Announcer: The Missouri State Journal, a weekly program keeping you in touch with Missouri State University.

Emily Yeap: While some stress is good for you, too much of it for too long will harm your physical, mental and emotional health. There are several helpful ways to relieve stress, such as yoga and meditation. I'm Emily Yeap.

My guest today is Dr. Stephen Berkwitz, department head of religious studies at Missouri State University. With expertise in South Asian religions and culture, he's here to offer some insights about yoga and meditation, as well as tips and advice for practicing them.

Stephen Berkwitz: There's a considerable amount of overlap between yoga and meditation, particularly before the modern period when yoga was focused more on mental development. Both yoga and meditation historically were originally done to achieve some kind of spiritual liberation, but there were different conceptions of what that might look like. Generally speaking, yoga is more connected with Hinduism, and meditation has a closer relationship with Buddhism. But one finds elements of both yoga and meditation in a wide variety of different religions. In the modern period, yoga tends to be focused more on bodily postures, and it's done for exercise and health. Yoga is a technique to train the body, whereas meditation is less active and the purpose is really to train the mind more than the body.

Emily Yeap: According to Berkwitz, yoga and meditation are effective for stress relief because they are both forms of exercise that cause you to stop and focus on the present moment.

Stephen Berkwitz: So much stress in our lives are related to activities and certain kinds of concerns or obligations that we have in the future, and so yoga and meditation are good practices that can center someone and keep them focused on the here and now, which helps to relieve some stress perhaps. Yoga and meditation are good, I believe, for helping people to gain more control over their lives, as well as maybe a greater sense of peace. Yoga and meditation have been generally shown to help people feel more relaxed and perhaps even more resilient when they face stress and struggles in life.

Emily Yeap: Besides stress relief, yoga and meditation offer other benefits.

Stephen Berkwitz: It's probably the health benefits that make yoga and meditation so popular now. They are increasingly encouraged by medical professionals and therapists, and they can be practiced without any religious commitment, but there are also people who find yoga and meditation to be spiritually fulfilling and that can give some people a greater sense of connection or understanding, and it helps people to get in greater touch with their own bodies and minds. The number of physical and mental benefits are being tested scientifically. There's some suggestion that it increases flexibility, muscle tone and energy when you practice yoga. Yoga and meditation can help relieve anxiety and fight depression. And they are both thought to improve one's overall quality of life.

Emily Yeap: If you haven't tried yoga or meditation before but would like to, follow these tips and advice from Berkwitz.

Stephen Berkwitz: Start slow, and seek guidance from teachers. I think it's easier to learn and continue practicing yoga and meditation if one participates in a group setting. It's probably better, in least, in my opinion, than trying to do this on your own with an app on your phone or online video. I would suggest that people try it for at least a month before deciding it's not for them. Don't get discouraged if it feels a little bit difficult or frustrating at first. I think one of the common misconceptions about yoga and meditation are that they're easy to do and that's not always the case. It can be relaxing, but it can also be somewhat strenuous and so it requires a fair amount of persistence to really begin to experience the benefits.

Do try different forms and different teachers until you find something that you're comfortable and happy with. There are a lot of choices out there, and it's quite possible that your first experience might not be as great as you wanted it to be, but I'm sure that there would be other forms and other teachers that might fit your bill.

Emily Yeap: A few ways to find a yoga studio or meditation group to join include asking recommendations from family and friends, and checking out online advertisements and reviews. I'm Emily Yeap for the Missouri State Journal.

Announcer: For more information, contact the Office of University Communications at 417-836-6397. The Missouri State Journal is available online at ksmu.org.