

Pathways
to
Enhance
Well-Being



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The Co-Creators of the Booklet

From Linda Lentini: As Project Director for Healing From Within(HFW) since its beginning, I cannot begin to express how much this project has changed my life personally and professionally. It is a great honor for me to share the practices that I do daily with participants in HFW groups. As someone with lived experience of being incarcerated, hospitalized, and homeless, these practices give me the tools I need to handle life's stressors and celebrate the joys of living.

From Lauren Spiro: If every vision could be this easy to manifest the world would be a much more peaceful and cooperative place.

From Peggy Swarbrick: I believe that each day we have so many opportunities to be fully present and appreciate ourselves, others, and our environment. I hope this resource can help you see ways you can enhance your wellness.

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Welcome

This booklet was created to share some specific wellness practices that anyone can do. We also have included some research findings on how these practices have enhanced the wellness of many people.

Before the idea of this booklet came about, we began looking at what research findings show on the impact of alternative approaches to wellness for people who have been diagnosed with a mental health condition. We cast a small net, only looking at research on people who had been assigned a mental health diagnosis. By narrowing our review of the research, we hoped to get some clear findings that would inform not only people with mental health conditions but behavioral healthcare professionals and others who might consider using these approaches.

We found some very encouraging findings that we wanted to share with a broader audience so that anyone—healthcare professionals, lay people, family members, past or current users of mental health services, friends—could benefit from this information and these simple practices. We hope you find this information helpful on your journey to enhance not only your well-being but the well-being of those around you.



Sources cited are listed in the References and Resources section at the end of the booklet.

Research Supporting Well-Being Practices

Increasingly, research shows that alternative approaches to wellness for broad-based audiences reduce the physical and emotional impact of stress.

- ☆ Relaxation practices like yoga, breathing exercises, and meditation can reduce the need for medical care by 43%.¹
- ☆ Yoga is the most commonly used complementary and integrative health intervention in the US, not including vitamin or mineral supplements.²
- ☆ Yoga has been shown to improve quality of life; reduce stress; lower heart rate and blood pressure; help relieve anxiety, depression, and insomnia; and improve overall physical fitness, strength, and flexibility.³
- ☆ Reviews of the research on a variety of yoga practices show promising results. Yoga is effective in reducing stress responses and the effects of stress. Yoga also seems to be helpful for anxiety and depression, as are other relaxation and stress management techniques such as meditation, relaxation, exercise, and socializing with friends.⁴
- ☆ Qigong (pronounced *chee-gung*), associated with the practice of tai chi, combines small and gentle movements with breathing exercises. Both qigong and tai chi are popular because they are safe and can be adapted for people with a variety of health conditions or physical limitations. Although few formal analyses have been conducted, tai chi appears to be relatively cost-effective.⁵

- ☆ Nobody knows exactly how or why controlled breathing exercises promote healing, but such practices do seem effective. Some experts suggest that controlled breathing changes the response of the body's autonomic nervous system—this system is what controls unconscious processes such as your heart rate and digestion and is responsible for how you respond to stress.⁶
- ☆ Mindfulness practice shifts the focus of our attention, which seems to activate the brain in a certain way that creates a sense of calm and peace. Scientists have shown that the brain can change as a result of certain experiences. Over time, regular mindfulness practice makes this beneficial brain state part of a person's everyday way of being in the world. The resulting feeling of clarity and stability leads to increased resilience and improved health.⁷

When human beings are seen as multilayered and integrated with their environments, the view on the causes of disease shifts, along with approaches to treatment and prevention. Health is no longer seen as a purely biological or personal phenomenon, but as part of an intricate web of interrelated factors, behaviors, patterns, and interactions. There are benefits of alternative approaches both for the general population and for people with mental health conditions. Some of these practices done regularly can reverse disease and some can positively impact other long-term conditions.

Imagine scaling alternative approaches to wellness and stress management to the community level—shifts would begin to occur in population outcomes, and tremendous potential benefits to society could be realized.⁸



Practices for Well-Being

Well-being is a general feeling of contentment. The world seems right and life seems worth living. From time to time, everyone experiences difficult times. At these points, we all benefit from having a pathway that will reduce our feelings of dis-ease or struggle and increase our sense of peace and happiness.

In this section, we describe six wellness practices. Each one is explained briefly, with background on the research supporting how to use it to enhance your well-being.





Breath Practices

Deep breathing exercises are often used for relaxation and stress management. By breathing deeply, you slow your breathing down. Air comes in your nose, fully fills your lungs as your lower belly expands, then gets released slowly through your mouth.

How can deep breathing exercises help me?

