



YOGA as SELF-CARE

for Healthcare Practitioners

CULTIVATING RESILIENCE,
COMPASSION AND
EMPATHY

SINGING
DRAGON 

Aggie Stewart
Foreword by John Kepner

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LONDON AND PHILADELPHIA

Introduction

THE ESSENCE OF SELF-CARE

Self-care is never a selfish act—it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to offer others. Anytime we can listen to true self and give the care it requires, we do it not only for ourselves, but for the many others whose lives we touch.

Parker J. Palmer

This is a challenging time to be a healthcare professional. Whether in education and clinical training or in professional practice, major aspects of the healthcare education and delivery landscape present inherent and well-documented risks to the health and well-being of students and practitioners.¹

Currently, the effects of the epidemic of burnout and self-harm, blunted empathy, compassion fatigue, absenteeism, and attrition are being felt across the health professions.² Research into the factors underlying the current state of practitioner wellness indicates that, for many, signs of burnout and its related consequences emerge during the education and training period and go unattended as graduates step into professional life.³

As the healthcare professions grapple with the range of environmental and cultural issues that contribute to the current state of practitioner wellness, self-care has emerged as a pressing need for both students and practitioners.⁴ Broadly defined, self-care encompasses the ability to recognize and respond in an appropriate and positive manner to one's needs on all levels: physical, energetic, mental, emotional, and spiritual. Increasingly, health professional schools, healthcare settings, and health professional associations are providing education on the importance of

Self-Care

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self-care on all these levels along with training on specific aspects of self-care, such as diet, exercise, finances, and activities that support self-care, such as yoga and other mind–body–spirit practices.

Greater awareness of the need for enhanced self-care practices among students and practitioners acknowledges the profoundly human foundation of healthcare delivery. It is a system of humans caring for other humans—humans who are subject to the very same health and wellness challenges and goals as the humans for whom they provide care; humans who are affected by those they care for and with whom they work; and humans who are affected by the environmental conditions and circumstances of the delivery settings in which they work along with the myriad pressures that bear on those settings. Special knowledge of how health and pathology manifest in the physical body and the mind does not make healthcare practitioners or students immune to health issues, particularly those associated with work-related stress, fatigue, and burnout.

Challenges to Resilience, Empathy, and Compassion

Managing the work-related stresses faced by those dedicated to supporting the health and wellness of others is nothing short of heroic. Across healthcare disciplines, practitioners and students face similar pressures. Some of the most difficult include:

- the rising cost and debt burden of education and training
- the effects of the “hidden” curriculum—that is, the conflicting expectations for professional behavior between what is taught in the formal curriculum and what is experienced in the clinical environment, including continuing stigma around mental illness
- constraints on care delivery imposed by healthcare financing and regulation
- reliance on cumbersome information technology of varying quality that further decreases meaningful time with patients and clients
- the impact of sleep deprivation due to long hours, shift work, and call schedules
- the hierarchical organization of the work environment and the clinician–patient/client relationship that rewards power imbalance, self-sacrifice, and stoicism in the face of complex health issues and at times of tremendous human suffering.

Each of these conditions makes its own contribution to the multifactorial work-related stress equation. Individual disciplines working in a range of delivery settings from private to public and locations from urban to rural face further demands uniquely configured to their patient and client demographics. Additional pressures often include conditions such as:

- high staff turnover and clinician shortages
- increased workload and decreased allotted time with patients and clients
- exposure to patients’ and clients’ emotional needs and suffering related to their health issues along with the associated secondary trauma
- exposure to workplace violence.

When we combine stresses in our personal life with the resulting mix of work-related stress, the impact on our health, well-being, and resilience and the potential for eroding our ability to act from our innate capacity for empathy and compassion become readily apparent. The evolving science of stress gives us a more nuanced way of understanding how consistent, prolonged stress affects our overall health, well-being, and resilience along with our ability to act consistently with empathy and compassion.

The World Health Organization defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”⁵ Well-being can be characterized as a state of comfort, contentment, or happiness. Broadly defined, resilience is the ability to recover from adversity, to meet the challenges of difficult situations and “bounce back,” not merely surviving but learning and growing from them. Resilience reflects the core of our health and wellness. Its strength influences our innate capacity to act with empathy and compassion, two related but different inherent

Health

“A state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO definition).

Well-Being

A state of comfort, contentment, or happiness.

