

LIFESTYLE

STRETCHING THE CEO

Yoga is no longer only for the sandal-wearing among us, and even executives can benefit from the downward facing dog position. **Report: Jessica Gardner**

● Thrifty Car Rental chief executive Bryn McGoldrick calls himself a “blokey bloke”. He originally thought yoga was all about incense and “those string instruments”.

But four months after his first class, McGoldrick is hooked. He reports feeling “kind of tingly and very energised” after the hour-long sessions. Twice a week in his home, starting at 6:30am, he takes a private class from teacher Neera Scott.

“It’s the perfect way to start the day,” he says.

The vice-president of Yoga Australia, Leigh Blashki, says the profile of yoga students “has changed considerably over the last, probably, four to five years”.

Anecdotally, as the benefits of yoga are recognised more widely, the demographic has broadened to include the bluest of blue collars and the crispest of white collars, Blashki says. He reflects that the acceptance by medical and allied health practitioners that yoga can have benefits for stress-related health problems, such as high blood pressure and sleep disturbances, may be a reason more executives are taking a lunge.

Yoga is a discipline that stems from ancient Indian philosophy. The most committed practitioners have a goal of perfect spiritual insight and tranquility. Popularised forms of yoga practised today incorporate meditation, stretching and body movement and postures, which serve to strengthen and invigorate the body.

“Yoga is about settling all that disturbance in the mind,” Blashki says. “The executive probably uses his or her mind to a greater depth than a lot of other people. What we’re doing is cleaning it up.”

If the testimonials of two chief executives are anything to go by, yoga may be the perfect antidote for stressed-out senior executives.

McGoldrick was a sportsman in his younger days, playing rugby union and league, and the 54-year-old still finds



DOWNWARD DOG

Relieves tension in the neck and shoulders. Teacher Neera Scott says, “Let the head hang heavy and press the hands and heels into the floor.” Perfect if the company share price has just tanked or a deal has fallen through.



On the mat: It’s much easier on the body than jogging

time for regular jogging and tennis. But he calls himself “a one piece bloke”. “Nothing bent or moved,” he says.

Since taking up yoga, McGoldrick says his posture has improved and he’s more in touch with different parts of his body. He also incorporates breathing and stretching exercises into his day, if he’s feeling a bit flat.

Professionally, he feels that he’s more focused and aware.

“I probably like what it’s done to my concentration levels,” he says. “I feel holistically better and I’m sure that that makes me a better person [to work with].”

McGoldrick assumed that yoga would be sedentary and a bit “ethereal” – his response when it was recommended by a leadership consultant was, “You’re kidding.” He adds, with a belly laugh, “Yoga? Yoghurt I could understand!”

“It amazes me that in a one-hour session, by the end, I’m sweating profusely. I don’t need to go for a run when I’ve done yoga.”

Scott says her private classes have become more popular lately, especially among senior corporate men, which was a surprise at first. She says that although many may have been physically active in their younger days, once they’ve hit their 40s there is a desire to take up a lower-impact exercise.

“Sport is harder on the body,” Scott says.

“Maybe they move away from doing those impact-type sports.”

Her clients begin to recognise that yoga can bring them relaxation and mental clarity, as well as physical practice, she says.

“In those senior positions, they’re motivated, intelligent and disciplined



LOTUS

"It's the perfect seat, it allows the spine to be absolutely straight," Scott says. But "I don't see many executives getting into lotus". Keep the knees comfortable. Take a seat before your PA outlines your many meetings for the day.



WARRIOR

Mobilises energy and promotes a feeling of strength and vitality. "Keep the back leg nice and straight and lift the chest," Scott says. Practise before your meeting with the remuneration committee.

people and they can identify that yoga [is] really valuable."

To her private clients, Scott delivers an individual session based on the hatha form of yoga, which focuses on static postures. She also adds in some "dynamic sequencing to mobilise the body and warm things up". But Scott ensures the classes don't heat executives up too much in case they "have to walk into a meeting straight after".

Scott finds her executive clients "like to feel like they've had a workout" but also enjoy the relaxation.

"I've got to provide a balance there," she adds. A posture she finds particularly useful to calm the mind "and settle the nervous system down" is the preparation for a shoulder stand, where the student lies on his or her back, with their bottom touching the wall and their legs shooting straight up.

"It switches them down from fight or flight mode," she explains.

NRMA chief executive Tony Stuart says there is a preconception that yoga is a bit "unblokey". The former rugby player still manages an ocean swim at Manly beach in Sydney twice a week.

"In physical exercise we do weights or we do stamina," he says. "We work on cardio to the point of exhaustion and I have always been fascinated [about] why, with meditation, yoga and tai chi, people seem to be able to strengthen their body and their mind."

Stuart took up yoga on the advice of a colleague who suggested he would be more focused if he had his breathing under control. The outcome was just so.

"I didn't realise how rejuvenated the mind feels when it's doing a lot more deeper breathing," Stuart says. "If people didn't even do yoga but just did

breathing exercises I think there would be great benefit."

He adds that he is more conscious of his breathing throughout the day, especially in meetings if he begins to feel a bit tired. Focusing on breath can be "almost like rejuvenation without going for a run around the block".

When asked if he recommends yoga to other senior executives, Stuart widens the net to "all human beings". The NRMA has appointed a wellbeing officer who runs yoga classes for staff at head office. There are also classes across the group, either for free or a nominal cost.

"I'm no medical practitioner but I have no doubt that good breathing, good relaxation and agility in the muscles does make you feel sharper," Stuart says. "You feel more relaxed and the most rewarding thing is you feel more energised." **BRW**