



## Conscious Life presents

### Tools For Reducing Stress

**Guest - Debra Poneman**

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#### **[00:00:10] Meagen Gibson**

Hi, and welcome to this interview. I'm your co-host, Meagen Gibson. Today, I'm speaking with Debra Poneman. She began transforming lives in the 1970s when she spent years in deep meditation, often for 10 to 12 hours a day, and in complete silence for weeks at a time, and then taught meditation to thousands worldwide.

In the 1980s, Debra founded Yes to Success seminars, bringing what was then considered radical ideas like, your thoughts create your reality, into the mainstream, offering a system for creating outer success on a Foundation of inner silence.

Debra's students went on to become mega-successful entrepreneurs, best-selling authors, billionaires, and some of the most recognized names in the world of transformational leadership. Debra Poneman, thank you so much for being with us today.

#### **Debra Poneman**

Well, thank you for inviting me. I'm very excited about this topic.

#### **Meagen Gibson**

So everybody's heard your bio that we just read, and it seems like you're an expert in meditation. So can you tell us a little bit about your background and how you became a meditation teacher?

#### **Debra Poneman**

Yeah, I'd be happy to. Actually, the story of me becoming a meditation teacher is not all that exciting. But basically, I was a child of the '60s, and those are the days where people were first turning to meditation and gurus in a big way for spiritual guidance.

It was when, for example, the Beatles and the Beach Boys and famous actors and actresses like Mia Farrow went to India to study with the great spiritual master, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. And

that's what I did. In fact, Mike Love and Al Jardine of the Beach Boys were in my small study group when we were learning the steps of teaching.

**[00:01:49]**

That was fun. That was back in 1971 and '72. But this is where it gets interesting in terms of the Anxiety Super Conference, because Maharishi had a unique genius.

What Maharishi discovered is that when he came out of the Himalayas and built a huge organization, he wanted to give the people of the world a technique to uncover their full potential and to experience unbounded consciousness and to live in a state of enlightened awareness.

But what he realized is that besides a handful of hippies, what most people of the world wanted from meditation was to get rid of stress. To no longer live with underlying anxiety. To not have tension headaches or be on medications to control their anxiety.

He knew that meditation was a tool for all of the above. So what he did... This is part of his genius. Instead of asking people to believe this little man with the beard and white robes. The "I will get rid of your anxiety," he gathered scientists from some of the most renowned universities and research centers in the world to study the effects of meditation on stress.

The results were so phenomenal that Transcendental Meditation became a household name. Then I became a full-time meditation teacher for the decade of the '70s, and I taught literally thousands of people. I saw literally thousands of miracles, especially in the realm of getting rid of stress and anxiety.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Fantastic. Why do you think that stress is the biggest threat to our health and well-being, just like your teacher did?

### **Debra Poneman**

Let's be clear about what I mean by stress, because the stress response can actually save our life. I mean, it gives us the surge of energy when we need to run out of the way of a speeding car. And in earlier days, to outrun a predator like a tiger. It also mobilizes our immune system to fight infection, which is likely to occur if we get injured.

But the problem with the stress response is that sometimes it becomes chronic or prolonged, which is the case in modern life. In fact, according to the past president of the American Board of Anti-Aging Medicine, the stress hormone cortisol is not only...

It's the major age-accelerating hormone. I teach a lot about anti-aging, as you heard in my bio. It also... Cortisol interferes with memory, and it's just bad news for your health and your well-being. The more of it you have, the worse your brain functions, and the more susceptible you are to disease.

**[00:04:52]**

You see, we were created to spend most of our time in the restful, rejuvenating peaceful part of our nervous system, and only short periods of time in the stressful fight or flight response. Also, stress repairs... Not repairs. Impairs our ability to focus and to problem-solve, and to learn, and to recall information.

The American Psychological Association... Just to round up this picture, just reported that stress is now linked to the six leading causes of death. It's implicated in heart disease, cancer, stroke, chronic respiratory disease, even accidental injury, which makes sense.

When you're stressed, you're more likely to get injured, and of course, Alzheimer's. It was even implicated in death from COVID-19. Besides having the potential to trigger the six leading causes of death, stress also destroys our vitality.

