

UPMC Center for Integrative Medicine

Dedicated to increasing knowledge about safe and effective complementary and integrative medicine approaches.

Time for a Change—Starting the New Year on the Best Foot

Angie Phares—Integrative Health Coach, Sarah Schmidhofer, MD—Integrative Psychiatrist, Ronald Glick, MD—Medical Director

All great changes are preceded by chaos—Deepak Chopra

The universe tends to move from a state of order to disorder. That certainly fits with the chaos of 2020. If things are destined to become more disordered and chaotic, what can we do? In physics, if you introduce energy into a system, things can reorganize and this can apply to our behaviors and mental patterns as well.

First, the bad news—the things we already know. Many of the things we used to do to take care of ourselves and our families have become a challenge. We're stressed, which makes everything take more energy, and since we are exhausted, the energy we need is no longer there. At times like this, there are so many things we can't control, there's a tendency to feel paralyzed or to want to withdraw.

In the natural world, the downward spiral ends when you introduce energy into the system. That energy often starts with motivation, followed up with action. An example is your yard in the early spring. After months left alone, there are branches in the flower beds, leaves and dead plants strewn about. To create the order we seek, we have to expend energy to remove the debris. Perhaps the motivation comes from the fact that the neighbors cleaned up their yard and yours looks bad by comparison. Perhaps it is that the sun is shining and you're really looking forward to listening to the birds from the back deck or getting those peas in the ground so you can enjoy them in your salad.

For some health behaviors, such as addictions, it's all or nothing, so it takes a very large step or more graphically, a jump into the deep end, to make a change. For other behaviors, such as exercising or meditating, one can dip a toe in the water and begin more gradually. Similarly, some people go from a Carbohydrate diet to Atkins, and others make more modest changes. It's all good, as long as we are moving in the direction that we set out for ourselves. What motivates us to make changes in our lives? For my (RG) uncle Fred, it was a heart attack. He was in the ER with chest pain and the doctor asked about smoking. He replied, "I used to". To the follow-up question, "When did you quit?" he responded, "5 minutes ago". For him, it took a major medical scare to make this step. Today, let's think about finding something that motivates us to make healthy changes, short of a catastrophic illness.

Where should we start? What changes do we need to be making? Much of our health is determined by 6 factors which fall under the heading of "health behaviors". These include: diet, exercise, habit control, stress management, sleep patterns, and social connectedness. This is probably not news to most of us—eating more healthily, exercising, and cutting out smoking or drinking often top New Year's resolution lists every year. We know intuitively that problems in any one of these areas can snowball, affecting the other areas as well. This year in particular, with the tremendous stress

and restrictions that the COVID-19 pandemic has imposed upon the world, it has been more challenging than ever to eat right, get regular exercise, take space for ourselves, relax, and visit loved ones.

Why do people decide to make a change in behavior or habits? The individuals we see at the Center commonly have conditions or symptoms which are bothersome and haven't responded to a standard biomedical approach. Will lifestyle changes help? The short answer is yes they may. We know this intuitively and our research bears it out. For example, migraines may have a stress trigger and may get worse at times when our sleep is disrupted, such as a college student staying up late studying for exams. So for that person, addressing stress and sleep cycles would be an excellent place to start.

Once a person steps into the world of self-management, we encourage them to start with one or two goals at a time, breaking them up into smaller steps, so that change does not seem overwhelming or impossible. Today, we focus on stress reduction and sleep patterns, as these are foundational to the rest of our health.

Stress levels are at an all-time high for many of us. We are isolated, struggling with employment, health and the pandemic, political unrest, childcare, education, quarantine and fear, to name a few. While stress relief could be a whole article on its own, we will talk about some simple ways to introduce stress reduction measures into your life. You can start with one or two of these, and work towards incorporating more into your life.

1. Work some "me-time" into your day, even if it is just 10-20 minutes. This should serve the sole purpose of doing something that you *want* to do, rather than something on your to-do list. This might take the form of a luxurious bath or shower, calling a loved one, reading a book, exercising, engaging in a hobby, or meditating. If you live with others, ask for their support in this and offer to give them time alone in return.
2. Take a mindfulness break. Mindfulness refers to paying attention to your current experience, without judging it. This could be sitting with eyes closed, tuning into your breath and focusing on not judging what comes up; or this could be more active, for example, going outside and deliberately focusing on the wind on your face, or tuning into the sounds around you. Start with 5 minutes at a time, and work up from there as you are able.
3. Use breathing techniques throughout the day to reduce stress. One simple technique involves linking breath with movement ("vinyasa") and is both grounding and relaxing. Start by bringing your palms together. As you inhale, separate your palms apart. It doesn't matter how far you go—just use your breath as a guide. Move continuously as you breathe in, then exhale, and slowly bring your palms back together. Repeat; bringing hands apart on the inhale and back together on the exhale. Focus on synchronizing breath with motion. Try to have fun with this—it is ok if things don't match up exactly. The idea is to connect your body and your mind using your breath.
4. Try meditating, a well-known way of reducing anxiety, boosting mood and calming the nervous system. There are many guided meditations available on YouTube or through a free phone app, such as Insight Timer.