Deep breathing exercises can help you relax, reduce stress, concentrate better, and counteract the body's fight or flight response. One research study⁹ used a 12-week group to teach breathing exercises. In that study, people also learned a type of cognitive behavioral therapy, muscle relaxation, and ways to improve sleep. This study found:

- ☆ People in the study reported better sleep, even after the study ended
- ☆ Heart rates for people in the study were steadier, even at the end of the study

Are there any risks of deep breathing exercises?

In general, deep breathing exercises are safe. Some individuals may find it hard to focus on breathing, but this becomes easier with practice. At first, you may feel lightheaded. A yoga instructor or other person experienced in deep breathing exercises can guide you in developing breath awareness and adjusting your breathing techniques.

What else do I need to know about deep breathing?

Stress can be detrimental to our health, and we need to be able to manage it if we are to lead healthy, happy lives.

Breathing relaxation exercises can be used alone or combined with other approaches, such as meditation, a mindfulness practice, guided imagery, or progressive muscle relaxation.

You can practice these simple exercises at home or at work.

Using Deep Breathing

The first method to learn is how to do what is called *belly breathing*. This is the most basic breathing technique and the one to master before trying others.

- 1.** Sit or lie on a comfortable surface, as you prefer.
- 2.** Place one hand on your stomach, just below your ribcage; place the second hand over your chest.
- 3.** Breathe in deeply through your nostrils, letting your first hand be pushed out by your stomach. You should find that your chest remains still.
- 4.** Breathe out through your lips, pursing them as if you were going to whistle. Gently guide the hand on your stomach inwards, helping to press out the breath.
- 5.** Slowly repeat 3 to 10 times.

You should begin to feel relaxed after two or three deep breaths. Keep practicing as long as you would like. As you become skilled in this breathing exercise, you may choose to learn about other breathing exercises that you can try.



Meditation

For centuries, people have used meditation to focus their attention, relax their minds and bodies, and promote patience, forgiveness, and loving kindness.

Meditation can involve sitting still, lying quietly, walking, repeating a mantra (a word, phrase, or sound used as a focus of attention to remove awareness from thoughts and feelings, and allow undisturbed concentration), or other meditative activities. Some people listen to music, nature sounds, or use a guided meditation to support their practice.

How can meditation help me?

Several research studies¹⁰ on the practice of meditation report positive results for people dealing with stress. Many people who have experienced trauma, depression, or anxiety notice a change in their overall wellness after introducing these practices into their life.

Are there any risks of meditating?

Research studies have not reported harmful effects from meditation. Some people have difficulty relaxing or concentrating when meditating. Many people find that an experienced teacher can help people who are learning to meditate and help you explore ways to meditate that are gratifying and match your needs and concerns.

What else do I need to know about meditating?

You can meditate anywhere. People meditate for different lengths of time—anywhere from one minute to one hour. Experiment with the time and style of meditation that works best for you. The most important thing is using your knowledge, talents, and abilities to explore various types of meditation practice to find those that work best to achieve your meditation goals.

A Simple Meditation for Beginners

- 1.** Sit or lie comfortably.
- 2.** Close your eyes.
- 3.** Breathe naturally. Do not make an effort to control your breath.
- 4.** Focus your attention on the breath with each inhalation and exhalation. Notice the movement of your body as you breathe. Observe your chest, shoulders, rib cage, and belly. Simply focus your attention on your breath without controlling its pace or intensity. If your mind wanders, return your focus back to your breath.

Maintain this meditation practice for two to three minutes to start, and then try it for longer periods. You may want to use a timer so you do not need to watch a clock.



Mindfulness

Mindfulness means being aware of the present moment. You can use your five senses—sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch—to sustain this awareness. Practicing mindfulness supports your ability to be aware of the present moment without judgment.

How can mindfulness help me?

Practicing mindfulness is good for both your body and your mind. These practices support refocusing your attention on the present moment, which helps reduce the experience of stress that results from focusing on the past or the future. People use mindfulness-based practices to reduce excess energy, elevate mood, ease stress, relieve symptoms of anxiety, and cope with the experience of pain.

Long-term stress can have negative effects on your body as well as your mind and can lead to health problems.¹¹

Mindfulness can reduce stress as well as offering other benefits, such as pain management, thinking skills, and improved emotional control.¹²

Are there any risks of mindfulness practice?

Research studies do not identify any risks to mindfulness practice. Some people find it hard to learn on their own and may benefit from a mindfulness course or teacher.

What else do I need to know about mindfulness?

