

Yoga for Stress Management:
Will the practice of yoga help me
continue to be a positive teacher?

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Introduction

It was fifteen years ago when I discovered that I wanted to become a teacher. Fresh out of college, I was working with an environmental firm. As one of my duties, I was required to attend beach cleanups with school groups. I never contemplated becoming a teacher while trying to decide upon a future career. However, it was on the beaches of NJ that I realized sharing my love for science with children was the profession for me. Teaching and appreciating science with the students was so invigorating, so rewarding.

I began my career through the alternate route program. With the support of great mentors, administrators, and colleagues, I began to become the teacher I knew I could be. Teaching comes from the heart and I knew I had what it takes. Both in-district and out-of-district professional development programs, college courses, and professional reading allowed me to continually improve my practice as a teacher. Great teachers never stop learning. As life continued forward through its ups and downs, both good times and bad times, my rewarding profession as a teacher has always remained a positive constant. My first position was a fifth grade science teacher. This position was a true challenge. It was a town that struggled with poverty, drugs and gang activity. I worked so hard and had never been more satisfied.

Five years later, I accepted a new teaching position as a sixth grade science teacher in northern New Jersey. I am currently in a large district that has always provided for numerous, diverse professional development opportunities that many smaller districts do not offer. The collaboration among fellow science teachers in

our district has always been a healthy support system. Throughout the years, our science department has shared knowledge, creative ideas, and encouragement for the betterment of our courses. I have had the ideal teaching career. Yet recently, I have been quite stressed, anxious, and unsatisfied.

It was through EDUC 510 journaling that I realized I was most inspired by teachers from my past that displayed a never-ending enthusiasm for their content. Positive energy is contagious. As a student, I truly remember those positive, influential teachers that created a fire for learning. I also noted through the journaling that negative thoughts invaded some of my writing pieces. About a year later as I began my action research, I realized too many issues are stressing me out. In my fifteenth year of teaching, how can I feel this anxious? Exploration and creativity within the classroom have been replaced by rigidity. Assessments, many assessments, drive what is done in the classroom. Quarterly exams, pre- and post-SGO assessments, interim-writing reports are placed throughout the schedule. With all these assessments, hands-on exploration and engineering receive less time within the class.

In the meantime, classroom websites are created and recreated from year to year. Moodle was replaced by MyBig Campus, which was replaced by Edmodo, which had now been replaced by Google Classroom. I need a tech assistant to keep up with switching platforms! The creation of these sites takes time, time that is truly limited. Professional development needed to stay abreast of this changing technology has been removed to make time for study and creation of SGO

documents and quarterly exams. Common planning time has been removed as well to accommodate the new assessment demands.

In addition, the new teacher evaluation models are quite stressful. I would never give a student a performance rubric and have them openly know that even though a four rating exists, it would be highly unlikely that the four could be earned. Yet teacher evaluation models have been discussed in that manner. In addition, our administrators are implementing these evaluations. The question is who are my administrators.

The turnover rate of administration is unbelievable. I have been in my current district for nine years. In that time, I have had four principals and seven vice principals. Administration has been a revolving door. These new administrators move in and make new demands of their teaching staff on top of what we are already doing. The administrators are not in a position long enough to build a healthy, trusting, supportive relationship with the staff. Before you know it, they are off to a different location.

In the past few years, my science supervisor has remained. She has been a structured, supportive guide through these changing times. On the first day of school this year when our science supervisor met with our department, it was at this meeting that my heart broke. "Overall, upper level students report they are no longer 'excited' about science in our district any more". My heart hurt as I thought to myself, "I do not feel very excited either".

The negative climate of education infused with unrealistic overwhelming demands has created such a world of stress and anxiety. It is in this, my fifteenth year

of teaching, that I ask myself- "Why do I feel so horrible?" The search for ways to decrease tension, frustration and anxiety drives my action research. Realistic stress management techniques for this married working mother of two are the topic I delve into. I know in my heart this too shall pass but in the meantime, I need to stay positive and healthy. This negative tension is detrimental. I feel as if anxiety is affecting my outlook on life, my personal relationships, as well as my health. Additionally, this cannot be beneficial for my performance in my teaching responsibilities.

It was two years ago that I began experiencing a bout of illness. I worked with doctors to investigate this health issue. It was often stated that these inflammatory diseases are often flared up by too much stress. Stress can cause the body to enter into a diseased state. I believe this event stemmed from the toxic state in which I was functioning. Stress had to have been the cause. I was "making it all happen" at the expense of my own health. *Therefore, it is in this journey, that I wish to not only save my teaching career but also improve my health as I work towards decreasing stress.*

Literature Review

Summary

The initial research topic of interest was work/life balance. After reflection, however, it was clear that home demands were manageable yet work demands were unrealistic. The assessment driven climate of education infused with overwhelming demands has created such frustration and anxiety. As I enter into my fifteenth year of teaching, the focus of my literature review is whether there is a stress

management technique that I can implement to help sustain productivity within my teaching career. The search for ways to decrease tension and anxiety drives my action research.

Analysis of Articles

The 10 Best-Ever Anxiety Management Techniques by Margaret Wehrenberg

Wehrenberg (2012) defines anxiety as the emotional and physical state that results when you do not know what is happening, what will happen, or what to do about what is happening. Anxiety needs a resolution to subside. Anxious thoughts are often connected to “what if” thoughts. Working through anxiety can help a person take action to find a solution. However, trouble lies when these “what if” anxious thoughts are not true or valid. If troublesome thoughts are not truly useful to you, then these draining thoughts just need to stop. Someone struggling with anxiety may be able to put one idea to rest only to have another anxious thought pop up.

