



## **The Blood Pressure Balance Programme**

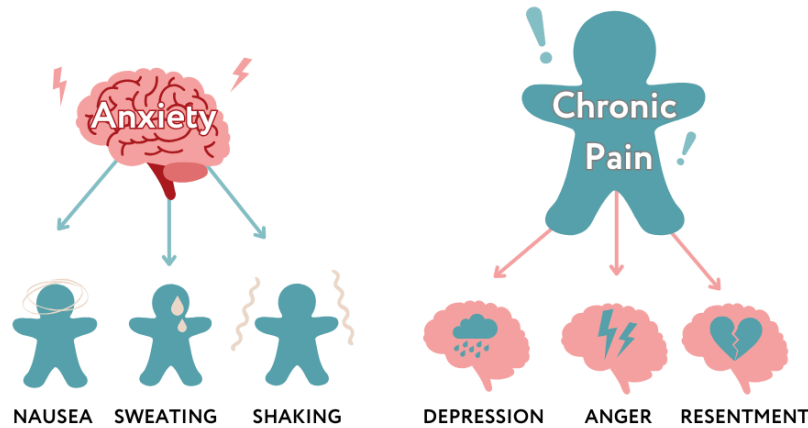
### **Week 5 Handout**

#### **Healthy Body and Mind**

Mental wellbeing is understood to be just as important as physical health. Not only that, but the two are interlinked and can have a direct impact on the other, which can affect our overall health and wellbeing. This is called the mind-body connection. The mind can't function unless your body is working properly, but it also works the other way. The state of your mind affects your body. If you feel low, you tend to do less and be less active, which makes you feel worse – you can become more tired, feel more depressed and tense, plus you miss out on things you enjoy. It can easily become a vicious cycle.

Physical relaxation techniques can help mitigate mental stress, demonstrating the intertwined relationship between the mind and body, as well as regular physical exercise, which isn't just good for our muscles and heart, it's also shown to reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety.

## Ways the Mind & Body Can Negatively Affect Each Other



### Benefits of enhancing the mind-body connection

Strengthening the connection between your body and mind may benefit all areas of your life. It can help balance stress, promote better sleep, and may even help you better regulate your emotions.

#### Stress Reduction

A strengthened mind-body connection may promote greater resilience against daily stressors. When we are more in tune with our bodies, we may better sense the initial signs of stress, such as a fast heartbeat or tense muscles. Recognizing these early can lead to timely interventions, like taking deep breaths or practicing mindfulness, to counteract and manage stress more effectively.

#### Better Sleep Quality

A mind and body in harmony can often lead to better sleep. Practices that develop this connection, such as guided imagery or gradual muscle relaxation, can help to calm the mind and release physical tension, preparing the body for restful sleep.

#### Enhanced Self-Awareness

Cultivating a robust mind-body connection can boost self-awareness. This heightened awareness often helps us understand our bodily responses to various emotional or environmental triggers.

Enhancing the mind-body connection may also provide insight into our habits, contributing to us making informed choices about our food, daily activities, and how we respond to our emotions. This can lead to better health and decision-making.

The mind-body connection can be experienced in lots of different everyday situations. In some cases, when you're feeling nervous about a presentation, you might notice your stomach churning or your hands sweating. Alternatively, after an intense workout, you may feel a rush of contentment that boosts your mood and alleviates stress. This back and forth, where mental or emotional states may trigger physical reactions and vice versa, is the mind-body connection at work.

## Connecting Breath and Movement

You can enhance the relationship between your mind and body by incorporating simple, but effective, habits into your daily or weekly routine. Remember, the goal isn't perfection but increased awareness and attention to the connection through consistent practice.

Physical activity often releases natural mood-boosting chemicals that may help reduce anxiety. By choosing to be mentally present during these activities, you may help strengthen the connection.

### Tai chi

Often described as "meditation in motion," tai chi is a Chinese martial art that combines slow, deliberate movements with deep breathing and mental focus. The gentle flowing movements may help reduce stress, improve balance and flexibility, and support cardiovascular health.

### Yoga

Yoga is a practice that combines physical postures, breath control, and meditation. Through poses (asanas), you can enhance your flexibility, strength, and balance, while the meditative components of yoga deepen your mental clarity and calmness.

