



A Time-Out Gift of Yoga for Yourself

By Janet Hennard, E-RYT500/C-IAYT

Are the holidays cheery hustle and bustle, or high-stress shopping? An exciting trip to see family or a holiday-induced travel nightmare? A festive event, or loss of needed downtime?

Holiday stress can take a toll on your body and your spirit. And for some, the loss of loved ones or strained family relations may bring sadness or anxiety during the holidays, with the resulting absence of cheer or purpose.

How do you wind down and re-center? One way is with a time-out gift of yoga — for yourself.

It's no secret that yoga has calming powers. A mindful yoga or meditation practice can help to lower blood pressure and heart rate. Yoga also promotes healthy breathing habits that nurture a sense of well-being.

To understand yoga's power to reduce stress during the holidays — or at any time of the year — think about those wonderful stress hormones, adrenaline and cortisol, which help to regulate bodily functions like an inflammatory response, blood pressure,

glucose metabolism, immune function, and insulin release. During a fight-or-flight situation, such as when you are in imminent danger or feel threatened, there is an immediate surge of these hormones. You will quickly jump onto the curb when a speeding car approaches, or run from a burning house, all before you are fully aware of what is happening. This action is called the "stress response."

Fortunately, the high release of stress hormones decreases as the danger or threat subsides, and your body eventually returns to normal. But when we perceive near-constant attack — frustrating holiday traffic, anxiety about event preparations, worry about holiday weight gain, feeling overwrought about finding a perfect gift, or worrying about how you will pay for gifts — stress hormones remain overabundant. As the stress response continues, both heart rate and blood pressure increase. Your body's reaction to high levels of adrenaline and cortisol may also include insomnia, fatigue, feelings of irritability, and weight gain — especially around the mid-section.

Now for the good news. Multiple clinical studies have shown that yoga and meditation result in reduced levels of adrenaline and cortisol, eliciting what is known as the "relaxation response." Breathing slows down, muscles relax, blood pressure decreases, and there is a general feeling of well-being.

So hit the mat, give yoga a try, or redouble your practice. If you're feeling especially anxious or overwrought, you may want to look for a restorative yoga class or something easy but relaxing like a gentle yoga class.

Go ahead, enjoy the holidays. Just don't forget to give yourself the most important gift — the relaxation response. **fyi50+**

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