



# SELF-CARE

## THE "PRESCRIPTION" NEEDED TO IMPROVE OUR HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

*An Interview with Dr. Robyn Tiger*



This article discusses sensitive topics that some readers may find distressing.



*Robyn Tiger, MD,  
DipABLM, is a  
double-board  
certified Lifestyle*

*Medicine and Diagnostic  
Radiology physician, Certified Life  
Coach, Certified Yoga Therapist,  
Certified iRest® Meditation  
Teacher, and the founder of  
StressFreeMD, a wellness practice  
that focuses on a whole person  
approach to self-care education.*

**R**ecently, Victoria Sweeney<sup>1</sup> and I sat down with Dr. Robyn Tiger, a “Self-Care Doctor,” Lifestyle Medicine physician,<sup>2</sup> and stress management specialist, to discuss the practical steps each of us can take to feel better amidst all of the chaos in our lives.<sup>3</sup> According to Dr. Tiger, “you didn’t come this far to only come this far. You worked so hard to get here, now it’s time to enjoy it.”

### DR. TIGER'S STORY

Dr. Tiger started her medical career as a Diagnostic Radiologist and felt incredibly privileged to use her skills to peer inside her patients’ bodies in search of the etiologies behind their symptoms and illnesses.<sup>4</sup> Over time, however, she started to develop several seemingly unconnected physical symptoms and illnesses, including migraine headaches with intractable vomiting, vertigo that would send the whole room spinning, tinnitus that prevented her from sleeping, horrible reflux and burning chest pain, and bleeding gums that no one could figure out.<sup>5</sup> She felt like

“the tin man from the *Wizard of Oz*.” Her joints felt stuck. Her muscles hurt. She was in so much pain. She developed intermittent paresthesias where she would have the sensation of tingling in her hands, feet, and the left side of her back.<sup>6</sup> This came on at the most inopportune times, such as when she was cutting vegetables and all of a sudden, she would not be able to feel the knife in her hand, or when she was doing a breast biopsy and suddenly she could not feel the biopsy gun and would have to wait for the lack of sensation to pass before she could continue the procedure.<sup>7</sup>

Dr. Tiger saw many medical specialists for her symptoms, ranging from a periodontist, to a gastroenterologist, to a neurologist.<sup>8</sup> All of the imaging studies were negative. Each doctor she saw treated her symptoms with a pill, yet she wasn't getting any better. No one could diagnose what was going on with her. Dr. Tiger went to a mental health care professional, who she describes as a “really wonderful human,” but she still was not getting any better.<sup>9</sup> During this time, in pain and terrified, Dr. Tiger began having suicidal thoughts.<sup>10</sup> She knew she had two choices. Either to continue on the path that she was on, which would lead her in the direction that three of her physician colleagues had gone who had died from suicide, or try and figure it out herself. She chose the latter option because she did not want to end up like her colleagues.

At this point, Dr. Tiger was willing to think outside of the box and try anything. Her life depended on it. As a self-described “gym rat,” who was already on a plant-based diet and eating really well (when she was able to eat), Dr. Tiger knew that these were not areas that she needed to change.<sup>11</sup> Although she had been hearing and reading more and more about yoga and meditation, she was quite skepti-

cal.<sup>12</sup> Having nothing to lose, she gave yoga meditation a try. Dr. Tiger dragged her exhausted self (including all of her preconceived notions about yoga) and a good friend to a yoga mediation<sup>13</sup> class after a hectic day.<sup>14</sup> After the first class, she felt an unbelievable shift. She was no longer tired. She was calm and clear. Over time, as she continued to attend these classes, her symptoms and “illnesses” started to go away. She did not need pills or a mental health care professional.

Her diagnosis — that every doctor missed (including Dr. Tiger, initially) — was that she was suffering from a severe case of chronic stress.<sup>15</sup> That chronic stress was manifesting itself in her body in the various different symptoms. Chronic stress is the direct cause of the most common chronic diseases in the world including hypertension, adult onset diabetes, heart attacks, stroke, cancer progression and growth, and it also prematurely shortens our telomeres, or the protective ends of our chromosomes that determine our longevity — which means we live shorter lives.<sup>16</sup> Dr. Tiger knew that she needed to make a change.

