

KANE COUNTY CHRONICLE

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22

OPINIONS

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OPINIONS

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Introducing ... Yo Joan!

"There is more to life than increasing its speed." – Mahatma Gandhi



YO JOAN!
Joan Budilovsky

Good day readers! I am so happy to be back as your "Yo Joan" columnist. Back again, but for the first time with the Kane County Chronicle. My "Yo Joan" column ran for 10 years in other area newspapers. I am an author of several popular books on the subjects of yoga, meditation and massage that continue to be translated into multiple foreign languages. So I knew we would eventually meet either here or overseas.

When I first started my studies in these fields of fitness, they were considered a fringe element of health care, but that has changed over the years. The question is no longer "What is yoga?" It is now, "What kind of yoga do you do?" Massage therapy has become a respected profession too – even though it was considered so in other countries for many years before it gained acceptance here in the states.

I eventually became a professor in these disciplines with a PhD in education from the University of Illinois at Chicago. My dissertation was in awareness studies. A pretty broad subject, but certainly as our lives become more fragmented and multitasked, most of us, myself included, could perhaps benefit from taking that extra deep calming breath and learning a bit more about how to effectively de-clutter the busy mind. After all, self-awareness is an ongoing study. It's kind of ironic that as we become more interconnected, we also can become less connected with our immediate

community, family or our very self.

So here I come again, hoping to "wrap my heart around your little finger" – that's a Dolly Parton quote. As a musician myself, I particularly enjoy quoting sages of musical ages.

Whether you are reading this digitally with a swipe of your finger or the turn of your crisp paper, my hopes are that you will look and linger on these columns through the weeks and hopefully years ahead. I would enjoy hearing from you, too. My contact information is listed at the bottom of this column and I will do my best to respond personally to every letter received.

Every "Yo Joan" column will have a simple stress reducing exercise. I've learned quite a few over the years.

Here's a simple one to start with:

Exhale twice as long as you inhale.

For example: Inhale 4 counts. Exhale 8 counts.

Continue doing this until you feel your stresses residing. No one needs to even know you are doing it. You can do this privately within the confines of your very own breath.

Till the next column, wishing you a week of feeling ever less stressed and ever more blessed.

Joan Budilovsky can be reached at editorial@kcchronicle.com. She is a resident of St. Charles. Her award-winning Yoyoga website is at Yoyoga.com.

Shoulders and stress

"We all have a destiny in accordance with the breadth of our shoulders. My shoulders are broad." – Placido Domingo



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Inhale deeply.
Exhale slowly.
Roll your shoulders down away from your ears.

Simple, right? Yet so many of us walk around carrying the weight of the world on our shoulders. We don't realize how tense our shoulders have become until perhaps they are touched. Are you one of these people? If you are, you are not alone. Every single person you will meet today, any age and any condition, carries some form of stress in his or her life. In fact, every person in the whole wide world does!

Not all stress is bad. Stress can actually motivate us to achieve great heights. For example, an athlete works out and stresses the body to reach goals of glory. Overstressing the body can cause injury and no athlete wants that. Or for others, putting together a big presentation at school or work can be stressful, but these stresses also can help to make a spectacular event happen. Overstressing about things can cause stage fright, fatigue or illness.

What may be a major stress for you, might be a minor stress for someone else. It's all relative – some might even say it is the relatives. Stress is personal. Yet any way you look at it, it's there for the taking. Stress happens.

There's one other thing you and I and every single living person in the whole wide world have in common: we are breathing.

So, as you read this now, take a deep breath in and as you exhale, roll your shoulders down away from your ears.

Do this simple movement throughout the day. You may not realize how much you need this till you do it. By simply rolling your shoulders down away from your ears, your shoulders broaden. You are physically reminding your body to relax. You are reminding yourself you are strong. You can do it! Sort of like in with the good, out with the bad. Whew ... the shoulders come down. Here I come world!

In my last column, I suggested exhaling twice as long as you inhale to help release anxiety and unhealthy stress. This simple breathing pattern can be practiced anywhere and anytime.

So, here's another stress-buster for anywhere and anytime: Roll your shoulders down away from your ears.