The techniques presented are an attempt to override the unhealthy thoughts so that an individual can enjoy their life. Thought stopping and thought replacement is a method that strives to do exactly what it says. If suffering from anxious thoughts, immediately stop that negative thought. Once the anxious thought is stopped, a positive thought must be ready to take its place. The happy distraction keeps the mind working/ preoccupied but now on something upbeat. This takes practice and an arsenal of positive distractions should be brainstormed and ready.

Hypochondria ruminations occur if one has anxious thoughts about what the body is experiencing. If this happens to you, it is recommended that you not watch the nightly news. The news dramatizes stories regarding health concerns. If there are real

symptoms, talk them over with someone you trust and avoid self-diagnosing via the Internet at all costs. Know in reality, if the symptoms were truly an issue, you would have already been to a true medical physician about the problem.

“Too much to do” ruminations are another true source of stress. Working as a middle school teacher, taking an action research graduate course, and supporting two children in their elementary school studies all while maintaining a functional household with my husband- life is quite overwhelming. It is in these stressful times that prioritizing tasks is critical. One must create realistic expectations for oneself within the constraints of a day. “Too much to do” ruminations drain most of energy needed to tackle the long to do list.

I liked the opportunity for self-assessment within the book. “If you checked 3 or more boxes, it means that anxious thoughts are interfering with your life and you might need all the various interventions that go with thought-stopping” (Wehrenberg, 2012, p 118). I checked off nine boxes. The self-assessment was helpful in validating that I truly suffer from anxious thoughts. One area identified as an area of improvement was the need to accomplish the tough task first. Avoiding hard tasks will only make me stressed and anxious for a longer period of time. Also, there will be times when missing a deadline may occur- ok so pay the overdue library book fine if needed. Less worrying!

“What if” thoughts and life ruminations reinforce a stressful lifestyle. Instead of wasting time and energy on these anxious thoughts, a shift into the positive mindset is needed. However, the question remains- is it truly possible to find peace from these anxious thoughts? Do negative thoughts ever really subside or will these techniques just

need to be continually implemented? I wish the authors created more techniques to rid one of these anxious thoughts.

Stress Management for Special Educators: The Self-Administered Tool for Awareness and Relaxation (STAR) by Krista Williams & Elissa Wolfe Poel

The Self-Administered Tool for Awareness and Relaxation (STAR) is a stress management strategy designed for special educators. Williams' and Poel's STAR strategy (2006) works to bring about awareness of the physical, mental, emotional, and physiological effects of stress through the interconnectedness of the brain, body and emotions. The first step is to identify the source of stress. There are various reasons why stress occurs. Physical ailments or discomforts can be a source of stress. When feeling overwhelmed or discouraged, one may lack the motivation or desire to improve or change. An individual response to one's own emotions or thoughts can be stressful. Lack of or the inability to communicate well is another source of stress. Stifled creativity can have a negative impact as well. Finally, lack of inspiration can crush our spirit. Stress, stemming from one or more of these, comes from various sources in our lives.

The next step has the individual connect to events by using the phrase, "I feel..." or "I am...". Increased awareness is achieved by analyzing what the stress is connected to and identifying the impact that the stress has on one's own life. Connecting the stress to self makes the stress real, not just something dramatically created in our mind. Finally, teachers create an affirmation statement using a positive "I" to address the stress. The positive "I" statement provides the individual with power. Working towards a solution using an "I" affirmation allows he/she to feel as if there is some control over what is occurring in life.

Deep breathing should continually accompany this thought process. Relaxation is achieved when the teacher works through these thoughts and repeats positive affirmation statements that promote self-image and self-control. The mindset will slowly evolve to bring the teacher to a more positive, in-control state of being. This leads the person to a stronger state of mind to face life's challenges. It is suggested to use the STAR at least once a day for a total of ten days to experience its benefits. It is advised to practice at different times of the day or in different locations.

Through my journaling, I have learned that identifying the source of stress is critical. Once the stressor has been identified, you are one step closer to reaching a solution. The article taught me using the powerful "I" statements provides a sense of control. Knowing there is somewhat of a handle over the stressful situation is an empowering feeling. The more in-control mindset leads to better functioning during stressful times.

The STAR strategy discussed "working through thoughts" as a tool for self-awareness. I am left to wonder if simply thinking over one's thoughts is as powerful as reflective journaling. In addition, the article mentions incorporating corresponding STAR exercises for the inner realm. However, the authors do not explain these exercises. This leaves me as the reader wanting to know more. After researching about the author Krista Williams, I understand that she is a yoga instructor. This leads me to believe these exercise moves are related to yoga but I do not know for sure.

On the other hand, this article's strength is its ability to build a strong case for the need to incorporate stress management strategies. The negative impact stress has on human health heightens the importance of their study. Referencing the body's physical

response to stress is quite informative. I was impressed by their ability to infuse medical studies to support their strategy. The medical studies incorporated explain body reactions that involve adrenaline, cortisol, and the sympathetic nervous system. It is hard to dispute that controlling stress is needed to protect our body.

The Efficacy of a Collaborative Stress Management Program for Teachers

by Janet G. Froeschle and Charles R. Crews

This research article takes a close look at the RIS (relaxation, imagery, solution) stress management program implemented within two middle schools located in Texas. This study addressed negative feelings that develop over time and ultimately can impact a teacher's performance in the classroom. As the imbalance between needs and resources arise, a state of emotional exhaustion overcomes the teacher as he/she begins to feel overextended. Stress now causes the teacher's attitudes and behaviors to turn negative and cynical. Unhealthy feelings of incompetence and low work achievement settle in. In reality, this cannot be beneficial for the relationship between the teacher and students.

