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City

India

World

Entertainment

Sports

Spirituality

NEWS / BLOGS / INDIA / Coping and performing without stress

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Coping and performing without stress

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Covid-19 has made life difficult for most people. Our society is facing a multitude of challenges on various fronts: economic, social, and biological. In such demanding times, it is natural to feel stressed out. But excess of stress acts as a drain on our bodily resources and well-being; it lowers our productivity, and over time builds up the risk of developing cardiovascular and metabolic diseases. Harmful effects of stress cause an increase in heart rate, release of cholesterol and triglycerides into the bloodstream, possibly binge eating, less physical activity, and smoking—leading to a reduction in immunity and an increased risk of disease and death.

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TOP VOICES

How does one ward off stress while leading a modern life? One answer that our scriptures offer is by performing one's duty without being affected by results, in the past or future. "Yoga is a skill in action," Lord Krishna declares in the Bhagwat Gita. How does one practice it in daily life? By following three cautions.

First, a complete focus on the present: the activity, time, and persons. The best multitaskers are those who focus on one task at a time but who are also able to switch their attention to others rapidly. Human brains are developed and programmed to focus on one task at a time. Anything else leads to lowered efficiency and performance. In contrast, focusing on one thing at a time, mindfully, is positively associated with well-being and lower job burnout. Mindfulness-based stress reduction is known to be effective and improves the quality of life. Focusing on the present, however, has a pitfall of being too much involved, immersing oneself totally, and forgetting the larger context. Hence, it is important not to lose sight of the spiritual context, which tells us that we are all actors in a play of traits, with senses moving in sense objects. So, it is suggested to work with a sense of detachment, or of doer-ship, treating oneself as an actor in the drama of life. Treating oneself as a part of a larger universal truth, and visualizing the present as performing the given task

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TOP EDITORIAL

1

Why Zoma

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3

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helps in getting over over-involvement in the present. Practiced over time, one learns to distance from the extremes of events, of pleasure and pain, successes, or failures, as suggested by Krishna to Arjuna.

Second, switching off from events once they are over. This freshens up the mind for the next event, rather than being burdened by past experiences, successes, or failures. Most of us keep long-time memories of events, which we replay in our spare time, and with some modification in our sleep. It is best to rid the mind of past experiences after the event is over and one has noted follow-up actions and drawn one's lessons for the future. This is a difficult task because biologically, memories are formed and stored as proteins in brain cells, which can be raked up even years after the event. So, a conscious effort is required to insulate oneself from happenings and events and let bodily mechanisms of cleaning of memory work to dissolve these associations. The first two suggested approaches lead one to the desirable state of equanimity in success and failure, so gloriously advocated in the Bhagwat Gita.

The third is to "consciously relax" by drawing one's attention inwards. Breathing is the pathway to the inner being, and one can easily withdraw from the external environment by constantly observing one's breathing. With breath

starts the journey of discovering one's inner being. It is a time of beginning to establish contact with the supreme power, to connect our bodily battery to the infinite power, and start recharging. A 180-degree shift in the span of attention from outwards to inwards is accompanied by relaxation, calmness, slowing and deepening of breath, and the slowing of the heart. Such an "active relaxation" is the state of regeneration of the body, when healing and repair take place, both biological and psychological. In this state, our mind becomes highly productive, and creative, what some people call as intuition. We can plan better. This state sets the stage for the shift of attention to the universal energy, and ascendancy on the path of meditation, which leads to peace and happiness. We get up fresh and rejuvenated as though from a long sleep, which "active relaxation" accelerates and magnifies.

So, we can continue to be active and lead a productive worldly life, while not being swept away by the tumult of daily events or the vagaries of the response of circumstances or behaviors of people. This is the state of Raja Janak described in the Bhagwat Gita of a Yogi. This is the state of sustainable living, an effective manager, and an effective person.

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2021

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Election date
2021

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registration

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4th test

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Golden Globe	Cynthia
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Winners	Amitabh
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