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It's all in the jaw

*"And though hard be the task,
keep a stiff upper lip." – Phoebe
Cary*

At some point, we've all been told something of this sort:

"Smile!"

"Keep your chin up!"

"Buck up!"

"Keep a stiff upper lip!"

That's all fine and dandy encouragement, but there comes a time when we have to let our bravado down or the fragile china of the soul begins to suffer and crack. As tough and confident as we need to be to get by in this hectic competitive world we live in, we also need moments of letting our defenses down and permitting our real being to shine through. By real being, I mean the real beauty most definitely there inside you, inside each of us, irrespective of stiff lips.

So after all that stiffening and bucking up, try unclenching your jaw. Move it around a bit. Not by talking, but rather move the jaw around in silence. Consciously try to ease away the tensions there by simply focusing your awareness on your jaw and instructing it to soften and relax. The tensions we hold in the face, and particularly the jaw, can last long into the night when teeth grinding takes over and rules the sleeping kingdom.

A way to remind yourself to release the tension in your jaw is to notice when a negative thought pops up in your head. Negative thoughts have a way of messing with the body and creating significant tensions. This may appear fairly obvious, but watch how often throughout the day your mind shifts to a neg-



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ative thought. Perhaps at no time in particular your mind turns to a memory of an argument with someone, or to thoughts of something you did you know full well you could have done better. The chitter-chatter of self-talk can swiftly turn into a symphony of dissonance and discord. When this happens, the jaw tenses. Even though it may look as if you are not talking, you indeed are – to yourself.

So, for now, simply become more aware of this negative chatter when it occurs. Instead of getting into the miserable trenches with it, change your focus to your jaw. Move the jaw around and let go of that negative thought. Turn the negative self-talk into silent words of loving kindness. Relax the jaw. Relax the shoulders. Exhale the negative thought away.

Here you have it. A simple 3-step tonic to physically reduce unwanted stress:

1. Unclench your jaw.
2. Roll your shoulders down away from your ears.
3. Long exhale – bye-bye negative mind chatter.

Hello world!

Joan Budilovsky can be reached at editorial@kcchronicle.com. She is a resident of St. Charles. Her award-winning Yoyoga website is at Yoyoga.com. Her Yo Joan column appears on the second and fourth Thursdays of the month.

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Open your breath, open your heart, open your mind

Open the breath.
Open the spine.
Open the heart.
Open the mind.

Each of these expressions stand well on their own, yet when experienced together create a force to be reckoned with. Let's look at each separately.

Open the breath.

You know the feeling of taking a deep breath that seems to fill up your whole body. You probably also know the feeling of trying to take a deep breath but the lungs don't expand enough – you can't quite catch it. Those of us with lung problems know this feeling all too well. Sometimes it takes little effort to inhale while other times there's a shortness of breath – the deep rush of air inside is lacking, incomplete, sometimes even painful. Engaging our lungs in a



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way that opens them up to their fullest capacity has a freeing type of feeling.

Open the spine.

When your spine straightens, your neck lengthens, your shoulders relax down. Adjusting the spine can take us from despair to joy in a matter of seconds. When the spine moves freely, the whole body feels the benefits, all the way from the bottom of the feet to the top of the head. The spine being our central station for the body, freeing its mobility can be incredibly energizing. Through exercise and movement, the fluid functioning of the spine improves.

Open the heart.

It's more than puffing out the chest – though that is certainly a start! It is natural to curve the body in when trying to protect yourself. Some of us stay in a protected and caved in position more than we need to. By not curving the shoulders forward but instead bringing the shoulders back and opening the chest, we, in essence, are saying "I matter." Next time you stand up straight and open up your chest, think deeper. Think of opening the heart within the chest. Opening the heart to the idea of "Yes, I matter, and Yes, you matter, too." You can stand tall for yourself while also being compassionate for others. Open your chest – open your heart.

Open your mind.

With the breath open, the spine flexible, and the heart increasing in compas-

sion, our mind becomes less cluttered with self-defeating thoughts. The mind is able to see more clearly the joy of life and, yes, the heartaches, too. Life is magnificently full. An open mind is less judgmental and more creative. It is able to turn challenges into opportunities.

