

YOGA THERAPY: IT'S FOR EVERY BODY

By Matthew J. Taylor, PT, PhD, RYT

Q I am hearing more about Yoga therapy these days and wondering what is it and how is it different than Yoga?

A Yoga therapy is both very old and fairly new. Literally Yoga therapy can help people from prenatal to their last dying breath. Athletes, children with attention challenges, seniors with arthritis and people struggling with anxiety and depression have found support in starting a Yoga therapy practice. While a full discussion is beyond the space we have here, let me share some important aspects of Yoga therapy.



All Yoga done appropriately can reduce stress, improve posture and flexibility for a therapeutic result. Unfortunately, much of what is marketed in the US as Yoga is just a form of western fitness exercise. So let's begin by defining what Yoga therapy is and is not. I was privileged to chair the committee that first defined Yoga therapy for the International Association of Yoga Therapists (IAYT) in 2007. We now define Yoga therapy as:

"Yoga therapy is the process of empowering individuals to progress toward improved health and well being through the application of the philosophy and practice of Yoga."

If we look at each component it will help you better understand this exciting new profession.

Historically Yoga is psychospiritual practice designed to alleviate human suffering. We get into trouble, or suffer when we forget who we really are through a process of misidentification. Yoga therapy reminds us that our job we hate effects our digestion which alters our level of inflammation that can lead to body pain, etc. When one practices Yoga, one rediscovers through a process of practice how our thoughts, relationships, posture, and breathing are all interwoven. The process takes time and Yoga therapy is not a "quick fix," but aimed to get at the root of the suffering. That is, it doesn't happen overnight or as an event.

A key point that separates Yoga therapy from other therapies is that the therapist isn't "doing therapy" to the student, rather the therapist empowers the student through the application of Yoga to experience relief through the discovery of their true state of interconnectedness listed above. This is very different than most therapy where the therapist "makes" someone better. You discover how to make real and lasting changes vs.

covering up symptoms or getting short-term fixes.

The essence of Yoga is that within the relationship between the student and therapist both come to discover the source of suffering and in that discovery the barrier to health and well being is eliminated. Again, this is a succession of process steps, but the student is empowered to progress in their practice, guided and supported by therapist, but not dependent on the therapist as the healing agent. You take charge of your health!

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Finally, it takes practice...that is, effort. Yoga therapy isn't for you if you want someone or some "thing" to fix you. You need not be strong, flexible or change any of your beliefs. You do have to show up for yourself and change those things you identify as holding you back from vibrant health and happiness. The process can be learned privately or in a group setting. Unlike glamour Yoga, you don't have to do complex postures, wear tight fitting clothing or chant to some deity. Yoga therapy is gentle, slow and adapted just for you to prevent injury or embarrassment.

Is it just a fad? No, it has been around for thousands of years. I'm excited to see the increasing number of studies produced by leading universities now demonstrating its effectiveness. The National Institute of Health (NIH) just awarded the MB Anderson Cancer Center in Houston a \$4.5 million grant to study further its effectiveness in supporting people with cancer, so Yoga therapy is legitimate.

How can you find a Yoga therapist to assist you in improving a health condition? There are so many various schools and lineages with some reserved for only the most senior teachers and others grant entry level training for individuals with little or no training. No wonder it's confusing! My office is happy to offer local guidance and for those out of the region can learn more about the various schools of Yoga therapy and how to find a Yoga therapist by visiting www.iayt.org.



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