What was the cure? Self-care.<sup>17</sup>

When Dr. Tiger was able to learn to find the balance between the sympathetic (stress response) and parasympathetic (relaxation response) components of her autonomic nervous system,<sup>18</sup> she was able to decrease the cortisol levels in her body, start to increase the feel-good hormones (dopamine, serotonin, endorphins, and oxytocin)<sup>19</sup> and change the chemical imbalance in her own brain and body.<sup>20</sup>

## LEARNING AND NOW TEACHING SELF-CARE

Dr. Tiger recognized that she had taught herself what medical schools fail to teach doctors: We can work with what we have so that we can feel better, but we do not know how because no one teaches us how.<sup>21</sup> This self-care training allows us to be equipped with a toolbox to deal with life's many stresses when they come up, rather than being reactive every time something happens.<sup>22</sup> As Dr. Tiger describes it, “[s]elf-care is the Rx we were never taught to write.”<sup>23</sup> If this training is omitted from medical school curriculum, then it is unlikely that those of us who are not medically trained have these skills, unless we have sought this training on our own.

After diagnosing herself, Dr. Tiger dug into the medical literature and physiology. Thirsty for more knowledge, Dr. Tiger became a Certified Yoga Therapist and a Certified iRest® Meditation Teacher both trauma-informed disciplines focused on teaching others how to relieve stress from their bodies, and a Certified Life Coach<sup>24</sup> so that she could help us relieve stress by working with our thoughts, and later became board certified in Lifestyle Medicine.

*“In every situation, you are either the victim or the victor, and you decide. Do you want to be the victim... or the victor? When you decide to be the victor, then you're more focused, you're more efficient, you have more concentration, and you get things done. As the victor, you create more space in your life and have more space for yourself.”*

CONTINUED >

*“Okay, get in the driver’s seat of your own health and well-being because you’re letting them win by not taking care of yourself. This is a mess, but you don’t have to be a mess. The only thing you can control is your own health and well-being. You’re not in control of your boss. You’re not in control of your schedule, the deadlines, or the long hours. But you can be in control of yourself. When people start to feel like they can be in the driver’s seat of their own lives, they feel so much better.”*

Dr. Tiger begins by focusing on the human and finding out what is going on with the person in each of the six pillars of Lifestyle Medicine: Stress management, sleep, nutrition, exercise, social connection, and risky substances/escapes. Then, she and the client can address what they can do to create effective behavior change. The good news, according to Dr. Tiger, is that when we start to make certain specific lifestyle changes, we can build our telomeres back up again, and even make them longer than what they are supposed to be, which actually increases your longevity. In Dr. Tiger’s experience, “[w]hen people start to realize that all of this chronic stress is making them sick, it’s causing them to feel the way that they’re feeling, and it’s the cause of their current disease, or its going to cause their disease to get worse . . . it is a bit of a wakeup call. And, most people ask, ‘What can I do to change this?’”

#### [Dr. Tiger’s Model for Dealing with Any Stressful Situation](#)


While Dr. Tiger does not know whether she will live to see our broken healthcare system fixed or to see a

change in the way law is practiced,<sup>25</sup> she does know that we can work with the human and educate the human so, regardless of what is going on in your workplace, or the legal system at large, there is something each of us can do — right now — to reduce the chronic stress in our lives and live longer, happier, and healthier lives.

In any stressful situation, Dr. Tiger says we first need to calm our bodies so that we can then work with our thoughts.<sup>26</sup> According to Dr. Tiger, the second step involves separating our thoughts, which are often not very nice, from circumstances, which are facts. For example, the deadline in the case scheduling order is a fact. Your upcoming trial or mediation is a fact. Your job is a fact. Your situation — whatever it is — is a fact. These facts are not making you feel stressed. Instead, as Dr. Tiger explained, it is your thoughts about these facts that are making you feel stressed.

Dr. Tiger utilizes a Life Coaching model grounded in Cognitive Behavior Therapy for separating thoughts from facts or circumstances that she calls C.T.F.A.R. (circumstance, thought, feeling, action, result). Using this model, she encourages us to separate what our brain is telling us about the circumstances from the actual situation and recognize what our brain is doing. Once we do that, then we can say: “How do I want to feel about this? What is the thought that would drive that feeling? How do I show up? What result do I want?” Once we master the model, Dr. Tiger suggests that we can work with anything that comes up.

