use your mind to heal your body
Your body’s best friend? Your brain! Cutting-edge research proves mind/body techniques can ease aches, illness, insomnia and more. A skeptic’s guide to thinking yourself well  By Erin Bried

There’s a good reason you feel like a goddess when you walk out of yoga class, and it’s not because you finally got your money’s worth out of your gym. It’s because yoga and similar mind-quieting methods have the potential to work as well as many medications at treating what ails you. “We now have compelling scientific proof that the mind can heal the body,” says Herbert Benson, M.D., director emeritus of the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital and author of Relaxation Revolution. The latest promises:

**Your body dials down stress.** Dr. Benson’s research has found that mind/body practices—meditation, yoga, tai chi, deep breathing, visualisation—all elicit the relaxation response, quelling the release of stress hormones cortisol and adrenaline. Your heart slows, blood pressure falls and digestion eases.

**Your immunity soars.** The relaxation response causes cells to release micropuffs of nitric oxide, a gas that dilates blood vessels and stabilizes the immune system, Dr. Benson reported in Medical Science Monitor. Mind/body methods worked as well as drugs designed to do the same thing, without the side effects.

**Your brain grows.** As you get older, your brain begins to shrink. But in a study in NeuroReport, researchers discovered that the prefrontal cortex and the anterior right insula, areas linked to attention and sensory processing, were thicker and more robust in those who meditate. “It’s like exercise for the brain, making it stronger,” says Rick Hanson, Ph.D., a neuropsychologist in San Rafael, California, and author of Buddha’s Brain.

**Your genes change.** Here’s the real slap-your-forehead news: In a study in PLoS ONE, Dr. Benson compared the genes of 38 people, half of whom meditated regularly and half of whom never did. Controlling for other factors, he found that genes associated with stress-related illness behaved differently in the two groups. “These genes control not only stress but also premature aging and inflammation,” he says. It seems meditators’ genes were essentially telling their body to stress less and age more slowly.

Despite the powerful evidence, 45 percent of you remain skeptical of mind/body medicine, according to a Self.com poll, and 2 percent say it’s out-and-out baloney. Read on and we guarantee you’ll change your mind—and your body, too.
**Wait. Yoga can help cure that?**

Those Sun Salutations, Downward Dogs and Chaturangas are your ticket to much more than sexy curves and a lean body. Choose the right method and you can pose your way out of...

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<th>Back pain</th>
<th>People who attended only one 90-minute yoga class a week for 16 weeks reduced their back pain by two thirds and their pain medication usage by 88 percent, according to one study in the aptly named journal Pain.</th>
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<td>Migraines</td>
<td>Still more proof of yoga’s power to alleviate ouches: Migraine sufferers who took up the habit for three months reported fewer and less intense headaches, a 2007 study in the journal Headache shows.</td>
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<td>Depression</td>
<td>People on antidepressants who added thrice-weekly yoga for two months said they felt less depressed, anxious and angry. University of California Los Angeles research notes. In 65 percent, their depression went into remission.</td>
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<td>Eating disorders</td>
<td>Could a yoga heal your eating issues? In a recent study of 50 adolescent girls with eating disorders, scientists found that an hour of yoga a week for eight weeks reduced the subjects’ symptoms and their overall preoccupation with food.</td>
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<th>What we know</th>
<th>How it works</th>
<th>Which type to try</th>
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<td>One of many theories: Pressing into the floor activates your pressure receptors, blocking the neural pathways that signal pain, suggests Tiffany Field, Ph.D., director of the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami.</td>
<td>For starters, yoga reduces cortisol by relaxing you. “Nasty stress hormones only aggravate pain,” Field says. Yoga also promotes better sleep, and the more soundly you snooze, the fewer pain chemicals your brain secretes.</td>
<td>Skip the hard-core yoga and emphasize meditation and stretching. “Tight muscles can be a factor in pain, and calming your nervous system will help relax them,” says Timothy McCall, M.D., author of Yoga as Medicine.</td>
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<td>Your hormones are at work here, too. “Yoga helps your body produce serotonin, a natural antidepressant, and helps lower cortisol levels, which are elevated in people with depression,” Field says.</td>
<td>As with treating back pain, pick a calming practice. Dr. McCall advises. Zenning out in a long Savasana (Corpses pose) at the end of class will help. So will focusing on exhalations. If it feels good, make each twice as long as your inhalations.</td>
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<td>Anxiety and depression pop up more often in people with eating problems, says study coauthor Amber Frye-Johnson, a research scientist at Abbott Northwestern Hospital in Minneapolis. Yoga fans have lower rates of both.</td>
<td>If you’re in a slump (but still fairly fit), energizing poses such as Sun Salutations may lift you out of it. “There’s a misconception that yoga is only about relaxation,” Dr. McCall says. “Some practices can stimulate you.”</td>
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### Chanting with the stars (and more la-la moves)

**Mel B.**

**TREATMENT** Reiki for stress

**WHAT SHE SAYS** The former Spice Girl says Reiki—in which a healer lightly touches you, supposedly transferring energy—helped her cope during the delivery of her youngest daughter, now 3. “Sometimes you can create lots of panic and problems,” she told British OK! “I think [Reiki] helped me relax.”

**WHAT SCIENCE SAYS** Try it if you’d like, but don’t count on major results. A 2008 review in the International Journal of Clinical Practice found that there aren’t enough solid studies to show that Reiki works. Still, the lying-still-for-30-to-90-minutes part of the therapy may help you chill out, which could lower your blood pressure and heart rate.

