



*By Swami
Jyotirmayananda*

The Art of Handling Stress

Mental stress is a universal problem that has existed from ancient times. However, with today's increasing technological advancement, growing population, crowded cities, and ever increasing atmosphere of insecurity, the intensification of stress of the body and mind is more prominently found. Most people today live imbalanced lives, breathing polluted air, eating foods containing many harmful preservatives, and confining themselves to concrete buildings far away from the relaxing and invigorating atmosphere of nature. In addition there is a general lack of harmony in the family and growing tension in human relationships, and people sacrifice their spiritual and ethical values for the sake of material ends.

Interrelation of Body and Mind

According to Yoga, mental stress causes a disharmony in the flow of the *pranas* or vital forces that maintain the body. This results in chemical changes leading to toxic developments, which in turn cause physical diseases. It is also true that when the body is kept in a state of tension and imbalance, the mind tends to fill itself with negative thoughts, thereby reinforcing the distressed condition. Of these two, the mind plays a greater part, and therefore, if the mind is well trained and disciplined, it can very effectively promote physical relaxation. Further, it is the mind that holds the key to one's spiritual evo-

lution, leading to the attainment of release from the cycles of birth and death.

It is important to understand that a certain degree of stress is normal in life, but the exaggerated states of stress caused by lack of spiritual insight and understanding must be controlled. Such extreme degrees of stress must be removed in order to allow your inner potential to unfold in life. Being constantly irritable and pessimistic, and always bitter and depressed is bound to thwart your spiritual and mental movement.

The idea that by some miracle you can become free of all stress and live in perpetual peace is erroneous. Rather, what is needed is to learn the art of handling stressing conditions in such a way that you continue to evolve spiritually until Enlightenment is attained. At that time, you become like an expert swimmer in the turbulent waters of the world-process—even when the waves of adversity come crashing, you are adept in diving below them to enjoy the still waters of the Universal Self.

Hatha Yoga has evolved various *asanas* (physical poses) and *pranayamas* (breathing exercises) that promote the psycho-physical health of the personality. Through these exercises, you can very effectively learn the art of relaxing the body and mind. Salutation to the sun, head-stand, shoulder-stand, and simple *pranayams* such as *sukha purvak*, *kapala bhati*, *bhastrika* and *shitali* are very helpful in promoting physical relaxation that leads to mental relaxation.

The *pranas* are also harmonized, replenished and enhanced by a pure and nourishing diet. For thousands of years, Yogis have emphasized that non-vegetarian foods cause increasing tension in body and mind. Further, pure foods such as fruits, milk and milk products, nuts, cereals, vegetables, and others are more harmonious to the body and the mind. An occasional fast (with proper understanding of the art of fasting) is also beneficial, or a fruit diet or raw-food diet. These have proven very helpful in relaxing the body and recharging it with fresh *pranic* energy.

Helpful Techniques for Handling Stress

1. Be patient. When confronting adverse circumstances, reflect upon the saying, “Even this will pass away.” Learn to be patient and watchful.

2. Do not rehearse a calamity. Even before an adversity actually comes, do not fill your mind with numerous negative thoughts through uncontrolled imagination. A parable in the Mahabharata illustrates this point well:

Once in a green forest there lived a mighty Cotton Tree. With its numerous branches covered with shining leaves and resounding with the choruses of warbling birds, the tree began to brag, “I am so strong that even the Wind God doesn’t dare hurt me.” Soon through whispers and gossips, these words reached the ears of the Wind God, who then let it be known that he was going to visit that conceited tree by the next morning.

These words of the Wind God got back to the Tree, who then began to tremble with fear. Throughout the night, the Tree imagined the ferocity of the Wind God, and shook so much that most of its leaves and even many of its branches fell to the ground. By early the next morning when the Wind God came rustling by, the Tree appeared wretched and miserable. Overcome with pity, the Wind God said, “O Tree, I never intended to hurt you to the extent you have hurt yourself. I would have simply shaken you a little, but would never have brought you to this condition.” Much in the same manner, in the Divine plan, adversity is meant to enhance your insight and strengthen your will. But due to ignorance, if you fill your mind with negative thoughts, you do more harm to yourself than the actual adverse situation could ever have done.

3. Adapt and adjust. Another parable is told of the Ganges and the Ocean. Once the Ocean God asked the River Goddesses, “How is it that you always bring tall trees to me as your offerings, but never bring those tender canes that grow by your banks?” The Goddess presiding over the Ganges River, as representative of all rivers, spoke, “O Lord of Waters, the tall trees are stiff and adamant. They do not bend. When we sweep over them with violent waters, they break down and are easily carried by us. But the canes bend down when we sweep over them, and when our waters have subsided, they rise again. Because of this we are unable to bring the canes to you.”