According to Dr. Tiger, independent of anything going on in the workplace or our lives, we can still feel better and reduce — and even eliminate — the symptoms of chronic stress by mastering this approach. Who would not want to proactively take steps to increase their health span so that it is as close to their life span as possible?<sup>27</sup>

If our discussion with Dr. Tiger has inspired you to take the next step in your self-care journey, Dr. Tiger’s one-on-one online private coaching sessions or customized Lifestyle Medicine Online Group Coaching Programs might be of interest to you and/or your organization.<sup>28</sup> 

---

*Bar Journal* Content Editor **Laina M. Herbert** is senior counsel at Grant & Eisenhofer P.A. in Wilmington, Delaware. Laina has served as Chair of the DSBA’s Women & the Law Section. She may be reached at [lherbert@gelaw.com](mailto:lherbert@gelaw.com) and additional information about the author is available at [www.gelaw.com](http://www.gelaw.com).

## Notes:

1. Victoria Sweeney is a Deputy Attorney General at the Delaware Department of Justice, a member of the DSBA Bar Journal Editorial Advisory Committee, and an advocate for mental health awareness. In 2014, Victoria began volunteering with The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) and serves as Board Member for the Delaware Chapter.
2. "Lifestyle medicine is a medical specialty that uses therapeutic lifestyle interventions as a primary modality to treat chronic conditions such as, cardiovascular diseases, type 2 diabetes, and obesity." What is lifestyle medicine? American Board of Lifestyle Medicine. Jan. 6, 2024. <https://ablm.org/#:~:text=Lifestyle%20medicine%20certified%20clinicians%20are,intensively%2C%20often%20reverse%20such%20conditions>. A clinician certified in lifestyle medicine is "trained to apply evidence-based, whole-person, prescriptive lifestyle change to treat and, when used intensively, often reverse such conditions. Applying the six pillars of lifestyle medicine — a whole-food, plant-predominant eating pattern, physical activity, restorative sleep, stress management, avoidance of risky substances and positive social connections — also provides effective prevention for these conditions." *Id.*
3. See also Robyn Tiger, MD, DipABLM. "2 Steps to Interrupt Your Brain's Default Network." *The Stress-FreeMD Podcast*, Nov. 21, 2023. Podcast, website, 15:56. <https://www.stressfreemd.net/podcast/episode/78fef5c0/2-steps-to-interrupt-your-brains-default-network>; Robyn Tiger, MD, DipABLM. "6 Phrase Morning Self-Talk Routine." *The Stress-FreeMD Podcast*, Nov. 28, 2023. Podcast, website, 16:38. <https://www.stressfreemd.net/podcast/episode/7c137700/6-phrase-morning-self-talk-routine>.
4. To hear Dr. Tiger tell her story in her own words, listen to the first *The StressFreeMD Podcast*, Robyn Tiger, MD, DipABLM. "Our Who, What & Why." *The StressFreeMD Podcast*, Aug. 2, 2021. Podcast, website, 14:39. <https://www.stressfreemd.net/podcast/episode/4c2ffc91/our-who-what-and-why>; see also Dr. Sapna Shah-Haque MD. "When Western Medicine is not Enough — Interview with Dr. Robyn Tiger, MD." *The Worthy Physician Podcast*, Apr. 13, 2022. Podcast, website, 43:51. <https://www.buzzsprout.com/1783908/10422340> ("When Western Medicine is Not Enough"); see also Robyn Tiger, MD, DipABLM. "The Rx we were never taught to write," KevinMD.com, Jan. 29, 2021, <https://www.kevinmd.com/2021/01/the-rx-we-were-never-taught-to-write.html> ("The Rx We Were Never Taught to Write").
5. See *supra* n.4.
6. *Id.*
7. When Western Medicine is Not Enough.
8. *Id.*
9. *Id.*
10. If you or anyone you know is thinking of suicide, call or text 988 for the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline.
11. See *supra* n.7.
12. *Id.*
13. "Meditation is a focusing of the mind on a single object with the goal of creating the cessation of all thought. As thoughts dissipate, the mind becomes quiet and we are able to be fully in the present moment." Thus, "[t]he term 'yoga meditation' is used to distinguish the practice of meditation with the broader context of yoga and from other forms of Eastern meditation traditions." "What is yoga meditation." *Yoga Basics*. Jan. 7, 2024. <https://www.yogabasics.com/practice/meditation-basics/>.
14. See *supra* n.7.