Resilience

The ability to recover from adversity, to meet the challenges of difficult situations and “bounce back,” not merely surviving but learning and growing from them.

Empathy

The ability to be sensitive to and emotionally share or resonate with the emotions of others.

Compassion

The ability to recognize the suffering of others, to feel their pain coupled with a genuine desire to alleviate their suffering. Compassion includes feelings of kindness for those who are suffering along with the recognition of the vulnerability and imperfection that underlies our shared human condition.

human faculties. Empathy is our ability to be sensitive to and emotionally share or resonate with the emotions of others. Compassion is the ability to recognize the suffering of others, to feel their pain coupled with a genuine desire to alleviate their suffering. Compassion includes feelings of kindness for those who are suffering along with the recognition of the vulnerability and imperfection that underlies our shared human condition.⁶

The unique stress-related challenges to resilience, empathy, and compassion that we face as healthcare practitioners necessitate that we view self-care through a different lens, one that helps us create a sustainable foundation for how we care for our self while we provide care to others.

Creating a Sustainable Foundation for Self-Care

How we do and don't take care of ourselves involves some of the most deeply rooted, longest-standing habits we have. While great work is being done to educate, expand awareness, and create opportunities for self-care to be actualized across healthcare disciplines, these very positive messages and actions can inadvertently convey and reinforce a sense of shame or blame around not taking better care of ourselves or striking a healthier work-life balance. This can become amplified if organizations are not invested in creating space for self-care during the workday.

Too often the idea of self-care and ways of acting on it become one more thing to do in a professional life already crowded with pressing demands and responsibilities within a larger personal life also crowded with pressing demands and responsibilities. Paradoxically, even simple self-care actions such as taking a stretch break every hour, eating meals away from our work, or remembering to breathe mindfully during moments in a busy, hectic day can feel like putting a band-aid on an open wound that requires stitches. Like New Year's resolutions, self-care actions embarked upon with the best of intentions become abandoned when the demands of our organizations and the strength of our habits overpower those intentions. These habits include the way we perceive stress, our self, the needs of others, and the environments in which we interact.

When viewed as a "to do," self-care becomes too easily relegated to the "may do" or "nice to do" category of activities in an already chock-full daily schedule, which makes self-care easy to drop or put off when time grows short and external demands assert themselves. This usually has nothing to do with how important we believe these activities are or even how much we enjoy doing them.

Viewed as an expression of our relationship with our self, however, self-care takes on different resonance and meaning. It elicits more positive commitment, motivation, and efficacious behaviors that support health, well-being, and resilience. When viewed as an expression of our relationship with our self, self-care can begin to become a way of life, part of personal hygiene, so to speak. This view supports self-care becoming regular and sustainable.

When I first mention to healthcare students and practitioners the idea of self-care being about our relationship with ourselves, I often get a deer-in-headlights response, visible stiff squirming, bemused *hmms*. Indeed, the idea may feel strange at first and may even set in motion a stream of harsh judgments about it being selfish, egocentric, and self-centered, encouraging self-absorption, and leading to a lack of consideration or caring for others. All these negatively charged associations can elicit deeply uncomfortable feelings.

Consider, however, that this negatively tinged perspective fundamentally pits caring for our self against caring for others. This perspective is not often evident during education, training, and professional life, much less the larger culture that forms and prepares us for entry into the healthcare professions. Nonetheless, the message comes through in subtle and powerful ways, with perhaps the most subtle being little real opportunity to act on self-care, not to mention being rewarded for toughness, stoicism, self-effacement, self-denial, and unquestioned adherence to hierarchy during both training and professional life.

Developing a conscious relationship with our self, however, one that is positive, kind, and loving, is aligned with current research on the positive effects of self-compassion. Human development researcher Kristin Neff, PhD, and clinical psychologist Christopher Germer, PhD, define self-compassion as "simply compassion directed inward" towards one's self.⁷ They point to a large body of research demonstrating that self-compassion increases coping skills for dealing with difficult emotional experiences and enables people to thrive and experience less anxiety and depression in the face of challenges. They note that self-compassion decreases cortisol and increases heart-rate variability, markers of our ability to regulate emotions through actions such as self-soothing when stressed.