It damages our body's energy factory, which, of course, you know is our mitochondria. When extreme, it's implicated in autoimmune diseases like chronic fatigue. Okay, so how can stress possibly be so devastating? Is it okay if I share with you a little bit about how our brain works?

### **Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely, please.

### **Debra Poneman**

Okay, so a little bit about neuroanatomy. This is how our brain cells communicate with each other. If my fingers... Okay, this is a neuron and this is a neuron. My fingers are what are called axons and dendrites.

And how our brain neurons communicate with each other is that an electrical charge travels down this spiny finger or neuron called an axon, and then the cell discharges a chemical called a neurotransmitter into the space between the two brain cells called the synapse.

Then the adjacent brain cell uptakes the chemical through its receptor, which is called a dendritic spine. Then that impulse gets picked up, and then it travels to another brain cell, then it travels to another and it travels to another brain cell. That's how we think.

Now, when the stress response is triggered, there's a hormone called CRH. It's called corticotropin-releasing hormone. It's released into many areas of the brain, including the prefrontal cortex and also the particularly vulnerable hippocampus, which is the primary memory and learning center. It's also involved in regulating our emotions.

Well, CRH causes the dendritic spines and the axons to retract so that the space between our brain cells becomes so large that our cells can't communicate with each other effectively.

It's like you can't remember. You know you remember that quote, but you're stressed because you're on the stage giving a presentation. And because of the corticotropin-releasing hormone, your axons and dendrites have retracted.

**[00:08:18]**

There's so much space between your neurons, and communication is difficult, if not impossible. This is the basis for test anxiety and maybe you've studied for an outstanding performance for work, and then you get in the actual situation where you need to draw on what you prepared and your mind goes blank. Has that happened to you?

**Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely.

**Debra Poneman**

Well, that's corticotropin-releasing hormone at work. Fortunately, usually once the stress dissipates and the CRH is metabolized out of our brain, the spines seem to grow back.

That's why those of us who are professional speakers, we have this joke about whenever you give a speech, there are three speeches you actually give. The one you write, the one you give, and the one you write in the car driving home when you're like, "Why did I not say that? Why did I forget that?"

Because that's CRH at work. When the stress isn't there anymore, all of the answers come flooding back, all of the brilliant quotes come flooding back. But chronic stress can result in permanent damage to the dendritic spines, leading to dementia and Alzheimer's.

By the way, I just want to throw this in. It's not just stress. There are other things that can cause permanent damage to our dendritic spines besides chronic anxiety, chronic stress.

Other things that damage our neurons are the wrong foods, like sugar, number one, or carbs that act like sugar, that's number one. Genetically modified organisms affect our neurons, so be sure to look for GMO. Non-GMO certification on your food.

Pesticides, fertilizers, chemicals like glyphosate that end up in our food supply. They affect the brain neurons. Nitrates, like in hot dogs. And besides food, not enough sleep. Electromagnetic fields don't ever hold your cell up by your ear. It affects your brain neurons. Or have protection like this on your phone. But all of those things...

But back to stress. I want to assure you that after this daunting picture I'm painting about the effects of stress on the brain, there is some great news. That is, although the impact of stress in our brains goes even further, it's also been discovered that stress and anxiety trigger the flooding of calcium into the hippocampus. Again, the primary learning center.

This results in the production of free radicals, which directly damage and kill brain cells. To summarize, stress causes brain cells to become malnourished, exhausted, assaulted. The lines of communication go down.

**[00:11:20]**

The challenge for us humans is that the body doesn't know the difference between a true threat, like when you're going to be torn apart by a tiger and a psychological threat, like when the boss is screaming at us. They both trigger the stress response.

Neuroscience points out that stressful media content and violent programming also activate the stress response, also causing corticotropin-releasing hormone to go to our brain.

Why would we watch stressful programming? Why would we bombard ourselves with news over and over and over when we know what it's doing to our precious dendritic spines?

So I would say, cut down on your consumption of unnecessarily stressful and sensation... Oh, all of these tongue twisters. Stressful and sensationalized and violent, intense entertainment, media if you want to protect your precious brain.

**Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. You also name a lot of the things that we're in direct control of that we can make changes about today. There's a lot of things that are harder to move the needle on.

