

November 2011

Yoga Therapy to Relieve Job Stress

Overview

Modern life is full of frustration, demands, deadlines and hassles. For many people, stress has become an inevitable part of life. In small doses, stress can help us perform under pressure and motivate us to do our best. But if we are constantly feeling frazzled and overwhelmed, and always running in emergency mode, our mind and body pay the price. When that happens, we need to take action to bring our nervous system back into balance.

Stress is a normal physical response to events that make us feel threatened or upset our balance in some way. When that happens, the nervous system responds by releasing a flood of stress hormones (adrenaline and cortisol). These hormones rouse the body for emergency action, with the following signs:

- Heart beats faster
- Muscles tighten
- Blood pressure rises
- Breath quickens
- Senses become sharper

These physical changes increase our strength and stamina, speed up our reaction time, and enhance our focus – prepare us to either fight or flee (stress response) from the danger at hand. Therefore, stress response is the body's way of protecting us. When working properly, it helps us to stay focused, energetic and alert. In emergency situation, stress response can save our life. Stress response also helps us to meet challenges and keep us on our toes. However beyond a certain point stress stops being helpful and starts causing major damage to our health, emotion, productivity, relationships and quality of life.

The factors that cause stress are known as stressors. Stressors may appear in negative forms such as an exhausting work schedule or a rocky relationship. Stressors can also appear in what seems to be positive events such as getting married, buying a house, going to college, or receiving a promotion.

Our perception plays a big role in determining what's stress – something that's stressful to us may not faze someone else and vice versa. Some of the common external causes of stress:

- Major life changes
- Work
- Relationship difficulties
- Financial problems

- Being too busy
- Children and family

Some of the common internal causes of stress:

- Inability to accept uncertainty
- Pessimism
- Unrealistic expectation
- Negative Self-talk
- Perfectionism
- Lack of assertiveness

Long term exposure to stress can lead to serious health problems such as:

- Pain of any kind

Prolonged stress continues to stimulate muscles, and can lead to muscular pain such as backache. Along with the sedentary lifestyles most people practice, this makes back, shoulder and neck pain extremely common.

Stress is also thought to aggravate existing pain such as herniated disc, fibromyalgia and repetitive strain injury (RSI). For example, people with migraine tend to suffer longer and more severe headache when exposed to stress.

- Heart disease

People whom are exposed to long term stress and whom are less susceptible to stress, have higher risk of cardiovascular disease. Those who tend to be more competitive, impatient, hostile and aggressive are particularly at risk.

- High blood pressure

Hypertension or high blood pressure is a very common chronic disease that usually had no obvious symptoms. However it can raise risk of stroke, heart failure, kidney failure and heart attack. In the short term, stress increases blood pressure. Chronic stress may contribute to a permanently high blood pressure.

- Diabetes

People whom are pre-disposed to diabetes may at higher risk of developing insulin-dependent diabetes when exposed to chronic stress.

- Infertility

There may not be a direct link between stress and infertility. However, people trying to have baby are found to have higher success rate when on holidays, or little stress. Fertility treatment is more successful in these conditions too.

- Autoimmune disease

Under stress, the immune system is suppressed, making people more susceptible to infection. Allergies and autoimmune diseases such as arthritis and multiple sclerosis have been found to be exacerbated by stress. Being stressed also slows the rate of recovery from pre-existing illnesses.

- Skin conditions

Stress is known to aggravate skin problems such as acne, psoriasis and eczema. It also has been linked to unexplained itchy skin rashes. These skin problems can themselves be a source of stress to sufferer.

Other health problems caused by stress include:

- Digestive problems
- Sleep problems
- Depression
- Obesity

Long term stress can also rewire the brain, leaving us more vulnerable to anxiety and depression.

Of all the stressors in an individual's life, job stress is one of the leading causes of stress. Workplace has become a source of extreme stress as a result of technological changes, mass retrenchments, mergers and acquisitions, information overload, demand for more productivity, fierce competition, and uncertain future. While some stress is unavoidable, excessive stress can interfere with our productivity and lower our physical and emotional health.