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Time for a Change, Starting the New Year on the Best Foot

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Going back to the patterns of the universe, there are natural rhythms all around us. Daily rising and setting of the sun and moon, seasonal migrations of birds and animals as well as plants growing, setting flowers, then seeds and going dormant. Sometimes we forget that we are part of this natural world and are subject to these same rhythms. Modern life can be in conflict with these rhythms as we get sleepy when the sun goes down but are still expected to perform at work or at home. Our bodies function best when we are in sync with these rhythms and stick to predictable patterns. Here are a few suggestions for establishing and maintaining a healthy sleep schedule:

1. Wake-up at the same time every day whether you have a good or poor sleep on any particular night. A consistent wake up time is even more important than a consistent bedtime because it acts like the anchor to your day.
2. Go to bed only when you are sleepy.
3. If you are unable to sleep, get up and go to another room until you feel sleepy enough to fall asleep quickly before returning to bed.
4. Use the bed only for sleeping and sex. Do not read, eat, watch TV, or use your smart-phone in bed.
5. Avoid daytime napping. Napping, particularly in the late afternoon or early evening may interfere with your night's sleep.
6. Create a wind down routine that is relaxing for about 30-60 minutes before bedtime. Some suggestions are to read a book, take a shower or bath, watch a relaxing show (not the news), do a puzzle or any other relaxing hobby.
7. Don't worry or plan in bed. If you can't shut off your thoughts, get up and stay up until you can return to bed without these mental activities interfering with your sleep.

Other helpful practices:

1. Turn the clock around.
2. Limit caffeine and consume it before noon.
3. Limit alcohol and do not consume within 3 hours of bedtime.
4. Exercise regularly but not close to bedtime.
5. Keep your bedroom quiet, dark, and cool.
6. Do not eat a heavy meal close to bedtime.
7. Incorporate some of the above breathing or relaxation techniques into your routine, as you settle in for the night.

In the morning, most of us feel groggy for 5-20 minutes. It's unusual to pop right out of bed full of energy like we see in commercials. It can be helpful to establish a wake-up routine to reset the body's circadian rhythms.

1. Don't hit snooze. It can be hard to get out of bed, especially on a cold winter morning, but going back to sleep can make you feel even more tired because this sleep is fragmented and shallow.
2. Sunlight, even on a cloudy day, is the most important way to reset the circadian rhythm. If you can't get outside, turn on lights in the house or look into obtaining a light box (dawn simulation) for use in the morning.
3. Wash your face or take a shower.
4. Increase activity gradually—taking the dog outside or doing

some laundry can accomplish two tasks

5. Put on some upbeat music to increase energy.
6. Contact a friend, by phone, text or whatever means works best for you.

We're creatures of habit. In the same way that some habits can be unhelpful, by changing things up, we may start to see the benefits of engaging in more healthful habits. The change itself will come from you, but professionals can help you identify your goals and break them down into smaller, more manageable steps, as well as help hold you accountable.

If you have a desire to work on changing one or more of these areas, it may be helpful to have a coach. Where can one find help with this?

- Many primary care offices work with a psychologist or social worker who can provide guidance.
- Most of the health plans, including the UPMC Health Plan, offer free health coaching to help individuals with changing health behaviors.
- The clinicians at the Center for Integrative Medicine are all oriented to helping individuals with behavioral change. The Integrative Health Coaching Program, with Angie Phares, is set up specifically for this purpose.

We're all experiencing a sense of chaos in our lives, but putting in the energy to make change is a great way to start taking control. Let's make 2021 a better year.

The UPMC Center for Integrative Medicine is dedicated to increasing knowledge about the effectiveness and safety of complementary and integrative medicine approaches. Other integrative medicine modalities may not have been subjected to the same level of scientific inquiry as western medicine treatments. The Center for Integrative Medicine, in concert with the University of Pittsburgh, is actively pursuing research to support the benefits of these therapies.

Got Back Pain?

Volunteers needed for a Pitt Research Study

Are you:

- age 18 or older?
- currently experiencing low back pain?



You may be eligible for a University of Pittsburgh federally funded research study exploring different therapies to treat low back pain and prevent it in the future.

There is no cost to you to participate in this year-long study. Compensation will be provided.

To learn if you may qualify for a screening

appointment, visit

www.pacback.org



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Welcoming Sarah Schmidhofer, MD, RYT-500

Meet Dr. Sarah Schmidhofer

Sarah Schmidhofer, MD is a Pittsburgh native, and is pleased to return home. She trained at Brown University and served on faculty there for several years. She is joining us at the Center for Integrative Medicine as Associate Medical Director. She is a psychiatrist and her practice focuses on integrative and holistic approaches to the management of mental health conditions, stress, anxiety, and depression. She has particular experience in working with young adults, but treats adults of all ages. In addition, she is a certified yoga/meditation instructor in the ISHTA lineage (RYT-500). This interview may allow you to get to know her.