In order to implement the study, participants from the two schools were placed in either a treatment group or a control group. The breakdown of the participants was defined in terms of their gender, years of experience, ethnicity. Ultimately both groups participated in the Maslach Burnout Inventory prior to the RIS program starting. This same test was taken following the completion of the RIS program. To ensure privacy for all participants, the teachers were asked to use a self-created password to ensure privacy. The pre and post scores were compared.

The treatment group started with counselors making sure that the teachers were in comfortable positions. Lights were dimmed. The counselor instructed individuals to breathe deeply and relax one body part at a time until total relaxation was reached. The

method is based upon the belief that this state of deep rest is shown to change physical and emotional responses to stress. Next, teachers were asked to visualize a relaxing or peaceful place in their mind. Teachers were frequently being reminded to breathe deeply throughout the journey. This guided imagery allowed the teachers to enter into a therapeutic state.

Counselors then used a complimenting technique that showered the participants with comments such as, ‘you are strong, you are confident, you are capable’. As the treatment session ended, teachers were asked to slowly enter back into the real world as the professional counts backwards from ten to one. Teachers then communicated with each other regarding thoughts on this treatment experience. This discussion among peers reinforced the positive feelings experienced encouraging teachers to strive for this relaxed state more often.

This article taught me the power of positive words. Powerful positive words have not been heard loud and clear by teachers in my current district within the past few years. The article explains how positive words have a positive affect on teacher morale. There is a part of me that does believe in the power of positive thoughts. However, it is tough to comprehend that true improvement was noticeable from only three weekly one-hour sessions. Yet the authors state within the results section that emotional exhaustion and depersonalization scores for individuals treated were significantly lower than the scores for the control group. Also, the personal accomplishment scores were significantly higher for those in the treatment group. Post- test scores support the original hypothesis that the RIS program would help to reduce teacher burnout.

If the program was that effective that quickly, I would be curious to know why this practice is not a big craze among the teaching profession. If the treatment were as simple as the article makes me think, then why wouldn't all districts opt to help their teachers in this manner by offering this type of collaborative stress management program for their staff? I guess that healthy habits do exist but it is just a matter of whether individuals take the time out to practice.

The Health Benefits of Yoga and Exercise: A Review of Comparison Studies
by Alyson Ross & Sue Thomas

In this review of comparison studies from scientific and nursing journals, Ross and Thomas (2010) set out to determine if yoga is equal to or superior to exercise when it comes to improving human health. There were numerous studies that could have been chosen from. No editorials, anecdotal or single case studies were chosen. Studies earlier than 1990 and those outside the United States were excluded. The qualities of research examined included originality, design, and bias. From here the articles were broken into categories based upon the type of study performed. The articles that were finally chosen were the comparison studies that focused on the effects of yoga compared to exercise.

The authors compiled the details of these twelve studies. The information presented included: the year the study was performed, the healthy or diseased population that participated, the type of yoga vs. the type of exercise performed, the duration of and the type of design which was implemented, as well as the health outcomes. A table was included that reported the outcomes of studies comparing yoga to exercise based on health status. The health status was broken into two categories. The "diseased" population included people living with diabetes, renal failure, or mental illness to name a few. Healthy populations included groups such as adults, seniors, or pregnant women.

The literature stated that for nearly every outcome measured for both healthy and diseased individuals, yoga appeared to be equal to or superior to the effects of exercise. One challenge that does exist when discussing the practice of yoga is the fact that it is “multi-dimensional”. The authors discuss how for future studies, the finer details regarding yoga need to be clearly defined. The practice of yoga can vary greatly so the facet(s) of yoga used need to be mentioned- strenuous exercise yoga poses, meditation, and/or breath work. Not only can the practice of yoga be diverse, the environments in which it is practiced and the props used during practice can be differ as well. As research continues, these factors need to be considered.

Within the article, the authors discussed forms of yoga that started me thinking about which form of yoga will be the focus of my self-study. It is Hatha yoga that will be included in my own study. Hatha yoga is a slow paced stretching class embedded with breathing exercises. This type is the beginner form of yoga, which includes seated meditation. The article denoted the health outcomes that were monitored through the various studies. The health outcomes discussed planted the seed for a few outcomes that I wish focus on. Quality of sleep, blood pressure, overall fatigue and pain were categories that I felt could be applicable for me.

So Stressed: The Ultimate Stress-Relief Plan for Women
by Stephanie McClellan and Beth Hamilton

Food plays a critical role when it comes to managing stress. Through proper nutrition individuals can provide the sustained, adequate energy that body needs in order to cope with prolonged, chronic stress. Ironically, when your body needs proper nutrition the most, this is usually the time when people resort to convenient, over-

processed unhealthy foods. This complicates the body's response to stress even further. Your diet is what fuels you to keeping going, especially during difficult times.

