

'Smiling face... happy heart'

C'mon... Smile. Say goodbye to everybody and eeveryyything in the world and feeel you are the happiest person. Breathe.

Every fortnight Dr Ludmila Vassilieva (MBBS, MD, PhD, GP) homeopath and iridologist, makes simple the concept and practices of holistic healing. Having practised medicine for over 25 years, she is the first licensed homeopathic doctor in Dubai.

Heart patients can benefit from yoga therapy that focuses on the much-abused organ

Move your abdomen like you are laughing," chants Yoga Acharya Nelson Thomas at the start of his Happy Heart yoga class. I can't help but let go of all my stresses of the day just by hearing Nelson's melodic words. And that's just the beginning. Nelson continues, "Focus your mind, on your heart. Breathe deeply into that point. Open your heart muscles by breathing deeeeply into your chest and exhaling from there." I follow his instructions and already begin to feel relaxed, yet simultaneously energised by this initial pranayamic exercise before moving on to the additional breathing practices and postures, all the time focusing on my heart.

Deep breathing

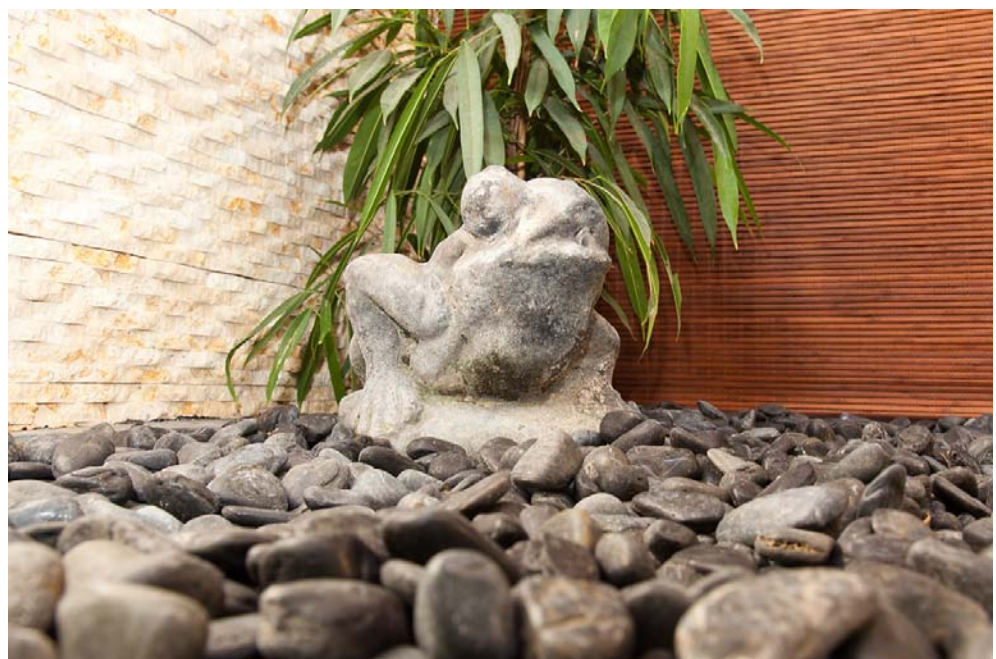
Inhaling, extending my arms overhead, and exhaling, bringing my arms bent down and back by my sides in bhastriga pranayama, I expand my chest during this deep breathing practice. Reaching for my toes in head to knee posture (paschimathasana), I listen to Nelson explaining that this eases the effects of stress on the heart and mind

while stabilising blood pressure. Lying on my back with my legs up the wall (viparita karani), I learn that this helps regulate blood pressure and relieves heart palpitations and breathlessness. Stretching, twisting and squeezing, I move from one pose to the next, becoming more and more invigorated and refreshed and before I know it, it's time to relax. "Relaxxx. Feeeel you are like a still one and watch your heartbeat. For the next one minute you will be completely still and watch yourself." I find this the quite difficult, getting comfortable, not scratching that itch on my leg, just lying totally still. But, when I finally get it right, I can visualise myself, smiling, laughing, happy. Embracing Nelson's powerful words, letting go, I am in a timeless zone where no one else exists and I can experience the healing power of yoga.

Heart healing

How can yoga heal? And, more specifically, how can yoga help you heal the heart? It's easy. Start by smiling. "C'mon, smile and laugh," as Nelson says. Really, be happy; make your heart happy. By moving your abdomen like you are laughing, the diaphragm rises and falls massaging the heart muscle, keeping the heart happy and healthy. The heart chakra is the point that regulates and intertwines our circulatory, respiratory and immune systems. If the heart is not functioning properly it inhibits circulation, impairs our breathing ability and generally debilitates our immune system leaving us vulnerable to disease and illness.

Since the majority of heart problems are lifestyle-related, linked to poor diet, stress, lack of physical exercise and cigarette smoking, it's not difficult to heal your heart.



In addition to eating a well balanced diet consisting of natural foods, practicing yoga therapy will massage the heart muscles and reduce stress. Ironically in today's fast-paced world, we are not moving enough physically and our organs therefore are not getting the movement or massage that they need. You sit at your computer or in meetings most of the day and your to-do list just seems to grow, causing anxiety.

According to Nelson, the easiest way to control all heart conditions is to relax. Take a few minutes each day. Enter a quiet room with a smiling face and lie down on your back. "Close your eyes and let your body feel loose and relaxed. Count down your heartbeat; then you can feel that you are entering into a deep relaxation. For a few minutes be still, watching yourself; and then begin to breathe in and out, moving your abdomen like you are laughing." Nelson begins his happy heart yoga therapy session with this relaxation and breathing exercise.

Using gravity

Once you are relaxed you can more effectively perform several pranayamic practices. For example, alternate nostril breathing balances the body temperature, and ujjai pranayama strengthens the heart muscles and clears the coronary arteries.

While breathing is essential, there are a number of different yoga postures or asanas that are good for the heart, many of which are inversions. The heart works against gravity when you are standing. However, when you are inverted, gravity can help



move the blood from your feet to your heart. Headstand (sirsasana), shoulderstand (sarvangasana) and plough (halasana) are all postures that promote a healthy heart. They control heart rate, contractibility and blood pressure and counteract the pull of gravity returning blood to and relaxing the heart. "The deep breathing in such postures brings more oxygen to the heart, strengthening the coronary arteries," explains Yoga Acharya Nelson.

Another very simple pose using just the fingers, known as a mudra in yoga practice, is another facet of Nelson's yoga therapy session. It can also be practised at home. Known as apan vayu mudra, this is a formation of the fingers that is considered a boon to heart patients. If you have any symptoms of heart attack, this mudra can be practised immediately as directed by your yoga therapist. Heart patients and people suffering from high blood pressure should practise it 15 minutes in the morning and again in the evening. Yoga Acharya Nelson says, "In cases of heart attack, practise of this mudra gives relief just like an effective injection or a tablet of Sorbitat." Regular performance of the mudra will strengthen the heart.

Be happy

Finally, Nelson added, "For a truly happy and healthy heart, on the mat and off, you must face everybody and everything with a sweet smile." From the heart stems many emotions, the most significant of which is love. So embark on a lifestyle change, reducing stress and practising yoga therapy. Don't worry; be happy; and your heart will benefit.

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