



- Alcohol dependency
- Attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- Epilepsy
- Eating disorders

“Yoga works because it’s a comprehensive system affecting body, mind, behaviour and our sense of being connected to the universe,” explained conference organiser Heather Mason of the Mindful Institute. “When people suffering issues of emotional regulation start with the physical it can have a quicker affect than, for example, trying to achieve behavioural changes.”

Research psychiatrists and neuroscientists can now track how yoga intervenes in our body’s ability to handle stress. They say it helps to create a healthy balance between two aspects of our nervous system. One part (the sympathetic nervous system) activates the “fight, flight or freeze” response that we need to survive in moments of great danger. The other (the parasympathetic nervous system) activates “rest and digest”, telling us we are safe and all is well.

These two systems need to be balanced, but many people are in frequent, if not constant, states of stress.

According to Dr Sara Lazar, a research psychiatrist at Massachusetts General Hospital, there is evidence that regular yoga sessions cause structural changes in the brain. She has conducted trials in which regular mindfulness meditation (a core part of any yoga practice) increases the amount of grey matter in several parts of the brain, including parts used in regulating emotions and the connections between thinking and feeling.

She also found that, over time, regular meditators had reductions in the size of their amygdala – the part of the brain primarily responsible for the “fight, flight, freeze” stress response.

Chris Holt, South London yoga teacher and writer, has been incorporating learning from the conference in her classes and weekend retreats, with visible effects.

Chris, who teaches classes in Brixton and Streatham Hill, and yoga breaks throughout the UK and Europe, said: “I know from my own experience as someone prone to stress and difficulties regulating my emotions, that on those days I get to my yoga mat first - before the chores and demands of the day take over - I actually have more energy to do things, more clarity to make judgements, and more patience with myself and others. I don’t feel so overwhelmed.”

“Whenever I include these practices in my yoga classes I almost always notice a feeling of calm and quiet descend on the class. I don’t think it’s my imagination, but when we open our eyes at the end everyone looks a little more smiley!”

Chris suggests trying this simple breathing exercise:

1) Sit comfortably on a chair or on the floor with weight of legs supported by the floor and your back long and at

ease, chest slightly lifted

2) Close or partially close the eyes

3) Notice your mind and what you are feeling

4) Breath in for a slow count of 5

5) Breath out for a slow count of 5

6) Continue breathing this way for 5-10 minutes

7) Return to your normal breath, notice your mind and what you are feeling

Chris Holt is a former journalist (regional dailies, then freelance for nationals including Marie Claire, The Guardian, Independent, The Observer, Sunday Express, Mail on Sunday, New Internationalist). Now a mum of two, yoga teacher and writer for yoga journals including Yoga and Health, Independent Yoga Network and Kindred Spirit.