So, all together now.

Open the breath, open the spine, open the heart, open the mind.

Joan Budilovsky can be reached at editorial@kcchronicle.com. She is a resident of St. Charles. Her award-winning Yoyoga website is at Yoyoga.com. Her Yo Joan Column appears the second and fourth Thursdays of the month. Joan's book, "The Complete Idiot's Guide to Meditation," has just been released in audio and is available on Amazon or Audible.com.

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A meditative moment

With the advent of spring, let's take a moment to separate ourselves from the troubles of the day and bring awareness to this miraculous rebirth happening right before our eyes. You need not look very far to see the grass starting to turn green, the leaves on trees beginning to form, the robins and birds flying through the air, singing and settling into their habitat around us.

Here is a simple meditative exercise to bring awareness deeper into the many beautiful aspects of nature unfolding before us right now. This exercise can be done anytime throughout the day. It is called the object of beauty meditation.

Look at or visualize a part of nature you consider beautiful. Look at it fully and breathe in its beauty.



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Observe this wonder from various angles. Study its many intricacies as its profound uniqueness unfolds before you.

Now, closing your eyes, let this vision of nature dissolve into a vision of yourself – you looking at yourself. The beauty you observed in nature is within you.

This is the object of beauty meditation.

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Reflecting on the wisdom of children

*"You, who are on the road
Must have a code
That you can live by"*
- Crosby Stills and Nash

As I walk along the streets in my neighborhood on this beautiful April day, I notice the sunset starting to form into transcendent hues - vibrant ethereal colors of orange, purple, pink. A squirrel scurries by, oblivious to the troubles our shared world is facing. As I watch the squirrel scurry, my eyes are drawn to the driveway of a house where "Peace" is brilliantly colored in chalk. Yes, peace, thank you.

A little ways further I come alongside another driveway with the chalk message of "Positivity." Positivity - I like that! A smile comes across my face. Down the road a few steps is another chalk message, "No Rain No Flowers." Yes, that's true! No rain, no flowers.



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I pause and reflect on this pretty artwork created by children. It reminds me of the Tibetan monks who make beautiful and intricate artwork in the sand on the shoreline of the sea knowing full well it soon will be washed away. They fully understand and honor the impermanence of even the greatest of things, the greatest of life. This exquisite driveway art I am now admiring will be washed away in the next rainfall, but its message did not go unnoticed. As tough as these times are, the flowers will eventually come. In fact, to confuse us even further, the flowers will come amid the great troubles of our world.

Another drawing I come across

in my walk is "after the storm." Yes, after the storm comes a rainbow. We often have to look closely for them. They're out there if we can catch the light of the sun just right. If we're especially lucky, we might even see a double rainbow! So magnificent in its colors and so fleeting in its time on earth. It sometimes fades before our very eyes. We treasure the moments looking at it knowing that getting to that pot of gold at the end of the rainbow is a long journey, unless of course you're as fast as a leprechaun.

Now's the time to not only listen to the experts expounding on all their rich and helpful scientific knowledge, but the children also have so much to say, so much to teach us. Their words are simple and true. The wisdom I just saw, for example, in the beauty of the chalk artwork in my neighborhood stands the test of time. It is backed by a love of life, a love

of artistic creation and the joy that comes in the sharing of it. Yes, joy! Thank you!

I'm sure your neighborhood is rich with children, too. Rich with their artistic expressions and heartfelt voices. They have important messages to share. They always do if we can simply pause and listen well. If we nurture their voices, their wisdom will grow like the beautiful flowers they draw.

Peace. Positivity. Flowers. Rainbows. That's the kind of world I love, dream of, and sure want to live in, too.

*"So just look at them and sigh
And know they love you."*

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A meditative moment

Overwhelmed? Frustrated? Confused? When it feels this way, bringing attention to simple experiences can be grounding. The following exercise is a simple breath meditation to help you when things feel out of control. It can be quite calming to practice on a regular basis and can be done anytime, anywhere. With regular practice, just a few minutes a day, this exercise helps your mind become less distracted with competing thoughts and more focused on what is important.