Medical View

a) Analysis of condition

Job stress (or workplace stress) is a prevalent and costly problem in today's workplace. Many people now view their jobs as the number one stressor in their lives. It is widely believed that workers have more on-the-job stress than a generation ago. Evidence also suggests that stress is the major cause of turnover in organization. Job stress manifests in the form of harmful physical and emotional response as a result of poor match between job demands and the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker. This may lead to poor work performance or even injury at work.

b) Symptoms of condition

Job stress-related disorders encompass a broad array of conditions:

- Psychological distress, e.g. depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, sleep disturbance
- Emotional disorder, e.g. mood disturbance, dissatisfaction, fatigue, tension
- Maladaptive behaviors, e.g. aggression, substance abuse, relationships problems (with family and friends)
- Cognitive impairment, e.g. concentration and memory problems
- Biological reactions e.g. upset stomach, headache, cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal disorders, or death in extreme cases.

The 4 main physiological reactions to stress:

- Blood is shunted to the brain and large muscle groups, and away from extremities, skin and organs that are not currently serving the body.
- The reticular activating system near the brain stem is activated, causing a state of keen alertness as well as sharpening of hearing and vision.
- Release of glucose and fatty acids into the bloodstream.
- Temporary shutdown of the immune and digestive systems

c) Lifestyle assessment/ contributing factors affecting condition

Job stress results from the interaction of the worker and the conditions of work. In general, there are two contributing factors to such conditions - individual characteristics such as personality and coping skills, and working conditions. Some of the working conditions deemed as key source of job stress:

- Increased in work intensity (high speed, tight deadlines, long hours, etc)
- A person's status in the workplace. While employees of all categories are potentially exposed to workplace stress, those who have less control and power over their jobs are more likely to suffer stress than the more powerful workers.
- Economic factors that can lead to job stress include high expectation and greater competition, pressure from investors, lack of trade and professional union in the workplace, rivalries within the company, laying-off workers, and bullying in the workplace.

d) Medical/ conventional treatments

Some of the organizational change that can be done to prevent job stress due to working conditions:

- Ensure that the workload is in line with worker's capabilities and resources
- Design jobs to provide meaning, stimulation, and opportunities for workers to use their skills
- Clearly define worker's role and responsibilities
- Give workers opportunities to participate in decisions and actions affecting their jobs
- Reduce uncertainty about career development and future employment prospects
- Encourage social interaction among worker
- Improve work schedules that are compatible with demands and responsibilities outside the job
- Combat workplace discrimination such as racism and sexism
- Bringing in an objective outsider such as an independent consultant to suggest a fresh approach to persistent problems
- Introducing a participative leadership style to involve as many subordinates as possible to resolve stress-producing problems.

Yogic View

While changing job or rethinking career ambitions might be helpful in minimizing stress level, it's the focus on one thing that's always within our own control that would triumph over stress management – ourselves. Individual characteristics such as personality and ability to cope with stress are very important in predicting whether certain job conditions

will result in stress. This underlies prevention strategies that focus on workers and ways to help them cope with demanding job conditions.

Determine aspects of condition relative to the 5 koshas:

1. Physical:

Individual reaction, or stance, taken in regard to stress literally manifests in posture. A defeated approach to stressful circumstances produces a collapsed body – resulting in a body structure that is tense. The repetition of such subtle behavior patterns produces a self-replicating body/mind construct of stress-posture-stress.

From the dietary perspective, low blood sugar level can make us feel anxious and irritable, while eating too much can make us lethargic. By eating small but frequent meals throughout the day, we can help our body maintain an even level of blood sugar and avoid mood swings.

2. Energetic

Anxiety as a result of stress can have profound influence on breathing pattern. Typically, people take small, shallow breaths, using their shoulder rather than their diaphragm when under stress.

3. Psycho-emotional

One of the major contributing factors to job stress is problem getting along well with others at work, which can bring conflict, anger and negativity to workplace. This may be a result of blaming others for our feelings rather than looking inward and be accountable for our own experiences – and find the reoccurring pattern of negativity that we are bringing out of our inner beliefs and hurts.

Ayurveda views problem in relationship as a cause of emotional stress, which can result in imbalance of Pitta. Emotional stress shows up as irritability, depression, and emotional instability. It affects sleep in a different way than mental stress - it can cause you to wake up in the night and not be able to go back to sleep.