Like any skill, mindfulness takes practice, so start small and work your way up to a mindfulness practice that you enjoy. One long-term option is to find a Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction course (MBSR) in your area to learn several mindfulness exercises that take little effort and you can do pretty much anywhere, anytime. And remember to have fun as you practice being in the present moment.

Sample Mindfulness Exercises

One Breath

Try to pay attention to what one breath feels like. Feel the sensations of one breath flowing in and out from your body. Notice the sensations in your nostrils, your shoulders, your rib cage, your belly, and so on.

A Mindful Moment

Use mindfulness to give your brain a break, rather than filling every space in your day. Instead of automatically reaching for technology, checking your e-mail, going online, or looking at your phone, try paying attention to the world around you and the world inside you.

Notice what you see and hear, as well as what you feel.





Guided Imagery

By using someone’s voice to guide you through visualizing a scene, an image, or a series of images, you can relax your mind and body and renew your energy.

The person guiding the practice may suggest images—such as a starry sky, a peaceful waterfall, or an imaginary walk in the woods—and may have you focus your attention on your breath. Once you learn to connect relaxation with a certain mental image, simply recalling that image during a stressful event may help you relax your body and mind.

How can guided imagery help me?

Guided imagery can use your different senses together to make positive changes and create a sense of balance in the mind and body. One study¹³ demonstrated how guided imagery helped people with depression who were in an inpatient setting. After 10 days, people using the technique felt more comfortable and had less depression, anxiety, and stress.

Are there any risks of using guided imagery?

Guided imagery is a safe technique, but it may take practice to be able to create images in your mind. It is worth trying different types of guided imagery to see what images are most effective in bringing you to a state of relaxation.

What else do I need to know about guided imagery?

Guided imagery can be used by one person or in a group, as well as be used with other approaches, such as breathing relaxation exercises or meditation.

Sample Guided Imagery Practice

- 1.** Sit quietly some place where you can close your eyes.
- 2.** Pick a favorite place to think of during this practice—real or imagined—where you feel good and safe. It could be a garden, a waterfall, the beach, or a room.
- 3.** Now, close your eyes and in your mind, go to that favorite place. Walk around slowly and notice the colors and textures around you.
- 4.** What do you see (in your mind)? What do you feel? What do you hear? What do you smell? Take your time while you walk around. Spend some time exploring each of your senses—sight, smell, hearing, tasting, feeling—and notice how good and relaxed you feel.
- 5.** Remember these sensations, they are the sensations of your very special place. A place where you can relax. Say to yourself “I am relaxed, my body and mind feel good, I am safe here.” Enjoy the feeling of deep relaxation.
- 6.** When you are ready, gently open your eyes, and come back to the present moment.





Yoga

Yoga is an ancient mind-body approach that includes meditation, deep breathing, mindfulness, and exercise. The practice includes holding your body in a series of poses with a smooth and gentle flow from one pose to another. At the same time, you bring awareness to your body and breath.

How can yoga help me?

Yoga has helped people with many different mental health and medical conditions. In most of the research studies¹⁴ reviewed, yoga had short-term benefits, including improved mental health, better health-related quality of life, and improved physical health.

Are there any risks of yoga?

If you warm up properly and do the poses correctly, yoga has few risks. An experienced yoga instructor can help you learn to move and stretch safely.

What else do I need to know about yoga?

There are many different forms or styles of yoga. They all include physical, mental, and spiritual practices. An experienced teacher can help you adapt the traditional poses to meet your needs, making the practice accessible for everyone, regardless of your life stage or physical ability.

Yoga Exercise Examples

Mountain Pose

Stand tall with your shoulders back but relaxed, your feet together, your spine fairly straight (not arched), your weight evenly distributed through the soles of your feet, your arms at your sides with hands relaxed but open, and your fingers pointing to the floor.

Take a deep breath. Raise your arms straight over your head, palms facing each other, reaching toward the sky with your fingertips. To help with balance, either look at the floor several feet in front of you or at a spot on the wall in front of you. Keep both feet on the ground. Be aware of your breath and how your body feels. Lower your arms as needed. Be compassionate and grateful.

Side Bends

Stand straight with feet hips-width apart and arms alongside the body. Breathe in and exhale while lowering your right hand down the outside of your right thigh. Your body is like a piece of paper, meaning that it is straight, not tilted forward or backward.

Bend straight to the right side, take three breaths. The opposite arm rests by your side.

Return to standing position, then repeat on the left side. The picture here shows the arms raised, but you might choose to do the pose with arms by your side.





