

Yoga is fit fo

by Mary Patricia Silver

For those who have never tried yoga, the images conjured up are most likely those of individuals who look like they have been twisted into pretzel-like contortions. Therefore you automatically dismiss this type of class as being beyond your ability. In reality though, beginner yoga classes provide some simple, yet gentle movements that gradually increase balance, build strength and promote greater flexibility. These are all key ingredients to well-being especially as we age, and even more crucial to those with physical disabilities including arthritis, MS, spinal cord injuries etc. Take arthritis for example, joint pain clearly discourages people from exercising and moving about more, yet the more sedentary they are, the weaker the muscles surrounding the “bad” joints become. This ultimately leads to more pain and worsening disability. So working through initial discomfort usually results in overall improved status, be it greater range of mobility and/or accompanying decrease in level of discomfort.

Here is a quote from Michael Sanford, who is currently a yoga instructor at Minnesota’s Courage Center. He became involved with this program years after having suffered a thoracic spinal cord injury as the result of a car accident. The quote is taken from a book he has written called *Walking: A Memoir of Trauma and Transcendence* (2006.)

“I came to Llyengar yoga twelve years after my original injury because I missed my body. I had reached a point where living as if I was only a floating upper torso was no longer tolerable. I had grown weary of willfully dragging my paralyzed body through my life. I wanted to reconnect, to feel my entire body again in whatever way was still possible. I figured what

OP EVERYONE



These two photos from *Yoga and MS*.

better way to start than a four-thousand year old discipline that is expressly dedicated to the integration of mind, body, and spirit.

Now, sixteen years later, I have a vibrant sense of my whole self that I never believed was possible. The dis-

ciplined practice of yoga has shown me the subtle, energetic connections that exist between mind and body.

These connections are never going to make me walk again, but they offer a sense of wholeness and vitality that inform every aspect of my life. I can

be “present” within both the paralyzed and unparalyzed parts of my body. This realization has given me a profound sense of inward freedom. I wish the same for everyone.”

Let’s delve deeper into the rationale behind the healing powers of yoga. Remember, yoga which literally means “to yoke” or “to unite,” is a set of theories and practices which originated in ancient India. One goal of yoga has been to help individuals realize true happiness, freedom and enlightenment and yet it has many other, so-called secondary goals, such as improving physical health, mental well-being and true emotional balance. Yoga is becoming increasingly popular in western countries but has been adapted more for physical health benefits and less so for spiritual context. Hatha Yoga is the practice of physical yoga and places an emphasis on postural alignment, strength, endurance, and balance which is precisely why yoga can benefit just about anyone, including those with physical disabilities.

According to Dr. Thomas Cochrane, Assistant Professor of Neurology at Harvard Medical school and Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston, “The simple act of participating in a regularly-scheduled period of contemplation and exercise has mental and psychological benefits that, by themselves, justify the effort. The physical

benefits vary depending on one’s starting point, but yoga can be modified in so many ways that anyone with physical disability can participate. Balance, mobility, and strength are the primary physical benefits. These all contribute to improved daily function, which is the primary goal of any therapy.”

In fact, he recommends yoga to most of his patients. Dr. Cochrane went on to explain, “The patients who benefit most are those with spine problems such as spinal stenosis in the neck or low back. Yoga exercises promote the flexibility and core strength that these patients need most.”

As with any form of therapy or new exercise regimen, individuals should always check with their physician to make sure the program he/she is contemplating is in fact appropriate for them at the time and to review any specific concerns. The rule of thumb for yoga is — if it hurts, stop! The old adage of “no pain, no gain” doesn’t apply to yoga and especially not for people with any physical limitations. For those who don’t have use of their legs, they can do what is called chair yoga, whereby postures and exercises are adapted for their upper bodies so that they can be performed in a sitting position. There is a national publication called “Yoga Journal” which contains directories and listings for classes nearest you but also has available contact numbers for those interested in

working with instructors who are experienced in using adapted postures. You can also search the Yoga Alliance website for a list of certified yoga instructors and/or private instruction because the Yoga Alliance is a national certifying body for both instructors and facilities.

I asked Dr. Cochrane if he thought people with disabilities would be “safer” taking classes in a hospital based facility to ensure adequate training for instructors and allow access to expert medical input, like physical and occupational therapy.

He responded, “I don’t feel that yoga needs to be done in a hospital setting, though there might be some advantages. The main thing is to find an instructor who can work with a student who has physical limitations. This requires some patience and thoughtfulness on the part of the instructor, but most yoga instructors in my experience have these qualities already — it’s what draws them to the practice.

“One thing I warn patients about is trying to perform exercises that involve a lot of motion, especially forced motion, of the neck. As an example, there’s a pose called the Plow, which involves lying on the floor and bringing the legs and hips up and over the head to touch the floor. Since the weight of the body contributes to the flexion of the neck,

there’s a risk of strain or injury.

“The other thing I routinely warn about is trying too hard to perform exercises perfectly — know your limits. Patients with sensory loss may not realize they’re stretching too far, and patients with weakness or imbalance may simply not be able to do some exercises without injury.”

Yoga can be a rewarding means of increasing physical well-being as well as providing a true emotional boost through yoga practices designed to meet your specific needs. So make today a yoga day. *

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Yoga and MS is available from Specialiving (pg 68) for \$26.95. Suitable for other disabilities too. Not all positions are from a sitting position. Order on website or call 888-372-3737.