

**Yoga and tai chi as a help for general
stress reduction and wellbeing**

by

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As a psychologically-informed coach practitioner focused on stress and anxiety management, I can strongly recommend yoga and tai chi to you wholeheartedly for your general stress and anxiety management. However, that strong recommendation comes with an important caveat. Despite being the total devotee of yoga- and tai chi-based healing movement that I am, I would *never* recommend yoga or tai chi as your *only* or *main* approach if you are experiencing severe stress and anxiety in your life. In this latter case you should *most definitely* consider professional stress management coaching and / or professional counselling, to specifically identify and target the root causes of your stress areas. Nevertheless, yoga and tai chi will forever be very worthwhile as additional aids to help with general calming and relaxation across your life whilst you are undertaking your counselling and / or coaching. And, you can certainly integrate yoga or tai chi very usefully into your lifestyle for the rest of your life, because of all the absolutely incredible mind and body benefits that it offers.

This article has been written by me based partly on my own life-enriching experiences, as a self-taught mind-body healing yoga / tai chi student, over almost a decade. Additionally, as with all of my work and writing, my ideas contained in the following are fully supported by evidence-based researchers in the worlds of psychology, western medicine, complementary health care, and sport and health science. For an evidence-based review of the benefits of yoga, and the risks, and highly dangerous poses and movements that you should avoid whilst doing it, I would very strongly recommend that you read "The Science of Yoga: The Risks and the Rewards" written by New York Times science journalist William J. Broad (published by Simon and Schuster, 2012). My only caveats with this book are that, whilst the risks and rewards are scientifically arrived at, some of what Broad has to say is largely his own personal opinion. Plus, he fails to give space in his book to newly evolved forms of yoga which seek to sidestep these dangerous areas of the practice and are highly credible evolutions in this respect. Otherwise, an excellent historically and scientifically accurate informative read.

So, how can almost any kind of yoga or tai chi be of benefit in reducing your stress? In the main body of this article which follows, let's look at three specific and strongly evidence-based supported areas, all of which I have also personally experienced. In each of these three areas, yoga and / or tai chi offer real potential in helping to reduce your general non-specific stress levels, as well as being extremely helpful in increasing your physical ability and ease in movement, flexibility and balance.

1. Release your stress and boost your personal wellbeing

As a psychologically trained professional, and as a life coach focused strongly on stress, one of the reasons why I advocate yoga and tai chi so definitely is the fact that their mind-body focus is shown by psychological and medical research to decrease or switch off the stress response. As you'll probably be aware from reading my website, I do between 30 minutes and 2 hours of yoga daily, partly for stress reduction purposes.

In Western culture we are pressured more and more to work harder, do more, achieve more, non-stop, getting tougher and tougher on us with each passing year. This causes our mind-body system to react to these pressures as if we are being attacked on a permanent basis, and the body's stress response kicks into action -- and, often, stays in operation on a long-term basis.

The stress response, properly called the *Sympathetic Nervous System*, is responsible for releasing adrenaline, cortisol and other emergency response chemistry into our bodily systems to generate the "Fight -- Freeze -- or Flight" behaviours in times of critical emergency. Clearly, this is not the way nature intended us to live for most of our lives, since this stress response also switches off our calming, healing and digestive systems, and greatly diminishes our protective immune systems when it activates, leaving us open to illness. This opens up possibilities of unfavourable gene expression, and physical / mental health deterioration.

In contrast, when we do mind-body exercise such as yoga or tai chi, the body's relaxation response mechanism is initiated (properly called the *Parasympathetic Nervous System*). This response immediately switches off the stress chemical production and activates the body's immune healing and protective systems, thereby creating greater calm in our lives. Apart from forms of tai chi and yoga, no other exercise systems have been shown by evidence-based research to achieve this. Since stress is such an immune system weakener contributing to many serious life-changing or life-threatening illnesses and emotional / psychological conditions, you can appreciate why exercise which helps to release stress is so overwhelmingly beneficial to creating mind-body wellbeing.

Most likely, this ability that yoga and tai chi have to activate the relaxation response is due to the combination of consistent mental focus on specific types of breathing, and gentle flowing movements, whilst keeping the mind focused in the present moment. This combination, possibly also accompanied or aided by the movement of the body into certain triggering poses or positions, may stimulate the vagus nerve, resulting in upregulation of the parasympathetic nervous system and a resultant – desirable -- drop in heart rate and blood pressure. Used on their own, certain breathing exercises, often found in various counselling therapies, can also be extremely useful in activating the relaxation response (some of these are originally from yoga, also). I use these breathing strategies daily for myself, as well as with clients, of course.