It might take us a while to change the scope of our job or find a different employer or get out of a romantic situation or something like that that's causing us stress or harm. But some of the things that we can do, we can implement really quickly.

**Debra Poneman**

Absolutely. Like don't watch... I know I watch stressful basketball games...

**Meagen Gibson**

There's also a thing as good stress, right?

**Debra Poneman**

Right. But even with... My heart is pounding. Why am I doing this to myself? But okay. Once in a while, it's not going to hurt you. But continually... I used to live with somebody, and I swear when I would... It was during COVID, I would come downstairs, and she was constantly watching the NYPD or something. I can't remember the name, but I think that's the name of it.

**Meagen Gibson**

CSI, NYPD, all the crime shows. Yeah.

**Debra Poneman**

And I would walk through the room and I felt stressed. I think, "Why is my precious friend doing this to herself?" But we know that probably we should do the things that we can control, and not add unnecessary stress when we already have plenty of stress in our world today.

**[00:13:49] Meagen Gibson**

I know that aging also has effects on our brain. How can we combat those effects as well?

**Debra Poneman**

Well, okay. Gosh, I'm so glad you said that because that is my favorite area. Everything that I talk about today in terms of stress increases aging. There are two areas of our brain that are most affected by stress, and that is the prefrontal cortex and the hippocampus.

Again, the hippocampus is a primary learning and memory center. What do people complain about the most as they get older? Their memory. You know, they can't remember where they put their phone. They can't remember what they were going to say.

The prefrontal cortex, which sits behind our forehead, is responsible for the sophisticated human intellect and things like planning and time management and basic organizing skills. Again, that's what people complain about when they get older. They don't feel as organized.

By the way, the prefrontal cortex also is the area of the brain that is responsible for self-control. It keeps your emotions in check so you don't lash out and also helps you with impulsive behavior. For example, it helps you argue against ice cream for dinner.

But speaking of age, the prefrontal cortex thins with age, which results in cognitive decline and is the basis for, what did I come in this room for? Or not being able to remember your friend's kid's name, or the name of the movie that you just watched yesterday. So could I tell you...

**Meagen Gibson**

What do we do about it? I know you've got to have a solution for me.

**Debra Poneman**

I do. I always have solutions. All right, what can we do about the thinning? Okay, most of you have heard that meditation is a potent stress management technique. In fact, you'd have to be living on a desert island the last several decades not to have heard that meditation is great for stress.

But meditation actually does more than just manage stress. It literally helps grow a bigger brain. It literally thickens the areas that normally thin with age. I mean, that's pretty exciting.

And multiple studies... One of my favorite studies. Before I got on, I told you I'm going to share some studies because... I was never a science geek, but the person that I teach my anti-aging courses with is a Harvard... She's a researcher, and she actually did the original research.

You're too young, but there was a cover of Newsweek magazine in 1990 that said, "Have We Discovered the Fountain of Youth?" It was all about meditation. That was her team's research. She was the head of that team at Harvard. She's turned me into a science geek. One of our favorite studies is by another Harvard neuroscientist. Her name is Sara Lazar.

**[00:17:03]**

She concluded... I even brought a quote here. "The average cortical thickness..." This is, remember, the prefrontal cortex. "The average cortical thickness of 40 to 50-year-old meditators was equivalent to the cortical thickness of 20-year-old non-meditators."

Then there was another study, and this was done at UCLA by a neuroscientist named Eileen Luders and her team. Her quote is, "A preliminary data suggests that meditation may slow, stall, or even reverse age-related brain degeneration. While deterioration may be predictable by adopting lifestyle choices such as meditation, we can push back any decline in cognitive functioning that would impact our quality of life well into our '90s and beyond."

**Meagen Gibson**

It's pretty remarkable, isn't it?

**Debra Poneman**

I would say so. And it's so simple. Meditation, right?

**Meagen Gibson**

Oh, sure, sure. It's simple. You're talking to a bunch of people with anxiety. So I know what they're thinking right now, which is like, "All right, you got me."

So many of them listening are probably a lot like me, where they have had anxiety or have anxiety that they're dealing with managing, healing. They've tried meditation, and it's been difficult. Not that anyone said it had to be comfortable or easy. But are all types of meditation created equal? Is there a right and wrong way to do this? How do we begin?