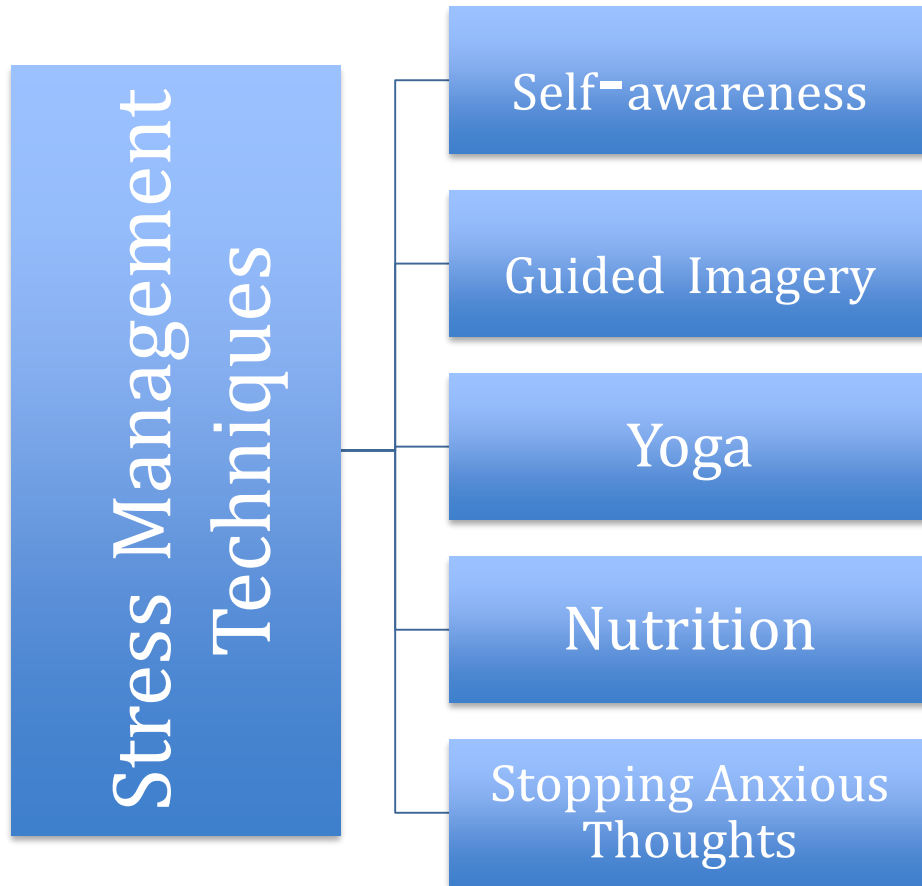
Simple strategies for providing the body with its needed fuel were shared. Remove the over-processed foods and replace them with fresh, natural foods. Since stress has the ability to deplete your body of nutrients, these whole foods can replenish this power supply to both your body and mind. The process of journaling brings awareness of what exactly is being consumed. Noting also when it is you are eating is quite important. One idea suggested recommended to provide smaller, nutritious meals to keep the body well prepared to deal with whatever comes your way.

Besides meals, the drinks we consume are equally as important to keep the body prepared to deal with stress. For example, popular caffeinated and sugary drinks provide a short boost by increasing your heart rate. However, this is not a healthy way to sustain energy throughout the day. It can even complicate your response to stress. By drinking water waste products can be flushed out. Without enough water, fatigue sets in. Being fatigued is never helpful when trying to survive a hectic, stressful day.

Different nutritional demands depend on the type of stress response pattern one experiences. I was able to identify myself as a HypoS individual. I related the triad of symptoms including fatigue, pain, and increased stress sensitivity. The use of vitamins and supplements counteract the negative effects of stress. HypoS should consume higher amounts of vitamin C since stress depletes this important antioxidant. Vitamin D is important for HypoS types to that tend to have an overactive immune system when under stress.

HypoS are often known for stress related autoimmune disorders. I personally find the nutrition information quite valuable. Numerous doctors could not identify what was causing my “inflammatory issue” a few years ago. The common response from different doctors was that it might have been induced by stress. Yet no doctor focused on my diet as a way to assist me in getting better. It makes me question how many people in our hectic world could have been healed with assistance from dietary changes instead of taking prescription drugs that have horrible side effects.

One challenge to the simple solution of proper nutrition is the know how to create tasty, healthy meals. The guidance of how to learn true healthy cooking was not provided. Where does the time to clean, chop, and create these meals come from when a person has an already busy lifestyle? Another challenge not addressed is the fact that drinking more water means even more trips to the bathroom. That simple task in the middle of a hectic school day is just one more thing to do. I’ve learned if the water helps with the energy to conquer stress than the trips to the bathroom should be worth it.



Research Questions

Recently I have been suffering from chronic stress due to work related issues. I wake up in the middle of the night pondering work related questions. Have I placed too many students in my top tier for my SGO evaluations? Will science class be defeated in order to meet the demands of the numerous standardized testing such as PARCC and our new quarterly exams? Will one of my three new administrators, who feel like complete strangers to me, come in to observe me tomorrow? Continuous anxious thoughts about my work never cease. I find myself highly distracted at home with my own children. I find that I am endlessly complaining to my husband about the negative work environment, overwhelming work demands, and not enough time. I am on edge with co-

teachers, colleagues, and students regarding the tight timeframe that we have to cover our science curriculum. This is unhealthy.

In an attempt to improve my stressful life, the practice of yoga will be incorporated. The question is, “Will yoga serve as a highly effective stress management technique?” The goal of this research is to determine if yoga is practiced twice a week will stress and anxiety levels decrease? Since yoga has been proven successful in healing the mind and body, will it work for me? Will I drift off to peaceful sleep and enjoy the sleep through the night? Will I be able to appreciate others and not be so on the edge all the time? Will the practice of yoga serve to make me a better, healthier person/teacher/mother?

Ultimately, stress is detrimental. Action needs to be taken in order to gain control. If you do not control stress, stress will control you. Stress negatively impacts work performance, interaction with others, as well as your own health. It would be an ideal situation to infuse many of these stress management techniques. However, through this ten-week self-study, it is the practice of yoga that will be the main focus.

