, anticipating the future. So many things arise to pull the mind out of the current moment as it is being lived—a phone call, a text message, a concern, a regret. Mindfulness practices such as meditation and yoga encourage the practitioner to return to the here and now by focusing the mind on one point—the breath, a sound, a physical posture.

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)

One of the most popular mindfulness-based therapies in the West is the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program, developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center to assist patients with chronic pain and health issues manage their symptoms (Kabat-Zinn 1). MBSR encourages the development of mindfulness through the use of seated meditation practice, in which practitioners are taught to center attention on their breath; a body scan technique, which coaches participants to focus on different regions of the body; and gentle yoga poses, which stretch and relax the muscles (West, Otte, Geher, Johnson, and Mohr 24). Practitioners are then encouraged to carry the wisdom gleaned from their experiences into their everyday lives, to focus on daily activities such as eating a meal, doing the dishes, listening to a friend, or studying for an exam with their full awareness on the sensations and emotions of the actual moment. In this way, every lived moment becomes a meditation.

Yoga

Yoga is an ancient Indian “science of life” (Venkataramana, Poomalil, and Shobhasree 89). The term “yoga” derives from a Sanskrit word meaning “to bind, join, attach, and yoke” (Iyengar 19), expressing the fundamental link between the mind and the body. The practice of *hatha yoga* focuses on the body as it moves and stretches. In the West, there is often a strong emphasis on the physicality of yoga; however, in the classic yogic text *The Yoga Sutras*, the Indian sage Patanjali describes yoga as “[t]he restraint of the modifications of the mind-stuff” (Patanjali 3), the control of those mental disturbances that create psychological stress. According to yogic philosophy, from these mental fluctuations arise various physical and emotional ailments (Venkataramana, Poomalil, and Shobhasree 90). By controlling these fluctuations, the practitioner can enhance well-being. Hatha yoga uses a series of postures—or asanas—that improve

health by increasing strength and flexibility. However, yoga's power is in its connection to the mind: practitioners (*yogis*) are taught to use the body's movement as the focus of concentration (in the same way MBSR focuses on the breath). By centering all attention on the body as it moves and stretches, yogis clear the consciousness of its clutter, thus paving the way for a deep relaxation at the end of practice. The beauty of yoga as a physical discipline is its absence of competition and judgment: yoga practitioners are encouraged to accept their bodies as they are, without focusing on physical limitations. It is the attention brought to the practice that yields the desired result—clarity of mind.

Efficacy of Mindfulness Practices

Many studies have concluded that MBSR, yoga and mindfulness practices can positively enhance well-being and can “lead to significant improvements in psychological functioning in a wide range of populations” (Carmody and Baer 24). By centering attention on the present moment—the only thing that can be controlled—mindfulness develops a changed attitude toward stressful situations, developing an ability to disengage from the riot of emotions that often accompanies our reactions to events, and to an increased ability to constructively approach all interactions (Weinstein, Brown, and Ryan 381; Shapiro, Oman, Thoresen, Plante, and Flinders 857). Studies of high school and college students reveal that a regular yoga practice decreases their sense of stress (Venkataramana, Poomalil, and Shobhasree; West, Otte, Geher, Johnson, and Mohr), while research of undergraduates indicates that mindfulness meditation results in long-lasting beneficial effects (Shapiro, Oman, Thoresen, Plante, and Flinders).

Personal Practice

Mindfulness practices such as meditation and yoga, while having an esoteric reputation, are actually simple to incorporate into one's life. Because they can be practiced independent of any religious tradition, they are universal in their appeal. You may find it beneficial to develop a personal mindfulness practice to help with the day-to-day pressures of college life. To begin, sit in a comfortable position, in a chair with your back straight or cross-legged on the floor. While breathing normally, focus attention on the sensation of breathing, such as the feeling of the air as it enters and leaves the nostrils, or the rise and fall of the stomach. If the mind wanders, gently bring attention back to the breath. Observe thoughts passively, without getting caught up in them, acknowledging them and then simply releasing

them. (You may want to visualize them as clouds floating away, or leaves drifting off on a current of water.) Practice this technique for three minutes, then ten, then twenty. Try the practice before an exam, as a break from writing a paper, or before facing a challenging situation. Over time, you will probably find yourself facing everyday stresses with patience and equanimity.

To explore more alternative therapies, try looking into campus resources available through UNH Health Services, including yoga classes (<http://www.unh.edu/health-services/ohep/yoga.html>), massage, acupuncture, and information of various meditation techniques (<http://www.unh.edu/health-services/ohep/holistic.html>). UNH Manchester students can explore the many yoga studios in the area, some of which offer student discounts: http://www.yoga-centers-directory.net/usa/new_hampshire.htm. With time and effort, you will notice the positive effects of mindfulness on your health, your stress level, and your emotional state.

The adverse health consequences of tension and anxiety are well-documented, but individuals can take ownership of their own reactions to the pressures around them—and improve physical and psychological wellness—by training themselves to be mindful in the present moment. Ultimately, meditation and yoga are empowering practices that teach participants to find their own healthy ways to face life's many challenges. The end result is a mind that is calm and at peace, and from that place of clarity arise the conditions that lead to improved health and well-being.

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