Neff and Germer also point out that rather than encouraging complacency and laziness, self-compassion has been linked to positive motivation, perseverance, and growth, as self-compassionate people retain an inherent sense of worth regardless of success or failure. This increases the

likelihood that self-compassionate people stay on track with and meet their goals. Neff and Germer further note that, contrary to commonly held beliefs, self-compassion does not lead to insular and narcissistic behavior—in fact, just the opposite. Self-compassionate people show *more* compassion for others, demonstrating an ability to act on empathic concern while being less likely to experience personal distress in the presence of another's suffering.⁸ Seen in this light, self-compassion becomes a fundamental aspect of the foundation for self-care.

Our relationship with our self determines just about everything we do in our day along with how we do it. It affects the way we wake in the morning; our morning rituals; what and when we eat; what activities we do; how we interact with others and go about our work; how we schedule our day; our evening rituals; and how we sleep. When we make this relationship conscious, we have a much better chance of making informed and deliberate choices that safeguard our health and well-being. These kinds of choices enable us to better serve and care for those around us, whether peers, patients, clients, and colleagues or family, friends, and community. They support cultivating and maintaining the health, well-being, equanimity, and presence necessary for working in a challenging healthcare delivery environment, and they deepen and nourish our natural ability to act with empathy and compassion as we care for others.

Personal yoga practice facilitates developing a conscious, compassionate, and loving relationship with our self, one that helps us maintain our health and wellness while keeping our energy and enthusiasm strong for doing our chosen work of supporting the health, well-being, and resilience of others.

Yoga as a Quintessential Self-Care Practice

Yoga practice facilitates developing the personal strengths, skills, self-knowledge, and discernment that help us navigate the challenges inherent in today's healthcare delivery environment. It does this, in part, through the application of various tools, such as *āsana* or physical posture practice, breathing practices known as *prānāyāma*, and relaxation techniques that have a direct impact on the strength and resilience of our nervous system and our energy. Used synergistically in integrated personal practice, yoga's robust and highly adaptable set of tools, techniques, and methodology promote health, well-being, and resilience and enable us to act consistently and genuinely from our innate capacity for empathy and compassion.

At a more fundamental level, yoga practice supports a shift in how we perceive our self and our experience, not least of which is our perception of stressful events, and thus, not only our experience of those events but also our response to them. Ultimately, yoga practice supports living from a place of mindfulness and clarity that helps us cultivate and maintain health, well-being, and resilience while keeping our well of empathy and compassion deep, full, and accessible. Best of all, yoga's adaptability to individual needs, interests, and goals makes it accessible to all abilities and ages. As the renowned twentieth-century yoga master T. Krishnamacharya taught, if we can breathe, we can do yoga.

Yoga as Self-Care for Healthcare Practitioners lays out the fundamentals of yoga practice, providing an introduction to its philosophical foundations and an orientation to its primary tools, techniques, and methodology. As a guide to developing personal practice, it incorporates an understanding of stress based on the contemporary science of stress, showing how yoga's tools, techniques, and methodology can be tailored and combined in individualized practices to address the impact of the daily stresses we encounter in our work as healthcare practitioners.

Yoga's Roots and Realm

Despite the modern popular image of yoga as a form of exercise that emphasizes stretching, yoga's true realm is the mind; its practice one of contemplative meditation. The emphasis on physical posture practice in modern yoga comes out of efforts in India in the early twentieth century to restore yoga within its culture and popularize the practice. These efforts were linked to yoga's ancient roots. As a way of connecting yoga to then current health trends, influential yoga teachers, such as T. Krishnamacharya, drew upon aspects of the Western physical culture that were popular in India at that time and incorporated them into the practice. These aspects were what have become the postures in contemporary practice. Over time, however, posture practice came to overshadow other elements of the practice. This included the role of physical practice in preparing the breath for *prānāyāma* and the role of *prānāyāma* in preparing the mind for meditation, not to mention the principal function of the practice as meditation to relieve suffering.

The ancient yogis recognized suffering as a universal human experience, and linked it and its causes to what goes on in the mind. They viewed contemplative meditation as an antidote to suffering, providing a

methodology replete with tools and techniques for quieting and purifying the mind—that is, improving our ability not only to see our self, others, and the world around us clearly as they are, but to remain grounded and present with all things as they are, capable of acting responsively, rather than reactively, with empathy and compassion. They found that as we purify the mind, our perception of our self, others, and the world around us clarifies, leaving us better able to take appropriate action in any situation or circumstance in which we find our self.

