

Gary Kraftsow's Stress-Reducing Vision

Take Ancient Yoga to the Modern Office

BY STEPHANI SUTHERLAND

They may seem an unlikely pair—a president of a global insurance giant and a local yoga teacher. But Mark Bertolini, CEO of Aetna, and Gary Kraftsow, Oakland-based founder and director of American Viniyoga Institute (AVI), share a mission: to improve health in the modern workplace.

The men, both young baby boomers, appreciate the potential of yoga. However, to make



Gary Kraftsow (left) with Mark Bertolini

lasting changes in Western health care, they realized their mission would require evidence-based research to support their shared beliefs.

With that in mind, Kraftsow and Bertolini collaborated on a scientific study of Viniyoga, Kraftsow's approach to the tradition, which emphasizes the needs of the individual practitioner. While Kraftsow sees a great potential for yoga to improve an array of health condi-

tions, the men began with stress as a target. Stress contributes to serious health conditions ranging from heart disease and cancer to anxiety and depression. "Stress impacts the physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral realms of our being," says Kraftsow. "Stress has consequences." Even seemingly benign impacts of stress—like hunching shoulders over a desk—can lead to muscle tension, pain, and sleep disturbance. For corporations, stress impacts the bottom line to the tune of billions of dollars a year.

The research, published in February in the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, was funded partly by Aetna and used the insurance company's employees as subjects. Kraftsow specially designed a yoga practice that the stressed-out subjects could do in the office setting. After 12 weeks, subjects felt their stress levels drop and their sleep quality improve compared to control subjects.

But perhaps more importantly, subjects who practiced Viniyoga saw an improvement in heart-rate variability, indicating better balance in the autonomic nervous system. Stress puts the body into fight-or-flight mode by activating the sympathetic nervous system, but after yoga, subjects seemed to shift toward the rest-and-digest parasympathetic mode.

This came as no surprise to Kraftsow, who began his studies of spiritual philosophy and yoga nearly 40 years ago in India. Whereas the popular idea and practice of yoga in the West revolves largely around asana—the physical postures—Kraftsow suggests that asana is but one tool in the yoga arsenal. He also uses techniques like mantra, chanting, and *pranayama* breathing, particularly for therapeutic applications. When it comes to asana, Viniyoga places more emphasis on the function of a pose over alignment. Though Bertolini came to yoga much later—after a severe skiing accident left him with a spinal cord injury in 2004—he uses these deeply traditional aspects of yoga found in Kraftsow's approach. »

VINIYOGA FOR STRESS: TAKE IT TO WORK

1. Stand facing your desk with your feet hip-distance apart and your arms at your sides. Raise your arms overhead as you inhale, and then exhale, drawing your navel in and bending at the hips, bringing your hands down to rest on the edge of your desk. On inhale, rise to standing again, bending knees slightly, with arms overhead. Repeat five times.
2. Sit in your chair with your feet on the floor. Place your right hand on your left knee and your left hand on the back of the chair behind you. On inhale, feel the crown of your head draw up toward the ceiling and your spine lengthen. On exhale, twist toward the left, looking over your left shoulder. On inhale, untwist to center and place your hands to the other side: left hand on right knee and right hand on the back of your chair. On exhale, twist toward the right, looking over your right shoulder. Repeat on each side. On the next exhale, twist to the left again and stay in position for four breaths. With each inhale, untwist slightly and lengthen the spine. On each exhale, twist a bit more deeply. Repeat on the other side.
3. Sit in your chair with open space in front of you. On inhale, raise your arms forward over your head. On exhale, bend forward over your lap, reaching your fingertips toward the floor or to your shins. Rise as you inhale. Repeat five times.
4. Sit in your chair comfortably with your spine long and straight. Bring your attention to your breath. Try to make your inhale and exhale the same comfortable length for two breaths. On your next breath, try to make the exhale about a second longer than your inhale. Repeat. Continue to lengthen your exhale by one to two seconds on every other breath, taking 12 breaths total. Sit quietly and relax the breath, noticing how you feel in your body and mind.



1.



2.



3.

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For Kraftsow and Bertolini, the next step is to bring Viniyoga into the offices of Aetna's clients, some of the world's largest corporations. The potential for massive change is vast, but so are the challenges. "It's going to require a shift in the whole corporate culture," Kraftsow says. People working in offices are incredibly busy, often managing last-minute travel and back-to-back meetings. And the current economy has meant downsizing and increased telecommuting for many companies. Space and funding are in short supply everywhere. And highly trained Viniyoga instructors need to deliver the practice onsite, at least initially. AVI plans to offer regional 200-hour programs to make training more accessible. While most studio classes take 90 minutes, corporate employees don't have that kind of time in their day. While the research study used a 60-minute practice, it needs to be further condensed to be feasible.

Perhaps the biggest hurdle is people's ideas about yoga—that it has to be practiced in a group class, that it's equivalent to working out. Standing up to stretch and unwind might cause a worker to feel self-conscious about sideways glances from colleagues. Instead, Kraftsow would like to see employers provide the time and space for workers to take short yoga breaks throughout their day. For example, a 10-minute practice followed by deep breathing could not only relieve tension in the neck and shoulders, it could clear and calm the mind. And as the study showed, it can reduce the consequences of the stress that workers face all day long. Kraftsow's vision would allow Viniyoga instructors to deliver practices to employees regularly—perhaps once a week—but also teach people short practices that they could use independently in a dedicated yoga space in the office. Eventually, Kraftsow says, people could develop their own personal practice and ultimately support one another in the workplace.

What could it mean if their vision is realized? "If people could be empowered to take better care of their own health," Kraftsow says, "there would be less illness but also less absenteeism and more productivity." And those benefits might speak the loudest to CEOs. 🐦

Stephani Sutherland, PhD, is a freelance writer, neuroscientist, and yogi who has been practicing for over 15 years. Stephani is training with AVI toward becoming a yoga therapist. This is her first piece for Common Ground, but her other writings can be found in Scientific American Mind, Spirituality & Health, and online at StephaniSutherland.com.

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