The parable shows how you should develop flexibility in your personality. When adversity comes, it is normal to bend down a little and be reflective; but when it passes on, you should rise again with increasing vigor and energy. Those who allow themselves to be deeply hurt during an adverse situation lack the art of spiritual life.

4. Cultivate positive impressions. Watch over your mind. Each time you become depressed or begin to entertain gloomy thoughts, you are creating negative impressions in your unconscious. The negative impressions will then fill your mind with fear even before you actually encounter an adversity.

If you tide over an adversity with a balanced mind, you have developed a positive impression. Then when another form of adversity comes, you will have an inner confidence that you are going to overcome that adversity without being affected. Thus you are led from courage to courage, from conviction to conviction, until you are a master of life's distressing conditions. Adversities will no longer thwart your progress and evolution, and moreover, you convert them into positive aids that accelerate the process of your evolution.

5. Surrender to God. By studying the lives of Sages and Saints and by coming into association with spiritually evolved personalities, you learn the Divine art of surrendering yourself to God, Who fills this universe with His dazzling glory. This world is not a conglomeration of chaotic inert atoms, but rather a well-designed plan of God, Who is the embodiment of Love. With an increasing sense of surrender to the Divine Self, you can enjoy the highest degree of relaxation in your mind and body. Deep within, everyone has the mystic potentiality of unfolding love for God and communing with Him. This is the goal of every person's existence.

6. Practice prayer and devotion according to your religious concepts. But in doing so, recognize the fact that though God is one, He can be worshipped in many ways. Therefore, learn to see unity behind all religions, unity behind all diversity in the world.

7. Practice meditation. Learn the art of concentration and meditation. By regular practice, you

can acquire the ability of stilling your thoughts at any time.

8. Enquire "Who am I?" Vedanta gives various methods of practicing spiritual enquiry. When the mind is still and calm, ask yourself, "Who am I?" and try to understand that the ego-sense is not your real center, not your real "I am." Discover that you are the untouched witness of your thoughts. Pleasant and painful thoughts may come and go, but you are the Self that is ever unaffected. Clouds come and go, but the sky continues to remain untouched. In the same way, the Self within you is untouched by the thoughts of the mind.

9. Study the three states of consciousness: waking, dream and deep sleep. When you dream, the realities of the waking world are ignored and a new set of realities arises. When you sleep, you go beyond all multiplicity and all awareness of time and space. The deeper "I am" in you is ever untouched by the three states, and it survives even death. That "I am" is *Brahman*—the Absolute Self. By constant reflection you develop intuitive vision of the Self, which leads directly to Liberation.

Become Your Own Psychotherapist

By the practice of the above nine important Yogic techniques, you will become your own psychotherapist. You will be able to lift your mind from the state of gloom to the state of cheerfulness.

Good mental health is your own attainment. It cannot be received as a gift from others. Although you need guidance from enlightened personalities, still you must follow the teachings yourself and allow your personality to be integrated.

Due to lack of knowledge and insight into the nature of the Self you have overlooked some parts of your personality and have disowned them. But now with the help of spiritual guidance, you have the ability to become whole again. Do not be upset when you discover a negative trait within. Continue to understand that intrinsically you are the Self, untainted by the limitations of the world. In day-to-day life, try to see things in a new light arising out of meditation and enquiry. There is something new to discover day by day. Do not look for final answers to your problems.

Rather, learn to face your problems day by day with increasing faith and spiritual vision. When you bring about expansion in your consciousness, you will find that even a difficult problem has an easy solution. But when your consciousness contracts due to negative thoughts, even a trifling problem will assume mountainous proportions.

Help Others to Overcome Their Mental Problems

The methods that have helped you in gaining mental strength should also be communicated to others so that they may be helped. By growing in inner perfection, you will begin to subtly influence those around you in a positive way.

You should also help others by sharing your knowledge with them and by guiding them skillfully through what you have learned. However, this must be done carefully. If you become too involved

in the problems of others and lose your own sense of objectivity, your effort to help them will not only be fruitless, but may also intensify your own mental problems.

Also, do not impose your views on others. Rather, try to lead them to understand that you care for their wellbeing, and once you have established a congenial relationship, you will be able to effectively help them. Be a good listener and show that you have a genuine love for them. If you make a hasty remark such as, "I know exactly what your troubles are; I was myself in this situation last year," you may have shut the door of communication. Most likely the person will not be receptive, and therefore you have lost the opportunity to be of assistance.

While helping others, develop the spirit of Karma Yoga. Instead of having the egoistic idea that you are doing good to others, develop the attitude that you are serving God through humanity.

May God bless you with health, mental peace, and spiritual Enlightenment!



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