On the other hand, Ayurveda views stress on the mental level as caused by an overuse or misuse of the mind, and it can cause an imbalance in Vata. The first symptom of Vata imbalance is losing the ability to handle day-to-day stress. As the person becomes more stressed, it impacts mental functions such as acquisition, retention, and recall. The person's mind becomes hyperactive, yet the person loses the ability to make clear decisions, to think positively, to feel enthusiastic, and even to fall asleep at night.

4. Wisdom

People often think that their work will be easier and happier if they have more money, an understanding boss, co-operative colleague, less demanding clients, etc. These external factors will help but they are not the most important things that make people feel happier at work. It is important to recognize that we all have the ability to increase our enjoyment of work with a little dedication and change of perspective. When there's enjoyment at work,

people can be successful and happy at the same time, while experiencing the full value of life.

Many people make job stress worse with negative thoughts and behavior. If we can turn around these self-defeating habits, many employer-imposed stresses become easier to handle.

5. Bliss

Most people dread going to their job, or find themselves constantly lacking motivation, doing dull and repetitive work. Staying in their current job will not only continue to cause stress, make them unhappy, but they are also not realizing their full potential in life. Yet other people work striving for profit/ gain in various forms: status, money, recognition, power, etc.

Healing program relative to the 5 koshas:

The ability to manage stress in the workplace can not only improve your physical and emotional health, it can also make the difference between success or failure on the job. Our emotions are contagious, and stress has an impact on the quality of our interactions with others. The better we are at managing our own stress, the more we'll positively affect those around us, and the less other people's stress will negatively affect us.

1. Physical:

Physical activities that raise heart rate and make us sweat is a hugely effective way to life – effecting our mood, increase energy, sharpen focus, and relax both the mind and body. In order to achieve maximum stress relief, at least 30 minutes of heart-pounding activities are required on most days. This may be broken into two or three shorter segments throughout the day.

The physical practice of Yoga can be adapted from most aerobic (Ashtanga Vinyasa, power yoga) to most gentle (restorative, Yin Yoga). For working people with a tight schedule, a practice of Surya Namaskar in the morning works great to kick start the day with fire and drive. Meanwhile when stress is mounting at work, a quick break and moving away from the stressful situation by taking a stroll outside the workplace, or spend a few minutes meditating in the break room may be all we need. Physical movement or finding a quiet place to regain our balance can quickly reduce stress.

The self-replicating cycle of stress-posture-stress is reversible by becoming more aware of our posture when under stressful situation. Although the modern asana practice is vigorous and aerobic-driven, we are constantly being reminded to check in with the way we breathe during the practice. Not only are we using the pattern of our breath as a guide to tune in with the state of our physical body, we are also using our breath as a bridge in linking our mind and body as one. This in turn raises our awareness to a higher level of understanding our own body, becoming more sensitive to the most subtle blockages and imbalance.

We can then apply this sensitivity and awareness into recognizing our inherent physical response to stress, and begin to choose the more optimal way of responding. For example,

if the back is tense and the shoulders are held up, we can begin to consciously relax these areas. Thus by changing our physical posture we can better prepare our body and our mind to take on stressful situation. Even minimal postural change, if sustained over time, can improve our health and well-being, even if we may often feel quite powerless due to lack of resources, occupying a lower rank in an organization, or being part of a low power social group.

We can also tailor practice that simulate high-power postures (widespread limbs, enlargement of occupied space, and spreading out), which have been found to trigger a rise in testosterone, a decrease in cortisol, a perception of power and a willingness to take more risks. This may be in the form of more dynamic and vigorous asana in standing (Virabhadrasana I, II, III), and back bending (urdhva dhanurasana), or more calming and restorative asana in seating (upavista konasana) and supine (shavasana).

From an Ayurvedic perspective, certain foods are natural stress busters. These include walnuts, almonds, coconut, and sweet, juicy, seasonal fruit such as pears, apples (cooked if possible), milk, and fresh cheeses such as paneer or ricotta.

