

PERSONAL BEST

Let's hear it for the poise

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Last year, during a yoga workshop in London, a participant raised his hand to ask, "How do we find emotional balance inside ourselves when there's so much chaos and imbalance in the world around us?" His probing question gets to the heart of why anxiety and depression have reached such epidemic proportions today. In fact, it's our outer focus – and what it does to our minds and bodies – that lies at the heart of our emotional struggles.

Today's professional climate demands that we perform at high levels externally, but gives us no guidance for assessing our inner emotional and spiritual progress. So we measure ourselves and one another by our output: where we live, where our children go to school, how successful we are in our jobs, how much work we produce.

There's nothing inherently wrong with outer focus or the drive to produce – both play key roles in our creativity. But they usually work best as a natural extension of inner focus and inspiration.

The dilemma: how do we move at our own pace when everyone seems to be racing along at lightning speed? And how do we cultivate inner focus when it feels like the world demands outer focus? Looking inward is the first step in developing emotional balance.

A yogi friend of mine remarked over tea the other day that his wife, long known for her strict emotional control, was suffering from acute colitis. She meditated every day, he told me, but she looked deeply unhappy during and after her meditations. "Sometimes, I wish she'd just let her anger out," he said wistfully. "All I ever get from her is the silent treatment." His wife's stomach problems told the story: the anger she couldn't express was devouring her from the inside out. "Zen on the outside, chaos on the inside," he said.

It can be tempting to think that emotional balance means mastery



Illustration: Henry Wong

Even the most disruptive emotions, such as grief and anger, add richness and spice to our lives

over our emotions: that we don't feel them deeply, or even at all. Yet we are biologically primed for reaction: emotions are wired into us. Few of us, even yogis, can encounter a dramatic display of anger without an answering burst of our own, or weather a romantic rejection without taking a hit to our self-esteem. Even the most disruptive

emotions, such as grief and anger, add richness and spice to our lives.

True emotional balance is not about getting rid of emotions, or only feeling positive ones. It is about how we relate to our emotions and to what they leave behind. After we've shot an emotional arrow into a loved one, for instance, can we reduce the angry after-effects, or do we keep fighting? When our heart has been broken, how long does it take to restore our self-esteem? When we're emotionally balanced, we experience the full range of fear, anger, sadness, or shame. We may even briefly immerse ourselves in these emotions.

The important thing for emotional health is that we learn to be present with our emotions – to feel them fully, then let go and return to centre. This requires a

dynamic balance between the activating and resting parts of our nervous system.

Emotions are mediated through the autonomic nervous system, which has two branches: the sympathetic (fight-flight-freeze) and parasympathetic (rest-and-digest). This two-pronged system structures our emotional well-being.

Think of a car. The sympathetic nervous system is like the accelerator: it revs us up and provokes an emotional response. The parasympathetic system is like the car's brake: it slows down the nervous system and returns us to our emotional centre. The more we press the accelerator and move into nervous system overdrive, the more deeply we wire in that pattern. Eventually, overdrive becomes our default

mode, and it's harder to put on the brakes and find our balance.

How, then, do we learn to balance the nervous system?

This is where yoga and mindfulness practices come into play. For the past 20 to 30 years neuroscientists have studied the effects of both on emotional health. Yoga and mindfulness help to balance the nervous system and create emotional health in the following ways:

- Contemplative practices, such as meditation and restorative yoga, help calm the nervous system and build resilience to stress.
- Contemplative, relaxation-based practices such as restorative yoga help reduce anxiety and depression.
- Even a 10-minute daily yoga practice increases stress resilience and helps with emotional balance – perhaps even more, research suggests, than a twice-weekly 90-minute practice. This doesn't mean, however, that you need to give up your favourite yoga practice.

"Infrastructure interventions" are tools that make your yoga practice more therapeutic: they balance the nervous system, strengthen the immune system, promote physical health, and build resilience to stress, anxiety and depression. You can integrate them into any style of practice, or craft an entire yoga practice using them.

For example, try slowing down your practice and lengthening the transitions between poses. This helps all movement emanate from core strength and integrity, which also makes your practice more challenging. These therapeutic practices help unravel the deeply woven emotional patterns of anxiety and depression, and create the embodied awareness that leads to lasting change.

Bo Forbes is a yoga teacher, integrative yoga therapist, and clinical psychologist with more than 22 years of clinical experience in mind-body healing. She will be teaching at the Evolution Asia Yoga Conference in Hong Kong next month. See asiayogaconference.com for details

THE TASTE TEST VIRGIN COCONUT OIL

Jeanette Wang

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Spectrum Organic Unrefined Virgin Coconut Oil

HK\$118 for 414ml, ThreeSixty
Made in the US and certified organic by the US Department of Agriculture, this oil has a flavour that is supposedly brought out best by either sautéing over medium heat or baking. With excellent moisturising ability, the benefits go beyond the kitchen: massage the liquified oil into skin or apply to hair for one hour, then rinse thoroughly.

Verdict: this had the strongest sweet coconut flavour of the three, which takes getting used to in fritatas or stir-fried foods.



Extra Virgin Coconut Oil

HK\$150 for 500ml, manna.hk

Unlike the olive oil world, which draws a distinction in quality between "extra virgin" and "virgin", there's no such standard with coconut oil. What's important, though, is that this is cold-pressed and unrefined, meaning it hasn't been chemically processed.

Verdict: smooth and light, this tasted closest to a fresh, young coconut.

Bali'Sun Virgin Coconut Oil

HK\$210 for 473ml, jirehhealthhk.com

This oil is produced in Thailand through a proprietary process called rapid enhanced chill phase, which speedily separates the oil from a coconut milk emulsion. This is said to intensify the oil's antioxidant-like properties, making it easier to digest.

Verdict: clean and crisp, this was the lightest oil of the three in texture and flavour.