As you move through each pose, being aware of each stretch and breath, you're essentially practicing being present and strengthening the mind-body connection.

## **Yoga and Cardiovascular Disease**

Yoga has been shown to help with anxiety, stress and depression, conditions which affect many people who have suffered a cardiac event or have undergone cardiac surgery. If you have a heart condition, regularly practising yoga can be a way of helping to deal with stress and therefore helping you to cope with your condition. It can also help to increase feelings of wellbeing. Some people find it helps with depression.

One of yoga's clearest benefits to the heart is its ability to relax the body and mind. Emotional stress can cause a cascade of physical effects, including the release of hormones like cortisol and adrenaline, which narrow your arteries and increase blood pressure. The deep breathing and mental focus of yoga can offset this stress and lower catecholamine (adrenaline) and cortisol levels.

Practicing yoga has been shown to reduce risk factors associated with cardiovascular disease. Yoga may help lower blood pressure, blood cholesterol and blood glucose levels, as well as heart rate.

## **How does yoga help?**

The beneficial effects could be due to the combined effects of practising yoga postures (which work the muscles), breathing (which can bring more oxygen into the body and reduce blood pressure), and relaxation and meditation (which calm the sympathetic nervous system, which is responsible for the body's fight-or-flight response to stress).

You might think of yoga in terms of contorting your body into pretzel shapes, but that's not necessarily the case. You don't have to do anything extreme and in fact it's

best not to strain yourself – the word asana (the Sanskrit term for yoga postures) means posture comfortably held.

And there's a lot more to yoga than the physical poses. The mental aspects are important too. Breathing (pranayama), relaxation, meditation and imagery can be very beneficial and can help to relax the nervous system, calm the breathing and in some cases lower blood pressure.

Yoga does not count towards the recommended physical activity of 150 minutes moderate-intensity activity per week, as it is not an aerobic activity, so practising yoga is recommended as an additional activity not an alternative one.

### PHYSICAL BENEFITS

- Improves posture for good spine health
- Build strong muscles and bones
- Improves heart health
- Maintain flexibility and movement in joints
- Stimulates healthy digestion and excretion
- Supports efficient breathing
- Boosts the immune system
- Eliminates toxins
- Improves organ function
- Improves bodily awareness



### MENTAL BENEFITS

- Reduces stress, anxiety and depression
- Reduces intrusive thoughts
- Increases emotional awareness and intelligence
- Increases energy levels
- Improves memory, coordination and focus
- Calms the nervous system
- Improves sleep
- Increases happiness
- Promotes relaxation
- Builds confidence

## Insulin, Mood and Stress

If you're feeling stressed, your body releases stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline. This should give you an energy boost for a 'fight or flight' response, but the hormones make it harder for insulin to work properly. Researchers think that high levels of stress hormones might stop insulin-producing cells in the pancreas from working properly and reduce the amount of insulin they make. As energy can't get into your cells, your blood sugar levels rise. In turn, this might contribute to the development of type 2 diabetes.

If stress doesn't go away, it can keep your blood sugar levels high and put you at higher risk of diabetes complications. It can also affect your mood and how you look after yourself, which can start to affect your emotional health.

Overeating when you're stressed could also be a factor in how people develop type 2 diabetes. Some people react to stress by eating more and this can lead to them putting on a lot of weight.

Some evidence indicates a potential relationship between mood and blood sugar. Fluctuations in blood sugar, whether high or low, may cause a person to experience a variety of serious symptoms, which can include changes in mood.

The symptoms of low blood sugar that may affect a person's mood include:

- confusion
- nervousness or anxiety
- hunger
- difficulties with coordination, concentration, and decision-making.
- aggression, irritability, and impatience
- personality and behavioural changes

Having high blood sugar may also cause symptoms that can affect mood, such as:

- difficulty seeing or concentrating.
- feeling unwell
- feeling tired or having low energy

## Go Among Trees and Sit Still

I go among trees and sit still.  
All my stirring becomes quiet  
Around me like circles on water.  
My tasks lie in their places  
Where I left them, asleep like cattle...

Then what I am afraid of comes.  
I live for a while in its sight.  
What I fear in it leaves it,  
And the fear of it leaves me.  
It sings, and I hear its song.

*By Wendell Berry from Sabbaths, 1987, North Point Press*