

# WHY HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS NEED YOGA NOW MORE THAN EVER

Exploring asana, meditation, and breath work just may be exactly what the doctor ordered to relieve stress.

By Stacey Leasca, 13 April 2020

Dr. Arghavan Salles, a bariatric surgeon and Scholar in Residence at Stanford University knows all too well the stress facing first responders, nurses, doctors, and all those working to save lives on a good day. But, throw in a global pandemic like the coronavirus, and it's easy for her to see why stress in the field may be growing out of control.



In the wake of the coronavirus, medical providers are having to make life-altering decisions of who gets care and who doesn't. They are now asked to work even longer hours, sometimes for less pay, and are asked to put their own lives and the lives of their families at risk for the greater good.

"Few people in healthcare have had real-life experience with triage in which a significant number of life-and-death decisions had to be made because of equipment shortages," Arthur Markman, a professor in the department of psychology at the University of Texas at Austin, told BBC. "That increases the chances that they may experience moral injury as a result of their jobs."

That “moral injury” Markman is talking about is a mental health concern, and often manifests in the form of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, otherwise known as PTSD. And, as BBC notes, a new research paper co-authored by moral injury experts Rita Brock and HC Palmer states, “the fight against the coronavirus is strikingly similar to battlefield medicine: desperate and unrelenting encounters with patients, an environment of high personal risk, an unseen lethal enemy, extreme physical and mental fatigue, inadequate resources and unending accumulations of the dead.”

And this is where developing a yoga and meditation practice becomes all the more critical for healthcare workers.

## The Experience of Frontline COVID-19 Healthcare Workers

Salles started sharing the benefits of the practice with her medical community and beyond by hosting free streaming classes each Saturday on [social media](#).

For people like Dr. Lindsey McAlarnen, a fourth-year OBGYN resident in Chicago, those virtual yoga lessons are exactly what was needed. “I’ve done virtual yoga with Dr. Salles,” McAlarnen shares. “I’ve been deployed to the COVID-19 renal service and had many unknowns amidst [the pandemic] and her yoga is a calming way to focus me and bring peace amidst the chaos.”

Dr. Amina Farooq, a radiology resident in New York, agrees with McAlarnen saying she too started doing yoga with Arghavan when the pandemic first hit. “It’s been amazing,” she explains. “It’s been a godsend to keep me sane through all the changes in the hospital and as a resident.”

Coping with this unimaginable stress can be overwhelming. However, Salles and her fellow yoga-practicing medical friends believe that if a few [Downward-Facing Dogs](#) can ease just a bit of the anxiety that goes along with caring for COVID-19 patients it’s worth a try. And there’s plenty of science to back up their wellness routine too.

## The Science on Yoga and Stress Reduction

As [Harvard Health](#) explains (and anyone who's ever practiced yoga can attest to), scientific reviews often suggest a regular yoga practice can have the power to “reduce the impact of exaggerated stress responses and may be helpful for both anxiety and depression.”

Harvard Health adds, by reducing perceived stress and anxiety through a yoga practice, a person may be able to modulate their stress response system. “This, in turn, decreases physiological arousal — for example, reducing the heart rate, lowering blood pressure, and easing respiration. There is also evidence that yoga practices help increase heart rate variability, an indicator of the body's ability to respond to stress more flexibly.”

According to a 2018 study published in the [Internal Review of Preventative Medicine](#), yoga indeed has an “effective role in reducing stress, anxiety, and depression.” And it's a tool the scientists say can be complementary to other treatments such as anti-anxiety medicines, providing a potential reduction in the “medical cost per treatment by reducing the use of drugs.”

And, even more specifically, in 2019, the [Journal of Clinical Medicine](#) published a story on the use of yoga to manage stress and burnout in healthcare workers. The researchers conclude, “yoga is effective in the prevention and management of musculoskeletal and psychological issues. In addition to an improvement in physical problems and quality of sleep, both stress levels and burnout are consistently reduced in subjects who practice yoga techniques and mind-body meditation.”

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