Yoga's roots reach back more than 2500 years into Indian Vedic culture. Some scholars point to archeological evidence suggesting that the practice goes back more than 1500 years further into pre-Vedic culture.⁹ What we know about yoga comes from Vedic texts, including the four *Vedas*, the *Upanisads*, which form a major component of the *Vedas*, the *Mahābhārata*, which includes the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and the *Yoga Sūtra*, among others.

A compilation of teachings on yoga, the *Yoga Sūtra* is the seminal source for yoga practice. Its composition in the second century CE is attributed to the sage Patanjali. This manual on meditation practice comprises four books, each of which includes between 34 and 54 aphorisms, or concise philosophically based statements, providing teachings on the practice of yogic meditation. Book I defines yoga and describes the aims and goals of yoga practice. Book II outlines the method of practice, including obstacles to practice and how to overcome them. Book III describes the special abilities that can emerge from the practice of sustained focus, meditation, and meditative absorption. Book IV delves more deeply into the experience of meditative absorption, addressing related topics such as the difference between the mind and consciousness.

The *Yoga Sūtra* is closely aligned with *Sāṅkhya* philosophy, one of six branches of ancient Indian philosophy, which includes yoga. Based in philosophical inquiry and reasoning, *Sāṅkhya* lays out an understanding of human experience and the world of that experience. Considered to be applied *Sāṅkhya*, the *Yoga Sūtra* presents an experiential practice of *Sāṅkhya* reasoning and enumerates its benefits. At its core, it acknowledges that the world of human experience includes things that change—that is, all of matter, gross to subtle, including the mind, ego, and thinking—and something that does not change: our true nature as awareness. In *Sāṅkhya* and yoga, awareness is said to pervade us and all of life. In the context of yoga practice, awareness is highly experiential and can be characterized as a

Purifying the Mind

Improving our ability not only to see our self, others, and the world around us clearly as they are, but to remain grounded and present with all things as they are, capable of acting responsively, rather than reactively, with empathy and compassion.

felt sense of profound unity, wholeness, equanimity, and interconnectedness within us and simultaneously with all of life.

According to the ancient yogis, we suffer because we forget our true nature, and we forget not because we are bad or stupid, but because we become identified or fused with what changes, and disconnected from the felt sense of our true nature as awareness.

The ancient yogis used metaphors, symbols, and analogies to express their understanding of suffering and the connection to psychophysiological health and well-being. In one such allegory human experience is compared to a chariot drawn by horses in which the five senses are the horses, the chariot is the body, the charioteer is the intellect, consciousness rides with the charioteer, the reins are the mind, and the pathways that the chariot takes are the objects of the senses. In this allegory, the reins are depicted as a tool of the intellect. To safeguard the body and its driver and make a safe journey through life, the mind must hold the senses steady. Through symbols, analogies, and extended metaphors such as this, the ancients also convey the idea of the thinking mind as a tool or instrument. When not properly controlled, the thinking mind gives way to the vicissitudes of sensory input, and when not properly cared for and calibrated, the thinking mind misreads the senses. Both scenarios risk the entire individual human enterprise. This insight is consistent with current neuroscience perspectives on the role of the brainstem regions that receive sensory input—vision, hearing, and somatic sensation—and the proper processing and interpretation of that input throughout the brain. It is also consistent with the current, more nuanced understanding of the autonomic nervous system (ANS) response to stress, including the role of the mind and mindsets in our response to challenge and threat. The ancient yogis understood meditation to be the proper means of controlling, calibrating, and caring for the thinking mind in order to safely navigate the ride through life.

From their insights and experiences, the ancient yogis identified tools, techniques, and a methodology that could be incorporated into practices for purifying the mind. They understood that when we purify our mind, health and resilience on all levels of body, mind, and spirit follow. An increasing body of research on yoga's efficacy for addressing the effects of a wide range of conditions related to stress is identifying the psychophysiology supporting the insights and practices the yogis' abilities brought forth more than two millennia ago.¹⁰ We can think of the ancient yogis as the integrative behavioral medicine healers of their day.

Awareness

In the context of yoga practice, a highly experiential state that can be characterized as a felt sense of profound unity, wholeness, equanimity, and interconnectedness within us and simultaneously with all of life.