Tai Chi

The practice of Tai Chi (pronounced “tie-chee”) is a graceful and gentle form of exercise that creates awareness of your body movement and calms your mind. By using slow, deliberate, rhythmic movements coordinated with your breath, you improve your balance, and increase your flexibility, while developing mental concentration and promoting inner peace.

How can Tai Chi help me?

Tai chi can help improve your balance, strength, alignment, and circulation. Research studies¹⁵ have shown various benefits, such as better quality of life, an improved outlook on life, a sense of well-being, and enhanced ability to deal with stressful situations. Individuals in these studies report that their bodies work more smoothly after practicing tai chi.

Are there risks of Tai Chi?

Research studies have found no harmful effects. A teacher trained in tai chi can help you learn to move your body in the right way, so that you do not strain your muscles or joints.

What else do I need to know?

These low-impact movements are easy on joints and excellent for beginners. Since the many different schools of Tai Chi use slightly different techniques, find a style or teacher you enjoy.

Tai Chi Example: Creating the Ball of Energy

- 1. Rub your hands briskly together.** This is the same motion you would use to warm your hands on a cold day, but this time, add your intention and awareness to the movement. Intention is what you desire more of in your life in this moment, during this exercise, and beyond. Hold the intention of bringing your life force energy to your hands. This energy is called qi (pronounced “chee”).
- 2. Awareness.** Be aware of your hands and feel this life force energy in each hand, as well as the connection of energy between your two hands.
- 3. Pull your hands gently apart.** After your hands feel that they are filled with warmth and qi, and the connection between them is strong, pull them apart slowly.
- 4. Keep your hands and fingers soft.** Let your hands flow smoothly through the air, keeping them relaxed and fluid.
- 5. Bring your hands closer together.** When you feel the connection between your hands weaken, bring them back slowly together. Do not let your hands touch.
- 6. Continue to pull your hands apart and bring them closer together.** Repeat this process of slowly moving your hands apart and then back together. Maintain a slow and steady rhythm. Feel the energy in your hands as well as the energy connecting them. See if you notice any changes in these energies as you complete the exercise.

To end, simply pull your hands slowly apart and let them drop to your sides. Over time, you may feel a sensation between your hands, like the repelling force between two magnets.



References and Resources

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Toivo is a holistic healing and stress management center that offers a safe space where people come to heal, experience relaxation, and find community.

Toivo is located at 399 Franklin Avenue in Hartford, CT. All people are welcome and encouraged to come as they are. To learn more, go to www.toivocenter.org or call 860-296-2338



Healing from Within is supported by Toivo, which is an agency under Advocacy Unlimited.

Staff from Toivo provide mind-body wellness groups on inpatient psychiatric units and in diverse community setting for both people receiving and providing mental health care throughout Connecticut.



Collaborative Support Programs of New Jersey, Inc. is a peer led not-for-profit organization.

Collaborative Support Programs of New Jersey provides community-based services that promote responsibility, recovery and wellness through the provision of community wellness centers, supportive and respite housing, human rights advocacy, and educational and innovative programs for people with the lived experience of behavioral health conditions and substance use. www.cspnj.org

Lauren Spiro, M.A., is a catalyst for inclusive community evolution via integrating both a socio-economic justice and an emerging cooperative leadership approach. She co-founded two non-profit corporations, directed the National Coalition for Mental Health Recovery, authored *Living For Two: A Daughter's Journey From Grief and Madness to Forgiveness and Peace*, and is a blogger on www.madinamerica.com as well as a thirty-year practitioner of yoga and meditation. Join her on www.Laurenspiro.com

Linda Lentini works as the Director of Healing From Within at Toivo by Advocacy Unlimited in Connecticut. Advocacy Unlimited is the only peer run agency in the state that offers education and advocacy in a variety of settings and has a mind-body center called Toivo, which means *hope* in the Finnish Language. Ms. Lentini started advocating for change in the mental health and addiction field after her own experiences being incarcerated, hospitalized, and homeless. She is a certified Louise Hay trainer and is trained in Breath-Body-Mind, Aromatherapy, and Stephanie Covington Women and Trauma. As she shares her personal healing journey with others, Ms. Lentini encourages following individual roads to recovery and building resiliency through adversity. She continues to grow personally in her own recovery and personal healing, as she works on building human connection, strengthening individual hope, and sharing love, kindness, and support.

Peggy Swarbrick, PhD, FAOTA, works for Collaborative Support Programs of New Jersey, Inc. at the Wellness Institute. For many years she has been involved in direct service, research, training, and consultation in wellness and health promotion. She has been promoting wellness in the 8 dimensions (physical, social emotional intellectual occupational, environmental financial, and spiritual). Peggy likes doing yoga, walking and working.