

Baby boomers taking yoga seriously, with good reason

By Agnes Oblas

First there was the jogging craze with jazzercise, step aerobics, speed-walking, swimming and biking following at a quick pace.

Then they started telling us if we weren't weight training also we weren't exercising right.

You'd have to be living with your head buried not to be aware that some type of exercise is one of the mainstays of any medical treatment plan. It's good for just about everything that ails you and even if you aren't ailing. Now, a new form of exercise is taking the country by storm: yoga. Why?

One reason might be that the baby-boomer generation's joints simply can't take the pounding anymore of running, even on treadmills or that we are just plain bored with our exercise routines and need something new. But what is it about yoga that lends itself to fulfilling the mandate of inclusion in anyone's healthful lifestyle?

Any longtime reader of this column knows that I generally begin with a basic lesson in anatomy and physiology. Today is no different.

Any discussion of yoga's influence on health must begin with the part of the nervous system known as the autonomic nervous system. It is called autonomic because it is responsible for internal mechanisms that lie beyond our conscious awareness such as blood pressure and digestion. Why they don't call it automatic nervous system I've never figured out.

Be that as it may, the heart beats without us con-

sciously telling it to beat, we breathe unconsciously, the stomach produces digestive acids and enzymes whether we want it to or not, etc., etc., etc. It's a good thing too that most of the bodily functions are unconscious; we have too many other things to be concerned about. And that's the point. Stress has a major influence on the autonomic nervous system, which manifests as headaches, acid indigestion, high blood pressure and a potentially endless list.

This autonomic nervous system is further subdivided into the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems. When the former is stimulated, adrenaline is released, the heart rate speeds up, the bronchioles open, muscles tense, blood sugar levels increase, pupils of the eyes widen. The classic metaphor for this phenomenon is the image of a pre-historic caveman who encounters a saber-toothed tiger and must gird himself to either fight or flee (fast!). The 21st century human continues to experience the fight or flight response albeit in relation to different and more frequent stressors: economic, relationship, political and environmental stressors. We may not be running into a saber-toothed tiger, but we do encounter stressors, repeatedly. The end result is a body almost perpetually responding to adrenaline.

The parasympathetic system is often thought of as responsible for the opposite effects. Instead of



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gearing up for fight or flight, the body experiences relaxation. The practice of yoga serves to stimulate the parasympathetic system through the various body poses, stretches and controlled breathing.

But you're still wondering why this is good exercise and what is the point of some of the contortions, strange balancing postures and headstands. The point is that yoga postures (termed asanas) actually stimulate receptors in the carotid arteries of the neck and aorta causing parasympathetic stimulation which results in decreased heart rate and blood pressure, decreased muscle tension and decreased acid stimulation. In addition to stimulating certain parasympathetic receptors, yoga is a tremendous way to get flexible and retrain the body's ability to balance. Both of these benefits contribute to being less prone to joint injuries and other musculoskeletal accidents.

Another focus of yoga is breathing. The breath serves as a subtle bridge between the physical aspects of the stretching and postures and the emotions. All the postures of yoga are performed with conscious breathing cycles making the movements so much more powerful in their end result of relaxation and a sense of well-being.

In summary, where yoga was once thought of as useful only for achieving meditative states and incredibly twisted positions, we now believe it goes beyond this aspect by also countering the effects of the sympathetic nervous system's flight-or-fight response. Try a yoga class and see for yourself. You may fall head over heels in love with this new rage.

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