Stress, Mindsets, and Yoga Practice

Stress often has a bad reputation in health research, health treatment, and public perception—and not without cause. In particular, toxic stress has been linked to a wide range of health conditions from chronic pain to autoimmunity to addiction, anxiety, and depression. It also plays a causal role in burnout, self-harm, and compassion fatigue.¹¹ Toxic stress is stress that is severe, frequent, and/or prolonged, occurs earlier during development, and is inadequately buffered by protective factors, such as supportive relationships, a positive self-concept, or a perception of competence.¹² Toxic stress focuses the brain's resources on survival and away from brain structures involved in executive function, attention, memory, affect, mood, self-awareness, and social and moral reasoning, among others. It also adversely affects the neuroendocrine-immune network, including ANS response and particularly the fight, flight, or freeze response.

The ANS comprises two synergistic systems that help maintain a state of homeostasis: the sympathetic and the parasympathetic nervous systems. When we perceive a threat or challenge, the sympathetic system responds by mobilizing physiological resources to deal with it. The parasympathetic system comes online to help our body rest and recover the resources expended by the sympathetic system in response to a threat or challenge. Frequent or prolonged activation of the fight, flight, or freeze response can lead to habitual and indiscriminate, if involuntary, activation of this response when faced with a challenge. It also contributes to diminished health, well-being, and resilience.¹³

Our ANS responds to a perceived threat or challenge in three primary ways. Each type of stressor has a different impact on our resilience. The stress-as-adversary characterization is only one part of a more complex and nuanced relationship between stress and resilience. Stress can also be positive and healthy. Positive stress stretches us enough, but not too much. It encompasses challenges that we welcome, for which we have sufficient coping resources to meet and that help us grow. It also includes situations and circumstances that excite us, such as watching a thrilling dance performance or experiencing an invigorating rafting trip in category 5 rapids. This type of stress response is sometimes referred to as “excite and delight.” Tolerable stress is either more intense or prolonged but is stress for which we still have sufficient protective factors, such as supportive relationships and healthy coping resources and strategies to buffer us from its damaging effects. This encompasses situations to which we respond to a threatening, traumatic, or otherwise difficult circumstance with bravery and by joining forces with

others in common cause, such as a rescue effort following a catastrophic natural disaster. This type of stress response is sometimes referred to as “tend and befriend” due to the social outreach and caring actions that it triggers. Then there is toxic stress in which prolonged activation of our stress response system is inadequately buffered by protective factors.

The predominant underlying message regarding stress, however, is that it is always an enemy, only ever toxic, and something to be combated, managed, mitigated, and eliminated. The very language used to talk about stress and describe its effects reflects this adversarial theme. We need ways to “fight” stress, to “beat” and “conquer” it, as if stress were a living organism like the flu virus. The subtle and overt message this languaging conveys tends to pervade all areas of our lives, personal, communal, and professional. The healthcare professions are not exempt. Culturally, we have been weaned on this singular idea of stress, albeit largely unconsciously. For many of us, it has become part of the bedrock of how we view the personal and professional challenges we face in our self, others, and the world around us. Among the unintended consequences of this singular idea that stress is bad is that it can actually amplify stress and subtly lead to or reinforce a sense of disempowerment by limiting our ability to see and evaluate clearly not only what is in front of us, but also our options for taking responsive action in the face of it.

The contemporary science of stress, however, also shows that our beliefs about stress are a critical piece of whether stress makes us sick or helps us grow. Our beliefs or mindset about stress significantly influence our physiological response to it, regardless of source or type. In her perspective-shifting work on the science of stress, health psychology researcher Kelly McGonigal, PhD, defines stress as “what arises when something [we] care about is at stake.”¹⁴ This broader and more general definition of stress provides an opportunity to see current events, situations, and circumstances from another perspective, thereby enabling us to take a closer look at how we see and understand what we encounter, the meaning we make of it, and the action we take in response to it.

Each of the three ANS responses to stress is not only linked to a different way of perceiving an event; each carries its own biochemical stamp, which supports a different set of actions or reactions and exerts a different physiological effect on short- and long-term health and resilience. Table I.1 provides a summary of these different responses to autonomic activation, the perception of threat or challenge each is associated with, and the short- and long-term effects on health and resilience.