**Debra Poneman**

You just asked me my favorite question. Well, having been a meditation teacher for 52 years, actually this month. 52 years, yes. I just popped out of my mom and became a meditation teacher.

**Meagen Gibson**

That's what I was going to say. As a toddler, you were teaching meditation.

**Debra Poneman**

Exactly, right? Okay. There are so many meditations out there today, possibly because humanity is recognizing the need. Scientists have begun to categorize them. You could think of meditation as a broad category, like transportation as a category.

While all transportation will get you from one place to another, there's a big difference between the speed of a jet plane and the speed of a rowboat. Okay. Same with meditation. Some you get there faster and some you get there slower.

**[00:19:37]**

Now, recently, the US National Library of Medicine curated research on meditation from over 50 peer-reviewed journals and found a broad range of effects, including stress reduction, decreased anxiety, everything we want. Decreased depression, reduction in pain, both psychological and physical.

Everything. Improved memory, reduced blood pressure, reduced cortisol. Remember the stress hormone. Increased melatonin. Meditators were actually faster on all tasks and so even as they got older, they were quicker, mentally and physically, and also an increase in cortical thickness.

I could go on and on. Reduce cortisol. The desire for nicotine. But I'm going to get to people who say, "Yeah, that's great, but it's hard." I'll address that in a second. And reduce heart attacks. And if that's not all, the efficacy of meditation has been found to diminish symptoms of PMS and autoimmune.

But this is important to know. Like I said, not all types of meditation produce these results, nor as quickly. The last study that I quoted from that has all of those benefits was from a category of meditation that can be called self-transcending meditation. Again, not all categories of meditation produce those benefits, and not all meditations are as easy to master as self-transcending.

I'm going to back up. One form of meditation is guided meditation. In my course, I teach a course called Yes to Success. I lead people through guided meditation. I have them put their attention on each of the chakras, the energy centers. That's a guided meditation. Now, put your attention on the throat chakra. There you see a blue light, whatever. It's good. It's basic meditation.

Another type of meditation calls on you to concentrate. To hold your attention, for example, on a candle flame. Guys, I could see why you would think that's difficult. Because some gurus say that this, in fact, breaks down the mind-body coordination because it goes against the natural tendency of the mind to seek something pleasing.

So your mind wants to see what's happening over there because there was a noise in your room, but you have to hold your attention on something. It's difficult, it's not pleasing, and it might... It's thought to cultivate a steady mind. But like I say, some gurus say it breaks down the mind-body coordination.

There's another category which is mindfulness. You've probably had guests. I haven't listened to all of the guests, but you probably have guests who talk about mindfulness. It's also called open monitoring, where you are instructed to just continue to monitor one or more aspects of your world.

For example, you're asked to be aware of your thoughts or aware of sensations or aware of the environment. Neutrally. No judgment, without interpretation. Proponents warn, be patient as it takes some time to master. Many practitioners during the actual practice also observe the breath going in and out.

Personally, I like mindfulness for a moment, like right now. We can just stop for a second. Just notice that I've been talking and now it's silent. What are you noticing? Some silence in your room,



maybe some sensation on your body. Here where I am, I can feel the coolness of the air conditioner because it's 100 degrees outside. That's good. For a moment, it felt good, right?

**[00:23:45] Meagen Gibson**

Yeah.

**Debra Poneman**

To just be in the moment. But now I don't want you to be in the moment anymore because I want you to listen to what I'm saying. What proponents say is that the more you become aware of being in the present moment, the more you will be in the present moment without trying to be.

The category of meditation that I personally recommend is self-transcending. For example, the Transcendental Meditation technique taught by the TM organization, or what's called Sahaj Samadhi, which is what I now teach through The Art of Living Foundation.

Now, these are forms of meditation that I practiced for over 50 years, give or take. Actually 54 years, and I've been a teacher for 52. I practiced for 54. In these self-transcending meditations, utilize the natural tendency of the mind to settle down to its source when given the opportunity to do so.