I have never practiced yoga before. I have not even exercised in years. Therefore, a local studio will serve as the exploration grounds for Hatha yoga practice once a week. In addition, the at home practice of restorative yoga will be practiced once a week. The hope is to quiet this chaotic mind before bedtime. Hopefully I will suffer less in this frazzled lifestyle and evolve into a healthier, more in-control way of life.

Methodology

My most memorable past educators were the teachers who were energetic, enthusiastic and passionate. I have always tried to inspire my own students in that

manner. Yet through journaling I noted numerous negative thoughts regarding my career that I love. I began to notice how I am no longer the teacher I used to be. My performance in the classroom was driven by outside demands. This new environment evoked an immense amount of anxiety for me. Therefore, this self-study research project focused on the practice of yoga as a stress management technique.

About a year later as I now began my action research, those cries of desperation still invaded my journal writing. Upon reflection on my current teaching position, I realized too many issues are stressing me out. In my fifteenth year of teaching, how can I feel this anxious? Exploration and creativity within the classroom had been replaced by rigidity. Creative professional development time had been seized to complete mindless, endless tracking of data for administrative purposes. New teacher evaluation models, the revolving door of new administrators, and rapid technology turnover were just a few sources of stress invading my teaching.

The negative climate of education infused with unrealistic overwhelming demands had created such a world of stress and anxiety. It was in this, my fifteenth year of teaching, that I searched for an effective way to decrease tension, frustration and anxiety. Yoga as a practice of stress management was incorporated into my life. The hope was to create a healthier life and prevent teacher burnout.

I am currently in a large district located in north Jersey. This sixth through eighth grade middle school enrolls nearly eight hundred students. This diversely populated district had always provided for many opportunities. Ample in-district professional development had allowed teachers to keep up with changing technology and best teaching practices. Opportunity for within the school day collaboration had always been

provided. Funds for graduate level courses and conventions had been provided. I have had the ideal teaching career. Yet recently, the district had changed dramatically and I have been quite stressed, anxious, and unsatisfied for some time now.

Exploration and creativity within the classroom had been replaced by rigidity. Assessments, many assessments, drive learning the classroom. Quarterly exams, pre- and post- SGO assessments, interim writing reports were placed throughout the schedule making most of lesson planning a game of what assessment needs to be covered and by when. Funding cuts had curtailed the ample helpful professional development needed to stay abreast of changing technology. Common planning time had been removed to accommodate scheduling changes. As a result, it was hard to find time to gain support from and connect with fellow colleagues. Depersonalization set in, as I would wish to be left alone. Many times I would dodge students and colleagues by remaining in the back office.

In addition, new teacher evaluation models were quite stressful. Administration had been a revolving door. These new administrators moved in and made new demands of their teaching staff. These in house demands were on top of all the new demands from the state as well. The administrators had not been in position long enough to build a healthy, trusting, supportive relationship. Before you know it, they were off to a different district. Emotional exhaustion set in from dealing with stress with no alleviation.

Journaling was the main form of data collection for this self-study. In the morning, my quality of sleep was assessed. I noted if the sleep was the 3=best, 2=adequate or 1=interrupted. Following each workday, a zero to five rating scale defined my perceived level of anxious thoughts due to work related stress factors. If the cause of

stress could be pinpointed, it was noted to raise awareness of stress inducing situations. Next, a short personal reflection entry described any other noticeable feelings such as fatigue or anxious thoughts. Throughout this daily journaling, yoga was incorporated twice a week.

At the end of the two-month period of yoga, the journal entries were reviewed in order to determine if my quality of sleep and level of anxiousness could be controlled or reduced. Different themes that popped up along the way were noted. I analyzed what seemed to be the true origin of stress. Other areas of concern that could possibly be investigated in the near future were identified. The goal was to identify any noticeable trends in my stress level from workday to workday while practicing yoga. Ultimately the goal was to have yoga help to maintain quality performance in the classroom.

Project Timeframe

- October 20-25, Finalize literature review and research plan paper
- October 26-31, Sign up at yoga studio and purchase appropriate practice attire
- November 3- January 9, Yoga @ studio once a week and yoga @ home once a week accompanied by daily journaling
- January 20-30, Analyze and code journal entries to identify noticeable trends
- February 2-13, Write presentation
- February 16-20, Create trifold presentation board and practice oral presentation
- February 24, Official presentation @ 6:00 pm

Findings

This ten-week self-study focused on whether yoga practiced twice a week could serve as a highly effective stress management technique for this overwhelmed teacher.

With the fear of teacher burnout lingering, the goal was to practice yoga to determine if daily stress and anxiety levels decrease. For many, yoga has long been proven successful in healing the mind and body. Would it work for me? Journaling would monitor my response to the practice of yoga. Indicators, such as my quality of sleep as well as level of anxiousness felt throughout the day, were monitored.

Prior to starting this study, I had been in a persistent anxious state and the chronic stress was wearing this middle school teacher down. At the start of this school year, it was impossible to think that I could sustain productive performance in the classroom experiencing these feelings. I needed to keep my mind in a healthy state for the students that I interact with daily. Following this ten-week study, yoga has proven to be a step in the right direction. Incorporation of this stress management technique seemed promising for keeping my sanity in my teaching career.

Dr. Freudenberger (1974) was the first to identify the 12-stage Burnout Symptom Cycle. Upon self-evaluation, I appeared to easily be at stage eight. Not only had stress affected my life but it also affected the people in my life. Yoga had played a part in bringing this to my attention and identifying the need to address it. Awareness of how I felt was ignited by the quiet reflection time that yoga provided. Following the recent loss of my father, I realized even more that life was and will always be delicate. While we are alive, we must ultimately take care of myself in order to make each day great.

