

HEALTH & WELLNESS

WELL-BEING

Steps to empowerment

When Alison Drake learned her father had cancer, running and yoga became outlets. Now, she teaches yoga to children to improve their mental health

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When Alison Drake was teaching in a primary school in Hong Kong in 2008, she learned that her father had just been diagnosed in the UK with stage four cancer – and did not have much time left.

The then-25-year-old was devastated, especially because they shared a close relationship.

“I was just always following my dad around since I was a little girl,” she recalls.

She began flying back and forth between Hong Kong and the UK – where she was born and raised – and found herself turning to running as an outlet for her feelings. Later, she discovered yoga and she credits both with helping her navigate the grief that came with her father’s illness and death.

She has found a way to use what she learned to help others: Drake is now a full-time yoga teacher who specialises in teaching children and teenagers. Her classes are focused on mindfulness and emotional regulation to help her students learn to process how they are feeling, something she used to struggle with.

For Drake, her father’s diagnosis left her simply going through the motions to get through each day. “I was on autopilot really, just trying to put one foot in front of the other,” she says.

That was when she took up running. “I just knew that I had to run, and it became such a focus for me just to get out there, just to run off that nervous energy.

“I look back and see how symbolic that time was for me, and it was a reminder I was strong, that I could keep going,” she adds.

Running became her passion. Before her father died in August 2009, she told him that she would one day complete a marathon. She made good on her promise in 2012, when she ran the London Marathon for non-profit organisation Cancer Research UK.



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ALISON DRAKE, FOUNDER OF OMSKOOL YOGA

Alison Drake with her father and mother before he died from cancer in August 2009. Photos: Courtesy of Alison Drake, Jonathan Wong



She has now run 14 marathons, including five of the six Abbott World Marathon Majors. Running is a way for her to keep her dad’s memory alive, and she often runs in support of cancer research charities.

Over time, she realised that despite feeling connected to her dad during her races, they were a form of distraction – an avenue for Drake to “run away” from her life. That was where yoga came into play.

She started practising yoga when her father was first diagnosed but gave it up after a distressing session in which the class had been asked to lie in the savasana – or corpse – pose. She could not hold in her emotions.

“Just to lie down in silence in a room full of people you don’t know, it’s massively confronting. One day, it was just all too much,” she says. “I started getting really annoyed, thinking, ‘What is this class? I paid for it. I wouldn’t pay to lie on the floor.’ I started crying, and that was it. I stopped going to yoga for a while.”

A few years later, she returned to yoga, and this time she was fully able to work through her emotions. “It was the thing that pulled me back and helped me to slow

down and actually sit with my feelings,” she says.

She started introducing some poses to her primary-school students as a way to get them to move in the classroom. She then trained as a children’s yoga teacher and later did training to teach adults. Poses, she learned, were but a small part of the practice, just one of its eight “limbs”.

Mindfulness, breathing exercises and emotional regulation were some of the other integral parts – all of which Drake knew would be hugely beneficial for children and teenagers to learn for their mental health.

By August 2018, Drake had quit her job to focus entirely on teaching yoga, opening OmSkool Yoga. She typically teaches those aged three to 18.

For young children she makes the classes fun through themes, songs, games and discussion. A typical class might begin with a warm-up, followed by sun salutation poses – a beginner-friendly sequence that helps stretch, strengthen and energise the body – and the introduction of a theme.

If a class is centred on self-belief, for example, she might teach some poses that are more challenging and require balance.

As part of her Lunar New Year class this year, she showed them the snake breath, which involves making the “sss” sound as one exhales.

“When you do a long exhale, it soothes your parasympathetic nervous system, so it’s calming for them. The kids think that they are just being a snake, but they are also learning how to regulate themselves,” Drake says.

Above all, Drake focuses on mindfulness and emotional regulation, whether she is teaching children or teens.

“We talk about how we are feeling,” she says. Doing so helps students to become aware of their emotions – to name them, to know where they feel it in their body – and notice how their emotions can affect their behaviour.

Drake also teaches relaxation techniques to enable them to practise healthy coping strategies in adverse situations.

“My job is very much equipping children with those skills for when they need them,” she says. One student told Drake that they were able to calm down before an exam by repeating a self-belief mantra learned in Drake’s class.

The benefits of yoga and

Alison Drake, with a “breathing ball” she uses to teach breathing exercises; Drake has run 14 marathons, including the Tokyo Marathon in 2013.



breathwork for young children are not limited to mental health, either.

According to a study from the Stanford University School of Medicine in California, at-risk children were able to sleep better and gain almost 30 minutes of REM (rapid-eye movement) sleep – the sleep stage where most dreams happen – after completing a mindfulness curriculum that taught them how to focus on the present.

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ALISON DRAKE

“There is theoretical, animal and human evidence to suggest [REM is] a very important phase of sleep for neuronal development and for the development of cognitive and emotional function,” says sleep expert Ruth O’Hara, the study’s senior author.

For those who may want to practise mindfulness themselves, or with a child, Drake suggests that you simply check in with how you – or they – feel every day. You can ask where that emotion is felt, its colour, or whether it feels like a type of weather.

“It’s so important to let children know that they are allowed to feel their feelings. All the feelings are valid, it’s just that some behaviours are unacceptable, so [it’s about] learning healthy ways to cope with those feelings and process them.”