The source is an unbounded field of peace. An unbounded field of fulfillment. Going beyond our thoughts to this simple, pure awareness. To consciousness itself, where consciousness is aware of consciousness. And to effortlessly experience this field of profound, nourishing stillness. Free from anxiety.

Now, and then when you come out, you bring that stillness back out into your daily life. It's called "self-transcending" because you transcend the chatter of the mind and "self" because you only need yourself. You don't need a teacher to guide you, you don't need a community. You don't need tapes.

But with regular practice, that silence... You go in and come out, you go in... And the silence stays with you more and more, even in the midst of stressful situations. Even in the midst of situations that would normally invoke anxiety. You feel centered. You feel calm without trying to.

Now, again, self-transcending meditation utilizes the natural tendency of the mind to go to a field of greater contentment. There's no concentrating. There's no controlling the mind. Anyone can do it.

Over the years, I've taught self-transcending meditation to thousands, and the benefits have been verified by science, including everything I mentioned above and more. Expanded heart, brain coherence, happiness. But most of all, as I said, just that immovable peace.

So just to summarize, it's effortless when you are given a vehicle... It is a mantra meditation. When you're given that vehicle for the mind to settle down, you don't have to try to experience the transcendental field of life. The mantra takes you there, and then you spontaneously feel that unbounded pure awareness and silence, and you come out and bring it into your daily life.

**[00:27:09]**

Almost all meditations provide some benefit, but I recommend a meditation that's easy to master. Again, in fact, out of the thousands of people I've taught, I've never had one student who couldn't master it after the first few hours.

Even people who would say, "I've tried it and it doesn't work. My mind won't stop chattering." Well, in this, you don't have to stop the chattering mind. It stops the chattering mind. So that's my feeling about the various forms of meditation.

### **Meagen Gibson**

I love that breakdown. I think people really have a good idea now of... And I love the analogy of the transportation modes because I think everybody can relate to that, especially people in big cities that take bikes or trains or buses or cars.

And going with that analogy, too. It's like during really, really stressful times in our lives, it's like rush hour when you're trying to get an Uber. Anybody who lives in a city. The rates go up.

Okay, we're taking the analogy too far, but I do really like that because it really works. Is it possible for you to teach us a meditation or part of the TM technique so that we can start relieving our stress and anxiety now?

### **Debra Poneman**

Well, I can't teach you TM or Sahaj Samadhi, which, as I said, you can learn through the Art of Living Foundation. And I don't win a toaster if you go learn from the Art of Living Foundation. I just recommend those because I really feel they're so effective. In my 50 years of trying many, many different meditations.

But I can teach you a technique to get stress and anxiety under control besides meditation. This is one of the quickest and most effective and foolproof methods of getting anxiety under control in just under two minutes. It's right under our nose, and that is our breath.

To show the power of the breath that conquers stress... First of all, there was a study done at the University of On... Ottawa, not Ontario. University of Ottawa by Dr Argyrol, and it was on cortisol, which I already shared as the stress hormone. The least popular hormone.

It was significantly reduced by simple breathing exercises. I'm going to teach everyone something that is so effective. There are many different types of breathing exercises. You've probably heard the word, pranayama. I know you have. Probably other guests have talked about pranayama. In Sanskrit, "prana" means breath or life force, and "yama" means to control.

So many techniques to control the breath. But I love this one because you could do it anytime, anywhere, to quickly calm the stress response and regain your ability to think on your feet, boom, and maintain your brilliance in stressful situations, even when you can't get an Uber.

**[00:30:10]**

And also to protect your precious dendritic spines. It's called shitali or sitali pranayam. "Sitali" in Sanskrit means cooling. It's a cooling breath practice. In English, it's usually referred to as straw breath. So I'm going to go ahead and teach it to everybody. It's so simple.

All you do is breathe in through your nose. We could do it together. And when you breathe out through your mouth, purse your lips like you're going to blow through one of those tiny straws at a coffee shop. One breath, and I bet you feel calmer already. But we'll keep going.

In through the nose, slowly. When you breathe out through the lips, purse your lips like you're blowing through a straw. That's why it's called straw breath. Slowly, not like blowing out the birthday candle. Slowly, with your lips pursed until your lungs are pretty empty, don't strain.