Does this work? Well, yes it actually does! Scientific research shows us without doubt that tai chi and yoga -- done for as little as fifteen minutes each day -- can make a very positive contribution in these areas, whether for beginners or more advanced practitioners.

2. Move through your daily life with greater ease

How can yoga and tai chi help you to move more effortlessly through your life?

Essentially, once you start consistently and regularly extending your body in gentle flowing, breath-assisted movements, and in varied directions, such as with yoga and tai chi, over time your connective tissues begin to develop more ability to stretch. This stretchability allows joints to move over a greater range, and your muscles are challenged to develop new strength. Plus, because yoga and tai chi movements begin in the middle of your body and are whole body movements, this helps you to develop improved core stability (pelvic stability) and core muscular strength. Coming along with this, of course, are increased flexibility and balance. In other words we're talking here about developing graceful, co-ordinated, easy-flowing and energy-saving movement throughout your daily living.

The combined result of this training in breath-assisted flow is to remove much (if not all) of the physical and psychological tension out of moving your body. This results in a greater ability to move with more ease across a wider range of physical motion, and a resulting increase in stamina therefore, since each move that you make takes less of your valuable energy.

This, too, can result in less psychological stress in your life, since physical tension carried in your body will translate also into emotional tension. It's simple really. If your body is comprised of tense, tightened muscles because your body is not softened in muscle and joints, or you're in pain, or tense from anxious thoughts or fear, then your sympathetic nervous system (stress response) will activate. This will create potential physical and psychological health complications for you over the longer term. If, on the other hand, your body is muscularly softened / relaxed, then your brain receives the relaxation response signals, and the relaxation response (parasympathetic nervous system) switches in and floods your body with the health-giving, healing, calming and digestive-aiding chemicals such as oxytocin, and many others as well.

And, there is a further added stress-reduction bonus because, if you are increasing your physical ability to move with greater ease then, as far as your bodily movements, flexibility and balance are concerned, you have less need to worry (get stressed out) about restrictions in your mobility today, or in the future.

3. Yoga and tai chi for improving your other exercise workout or sporting activities

For most sports players and exercise participants even very simple forms of tai chi or yoga movement combined with correct breathing, when done consistently, can be extremely beneficial. Why? Because, such exercises help to make your body more flexible and stronger from the core outwards, and *whole body flexibility (range of joint movement)* is the key to moving better, and using up less energy in the process. As you might expect, this increased flexibility may help significantly in reducing, or eliminating completely, some kinds of lower back pain, and pain from sciatica in back or legs, and may even avoid or reduce problems created by tight hamstring muscles. This is as well as helping in a range of other muscular-skeletal problems that might, similarly, have arisen from neglect, or from participating in certain sports or exercise.

This is especially the case in activities such as cycling, mountain biking, running, skiing, snowboarding, skating, and skateboarding. To put it simply, starting such sports, or maintaining your performance in any of these latter sports or fitness areas requires serious focus on developing a stable and strong core group of muscles. This core development is pretty much always the centre of attention or a definite by-product of all forms of yoga and tai chi, yet virtually always gets little, or no, attention in the above sports and fitness activities themselves.

Yoga or tai chi used in this way may also, at the same time, be helping you in reducing your stress and worry levels in a secondary way to the already-discussed stress management qualities of mind-body exercise. How? Because in using such gentle exercise forms to keep your body in good shape for performing your sport or exercise, you can save yourself from

anxious and depressive thoughts and mood that may arise from having the important exercise or sports areas of your life closed down to you, or heavily restricted, by pain and stiffness.

Conclusion: Can we use yoga and tai chi to help reduce our stress levels?

Many studies from the worlds of medicine and psychology have concluded that there are great stress-relief benefits from regular and consistent practice of yoga or tai chi. Month by month, year after year, the studies detailing the effects of stress, and the value of tai chi and yoga in working gently to relieve stress, continue to increase in their number. Thus, whilst tai chi or yoga in-and-of-themselves are unlikely to cure anyone of any serious disease or ailment, each of them has a well-proven ability to help us reduce general stress that may create or worsen various illnesses. And, of course, such mind-body exercise also helps us to live much healthier and happier lives in a whole wide range of ways.

Mind-body exercise, whether yoga or tai chi, is simply too good to ignore! As general mind-body self-care aids in all of our lives, yoga or tai chi can help each of us to create the wellbeing and better functioning that we deserve.

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