

PERSONAL HEALTH

Companies Say Yoga Isn't a Stretch

Physical, Emotional Benefits Are Praised as More Firms Look to Cut Health Costs

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Push aside the conference room desk and bring in the mats. It's time for office yoga.

As yoga gathers increasing acceptance in Western medicine, some employers are beginning to realize the beneficial physical and emotional impact the ancient practice can have on their work force. In today's environment, proponents say, yoga not only helps relieve tension and improve concentration, but also may eventually help companies reduce the escalating expense of providing health care, and provide a simple, low-cost way to offer more benefits to their employees rather than less.

At Katz Media Group, a New York media representation firm, an empty office has been transformed into the company's yoga room, and yoga mats and blocks are stacked in the corners. In the program's early days a couple of years ago, employees used to gather in the conference room for a once-a-week "chair yoga" session, where they did seated exercises. But when staffers expressed an interest in doing more physical yoga, the sessions were moved to a conference room before the extra office opened up, says Luba Timchinna, Katz Media Group's manager of meetings and special events.

Katz Media picks up the tab for an instructor who comes in from Integral Yoga, a national yoga school and studio that regularly provides sessions to about 10 companies in New York.

Those who twist and tangle alongside co-workers report feeling more energized and less stressed, and say they react more calmly when they're put in difficult situations. All of those benefits enhance the office environment, says Carol Krucoff, a yoga instructor and author in Chapel Hill, N.C.

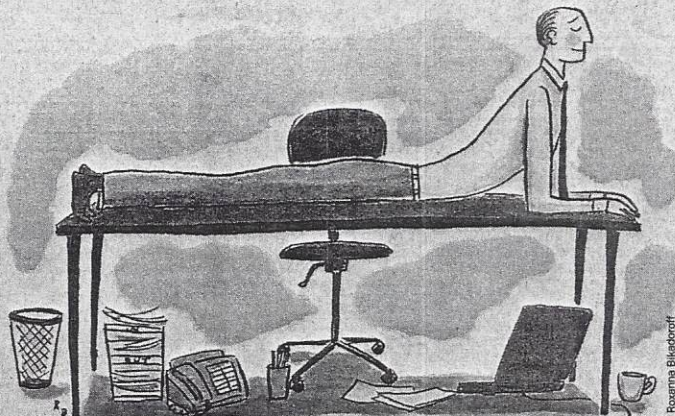
"Yoga in the workplace is so important for the way our world is going these days, because everyone is so rushed and frantic," she says.

After the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, members of the New York Fire Department's counseling-services unit worked 80 hours a week counseling grief-stricken colleagues and family members of the 343 firefighters who perished.

But the emotional toll on the fire department's counselors was staggering, too, and Bill Crawford, who headed the fire department's counseling office in Manhattan, went searching for a way to help them cope.

The 57-year-old Mr. Crawford found it in yoga.

The now-retired 30-year fire-department veteran tried yoga himself in the months after the Trade Center attacks and says he was overwhelmed by the physical and emotional release it provided him. When he heard his employ-



ees complain they needed help, too, the light bulb went on. Now, classes from New York's OM Yoga Center allow about a dozen staff members to carve out some time and energy to focus on themselves.

The NYFD yoga group meets twice a week—Tuesdays at lunchtime and Thursdays after work—in the counseling department's Manhattan office. Mr. Crawford says about seven people attend regularly (four women and three men) and others drop in from time to time; a larger group tried the sessions early on, but some couldn't fit it into their schedules or never got comfortable with the practice.

Aside from improving his lungs, Mr. Crawford says, "[Yoga] makes me focus and put aside all the stray thoughts of the day that overwhelm us and cause us stress."

Roughly 15 million U.S. adults, or 7%, now practice yoga, an increase of 28.5% from 2002; an additional 35.3 million people say they want to try yoga in the next 12 months, according to Yoga Journal, a national yoga magazine.

To be sure, it is difficult to quantify the cost-savings benefits of yoga in the workplace. It is a relatively new trend and the few companies offering the benefit have too little experience to measure its impact. Even so, employers are willing to take the chance that it might reduce absenteeism or health-insurance claims.

"They believe this is something that is going to be a benefit for their employees, and have also made a leap of faith that this is something that is fiscally healthy for them as well, even if they don't have the means to measure that," says Camille Haltom, a health-care consultant at Hewitt Associates in Lincolnshire, Ill.

Yoga has steadily crept away from its hippie roots and into the mainstream. In recent years, doctors and researchers have cited its effect as relief for myriad conditions, including asthma, obsessive-compulsive disorder, menopause, chronic pain and arthritis.

Some insurance plans cover yoga under "complementary and alternative medicine" programs. For example, de-

pending on plan and region, Oxford Health Plans allows members to receive alternative therapies—which include yoga, acupuncture and massage therapy—from certain providers in its network.

For Donna Lomangino, president of Washington graphic-design firm Lomangino Studio, it's an inexpensive tradeoff to pay for yoga sessions. It sets the firm back about \$400 a month for twice-a-week classes from Georgetown Yoga for her five employees; a parking space in their building costs about \$200 a month.

In the year that Lomangino Studio employees have attended classes, Ms. Lomangino says she's seen improved posture, better teamwork and greater focus from her workers. "[The cost] is well worth it in terms of mental and physical well-being and health," she says.

Most workplace yoga sessions incorporate elements of hatha yoga, which comprises the most traditional poses and teaches methods for breathing and managing stress, but doesn't deliver an aerobic workout.

Many newcomers may confuse yoga with a religious practice. To counter this misconception, Integral Yoga eliminates chanting at the beginning and end of its sessions at businesses.

"Everyone has their own view of spirituality and [chanting] may not be comfortable for them," says Jo Sgammato, director of the Yoga at Work program run by Integral Yoga.

Yoga doesn't transfer well to all workplaces. While small design and architectural firms have made a habit of sending employees to Margaret Burns Yap's

Georgetown Yoga studio, it has been harder to convince more conservative offices, such as law firms or government agencies, to give yoga a try.

Harder still to overcome is the thought of exercising next to one's co-workers. While the ease of the sessions means employees don't have to sweat next to their Lycra-clad boss, some are shy about showing up to the conference room in workout clothes and being instructed to remove their shoes. (Yoga is practiced barefoot.)

"Some people come to class and when you tell them they have to take off their shoes, they leave," Katz Media's Ms. Timchinna says.