How did you find your way from traditional psychiatry to a focus on integrative and holistic approaches?

Well, I never actually took the path of pure traditional psychiatry to begin with! I entered medical school and residency with the intent to practice in an integrated way. Before medical school, I experienced a difficult period as a result of Lyme disease, and turned to more integrative practices to heal, as I found Western medicine to be incomplete. Meditation and yoga were particularly helpful to me, and I realized that if I planned to be a healer myself, I needed a more full understanding of health than medical school could provide. I have been studying yoga under the guidance of Alan Finger at ISHTA Yoga in New York (and others) since that time, which has been an invaluable complement to my medical practice.

How is a visit with you different than with a traditional psychiatrist?

In many ways it will be similar at first—I will take a thorough history to learn more about your life, psychiatric history, medical history, and stressors.

There will also be some differences. I will ask questions about your lifestyle habits (such as diet, exercise, mind-body practices, and where you find meaning in your life). In addition to discussing medications (if appropriate), we will also talk about other ways of managing mental health symptoms, that derive from a mind-body-spirit approach. I may recommend consultations with other integrative health providers (such as acupuncturists, nutritionists, body work practitioners, or naturopathic doctors). I often recommend breathing or movement practices, and we will likely talk about specific meditations that could be helpful to you. My training as a psychiatrist and a yoga/meditation instructor allow me to be flexible in moving between these approaches. We will work collaboratively and creatively to meet your personal goals.

What is a good, basic breathing technique that can help with relaxation?

One of my favorite introductory techniques is called Nadi Shodhana, or alternate nostril breathing. This is a simple technique that works to balance your nervous system and brain activity. It is also a good practice to do before meditation, or any time you are feeling overwhelmed.

Begin by closing your eyes. Notice the flow of breath from your nostrils—most likely it will be felt more strongly on one side than the other. On an inhale, imagine breath flowing only in the right nostril, pause, and imagine exhaling only through the left nostril. Pause after the exhale. Next, inhale through the left nostril, pause, exhale through the right nostril. Pause. Begin again with an inhale through the right side and an exhale through the left. Repeat this pattern, alternating nostrils, until it feels as if air is flowing equally between both nostrils.

If imagining this is difficult, you can rest the index and middle fingers of your right hand on your forehead, and use your thumb and ring finger of the right hand to manually open and close each nostril as you breath. When the breath feels as though it is flowing evenly through both sides, lower the hands and rest in this state of balance for several minutes, or as long as you'd like.

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Coping with COVID-19

Brittany Kail, Administrative Manager

The COVID-19 crisis has continued to impact all of our lives, kicking up stress levels and making many of us feel isolated. Many of our patients experience chronic pain and stress-related conditions that interfere with their quality of life and respond nicely to the integrative health services offered at the Center.

We've increased the spacing between patients, so there aren't as many people in the waiting room at one time. We are continuing to provide in-person services here at the Center. These include: our bodywork modalities—chiropractic, massage therapy, and structural integration, as well as acupuncture and biofeedback. For the counseling and consultation based practices, we have shifted to providing these primarily through telemedicine. These services include: psychiatric management, functional medicine, naturopathic medicine, nutritional counseling, integrative health coaching, and yoga instruction. Telemedicine is provided through secure, HIPAA compliant systems. Our patients have appreciated the personal touch that comes across with our practitioners through the video connections.

For continued patient safety, we've established a number of measures:

- We will carefully clean rooms in-between patients and regularly clean the waiting room.
- We ask all patients and visitors to wear a mask, it is fine to wear/bring a cloth mask.
- We screen for symptoms of possible COVID-19 infection or exposure at the time of scheduling and on the day of the visit. If anyone feels they may be coming down with something, we encourage them to stay home.
- We strive to minimize patients' time in the waiting room. If you are feeling anxious about sitting in the waiting room, we ask that you call from the parking garage and we'll let you know when to come up for the appointment.
- We request that patients come by themselves, except in extenuating circumstances.
- As with patients, staff will be screened every day for signs of COVID infection and will be wearing masks in all patient care areas.
- We continue to have hand sanitizer available in all patient care areas. Staff will be observing strict hand hygiene and we encourage patients to use it as well.

How you respond to stress during the COVID-19 pandemic can depend on your background, your social support from family or friends, your financial situation, your health and emotional background, the community you live in, and many other factors. The changes that can happen because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ways we try to contain the spread of the virus can affect anyone. We appreciate your support of the services we offer here at the Center for Integrative Medicine. We hope that you and your families stay healthy.

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