Emotional stress that causes Pitta imbalance may be controlled through a diet that favors Pitta-pacifying foods and routine, such as:

- Eating lots of sweet juicy fruits
- Favoring Pitta-pacifying foods such as the sweet, bitter and astringent tastes.
- Drinking a cup of warm milk with cooling rose petal preserve before bed
- Cooking with cooling spices such as cardamom, coriander, cilantro, and mint
- A daily self-massage with a cooling oil such as coconut oil
- Going to bed before 10:00 p.m.

To address day-to-day mental stress, it is important to begin by managing mental activity. Secondly, we can take measures to pacify Vata, for example, by:

- Favoring Vata-balancing foods, such as sweet, sour, and salty tastes.
- Favoring warm milk and other light dairy products
- Performing a full-body warm oil self-massage everyday

It is important to get plenty of rest, and if you are having trouble falling sleep, avoid stimulants like caffeine and sip on herbal tea instead. Alcohol may temporarily reduce anxiety and worry, but too much of which can cause anxiety as its effects wear off. Drinking to relieve job stress may also lead to alcohol abuse and dependence. Similarly, people may feel more calm when they smoke but nicotine is a powerful stimulant that can lead to higher levels of anxiety.

2. Energetic

When a person is relaxed, their breathing is nasal, slow, even and gentle. Deliberately mimicking a relaxed breathing pattern seems to calm the autonomic nervous system, which governs involuntary bodily functions. Physiological changes can include

- Lowered blood pressure and heart rate
- Reduced amount of stress hormones
- Reduced lactic acid build-up in muscle tissue

- Balanced levels of oxygen and carbon dioxide in the blood
- Improved immune system functioning
- Increased physical energy
- Feeling of calm and well-being

In essence, the use of breathing in stress management is to shift from upper chest breathing to abdominal (or diaphragmatic) breathing, ideally in a quiet, relaxed environment where the person will not be disturbed for 10 – 20 minutes.

In Yogic Pranayama, we practice Full Yogic Breath, which involves the entire respiratory system and includes the portions of the lungs used in both upper chest and abdominal breathing (or high, low and middle breathing). It allows the lungs to expand so as to take in more air.

When Yogic Full Breath is mastered, AUM Pranayama may be employed. It is a breathing technique that can help to lower the intensity of anxiety and stress. The sound of AUM has always been sacred to Yoga. It is said that by chanting AUM, it helps to calm the nervous system – possibly due to its vibration. Stage one of AUM Pranayama include Full Yogic Breath on the inhalation, followed by chant of AUM on exhalation. Stage two of this technique involves Ujjayi breath on the inhalation, followed by chant of AUM on exhalation.

Alternately, Laughter Yoga also claims to teach practitioners how to move the diaphragm and shift the awareness of breathing from chest to abdominal breathing.

3. Psycho-emotional

Where environment and situation have grown increasingly stressful, we can still retain a large measure of self-control and self-confidence by understanding and practicing emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is the ability to manage and use our emotions in positive and constructive ways. Emotional intelligence is about communicating with people that draw them to us, overcome differences, repair wounded feelings, and defuse tension and stress. There are 4 major emotional intelligence components at play in workplace:

- Self awareness
- Self management
- Social awareness
- Relationship management

The mindfulness component in Yoga meditation helps to raise our emotional intelligence by increasing our consciousness as an individual and with the society at large. With increasing consciousness and awareness, we gain insight into our particular stress response, and become familiar with sensual cues that can rapidly calm and energize us. Meanwhile, we will also be able to stay connected with our internal emotional experience so we can manage our own emotions appropriately. Our moment to moment emotions influence our thoughts and actions, so it's important we pay attention to our feelings and factor them into our decision making at work. Meditation gives us the ability to recognize our emotions and

their impact while still allowing our intuition (subconscious, gut feelings) to guide our decisions. When we recognize the pattern of our thinking and mind, and stop identifying with them, we have better control of our emotions and behaviors; we become well adapt to changing circumstances.

The Anahata and Visshudha chakra govern our emotions, expression and communication. A heart-focus meditation can bring empathy and compassion into every situation and relationship. It helps to stop repetitive pattern of difficult relationships and bring forward joy and peace of mind. We will also become better at sensing, understanding, and reacting to other's emotions, and feel more at ease within the functioning of the society. When we are able to manage our relationship with people effectively, we gain key in managing and minimizing conflicts: we are able to inspire, influence, and connect with others at work.

