

## **Treat Yourself**

Happy 2020! With the holidays behind us, I take time to reflect on the necessary needs and unnecessary wants I have in my life. It's true the holidays were filled with too many pieces of pie, homemade fudge, carrot cake, and too many other delicious "treats" to list. The New Year, for me brings encouragement to change my diet to something healthier and increase weekly exercise.

Exercise can often be the hardest goal to make time for in our busy schedules. As a yoga instructor, I find that my classes are busy at the first of the year and then slowly dwindle down as the holiday season wraps up. Those who were feeling motivated can often lose the spark of those self-determined resolutions we promise ourselves to keep. I often see the new year bring new yogis and an opportunity for folks to make some lifestyle changes through exercise; this is always rewarding to watch as a yoga instructor.

Taking a moment to reflect on what our bodies and minds need in this New Year, the benefits of a regular, weekly regimen of exercise can offer us so much. The human body was created to move and when we spend most of our day working in an office setting; our bodies need some type of physical activity to decrease stress, increase heart rate and oxygen levels, and stretch to gain flexibility and balance.

Yoga can be one of the best forms of exercise because it focuses on breathing and meditation while exercising, moving from one posture to another. This allows the body to build strength, increase flexibility, balance, and endurance with a regular practice. In addition to physical benefits, yoga offers many mental health benefits: creating mental clarity by increasing calmness and body awareness, reducing chronic stress patterns, sharpening concentration, and relaxing the mind. The practice of yoga offers many different styles and based on the individual and their needs, yoga has a style that can be tailored to fit your personal needs. Even if your doctor has recommended you stay seated when exercising, chair yoga can be one of the most therapeutic and meditative forms of yoga. I encourage you to try it!

If you feel yoga is not appealing to you, there are many other types of exercise for you to explore. Gyms are great place to start if you are unsure what type of exercise you will enjoy. Some gyms offer memberships as low as \$10 a month making it an affordable option. Many gyms often include a variety of classes and different types of physical activity; so, you can try out what best suits your needs.

This past year my mother retired from her nursing career and took some time to relax after retiring, she quickly realized that some type of physical activity was needed in her life and began walking in the evening around her neighborhood. Initially, she started with ½ a mile, then a mile, and before she knew it; she was walking 2-3 miles daily. Walking 3 or more times weekly, she shared that her sleep had improved, overall physical strength and endurance was better, and most importantly her mood and feelings had positively increased. Instead of looking at exercise as a task or something she needs to do several times a week; she began to look at it as a reward or a way to "treat" herself.

The benefits of exercise are not only physical; it offers just as many mental and emotional benefits. The mental and emotional benefits of exercise may even be more rewarding than the physical benefits. Exercise helps the brain in many different ways. As the heart rate increases, it pumps more oxygen to the brain. Exercise helps with the release of hormones creating a healthy environment to encourage the growth of brain cells. It promotes brain plasticity by stimulating growth between new cells in many cortical areas of the brain. Additionally, a recent study from the Mayo Clinic suggested that cardiorespiratory exercise can even decelerate a decline in gray matter in the brain. As we age, physical activity can assist in combating age related cognitive decline.

The age old saying goes “starting is the hardest part”; therefore, when beginning exercise it is important to have a positive mindset. Instead of looking at it from the mindset of it being a task or something on your to-do-list, you can take the approach that it is a “treat” or an important form of self-care. We all know, the mind is very powerful and with a positive approach, we begin to see exercise as a more exciting and self-rewarding experience.

Namaste,

Angela E. Gray, MA, MS, LPC, RYT-200