Then in through your nose again. Fill up your lungs, but don't strain. Just easy. Then out through your pursed lips. Slowly let the air go out until your lungs are pretty empty. Don't strain. Now we're going to continue for a few more breaths on your own. For extra credit, you can close your eyes unless you're driving. Let's continue.

You could finish the breath you're on. You can open your eyes. That was less than two minutes. How do you feel?

### **Meagen Gibson**

That was really nice. There was a leaf-blower outside my window. That helped me manage my stress about...

### **Debra Poneman**

You know what I love about this is even if... Let's say, you're on a Zoom call, a board meeting or a family meeting, and you want to strangle one of the people. All you have to do, just sit there and just do your straw breath. It really brings you back to the present moment.

Instead of being in that, or fight or flight or whatever. It just brings you really to the present moment, and you so easily see the truth about the situation. I tend to be an impatient person.

So even when I'm in the line in the grocery store and the person who's checking out in front of me and they're chit-chatting. And I got places to go, people to see and things to do, I just do my straw breath, and then I just notice... Yeah, life is good. I'll just tell you one other thing.

I mentioned Ronnie Newman, my partner in teaching our Ageless course. Her mom once... Her 90-year-old mom fell and got a big hematoma on the back of her head, and Ronnie rushed her to the hospital, and the doctor couldn't get... Her blood pressure was over 200 over 140.

But he couldn't give her medication to bring it down because it would interact with other medications. He said to her, "Relax." How do you relax when you just fell? Because she could have had a stroke. Ronnie said, "Mom, I'm going to teach you something that we teach to gangs in the inner city, which is straw breath."

**[00:34:56]**

And she taught it to her mom. I kid you not, her blood pressure fell 30 points within minutes. I'm not giving medical advice or saying that's going to happen. But we have seen that happen just from this very, very simple technique. Now you have something to manage your anxiety beginning today.

### **Meagen Gibson**

The tool for the drive home in the traffic or the dinner time rush with the kids or whatever life brings you because... And I love that you just... I think you were admitting anyway, that no matter how long somebody has been meditating, most people still get irritated by other people and still experience stress.

I think we have this misnomer about people who practice or people who meditate, that they're these just people all the time that are unbothered and equanimous about everything all the time. And I hear you saying that's probably not true?

### **Debra Poneman**

Yeah. See, here's the thing. I'll just tell you about meditation. I've been meditating, as I said, for 54 years. Actually this month, 54 years. I would be lying if I didn't say that sometimes I get really upset. My kids, my god-kids, whatever, political stuff. But when I see how upset some people get, I thank God I have my meditation!

And the other thing about meditation is that... One of my teachers, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, gave an analogy. He said, "Before your nervous system becomes flexible from releasing the deep-rooted stress and fatigue from weeks and months and years that accumulates and accumulates and accumulates..."

Because the sleep we get at night is just about the only way that we have to release stress. But now you start to use one of these self-transcending meditation techniques. In the lab, you will see that your heart rate, your skin resistance, all of these parameters of how relaxed you are, go deeper than deep sleep.

So now you could get rid of deep-rooted stress and fatigue from weeks and months and years of living, like I said. And so what happens is that a situation that would have thrown you for a loop after you've been meditating for a while... Yeah, you experience it, but it's more like a line on water.

You experience it, but then the impression no longer remains. And that's the beauty of meditation. And that's being in the present moment. Yes, you're stressed out because of watching a debate or something. But you don't carry it day to day to day. You experience it and it's like a line on water. So that's the blessing of meditation.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Well, thank you so much for everything you shared with us today. If people are interested in you and your work, how can they find out more?

**[00:38:05] Debra Poneman**

Well, the best thing to do is probably to go to [vestosuccess.com](http://vestosuccess.com). That's the umbrella organization of everything else that I teach. You'll see I teach a course called Ageless.

You could get a free e-book there at [vestosuccess.com](http://vestosuccess.com), Y-E-S-T-O success.com. And also, if you're interested in more information about these transcending meditation techniques, just fill in the contact information there on my website, and I'll get back to you.

**Meagen Gibson**

Fantastic. Debra, thank you so much for being with us today.

**Debra Poneman**

Thank you so much. It was a pleasure.