At the most basic level, our ability to relate, connect and open up with people, allows us to share our thoughts and feelings with someone we trust may be all that we need to reduce stress. Talking over a problem with someone who is both supportive ad empathetic can be a great way to let off steam and relieve stress. When our heart and mind are open, we develop friendships with our co-workers that can help buffer us from the negative effects of stress. We in turn will listen and offer support when they are in need as well.

Stress can cause insomnia, and lack of sleep can make use more vulnerable to even more stress. When we are well-rested, it's much easier to keep our emotion in balance, a key factor in coping with job and workplace stress.

For people under the influence of stress, merely closing their eyes and going to sleep is not enough for relaxation. Stress reduction needs to be achieved with deep relaxation through a complete freedom from muscle, mental and emotional tensions. This can be achieved through the systematic meditation technique of Yoga nidra, which caters to our deepest neurological, physiological and subconscious needs in a holistic manner. Not only does Yoga nidra provide a full body relaxation but also enhance deep meditative state of awareness by relaxing muscle, mental and emotional tensions.

4. Wisdom

To look for joy in work means to strive for a balance work life. Life will deliver the value and balance we deserve when we are striving and enjoying something at the same time in every single day, in all the important areas of our lives, i.e. work, family, friends and self. Some of the questions we can contemplate on during meditation:

- When was the last time you achieved and enjoyed something at work? What about with family and friends?
- When was the last time you achieved and enjoyed something just for yourself?

It is important that we reflect on the joy of the job, and joy of the life, everyday. Even there's nobody to pat us on the back today, we can pat ourselves on the back, and do so for others to help them feel good.

There's no better way of busting stress than a hearty laugh and nothing reduces stress quicker in the workplace than mutually shared humor. When we or those around us start taking things too seriously, finding a way to lighten the mood by sharing a good joke or

funny story can diffuse stress in the workplace. Laughter Yoga may help to remind us what it's like to have a real hearty laugh, and to take our mind beyond the confinement of the circumstances to more optimistic attitude when faced with challenge. If we see only the downside of every situation, we find ourselves drained of energy and motivation.

No project, no situation, or decision is ever perfect. Trying to attain perfection on everything will simply add unnecessary stress to our daily life. In Isha Upanishad, the mantra Purna tells us that everything is full, infinite, and whole or complete. Everything in this world arises from and is contained within one energy – shakti. When we are in touch with Shakti, all of dualisms are resolved and dissolved, and all of imperfection and short falls are revealed as part of the whole. When we set unrealistic goals for ourselves or try to do too much, we are setting ourselves up to falling short. Aim to do our best, with the best of intention, no one can ask for more than that.

Similarly many things at work are beyond our control – particularly the behavior of other people. Rather than stressing out over them, we focus on things we can control such as the way we choose to react to problems.

Essentially, one of the main teachings of Yoga is based on the mythology of a trilogy of Gods: Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. They each represent the existence and passage of life: all thoughts, images, feelings, sense, materials – everything – are born, live and die. This teaching of Yoga is true even at work.

5. Bliss

People need to realize there's more to life, and business, than profits/ gain alone. This can be done through the incorporation of spiritual values into workplace, such as:

- To embody personal values of honesty, integrity, and good quality work.
- To treat co-workers and employees in a responsible, caring way.
- To participate in spiritual study groups or using prayer, meditation or intuitive guidance at work.
- To make business socially responsible in how it impacts the environment, serves the community or helps create a better world.

When we are living life in such a way we are turning we focus inward to get in touch with our higher self so we can learn to hear the guidance and truth our inner voice speaks. A spiritual practice at work can help us abolish the sources of stress, by changing our life's focus from pursuing conventional success symbols to finding greater peace of mind and understanding ourselves.

With greater connection to our higher self, we begin to find that change is inevitable – no matter what life stages we are in now, it will change eventually. This is true for both joy and challenge at work – when we start to look situation at life (hence work) as impermanence, even the most difficult situation will become easier to deal with.

Spirituality at work helps us to find joy in the smallest things and discover our true self so we can deal with the dog-eat-dog, face-paced world driven by desire and money. Such management of stress will significantly lower impact of stress on our emotional, mental, physical and financial well-being.