15. Stress manifests itself in various different physical, emotional, and mental symptoms, for example, aches and pains, heart palpitations, exhaustion or trouble sleeping, stomach or digestive problems, anxiety or irritability, depression, panic attacks, sadness. "Stress." Cleveland Clinic. Jan. 7, 2024. <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/articles/11874-stress> ("Stress, Cleveland Clinic"). Persons with chronic stress often turn to unhealthy behaviors, such as: smoking, using drugs, overdrinking, gambling, overeating or developing an eating disorder, or participating compulsively in sex, shopping or internet browsing. *Id.* "Chronic psychological stress is a major contributor to human health and aging, and is associated with the development of many physical and psychological disorders including cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, metabolic syndrome, autoimmune disease and depression." Lin, J. & Epel, E. (2022). Stress and telomere shortening: Insights from cellular mechanisms. *Ageing research reviews*, 73, 101507. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.arr.2021.101507>.
16. Stress, Cleveland Clinic.
17. According to Dr. Tiger, "[s]elf-care is composed of two key components: self-regulation and management. Through life coaching, self-regulation can be achieved through yoga therapy and meditation and mind management." *The Rx We Were Never Taught to Write*.
18. Our sympathetic nervous system controls our "fight-or-flight" response and is activated by danger or stress and our parasympathetic nervous system carries signals that relax our body. The two systems work together to keep our bodies in balance. "Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS)." Cleveland Clinic. Jan. 7, 2024. <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/body/23262-sympathetic-nervous-system-sns-fight-or-flight>.
19. Watson, Stephanie. "Feel-good hormones: How they affect your mind, mood and body." Harvard Health Publishing. July 20, 2021. <https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/feel-good-hormones-how-they-affect-your-mind-mood-and-body#:~:text=What%20are%20the%20four%20feel,your%20mood%20in%20the%20process..>
20. See *supra* n.7.
21. See *supra* n.4.
22. See *supra* n.7.
23. *The Rx We Were Never Taught to Write*.
24. As a life coach, Dr. Tiger approaches chronic stress and the many symptoms that result from it as a physical health issue, rather than a mental health issue. "With life coaching, there is no documentation like there is with mental healthcare professionals. That's why when someone is not at the point where they need a mental health professional, they feel safer with a life coach because there is no record of anything, no matter who you are. There should be no stigma. I think everyone should have a therapist and a coach. I think every lawyer should have a therapist and a coach — every human should." She describes a life coach as being "like a personal trainer for your brain" who helps us to work with our thoughts and the constant regulating and self-regulating that goes on in our brains all day.
25. While many of Dr. Tiger's clients are physicians, she also works with attorneys and C-suite professionals, among others.
26. Dr. Tiger discusses various ways to calm our bodies in her podcasts "Hail to Your Exhale." *The StressFreeMD Podcast*. Aug. 10, 2021. Podcast, website, 19:15. <https://www.stressfreemd.net/podcast/episode/4b024602/hail-to-your-exhale>; "Learn the 4 Superpowers of Your Breath." *The Stress-FreeMD Podcast*. June 27, 2023. Podcast, website, 14:03. <https://www.stressfreemd.net/podcast/episode/785924ca/learn-the-4-superpowers-of-your-breath>; and in the first of her four free self-care videos "A Calming Breath Tool." See Tiger, Robyn. <https://www.stressfreemd.net/free-self-care-videos> to request a copy of these short self-care videos.
27. The simplest way to differentiate between lifespan and health span is to think about quality versus quantity. Your lifespan is the number of years you live, or quantity, whereas your health span is the quality of those years.
28. For more information, please reach out to Dr. Tiger at <https://www.stressfreemd.net/>; Podcast: <https://www.stressfreemd.net/podcast>; Instagram: @Stressfreemd; Facebook: robyntigermd; LinkedIn: robyntigermd; and X: @robyntigermd.

## CLE at HOME

# DSBA CLE ONLINE

View an online CLE seminar  
ANYTIME, ANYWHERE.

View the full online CLE catalog at [www.dsba.org/cle](http://www.dsba.org/cle).

