

Yoga For A Healthy Mind

by Andrea Cirignano

When the days are shorter and our winter weary brains feel slow or less than optimally healthy, yoga can promote mental clarity, memory, intelligence and wisdom.

Yoga is not only a physical practice. The benefits of yoga transcend a smaller waistline and flexibility. Even for those that profess no interest in the spiritual aspect of this ancient discipline, yoga provides the means to engage the mind, senses and body in the present moment, enabling the cultivation of internal peace, supporting mental and emotional health. The most commonly used yogic tools include asana (yoga postures) and pranayama (breath work). Other yogic tools include drishti (a gaze upon a focal point, either internal or external, during meditation or during asana practice), mudra (specific gesturing, usually of the hands) and mantra (mental or verbal repetition of a sacred syllable, word or verse). By engaging and focusing the mind, these tools enable practitioners to easily enter a state of meditation and find mental and emotional balance.

A large number of Pacific Northwest residents work in the tech field and with that, often come slouchy shoulders and poor posture, both of which can contribute to higher levels of mental stress.

Nichelle Hegstrom, a student and recent teacher training graduate at Bala Yoga, in Kirkland, used to work as a web developer and trainer. "I would spend hours hunched over a keyboard," she recalls. "so I had back and neck pain as well as pinched nerves in my elbow that caused numbness in my fingers. Now a stay-at-home mom, Hegstrom still spends a lot of time on her laptop but credits yoga



with the disappearance of most of her pain.

From the cell phone alarm clock in the morning to late night television shows or working on the laptop in bed, technology seems omnipresent in the daily lives of most people. Having artificially produced light when there should be darkness slows melatonin production, which can lead to disruption of a normal sleep schedule. Unplugging from technology may be unrealistic, especially for Seattleites, but using yoga to unwind and recharge can help us maintain a calm and healthy mind, despite busy, high-tech lives.

"Yoga is especially useful to us in the Northwest when we can't be outside [because] the days are short and other forms of exercise aren't as easy to do [indoors]," says Heidi Lamare, a student at Yogavana, in Mercer Island. Lily Burns, manager of local studio Flow Yoga Redmond, says pranayama, asana and meditation helped her attain a healthier, clearer mind and aided in her recovery from post-traumatic stress disorder and anorexia. "I find myself using all of these methods when I'm feeling anxious, depressed, or some-