Table I.1 Differences in Autonomic Response and Perception of Threat or Challenge¹⁵

Autonomic response	Threat perception and principal hormones	Short- and long-term effects
Fight, flight, or freeze	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Threat perception: fear outweighs enthusiasm Norepinephrine, epinephrine Cortisol-dominant ratio of stress hormones 	<p>Short-term</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supports survival when faced with a life threat Mobilizes body and brain for action Directs energy towards body systems that support immediate survival and away from systems not needed for immediate survival <p>Long-term</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Erodes resiliency of biological stress regulatory systems, increasing the likelihood of chronic diseases, such as autoimmune conditions, coronary heart disease, hypertension, and type II diabetes Contributes to compromised immune function Exerts sustained wear and tear on the cardiovascular system Contributes to chronic systemic inflammation, and chronic illness related to systemic inflammation Contributes to undesirable emotional states, such as depression and anxiety
Challenge—“excite and delight”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Threat perception: enthusiasm outweighs fear DHEA*-dominant ratio of stress hormones 	<p>Short-term</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourages self-confidence Motivates pursuit of goals Mobilizes energy Heightens strength, focus, concentration, and sensory awareness Linked to absorption in “flow” states in which enthusiasm and passion draw us to something infused with purpose and meaning <p>Long-term</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lowers risk of depression, anxiety, heart conditions, and neurodegenerative and other conditions related to prolonged or habitual fight, flight, or freeze stress response The dominance of DHEA supports developing resilience and counteracts some of the adverse effects of cortisol

Tend and befriend	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Threat perception: enthusiasm outweighs fear Principal hormone is oxytocin working in conjunction with naturally occurring opioids Associated with the reward center in the brain 	<p>Short-term</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Motivates active, supportive connection with others Opens access to courage Decreases fear Increases trust Decreases experience of distress Increases ability to act rather than freeze in response to a threat Enables greater awareness of sensory signals Heightens attunement to others Exerts a protective and healing effect on the heart in the wake of stressful events Inhibits secretion of cortisol <p>Long-term</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contributes to positive learning from social connection in stressful events Supports developing resilience physically and psychologically Supports reduction of anxiety and depression Counteracts some of the effects of cortisol Protective of health and well-being
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* DHEA: dehydroepiandrosterone

A broader understanding of the stress response opens up opportunities for self-reflection on the impact of our life experiences on our health, well-being, and resilience. This includes our stress mindset and the behaviors that follow from it. Self-reflection becomes possible when our basic physiologic needs are met and we have a sense of safety and belonging, conditions that personal yoga practice supports. A growing body of research links both the “challenge” and “tend and befriend” responses with the cultivation of resilience, empathy, and compassion and their psychophysiological health benefits. When our response to stress remains habitually and indiscriminately, if involuntarily, fight, flight, or freeze as a result of unbuffered toxic stress, whether from abuse, neglect, or overwhelming challenges at family, community, or organizational levels, our resilience erodes and with it our capacity to be well and to act with empathy and compassion.

Yoga practice offers us tools, techniques, and a methodology that support self-reflection on our stress mindset, our perception of stressful or challenging events and situations, and our habitual responses to them.

These tools, techniques, and methodology provide a means to settle our nervous system and restructure our brain to support our health, well-being, and resilience, and with it our capacity for empathy and compassion. The tools, techniques, and methodology also provide us with the means to look at and transform habitual and often unconscious actions and behaviors, not least of which are those we act upon when we feel stressed or challenged. This includes our ways of thinking and perceiving that underlie the suffering that comes with exhaustion, compassion fatigue, burnout, and self-harm related to our work as healthcare practitioners. It supports cleaning the perceptual lens through which we see both our internal resources and abilities and the conditions and circumstances in our external environment so that we see them clearly as they are and act in ways that are not mired in past traumas or adverse events and that are aligned with our values and what we hold most dear. Approached in this way, yoga practice can provide opportunities for healing and transformation at the personal, organizational, and societal levels.

Engaging in this kind of self-reflection and yoga practice does not mean denying, minimizing, or sugarcoating very real problems when they exist in our self, others, or the environments in which we participate—in fact, just the opposite. It means recalibrating our nervous system and our brain so that we increase our ability to respond with intention and decrease our tendency to react. It means developing a deeper level of discernment about our self, others, and the world around us and, just as importantly, choosing responsive actions that honor what we see and how we both understand and make meaning from it. And it means cultivating greater mindfulness and presence, that is, the ability to remain grounded in the present moment with all of its sensory activation and consciously choose what we know to be the right action.