All signs point to yoga producing positive results. For example, at this point in the current school year, I had maintained good health and had not taken any sick days off yet. In the recent years, I have had to take off from work for unexplained aches and pains. All too often my primary doctor and rheumatologist would state that often times

these inflammatory disorders are caused by stress. That statement alone was enough to evoke stress. Yoga, with accompanied daily journaling, allowed me to feel as if I have been able to keep a true pulse on what my body experienced from day to day. The level of stress was noticeably toxic and awareness had helped me highlight just how important it was to value how I felt above all. If I was not well, there was no way I could care for others- family, students, or friends.

I also had not taken a mental health day off as well. Amid the chaotic environment of our school, I had remained a positive, effective teacher. I remained true to what I believe are best teaching practices. I did what I could to support my language arts and math teachers. However, true exploration and hands-on discoveries are what I value the most. I carved ample time out of the week to hold these as a top science class priority.

The teaching staff within my district had been bombarded with numerous administrative and curriculum changes. My role as a team leader had continued to be demanding. It was difficult to emotionally support my team of teachers through these turbulent times. One of my most important tasks was to keep our team of teachers motivated, knowledgeable and happy. At times, I was required to disseminate information from the district that I knew would be one more burden on already overextended teachers. Yet I had continued to be the person teachers seek out for support and advice. I felt like I continued to be that reliable ray of sunshine that provided them with something positive to hold onto as we continued to move forward in this chaotic time in education.

Through yoga I had learned to practice a peaceful feeling. I would like to think that I carried this practice into my workplace. While implementing a new rigid quarterly exam-pacing chart and infusing PARCC style practice questions in science class, I implemented positive thoughts. Yoga had placed a whole new meaning to being comfortable. While focusing on new demands, I had learned to value the remaining class time and focus on fitting in the best activities making the most of the remaining class time.

It was not just my colleagues and me who are adjusting to these new initiatives; the students were evolving as well. I had shared my own personal growth experiences with my classes. I focused on meeting new challenges with a growth mindset. Students were appreciative when I shared how I too was unsure of various changes. Together, we embraced interims, quarterlies and PARCC practice with a new viewpoint- we can only go up from here. It may be that the students and I are simply building a supportive classroom community as the year progresses. Yet, I'd like to think that my self-improvement through yoga has contributed to this positive environment too.

Home life too had been more hectic than ever. Both of my own children are in elementary school. I assisted them happily with their daily homework. I avoided complaining continually that I too have so much of my own work to complete. I stopped expressing my work overload stress to my children. With less support from my husband who volunteered to coach fall sports, our weekday evenings were extra full. Yet my husband was clear to comment on how I am "kept it together" very well. He stated I was much less hard on myself and I was a bit more positive.

Incorporating yoga at the end of my hardest workdays had taught me to focus on my own simple accomplishments and blessings in life as the day finally ends. I found that yoga prevented me from having the “I am overwhelmed” meltdowns. I found that yoga had allowed me to feel less anxious about my work performance, I redefined my definition of what perfect meant. This study highlighted the importance of caring for myself. Tending to my state of mind was critical for revisiting the same stressful events the next day. Physically my tense body also felt much better after stretching out after a long, hard day.

During daily journaling, there was a noticeable trend of incorporating yoga on my worst days. According to my journal entries, my thoughts expressed feeling overextended with statements such as, “drained”, “tired of feeling like crap”, and “not enough hours in the day”. Certain events would create weekday peaks of stress. On these days, my journal entry became a diarrhea of negative thoughts. It was especially on these stressful days that yoga was practiced. During yoga videos, I found it extremely effective to hear kind, gentle, de-stressing phrases from the yoga instructor. Deep breathing techniques was implemented during this quiet time. I would equate this deep breathing during yoga to a glass of wine- quite powerful.

During yoga, I often reminded myself reminding myself of the power of being proactive towards sources of stress that are in my control. For example, my principal had false information in my first observation of the year. Yoga, I believe, had a small role reminding me to keep an open mind and be true to yourself. I requested a meeting and spoke with my principal about the report. He was grateful that I spoke directly to him and shared his concerns about keeping up with the evaluation process. It took courage to

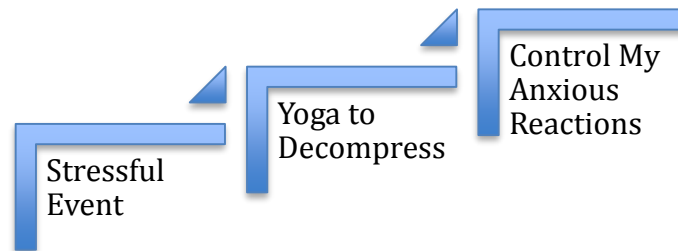
go in and speak with my new principal. I learned to challenge my anxious thoughts about these strange new administrators. As I felt more comfortable around the principal, I was able to spread this positive energy to my team of teachers and other colleagues.

