

House Call: Yoga and Tai Chi

Two distinct disciplines offer similar physical and psychological benefits

In the shadow of their New Year's resolutions, many people seek out the gym to improve their physical and mental well-being.

What a typical workout at the gym may lack, however, is a way to relax the mind, body, and spirit and a way to fight the stress inherent in our daily lives. Practicing yoga or tai chi can help calm the body's fight-or-flight response to stress.

Differences and similarities

Yoga, which originated in India, and tai chi, an ancient Chinese discipline, are distinct practices, but both seek to unite the mind, body, and spirit. Both practices have many styles, forms, and intensities.

By combining physical and mental disciplines, yoga can help you deeply relax and better manage the stress and anxiety in your life. Yoga has three main components: asana (physical postures and movements designed to increase your strength and flexibility), pranayama (breathing exercises), and meditation.

Together, these components are said to increase awareness and stimulate the free flow of prana (vital energy). Regularly practicing the yoga postures can prepare your body for meditation. The movement and controlled breathing help to quiet your mind and calm your muscles so that your mind can be clear to meditate.

People with limited flexibility may benefit from chair yoga, a gentle form of yoga practiced while sitting in a chair or standing and using a chair for support, or they may benefit from the continuous flowing movements of tai chi, which are typically performed while standing.

Tai chi, a system of martial arts that grew out of a Taoist pursuit of longevity, is typically practiced as a self-paced series of slow, flowing body movements that emphasize concentration, relaxation, and a conscious circulation of vital energy (chi) throughout the body. Despite its roots in martial arts, tai chi is usually practiced today as a way to reduce stress, calm the mind, and condition the body.

Benefits of mind-body exercise

Lorenzo Cohen, Ph.D., a professor in the Departments of General Oncology and Behavioral Science at The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center, explained that yoga and tai chi share numerous physical benefits, including

- reduced heart rate and blood pressure
- increased cardiovascular efficiency
- increased flexibility and energy
- and improved posture and sleep patterns.

Tai chi has been found to reduce the risk of falls for elderly people. And some research has shown that yoga and tai chi can also bolster the immune system and decrease the production of stress hormones like cortisol, epinephrine, and norepinephrine.

The psychological benefits shared by yoga and tai chi include

- improved mood and feelings of well-being
- increased self-acceptance
- decreased anxiety and depression
- and improved concentration and memory.

Dr. Cohen said that chronic stress can literally get under our skin and into our cells. "Chronic stress causes our sympathetic nervous system to go into constant overdrive. With typical physical activity or exercise, a quieting of the mind does not happen. Practicing yoga or tai chi can dampen the sympathetic nervous system and calm the mind, thus helping to reduce your stress level."

When deciding what type of mind-body practice is best for you, Dr. Cohen suggests choosing whatever fits into your lifestyle. "Ask yourself which of these practices you will do on a daily basis," he said. "After 6-8 weeks of daily practice, you will begin to see physical improvements in your flexibility, your sleeping patterns, and your physical energy. It takes about 6 months of daily practice to see the inner transformation that brings about a pervasive calmness, self awareness, and an open heart."

For more information, talk to your physician, visit <http://www.mdanderson.org/>, or call askMDAnderson at [877-632-6789](tel:877-632-6789).

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