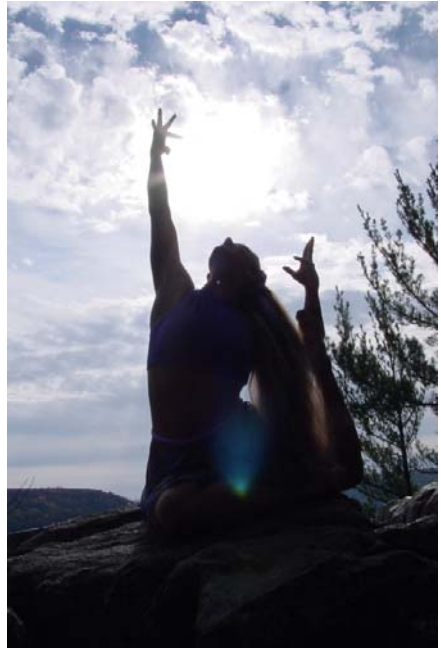


Can Stretching Help Alleviate Depression?

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I have found, and maybe you do too, that the more I understand exactly how a particular action or exercise works, why it helps, what the physiology and other science is behind it.....not only am I more likely to follow through with it, but I'm more likely to experience its reported benefits. Is it a placebo effect? Or could it be that my confidence in the effectiveness of that tool leads to my approaching the activity with more "gusto," thereby almost guaranteeing a positive change? You make the call. Either way, without a doubt there's something almost magical about that connection between knowledge and successful results.

With that in mind, this is the time of the year when the "winter blues" can all too often go from being just a hypothetical phrase to a very real, truly formidable challenge. And at a time when it can be frustrating, if not outright daunting, to seek relief from the lack of energy, feeling down in the dumps, mood swings, etc. that often accompany the gray days, the cold, the accumulation of reduced daylight.....to say nothing of any reports of bad news that we encounter on a daily basisit can be quite the shining light to at least realize that there are good, solid measures you can take to help lift that emotional weight from your shoulders and feel much better. I can think of no better way to rekindle a sense of optimism and hope than feeling like I can DO something about a given predicament!



Now on the subject of depression (and right now I'm talking about the more temporary, non-clinical form of depression, as opposed to the clinical, chronic variety that requires medical intervention), most certainly, one surefire measure to counteract the blues...is exercise. There have been numerous studies that look at exercise's influence in depression from various angles, and they all seem to underscore that physical movement does, indeed, have an elevating effect on mood and energy levels, no matter what the cause or origin. Good news there.

But sometimes the very fix we seek is itself out of reach. Between weather, the timing of when it gets dark, and our busy schedules (to say nothing of the glutted gyms – packed parking lots and hordes of members descending on the cardio equipment can make it difficult to reliably get that 5:00 workout in), we don't always have the ability to get a full-blown exercise session in, compounding the aggravation we might already be feeling.

This is where stretching can fill a huge void. Stretching, in its ease of use and portability, can be a great solution in the fight against depression. How? Behold some of the many potential effects:

- Stretching just before bed can lead to a better night's sleep. This in turn will help your body balance its hormones, including cortisol. We now know that cortisol is a hormone associated with stress, being fearful, depression, and a host of other undesirable states. Worse – and not surprisingly, studies are indicating that elevated cortisol levels seem to increase our cravings for high-fat, high-sugar foods. Which leads to the next bullet point.....

- By helping you get a better night's sleep and thus regulating your hormone levels, stretching can also offer the extended effect of helping you maintain your weight. None of us needs a study to know that when our weight is at a level we feel comfortable, we are far happier and far more resilient against feeling depressed.
- While a good night's sleep is one way to regulate our cortisol (see first bullet point), slow stretching and yoga in of themselves help to reduce cortisol levels as well, through the stress-reduction benefit of lengthening and consciously relaxing our muscles, and breathing smoothly. And when you're less stressed, you're probably also less depressed. Or, at the very least, you know that if you are MORE stressed, almost certainly you are vulnerable to be more depressed!
- Mindfulness – that is, being mindful and engaged in life's activities (all of them, including the more mundane) – tends to be quite the opposite state of mind than that of depression. When you're mindful, you are focused, aware, calm, and involved. When you're depressed, you're blah, stressed, and detached. So any activity, such as yoga or stretching, that can momentarily pull you into that mindful state, can also help keep you there and prevent you from returning to that depressed state.
- Stretching, by virtue of it alleviating physical stiffness, increasing blood flow, calming the central nervous system, and refreshing weary and fatigued muscles, can only help relieve the physical sensations associated with depression, leading to a sense of increased sense of well-being and the ability to extract joy and pleasure from what you're doing.
- It's been shown that an increase in gratitude can help offset feelings of depression and in fact elevate one's happiness. What better way to cultivate that gratitude than in becoming attuned to the miracle of your body's abilities through stretching? Feeling your muscles stretch, listening to yourself breathe, watching small improvements from one stretch session to the next, sensing an improved posture in yourself.....all of these things serve to interrupt the bombardment of outside information and bring us back to the sweet simplicity of re-connecting to that inner dialogue with your own body and mind.
- Finally, stretching simply FEELS GOOD. It's one activity that we can all do for ourselves, any time, any day, in any number of ways, and best of all, the relief is almost immediate!

Suffice it to say, this is just scratching the surface, but I hope it inspires you to consider taking that next step of adding 5-15 minutes of stretching, a few times during your busy week. Wouldn't it be nice to emerge from winter feeling refreshed and light, rather than worn out and heavy?