

Put *life* in balance

Your three-step plan to stopping stress

By Robert Baker, Correspondent
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Ok, now that the holidays are over, the huge meals have been eaten and the dishes have been washed and put away, things are beginning to get back to what passes for normal. Maybe you stepped on the scale and were horrified to find that those extra helpings you enjoyed have become extra pounds that you don't need.

Or maybe you tried to put on that pair of jeans that fit so well before Christmas and discovered that you couldn't quite button them.

Maybe you panicked.

"Time to start a crash diet and launch an aggressive exercise program," may have been the first thought that crossed your mind. But think again, advised Stephanie Tormey, who runs Heart and Soul Fitness LLC, in the Gillette section of Long Hill Township.

"Unless you're used to doing strenuous exercise on a regular basis, trying to do too much too soon could do more harm than good," said Tormey, who is studying for her Ph.D. in Health Science at Seton Hall University. "The first step for a previously sedentary person should be to work on gradually increasing their muscle strength and endurance. This will then allow them to participate in more vigorous forms of exercise such as high-impact cardiovascular activity with a decreased risk of harming themselves."

One effective way to accomplish this, research has shown, is to participate in a beginner yoga class.

"When properly taught by a knowledgeable and qualified trainer, a beginner yoga class can improve not only muscle strength and endurance but also balance and flexibility," Tormey said. "Balancing the muscles of the torso in terms of muscular strength, endurance and flexibility can lead to improved posture, which helps to improve back health. Finally, because of the relaxing nature of the exercise, it also can help to reduce stress, the cause of so many health issues in today's mile-a-minute, instant communication society."

Tormey first became aware of the need for stress reduction when, after 20 years of working in the fitness industry, she decided to go back to school for a graduate degree in exercise science.

"As one of the requirements for my degree, I had to write a thesis," she recalled. "I decided to conduct an experiment measuring the physiological and psychological effects of yoga training. The results of my research were significant. I found that yoga improved not only the muscular strength and endurance, balance and flexibility and back health of the people practicing it, but also their psychological well being."

Step 1 – Focus Your Mind

This research led directly to the establishment of Tormey's fitness studio. "I found that yoga can be safe and productive if performed judiciously using my knowledge of exercise science and biomechanics," she said. "It also offers a unique opportunity to focus the

WHAT MOMS ARE SAYING

Thinking about getting pregnant? Yoga can help.

"Yoga and pilates are great for reverse blood flow and getting better circulation to/from the pelvic bowl (reproductive) organs and to nourish the endocrine system. Beware not to over-exercise. Stress can directly and profoundly affect hormonal levels. Rainbow Light prenats are EXCELLENT — great choice! Opt for organic dairy — STRICTLY. Dairy is a hormone-driven substance, and so excess hormones and hormone-disruptors (i.e. growth hormones, herbicides and pesticides in the grazing/feed of the cows and antibiotics) can be a problem in fertility. Nutrition is key. Cheers,

TheHerbalist

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mind with the intention of reducing stress and evoking relaxation. In fact, its mood-enhancing, physically strengthening effects can lead to improvements in other health behaviors.”

But yoga is not the only stress reduction technique offered by Heart and Soul Fitness.

“We also conduct classes in aerobics., Pilates, belly dancing and weight training,” Tormey said. “Our goal is to help our clients, no matter what their age or physical condition, achieve both physical and mental fitness along with stress reduction.”

“The sense of community is important because it gives members an incentive to keep coming back.

"The fitness industry in our country caters to the young and vital, following trends and marketing to the two-thirds of those 18 to 44 years old who are reported to use some of their leisure time for physical activity." Tormey said. "The focus is not based on securing lasting changes in health behaviors, but instead what is new and 'hot' to draw participants to a facility. This marketing strategy works for the business owner, but has little staying power with the average inactive individual who starts and stops an exercise program half a dozen times a year."

Helping members make permanent changes in their health behaviors is Tormey's number one priority.

"According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), some 65 percent of all Americans are overweight, with 31 percent of those categorized as obese," she said "This can lead to any number of debilitating diseases. The CDC reports, however, that regular physical activity reduces the risk of heart disease, diabetes, osteoporosis and high blood pressure. That's why it's so important to keep members coming back on a regular basis."

One of the ways Tormey accomplishes this is by making sure that-whenver a member enters the studio, they are always greeted by name.

"It sort of reminds you of the scene from the TV show, "Cheers" in which a patron walks into the bar and everyone immediately turns and gives him a big 'Hello,'" she said. "Here, not only do the instructors know everyone's name, but members are personally introduced to one another and connections are established between them. They share stories of work and family, recipes for the holidays, even child-care advice. In fact, if members notice that someone has been missing from class, they will often contact that person to make sure everything is OK."

Step 2 – Make Connections

Heart and Soul Fitness also has extracurricular programs designed to augment the stress reduction techniques used in class. "The knitting club, for example, provides an opportunity for people to come together and enjoy the relaxing effects of knitting while once again making an underlying connection with other people," Tormey said. "It is free of charge to participants who currently range in age from 10 to 78 and offers a unique opportunity for the exchange of wisdom and kindness between people in all stages of self improvement. We have a fabulous group of senior citizens who are involved in every aspect of the studio, including teaching knitting to kids and adults alike. Our club meetings are like the sewing or quilting circles of yesteryear. In our fast-paced, competitive world, these are rare moments of peace and kindness that have a profound effect on our sense of well being."

Step 3 – Give Back

Another unique feature of Heart and Soul Fitness is the involvement of its members with caring for poor and homeless people in Newark. "Research has shown that caring for other people can actually lead to a longer, more gratifying life," Tormey said. "I volunteer with an organization called New York City Relief and we go into Newark on Friday nights with food, clothing, and emotional and spiritual support. The people at the studio have donated countless items to this outreach, including 70 pairs of gloves and hats at Christmas. This year we even knitted our own scarves to hand out!"

Tormey emphasized the importance of recognizing that the mind and the body are intricately connected.

"Physical well-being enhances the emotional and intellectual components of self," she said. "At the same time, emotional connections and stability lead to improved physical activity and health behaviors."

This connectivity explains why Tormey calls her studio Heart and Soul Fitness.