

Yoga and Headaches/Migraines

By
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Humans have been experiencing headaches since the beginning of time. It could be postulated that the first one was experienced when Eve put the pressure on Adam about that darned apple. Most of us know the triggers for our tension headaches: teenaged children testing their limits, reaching for the credit card to make a purchase and it isn't there, overload at work, being pressured by time constraints, stand-still traffic when you need to be somewhere. Vasoconstriction. The muscles tense so much that blood vessels are constricted. But the body and brain need those nutrients so the vessels are forced open. Throbbing, pounding headache. Most people who study Yoga, practice the asanas, relaxation techniques, and breath awareness find that the number of headaches they experience significantly reduces. And if they do start, they know their bodies and know how to get back to homeostasis.

What is it about the study/practice of yoga that can cause a reduction in headaches? On a physical level, posture is improved and misalignments are corrected. On a mental level, awareness is practiced and honed enough to pick up the first signs of an impending stressful headache-causing situation. Choices are then made. "Is this thought/action useful?" More observing, less controlling. Rather than being at the mercy of an emotion, a yogini knows that is a choice. If the traffic is at a standstill, she knows she can get her knickers in a twist or she can feel grateful that she is in a comfortable, air-conditioned car and she can use this time to observe her thoughts, listen to music or experiment with a breathing practice.

But, hey, who's perfect? If you find you are in the throes of a tension headache and a friend is nearby, ask her to help. Sit in a chair with a straight back. Your friend stands beside you, facing you. One hand is placed on your forehead and the other hand uses the thumb and middle finger to apply pressure just under the occipital ridge (base of skull). Experiment with placement of the thumb and finger so that they are in just the right spots. Your friend then gently applies a lift with both hands. Allow her to accept the weight of your head. Take full, easy, relaxing breaths.

If you are alone, try any yoga posture that lets the pressure of your head release into relaxation. There is a Yoga Journal site that describes 13 poses to relieve tension, http://www.yogajournal.com/health/120_6.cfm. Choose from those the ones that are right for you. Inversions help some people but increase the pressure pain for others. However, it is in the faithful daily practice of asanas and relaxation techniques that the real therapy lies, not just in the band-aid approach.

Now migraines are a different matter. They, too, have been with us for a very long time. They are perhaps one of the oldest medical conditions afflicting mankind. Migraine headaches were first recorded during the Mesopotamian Era in about 3,000 B.C. Over time treatments included drilling a hole in the skull to free "evil spirits," purges and

bloodletting, applying a hot iron to the site of pain and inserting a clove of garlic through an incision in the temple. Still about 30 million Americans suffer from migraines that are debilitating. There are many studies that attest to the benefits of yogic relaxation techniques and breathing practices in reducing the occurrence of migraines by 45 to 80 percent. The International Association of Yoga Therapists publishes a list of resources for many research topics. The one for headaches can be viewed at <http://iayt.org>. Just type “headaches” in their search.

However, when you are experiencing a migraine and you are cocooned to keep the light out and reduce stimulation as much as possible, this is the optimum time to engage in the deeper practices of Yoga. Or we could call them the higher practices of Yoga. First be aware of the breath. Allow the breath to flow steadily and evenly into the bottom of the lungs. Then empty from the top, middle then bottom. Make the breath steady and even without jerks or pauses, rounding the in-breath to the out-breath and out-breath to in-breath. Watch yourself breathe. Do this for a long time. Observe the pain. Observe the nausea. Stay with them, one at a time until they have a texture, a color, an identity. And know they are not you. Explore the body, the sensations. Be in witness consciousness. Find the element of space in your body. Go into the space where there is no thought, no sensation, and no pain.

There are guided techniques if that would be better for you. To be guided through relaxation techniques or even better, through to yoga nidra (yogic sleep) you only need a CD player and a CD. You can purchase a Yoga Nidra CD through Amazon.com or from www.swamij.com.