Drake also recommends practising gratitude.

“Something I love to do with the kids is reflecting on three things in their day that they are grateful for. We sometimes make the mistake of thinking you have to be happy, first of all, to then be grateful. But I think [if you are] grateful first, the happiness comes from that.”

She can attest to this herself. “Life will be hard. We will all have difficult times – grief, relationship issues, friendship issues,” Drake says. But if more people in the world are equipped with strategies to deal with these issues, it can only lead to positives.

“When people feel better about themselves, you just show up better in the world.”

HEALTH

Expert advice on how to wake up happy and stay that way all day

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Are you a morning person? Are you happiest and functioning at your best early in the day?

Many of us might be, more than we think. A study published last month by University College London suggests people generally wake up feeling in the best frame of mind, and that their mood is at its worst around midnight.

Michael Beckham, a clinical counsellor at Central Minds HK, says that treating anxiety has given him the opportunity to explore in detail people’s mood on waking and variations in their energy.

Not everyone is in a positive mood on waking, he says, but many factors can affect that. One in particular, he says, is their level of cortisol, the so-called stress hormone.

It fluctuates throughout the day, he says, “peaking in the early morning to help us wake up and feel alert”.

Its level can be affected by several factors: “sleep quality,

lifestyle choices, negative thoughts, fear, anxiety and even environmental influences”, Beckham says.

“Inadequate sleep or poor sleeping habits can lead to elevated cortisol levels, which may cause feelings of anxiety or irritability upon waking, setting a negative tone for the day.”

Beckham says nutrition, exercise and light exposure also affect morning mood. A balanced breakfast rich in nutrients can enhance energy levels and improve cognitive function,

whereas skipping it may result in fatigue and mood swings.

Exercise, especially if undertaken earlier in the day, can trigger the release of endorphins, hormones that relieve pain and give a feeling of well-being.

The mental state we cultivate before bedtime also plays a crucial role in how we feel in the morning, Beckham says.

“Stressful activities or negative thoughts before bed can carry over into the next day, leading to a pessimistic outlook.”

Having a habit of mindfulness,

perhaps through meditation or journaling, are effective ways to get into a more positive mindset. Routines can also be helpful.

Understanding the connection between cortisol levels and morning mood “opens up avenues for improving the way we start our days”.

Research shows a poor mood can negatively affect relationships at home and in the office.

Nancy Rothbard, a professor of management at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania in the United States,

discovered how your morning mood affects your whole work day in an often quoted 2011 study.

“Waking Up On The Right Or Wrong Side Of The Bed: Start-Of-Workday Mood, Work Events, Employee Affect, And Performance,” published in the Academy of Management Journal, studied customer service representatives in an insurance company over several weeks and found that those who started out happy or calm usually stayed that way through the day.

Dealing with customers

tended to enhance their mood. Most people who started the day in a bad mood, though, did not really shake it, and felt even worse by day’s end, Rothbard found.

To get off to a positive start and maintain a good mood during the day, Beckham advises focusing on what is within your control.

This will not only affect personal well-being, but can also enhance your productivity and interactions.

Beckham teaches his clients “pre-sleep” and “upon wake” techniques to help them shift

focus to the here and now and stop fretting about what is outside their control – a big cause of stress and anxiety for many.

One method is “Walking Through The Day”; this can be done as you prepare to sleep or as you awaken.

“We just imagine ourselves in each aspect of our day, broken down into time frames, moving through the day, and playing everything out in a calm, productive way,” he says.

“Imagine getting up, taking a shower, getting dressed, all the while being grounded and calm – there’s nothing bad that’s happening.”

Walking through these stages in our imagination can help us to feel in control of our thoughts, he says, and doing that makes us feel better, so our day goes better.

This can be a powerful way to keep the positive morning momentum going, he says, because we have already persuaded ourselves that everything is going to go well rather than imagining all the things that are going to go wrong – which almost never occur.

A GUIDE TO HELP YOU GET UP AND GLOW EVERY MORNING

- Invest in and set an alarm clock, rather than relying on your phone. There will be no risk of you oversleeping and feeling rushed – a sure way to lose that morning glow in an instant. You will not be as tempted to start doom scrolling the moment you wake up. A sunrise-simulating alarm clock that uses light in place of sound is kinder than the shrill scream of a conventional one, and you will awaken more gently and naturally.
- Drink a big glass of water slowly soon after you wake up to redress the mild dehydration that has set in overnight. Research shows this improves mental performance.
- Open the windows to allow the fresh air to energise you, even on a cold day.
- Organise yourself the night before – know what you are going to wear, for example – so you feel less harried when you get out of bed.
- Stretch and breathe deeply on waking. This will boost your circulation and release any tension.
- Take a cool – cold if you can bear it – power shower to pummel your senses awake.
- Eat breakfast with your coffee or tea so it won’t irritate an empty stomach and affect your sensitive cortisol levels.
- Get outside as early as you can – walk a bit of the way to work or have a short walk before work if you happen to work from home. It will help get your heart pumping, and getting natural light early helps ensure better sleep at night.
- Exposure to natural light in the morning helps regulate the body’s internal clock, potentially improving mood and boosting alertness through mechanisms linked to serotonin production,” Beckham says, serotonin being the feel-good hormone.