

YOGA AND STRESS

By David Emerson, Director of Yoga Services at the Trauma Center at the Justice Resource Institute

Stress takes a toll on many levels: physical, physiological, emotional and more. For our purposes, when approaching some yoga practices, we will focus mostly on the physicality of stress, that is, how it shows up in our bodies and how we might investigate and interact with these symptoms so that stress doesn't have as much power in our daily lives. In addition to looking at how stress effects our body we will also touch on how stress can manifest in the way that we breathe, and that by changing our breathing patterns just a bit we might free up some of that stress. The causes of stress in our lives may be more or less clear but we all know what it feels like. Some of us feel the effects of stress in our bodies as tight muscles or chronic pain. Stress may show itself in our breathing patterns (often shallow, choppy, chest oriented breath). When you start to move and breathe mindfully (one way to describe yoga) you may become aware, for the first time, of how stress is at work in your body and breath and this can be daunting. The encouragement is to be patient and kind to yourself as you investigate some of these practices. Take your time. Be willing to stop if anything becomes uncomfortable for any reason. There is no rush and there is no way to fail.

Here a few chair-based yoga practices to experiment with if you like:



Gentle Neck Rotation (moving your chin from side to side; breathing freely through nose or mouth)



Neck Rolls (begin by dropping your chin
And gently roll side to side)



Shoulder Circles (with finger tips on shoulders
make gentle circles with your elbows – try both
Directions if you like)



Seated Twist (try both sides if you like)



Forward Fold (fold as far as is comfortable
And give yourself half a minute to breath freely.
Feel free to gently shake your head “yes” and “no”
Inviting all the stress to release in your neck.