Stretched thin? Yoga pulls in a different direction

BY NICOLE LANCTOT
EXECUTIVE LIFE

More executives today are bypassing their health clubs’ elliptical machines and treadmills for a practice some think is a lot of pretzel-like bending, with poses that have fancy names like “upward dog” and “happy baby.”

Yoga has finally made it into the mainstream, and busy men and women have discovered that it can provide benefits for their health and their careers.

Originating in India 6,000 years ago, yoga is popularly known for its health and fitness aspects, but its ancient roots had a focus on meditation and care of the body, mind and spirit.

“A few years ago, it seems yoga just exploded in its popularity,” said Larry Gwynor, president and CEO of The Nalco Group, a Farmington Hills-based beauty supplies distributor.

Gwynor has been taking yoga classes regularly for the past four years. He does power yoga, a fast-paced, contemporary blend of yoga styles, at the Sports Club of West Bloomfield. On Mondays and Saturdays, Gwynor does a 75-minute class, beginning at 6 a.m.

“It’s the perfect way to start the week,” Gwynor said. “You’re so relaxed when you walk into the office Monday morning, nothing can upset you.”

In addition to keeping his cool, he loves yoga for all its health benefits. “It lowers your blood pressure,” he said. “It improves your immunity system. It gives you energy. I can’t remember the last time I was sick.”

Gwynor, who works out seven days a week, said yoga is a special treat. “When you do yoga, it’s really for yourself,” he said.

Debra Vandenbroek, president and CEO of St. Joseph Mercy Hospital-Oakland in Pontiac, practices Ashtanga yoga, a dynamic and vigorous practice of yoga postures, at least once a week.

“I think yoga helps you deal with life,” she said. “In a very fast-paced life, it helps you not react to stress as much.”

Vandenbroek began doing yoga at the Birmingham Center for Yoga, and also does it at home. She likes the challenge of yoga, and the way you can vary the level and intensity of it, she said. She has been doing yoga for a number of years, and even got her husband into doing it.

“Real men do yoga,” she said.

In that case, another “real” man is Tom Clift, vice president of Northern Trust Bank, who practices Bikram yoga with his spouse, Joan, at the Detroit Athletic Club.

The Cliffs first started yoga several years ago in Kohala, Hawaii. When they moved to metro Detroit two years ago, they discovered Bikram yoga, a system of 26 poses performed in a room heated to at least 100 degrees.

Developed by Indian yoga champion Bikram Choudhury, Bikram yoga was based on the effects of the poses, and to detoxify the body.

Ashtanga yoga: A dynamic and vigorous practice of postures.

The retreat, held in Glen Arbor, about 30 miles from Traverse City, is three concentrated days, where executives are completely removed from their daily work, she said.

A full-time physician for Henry Ford Health System, Rajdevi herself has been transformed since discovering the Anahat Foundation yoga program three years ago.

“I am a physician on call 365 days a year, but I don’t know what stress is,” she said. “Three years ago I could tell you just how difficult my job was. But now, nothing fazes her, she said.

Rajdevi said doing yoga has doubled her productivity, according to her boss, and that her husband’s blood pressure has dropped from doing it, too.

As a health professional, she works with people, but she has also found, “All those days I spend learning about medicine, but I know how much good yoga can do.”

You don’t have to become a stressed-out, overworked executive before you find yoga, she said. “Why wait until you’re older and have all the health problems, when you can prevent them at a younger age?”

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