

# Yoga can help employees stretch away stress, anxiety, burnout

By Leah Carlson Shepherd  
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Yoga can play a strong role as part of an employer's overall efforts to promote wellness, disease prevention and physical activity among employees. It also can dovetail nicely with an employer's initiatives to encourage employees to take more personal responsibility for their overall health and health care decision-making.

Yoga is a combination of physical poses (called asanas), breathing techniques and guided meditation. It is proven to bolster strength, flexibility and balance, says Terri Kennedy, a yoga teacher and board chair for the Yoga Alliance.

It has been used to help patients with back pain, insomnia, anxiety, depression, arthritis, heart disease and fatigue — all big known sources of presenteeism and increased costs for employers. It's also been used to relieve stress for cancer survivors. "Yoga is increasingly used as medical therapy," Kennedy notes. "It's the most commonly used complementary and alternative medicine therapy."

But can it reduce the cost of medical claims related to physical inactivity, obesity and heart disease? "Being preventive, it's very cost-effective," says Sat Bir S. Khalsa, an assistant professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School, who has studied the effectiveness of yoga in treating insomnia. "The math is very simple. If you practice these techniques, you will reduce costs. If you use yoga as a therapy for one thing, you're not just treating that one thing. You're treating yourself as a whole."

In fact, yoga can help with conditions typically associated with office work, such as eyestrain, carpal tunnel syndrome and back pain, according to Rachel Permuth-Levine, a deputy director at the National Institutes of Health's Heart, Lung and Blood Institute in Bethesda, Md. She teaches yoga classes for NIH employees, and she organized a yoga week for NIH employees and local residents.

"The best thing you can do for your workers is provide as many stress management modalities as possible. If you are stressed at work, it creates a culture of stress," she says.

Twila Stevens, a yoga instructor in Corpus Christi, Texas, recalls one student who said yoga helped her deal with tension between co-workers. Another student said yoga helps her relax during hectic business travel. Likewise, Stevens credits yoga for a reduction in her own anxiety and back pain.

Yoga helps people become better at maintaining concentration and coping with their emotions, which is important in a workplace setting, according to Khalsa. However, he cautions, one yoga class per week is probably not enough to produce lasting stress relief and lasting health benefits.

## Employer programs

Health considerations aren't the only reason employers provide yoga classes for their workers. "It's really to offer additional benefits to their team. It's stress relief, and it brings the people together in a way that you normally don't get," says Kimberly Wilson, the founder of Tranquil Space, a yoga studio in Washington, D.C. "It's a great bonding experience for the students."

About 10 employers contract with Tranquil Space to provide yoga classes for their employees at the worksite. In addition to regular yoga classes, employers can opt to provide a one-time workshop on a specific topic, such as newbie yoga, lunchtime stress breaks, desk yoga or mindfulness training.

Sandia National Laboratories, a national security laboratory in New Mexico, offers free yoga classes at an on-site fitness center for its 8,300 employees.

So far, yoga has been a hit. "There's a great deal of call for it. Yoga has always been consistently attended here. It's one of those classes you can take and go back to work and not smell really bad," comments Stephanie Holinka, a spokeswoman for Sandia. Unlike aerobics or other types of exercise, yoga doesn't require a shower afterwards — something that employees appreciate.

One of Sandia's main reasons for offering yoga is to help workers feel more relaxed and less stressed, she adds. "On the days that I've gone, I feel so much clearer when I get back here. You end up coming back with a lot of energy, which is nice," she says.

In addition, "The yoga instructors tend to be very accommodating for a variety of fitness levels, which is really important. They tell folks how to modify, and they're accepting when you need to modify because of an injury or illness," Holinka says.

### **Something for everyone**

Some workers might think they're too old or too inflexible to try yoga, but experts say anyone can do it. "Yoga has many styles to fit everybody — every age, capacity, need," says Kennedy. "There's something for everyone." Permuth-Levine agrees that yoga is highly accessible and attainable for most people.

To increase participation for your yoga classes at the worksite, Permuth-Levine suggests keeping the cost low (or free) and talking about how yoga can help with productivity and focus at work.

A quick demonstration may be helpful because having a positive experience and directly feeling the benefits of yoga is what will attract more employees to participate on a regular basis, Kennedy says.

Although yoga comes from an ancient Indian spiritual tradition that includes meditation and chanting, a class does not have to include a spiritual component, so employers can assure their employees that the class will be nonreligious.

With layoffs, financial strains and employee stress at high levels, it's no wonder that some employers are looking for ways to relieve that stress. When employees are in downward dog or tree pose, they're not worrying about layoffs, travel budgets or the downward spiral of the stock market.