Throughout the course of the yoga implementation, I discovered a fact that I always knew was true- carving time out during a weekday was extremely hard and required true commitment. I do not believe I would have persevered if it were solely for my own benefit. This sad fact highlighted how driven I am towards satisfying family and career requirements over taking care of myself. With the hectic work / home life, the rigid yoga practice schedule I originally had in mind only added to the stress of the daily to-do list. The more time I spent on journaling about how hard it was to make time to practice, the more resentful I became of my career and family responsibilities. I felt that I was taking care of others better than I was taking care of myself. Yoga proved very beneficial when I realized yoga was to help me. Here was a mantra I tried during this study:

You Matter
Open up to Possibilities
Gain Control of Anxieties
Appreciate Your Blessings

Another discovery was a newfound eagerness to minimize how much stress affected my life. In reality, I still do love being a teacher. However, the environment that I teach can be very negative. I put an immense amount of time into my professional responsibilities. I have done all that I can to stay on top of all these new demands. I have come to peace with understanding that a large percentage of my career is simply out of my control at this time. With new superintendent demands, new principal demands, new state demands, I have learned to do my best while managing my anxious responses to

these continuous demands. Yoga seemed to help me understand that I do not have to accept feelings anxiousness from day to day.



Through daily journaling, it was clear that yoga did not rid or minimize my stressful encounters. Also, yoga did not quite improve my daily quality of sleep on Sundays, Monday or Tuesdays. However, on my most stressful days when getting to sleep would have been extremely impossible, yoga proved beneficial in helping me decompress. Yoga, I truly believe, heightened my awareness of what was happening to my body and mind as a result of stress. During yoga I felt that I was able to spend time taking care of myself. Although I started to feel somewhat better, it never truly felt like enough.

Implications

The mind is powerful. I had proven to myself that my reactions to stress are ultimately most important key to stress management. Yoga was the avenue for helping to decompress when my stress level peaked. Keeping positive was important to me because in my past it was believed that toxic thoughts had the ability to embed toxic reactions within my body systems. Throughout this ten-week yoga study, I had maintained my health during this overwhelming school year. This study was important to me as I yearned to stay disease free and enjoy a healthy life. I was successful and each day I

woke up healthy, I held as a blessing. I noted this energy spent on myself was well worth it, not just for me but also for work and home life.

The true focus of the research was to determine if incorporating the practice of yoga could help to withstand and manage my stress levels. Just by practicing yoga, daily stress has not been removed. However, I found that yoga was a successful coping mechanism. It did prove effective to alleviate that built up tension that caused tremendous emotional exhaustion. My quality of sleep in the last half of the week was maintained even as stress levels peaked. The quality of sleep for the start of the week did not improve. A good night's rest was appreciated for my body's recovery. Acknowledging that stress was the cause of my looming burnout and taking action was critical. I believe with continued time and energy toward taking care of myself, I can continue to take care of students.

With overwhelming work demands, stress was at an all time high. Could I continue to be an effective teacher in this new type of environment; was this high demand, daily rigor sustainable? With adrenaline pumping for what seemed like every waking hour, I didn't know if I could last. Yoga was a fairly effective stress management technique. As I learned to control my reactions to events within the everyday rigor, I yearned to learn about other self-help techniques. Although I did not pursue other stress management techniques during this study, it is guaranteed that time will be allocated to them in the near future. Yoga with journaling allowed me to discover what my body needed to be a healthier person/ teacher/ mother.

Limitations/Subjectivity

While using yoga in an attempt to de-stress, I realized just how hard it was to carve out personal time in the day. Every day, there was just an insane amount of stimulation. Initially, I realized every time I started a yoga sequence from YouTube in my own home, my children saw this as an opportunity to join me on the ground and “play” with me. I love my children dearly but I immediately found that this was not the type of relaxation time that I was seeking. Therefore, I had to wait until the children were asleep before my time could truly ensue. Often by that time I was completely exhausted myself! Needless to say, the idea of practicing yoga at a studio proved unsuccessful as well since recreational basketball season started for both of my kids. The scheduled studio lessons were during the peak “mommy” time.

I wonder if the practice of yoga was as helpful as I make it out to be or is it the fact that this is the first stress management technique that I have ever committed to in years. I question how I make this out to be that effective when I only practiced for a series of ten weeks. The time frame in which yoga was practiced did coincide with the usual trend of a new school year. Stress naturally subsides over the first few months. There may have been a potential bias. Did this timeframe in which yoga was practiced give me the perception that yoga was working when it may have just been part of the natural, usual trend?

During this ten-week stress management study, there were numerous embedded breaks from work- NJEA convention, Thanksgiving, winter break, etc.... Was I able to manage my stress due to these repeated periods of down time off from work? I usually brought work home during those times. Contrary to what some believe are vacations, I

did continue to work during that time out of the school building. I believe I did not receive full reprieve from stress. Yet I felt it was important to note those days when I was able to catch up on work and recoup mentally.

Although this study proved successful, it did however add to the daily-overwhelming list of things to do. From my perspective, I found it extremely difficult to fit two practices of yoga into my workweek. However, as I discussed this with my neighborhood-working mothers who don't get home from New York City until eight at night, they laughed at me. I became aware of my "not enough" time perspective as I shared my journey with friends. It truly is all about perspective!

Emerging Questions

Throughout my home practice of yoga, I tried to create an ambiance with dimmed lights as I watched my video on the iPad while on my soft living room rug. I often ask myself, "If I felt that good after a YouTube instructional video, how wonderful would I feel if I were in a yoga studio?" The studio has wispy drapes, numerous candles, bubbling water fountains, and peaceful music playing. The temperature was always cozy warm. My goal is to experience this over the summer.

With continued vigilance over my own mental state of mind, I also wish to further research ways to improve my mindset. I often fear the worst before there is any real issue to worry about. Anxious thoughts frequently invade my thoughts. I want to continue to understand why I think the way I do so I can be proactive and positive in preventing this useless waste of energy. Even though I have been teaching for some time now, I still continue to feel those new teacher jitters around new administrators. I want to learn more

ways to prevent these anxious feelings from detracting from my energy, which I should be focusing on my students.