**Mariah Carey**

**TREATMENT** Acupuncture for the promotion of fertility

**WHAT SHE SAYS** Carey took up needling after a miscarriage in 2008. Happily, her first child is due this spring. “People who know me would be, like, ‘You scheduled acupuncture at a certain time every day?’” she told Access Hollywood.

**WHAT SCIENCE SAYS** Studies are mixed and subjects were women who exclusively used in vitro fertilization. (Carey says she didn’t.) A 2008 review concluded acupuncture produced 85 percent better odds of pregnancy. Five months later, however, a larger review in the international Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology found needles had no effect.

**Courtney Love**

**TREATMENT** Chanting for anxiety and depression

**WHAT SHE SAYS** Love has been known to spend two to three hours a day chanting repetitive prayers created by ancient yogis. “It kills anxiety and depression dead,” she told The Telegraph.

**WHAT SCIENCE SAYS** Doo o. Chanting confers all the benefits of meditation and helps blood flow in two parts of the brain that regulate stress, Nuclear Medicine Communications reports. But no need to emulate Courtney (please!). A mere 12 minutes a day improves memory, energy and mood, says Dr. Bauer of the Mayo Clinic. “That said, if you want to hang an amethyst in front of your breakfast bowl, I can’t argue too much. It’s pretty.”

**Uma Thurman**

**TREATMENT** Gemstone therapy for fatigue

**WHAT SHE SAYS** Thurman has reportedly donned an orange amethyst necklace to boost vitality. The idea is that gemstones embody energy that encourages cells to heal.

**WHAT SCIENCE SAYS** “Can we say from a scientific standpoint that a gem can help your body? No,” says Dr. Bauer of the Mayo Clinic. “That said, if you want to hang an amethyst in front of your breakfast bowl, I can’t argue too much. It’s pretty.”
Get your qi on

More than half of you say you've never heard of qigong. But the ancient Eastern practice, also known as Chinese yoga, can ease a long list of ailments, including heart disease, bone loss, high cholesterol and type 2 diabetes. Try these moves from Samuel Barnes, star of the DVD Element: Tai Chi for Beginners. (Tai chi is a form of qigong.) "You'll strengthen your immune system and feel your energy surge," he says. Hooked? Find a teacher at QigongInstitute.org.

**Lifting Hands** Stand tall with your feet hip-width apart, knees slightly bent, hands hanging down in front of thighs. Inhale and lift both hands to chest level, leading with the wrists (as shown). Then exhale and bring hands back to thighs, "painting the wall" with fingertips. Repeat for two minutes.

**Universal Post** Stand with heels together, toes out at a 45-degree angle. Bend knees slightly; shift weight into center of left foot; step right, weightless, feet forward. Shoulders relaxed, pretend you're hugging a giant beach ball against your chest (as shown). Close eyes; breathe deeply for two minutes. Switch feet. Repeat.

**Triple Heater Stimulator** Feet together, clap hands in front of forehead and rub palms together for 10 seconds to create warmth (as shown). Next, clap and rub in front of navel. Inhale, bringing hands in prayer position to head, hold for 30 seconds. Exhale.

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**I tried it**

**Qigong for cancer**

I was 32 years old and five months pregnant when doctors told me I had colon cancer. At that time, in 1996, it felt like a death sentence. Still, I told them I wanted to deliver the baby and then focus on the cancer—I had gone through eight miscarriages, and this time, I was really having a baby. That's all I wanted to think about.

After my son was born, I had a six-hour surgery to remove my colon. But six months later, I learned the cancer had spread: I had a huge tumor in my liver. Surgery was difficult—40 percent of my liver was resected. Doctors offered up chemo but said they honestly didn't know if it would help. I told them, "I've spent too much time in hospitals, away from my son. I don't want it."

Then I met Shane. He was an incredible athlete who had never smoked yet had lung cancer. He told me about qigong, and I went to our local wellness center and joined a class called Chi-Lel Qigong. The master taught us to direct life energy: We used meditation and hand movements to direct the qi to our body parts. The point is to use your mind to overcome your matter. It was calming, while also making me feel present and alert. The energy 20 people gave off was so positive. You could feel it!

The instructor told me this is not a once-in-a-while thing: to heal myself, Qigong would have to be part of my life. And it has been for 13 years. I am cancer-free, and my liver regenerated. I go in yearly for blood work, and the oncologists say that's all I need to do. I'm so grateful that I've been able to stay and watch my son grow. Who knows why people really get better? But this is what worked for me. —Criss Epstein, as told to Elizabeth DeVita-Raeburn

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**I tried it**

**Needles for blood pressure**

Acupuncture so terrified me that it should have made my blood pressure worse. Yet here I was, having a man perform a task that had the actual word *puncture* in it. I was in my second trimester of pregnancy, and my blood pressure read a worrisome 140/100 at my OB's office. I was willing to try anything to fix it.

I began seeing Jason twice a week. He adjusted pillows and blankets for me. He listened to my story and asked after my family. I swear I could hear a pop as he punctured (yes) my skin. But the room was warm and cozy. And when I returned to my OB, I was holding a scrap of paper showing a normal reading of 110/80.

I've heard of white coat syndrome, in which vitals get worse simply because you are in the company of a doctor. I think part of what made my pressure drop in Jason's office was the opposite—a sort of kindness syndrome, in which a medical professional gives you the time you need, puts his hands on you, looks you in the eyes and tries to understand you. I'm glad that acupuncture helped my blood pressure. But I'm even more grateful that for these few hours, over these few months, it helped me. —Tafty Brodesser-Akner