

Boosting self-esteem and promoting calm in teens

The effectiveness of yoga as a therapy for common emotional challenges in adolescents

Drugs, sex, violence, eating disorders—the stuff of parental nightmares, but not insurmountable with the right approach. Getting to the source of these behaviors and knowing how to replace them with more positive life choices can be a challenge, but yoga may be a good solution for many teens acting out.

The teenage years are preoccupied, by and large, by concerns for what other people think. With wildly fluctuating levels of hormones and fueled by an extreme fear of rejection, it's no surprise that adolescents are extremely sensitive to the feelings of friends and family.

Failure to meet others' expectations—be they the desire to achieve a particular physical appearance, athletic ability, or academic aptitude—can drive teens to experience high levels of anxiety, low self-esteem, and a general drop in wellbeing. As if that weren't hard enough, many adolescents are also coping with big changes like divorce, remarriage, family relocations, and new schools.

Inevitably, adolescent children may become so overwhelmed by the pressure that they turn to any number of self-damaging behaviors, some in attempt to gain control, others out of a desire to run away. Frighteningly, a study put out by the University of Maryland in the Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine noted that teens now suffer from incredibly high instances of emotional and mental health problems, with the rates of adolescents seeking medications for anxiety and other disorders more than double what they were in 1987. Suicide rates in children between the ages of 10 and 14 went up by 109 percent between 1980 and 1997 according to the same study.

Yoga may present an opportunity to overcome some of these challenges. Recent studies have begun to show that yoga for adolescents can produce such benefits as emotional equilibrium, a feeling of calmness, improved self-esteem, higher energy levels, and better eating habits.

Approaching the question from many different angles, several researchers are looking into the benefits of yoga for teens. In one study, focused breathing, meditation, relaxation, and movement helped anorexic adolescents rid themselves of distorted self-perceptions (Susana A. Galle and Tomas E. Silber). Children with autism disorders gained improved focus, flexibility, balance and strength with yoga in a study by R. Fridholm. In yet another study by Bortz and Cradock, girls between 14 and 17 who'd experienced traumatic abuse became more relaxed, happier, and less stressed through regular yoga practice.

In general, here are some of the ways yoga can help adolescents overcome common hurdles of the age:

- Yoga encourages the expression of compassion and love (for self and others) that can lead to greater feelings of tolerance and patience.

- Yoga and meditation can teach teens to feel centered and grounded, giving them a sense of peace and calm in a world that can often feel out of control.

- Physical benefits of yoga include increased physical strength, sounder sleep, reduction of stress, increases in energy levels, and the alleviation of back pain and headaches.

- Emotionally, yoga can help reduce depression and anxiety, increase self-confidence, and provide a boost in wellbeing.

The pressures on teens today seem larger than those faced by young people only a generation or two ago. If you are searching for some way to help your child improve their overall wellbeing, why not consider enrolling them in a regular yoga class for kids or teens? It's a safe form of exercise with little risk, and whole lot to gain. ☺



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