The shift to conscious presence is also intimately related to how we see ourselves and how we honor our basic needs physically, energetically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. This shift is self-care in its most basic and straightforward expression. The movement away from unconscious, reactive habits to conscious presence via a regulated nervous system is fundamental to cultivating resilience. It is also the key to replenishing and deepening our well of empathy and compassion. And it is crucial for increasing our facility to act from that well in the most challenging situations, such as exposure to patients' and clients' emotional needs and suffering related to their health issues while preventing or mitigating associated

Mindfulness and Presence

The ability to remain grounded in the present moment with all of its sensory activation and consciously choose what we know to be the right action.

secondary trauma; working in and under less than optimal conditions for helping patients and clients to heal; and extended periods of work-related sleep deprivation, to name a few.

Support for Cultivating Resilience, Empathy, and Compassion

In delineating the path of practice, the ancients address the interconnected nature of the human experience with all of life. Part of the brilliance of the *Yoga Sūtra* and other teachings within the yoga tradition is their tacit acknowledgment that we live in a relational world. Everything inside of us and outside of us exists in relation to something else, interlaced like the fibers of a beautifully and finely woven tapestry. Our lives are defined by a wide range of relationships, starting with the one we have with our self. This relationship exists in a dynamic interplay with all the other relationships we have. When we become more conscious of our relationship with our self, we put our self in a much better position to maintain equanimity in that dynamic interplay or recover equanimity when it becomes challenged or threatened by people, events, and circumstances in our external environments.

Because the practice of yoga is fundamentally about our relationship with our self, the practice is designed to affect the quality and health of that relationship on all levels: physical, energetic, emotional, mental, and spiritual. By acknowledging the universal experience of suffering, the ancient yogis identified the mind as a primary arena in which we can find the causal factors of suffering. The inquiry-based method and the tools and techniques of practice they developed target how we relate to and interact with the agents of the mind: our feelings, emotions, thoughts, memories, and related behaviors. Through practice, we can tap into a wellspring of self-knowledge and develop the discernment necessary to acknowledge, understand, and respect our feelings, emotions, and thoughts more fully and accurately. This discernment enables us to take actions that safeguard our health on all levels. It also enables us to do our chosen work with sustained resilience, energy and passion, and empathy and compassion.

Yoga's aim of clarifying our perception and knowing our true nature supports making conscious choices aligned with both the "challenge" and "tend and befriend" responses rather than acting from a predominantly and indiscriminately, if involuntary, fight, flight, or freeze response. The "challenge" and "tend and befriend" responses build health, well-being, resilience, empathy, and compassion. As our mind becomes purified, self-knowledge grows along with our skills of discernment and discrimination.

These qualities support taking right action, starting with our self and extending to others.

A Guide to Personal Yoga Practice

As a guide to personal practice, *Yoga as Self-Care for Healthcare Practitioners* combines theoretical information about the practice of yoga with practical suggestions for applying that information in an individualized personal practice.

Chapter 1 lays out the yoga teachings on the multidimensionality of the human system. These teachings form the basis for application of the various tools, techniques, and methods of yoga practice. Chapter 2 looks at the role of intention in yoga practice, showing how an understanding of our life's purpose or mission shapes the intention of our practice and how that intention then becomes its driving force.

Specific tools, techniques, and methods of practice are outlined in Chapters 3 through 7. Chapter 3 focuses on tools for quieting the body so that it is not a distraction during meditation. Chapter 4 provides an overview of yoga breathing practices designed to work with managing our energy. Chapter 5 looks at how breath and other tools, such as *mantra*, further quiet the mind and develop focus and concentration. Chapter 6 discusses ways we sustain focus and concentration and develop the metaphorical "muscle" of meditation, allowing the thinking mind to recede so we can release further into a meditative state. Chapter 7 shows how regular, sustained meditation practice that connects us with our true nature as pure awareness provides essential nourishment for nurturing health, well-being, resilience, compassion, and empathy.

Chapter 8 provides an assessment process to help identify practice needs and details principles for combining yoga's tools and techniques into individualized personal practices tailored to those needs and factoring in our interests and goals. Chapter 9 offers guidance on selecting practice components, including ideas for short practices. It underscores cultivating a broader understanding of yoga practice so that it becomes a way of life, that is, a way of maintaining mindfulness, presence, perspective, and right action from moment to moment. Appendix I provides a description of common *prānāyāma* techniques and methods, indicating their uses, effects, and benefits and offering relevant notes on the technique or method described. Appendix II provides additional resources for further study and practice support along with information for finding local yoga teachers and yoga therapists.