Simple breath meditation

Watch the movement of your breath. As your mind wanders to different thoughts, bring your attention back to the simple movement of the breath.

Watch as your breath flows in and watch as your breath flows



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out. Let the distractions of your mind float away with your exhale. Bring your focus back to simply watching your inhale and exhale.

Inhale, exhale.

Inhale, exhale.

Let go of the thoughts, the problems, the concerns. Clear and strengthen the mind by simply watching the movement of your breath.

Inhale, exhale.

Inhale, exhale.

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Helping our four-legged friends relax at home

"Whosoever is delighted in solitude is either a wild beast or a God."
– Aristotle

Or an owl. The photo was taken recently by Karen Chapski of Elgin in her family's backyard. This beautiful owl sat majestic and strong in his serenity. He knew he could fly away at any time, free bird that he is. As most animals, owls are very sensitive to sound and prefer quiet surroundings. After all, they can hear a mouse a half a mile away! With that type of sensitive hearing is it any wonder we rarely see them in the mainstream of our noisy and busy lives?

Owls, however, aren't the only animals with highly developed ears. Numerous studies have shown that our house pets are significantly influenced by the sounds in their human homes. Sensory overload is the cause of much undo stress for us and our pets. Leaving a TV on for your pet's stimulation while you're away can actually have stress-building



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effects. Unexpected noises will stress out pets, and TVs are filled with them. A pet's natural instinct when hearing a new or threatening sound is to fight or flee. Since the pet can't distinguish a TV sound from an actual threat, this increases stress for your pet. Its stress has no way of resolving because it can't run after the sound to fight it or run far away to flee from it. Your pet instead has to remain there to suffer the interminable stress building consequences until its owner returns. Is it any wonder the return home is to a shredded soiled carpet or perhaps even worse?

Here's a scientifically proven way to help your dear pet relax – listen to simple solo piano music together. Once your pet associates relaxing with you to this music, it will soon



Photo provided

Karen Chapski of Elgin took this photo of an owl in her family's backyard.

remember this relaxing association when it plays softly while you're away. Dogs have good memories. It need not be loud. After all, your pet's hearing is more acute and sensitive than yours.

Our pets can't turn TV channels or tune radios. Nor can they distinguish between Mozart and Coldplay ... well, actually that's not true. They indeed

can distinguish between different musical sounds. Studies have shown that solo classical piano music at a tempo of about 60 beats per minute is the tempo that most relaxes humans as well as their dogs. The average resting heart rate for a human is 50-70 beats. Dogs usually have slightly higher resting heart rates. Yet perhaps because they are man's best friend, dogs relax best to the tempo of music that has been scientifically proven to heal the stress of their beloved human partners.

So keep in mind Fido can't calm down by surfing the internet, calling a friend or sharing a beer. But if together you listen to a piano solo of Bach's "Prelude in C Major," you might just find your days together, as well as your days apart, becoming ever less stressful.

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Bells can help in meditation

Bells often are used in meditation as gentle reminders for increasing attention and focus. They can help us from falling asleep or getting lost in drifting thoughts. Using a bell can help in your meditation practice of focusing on the breath because the mind has a tendency to fly to far-off lands.

A regular practice of meditation strengthens your mind in the same way a musician strengthens their skills through learning scales. It doesn't happen overnight. It takes practice.

Here's a bell exercise for a meditative moment: simply ring it every time a thought comes up that takes your focus away from watching your breath. You may find it ringing like sleigh bells!

Another way is to practice with a timer. Set the timer for three minutes. Sit comfortably, close your eyes and place your closed hands in your lap. See how long you can keep your attention on your breath without getting dis-



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tracted by a thought. Every time you drift with a thought, lift up a finger and go back to watching your breath. This is a fun exercise to do with the whole family!

By the end of three minutes, you may have all your fingers (and toes) raised. Keep this daily practice until you have no fingers raised. It may take many days of practice. There is no rush. It's not complicated. It's easier than playing a B scale on the piano. It's the lyrical breath of your own body, watching just one simple breath at a time.

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