I am usually found outside my class organizing class trips, performing professional reading toward the completion of my professional development plan for the year and completing other teaching related tasks. When I interact with colleagues, I am frequently discussing education related topics. However, during our graduate class, I thoroughly enjoyed discussing the topic of stress management with other teachers. In the past, discussing my stress level was like admitting defeat. This made me feel inadequate. Yet, it is quite amazing the volume of teachers which feel the same way. I want to identify support networks where conversations with other positive minded teachers can occur.

I have appreciated managing my own stress throughout this short timeframe. However, what is strikingly scary is my increased awareness of noticeable stress induced behaviors within my current students. I had witnessed a female student pull out her eyelashes during quarterly exams. The disorder known as trichotillomania is a compulsive disorder, which serves as a coping mechanism for anxiety and other difficult emotions. Did the added pressure of exams on top of all the other middle school demands cause this? I witnessed a male student violently tear at his cuticles during rigorous PARCC style writing practice. These definite signs of high anxiety made me even more concerned for the students! If I felt this out of control as a professional, how could it not be affecting these sixth grade students? I look forward to learning how to infuse simple yet effective stress management into class for my students.

Conclusion

This study means more than just saying I enjoyed trying yoga. This self-study was a means to determine if staying a teacher was possible during this restless time in education. The results lead me to believe that if valuable time is spent on trying to take care of myself, longevity and productivity in the classroom is possible. Following this ten week period, the study was a reminder that when things get hectic, placing myself at the bottom of the to do list is not a good idea. In conclusion, the reflective time spent during journaling proved to be an extremely powerful tool. It was an eye opening experience regarding how much of my life energy was wasted on unnecessary stress. Taking the time to think about the sources of my stress and my reactions to them were quite critical.

Yoga had proven to be somewhat helpful in reducing stress levels making my mind and body feel better. Throughout the sessions, one of my top priorities was to rid my mind of the anxieties. Reflective journaling highlighted enjoyable times as noted with comments as, “fresh air felt good”. I need to get out, literally get outside of my school and home more often. For example, following a Critical and Creative Thinking course, I placed aside my rigid lesson plans to infuse a great new activity I learned. The students and I had a great class. “I am so glad I prepared the day before” comments displayed that time management is key to my reduced stress level as well. This stress management concept is a work in progress for me. Journaling definitely proved insightful.

I believe this study might be helpful to other colleagues and working parents. It is almost therapeutic to admit that being blessed with a family and a career can at times be

quite painful. This discussion of stress management often times left the topic of yoga and moved onto other ideas that can be helpful. Simple ideas discussed included implementing crockpot recipes to free up time at home or infusing self-assessment to create less grading for the teacher. Further ideas for alleviating teacher workload stress can look to be incorporated.

Although this study has come to an end, I know that how I perform in my classroom will continue to be affected by my stress level. I can honestly say that my exploration of stress management techniques will continue. I wish that what I learn could also be imparted unto my students as a helpful life skill. Healthy self-awareness hopes to be modeled for the benefit of my students. I will take a more proactive part in being a supportive person not only for my students but also for others that I interact with. “Be the change that you wish to see in the world” is a quote by Mahatma Gandhi that now resonates with me.

Implementation Plan

I plan on practicing yoga on an as-need basis because it proved helpful. It was effective in getting me to sleep when I was extremely stressed out. I hope to take this home practice of yoga to the next level by committing to a membership to a yoga studio during the summer vacation. Since using a YouTube instructional video in my living room was beneficial, having a real instructor as a guide would be the ideal situation. Even if achieving this entails recruiting grandma for about an hour to watch the kids, I believe it will be worth it. I did want to try this on an already hectic school day when there was already too much to juggle.

Yoga also made me realize the importance of caring about myself. It was usually about so many other people before me. Now I feel the benefits of taking care of myself and it is a great feeling. As my own children are growing, I feel their eyes on me more often. They are watching to see how I respond or act toward various situations. I plan on continuing to read literature about stress management as a way to continue to grow as a positive role model for both my own children as well as my students in the classroom.

It is powerful to think that yoga twice a week was so helpful in maintaining stress levels. Creating a healthier vision of myself would encourage me to continue to research self care strategies. It is draining always being the happy one that people flock to in despair. I hope to build up a supportive network of positive friends. I wish to gather and post a variety of meaningful quotes reinforcing the importance of taking care of myself and post them in the classroom. This should be useful for both my students and me. Every day is a new opportunity to be great.

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Appendixes

Data Collection Instrument

Stress Management

Date: _____

Quality of Sleep

3- Best Ever

2- Adequate

1- Interrupted

Anxious Ruminations



Personal Reflections

Dr. Freudenberger (1974) 12-stage Burnout Symptom Cycle

- Stage 1: Compulsion to prove (Driven by an ideal)
- Stage 2: Intensity (Working like a maniac)
- Stage 3: Subtle deprivations (Putting your own needs last)
- Stage 4: Dismissal of conflict & needs (Miserable & clueless as to why)
- Stage 5: Distortion of values (The death of values)
- Stage 6: Heightened denial (Frustrated, aggressive and cynical)
- Stage 7: Disengagement (Emotionally exhausted and disengaged)
- Stage 8: Observable behavior changes (I've morphed into What?)
- Stage 9: Depersonalization (Get away from me)
- Stage 10: Emptiness (Inner emptiness)
- Stage 11: Depression (Who cares and why bother?)
- Stage 12: Total burnout exhaustion (Physical and mental collapse)

Retrieved from: <http://turnerpsychologycalgary.com/what-is-burnout/#sthash.5sPkTRJw.dpuf>