

Yoga for Arthritis

Relaxation is key to alleviating pain – both physical and mental

By Julie Phillips-Turner, RYT, AYS



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Yoga is known for its ability to help relax, stretch, strengthen and balance both the body and the mind through physical and mind/body exercises such as movement, breath and meditation.

It is also not a surprise that more doctors are suggesting that patients suffering from various types of physical pain, such as arthritis, try yoga.

Arthritis is experienced by millions of Americans. Additionally, the face of arthritis comes in many shapes, sizes, and ages. However, one aspect that each person who suffers the different types of arthritis shares is chronic pain, which in turn affects the quality of each of their lives.

A few studies have been conducted in the Baltimore area, led by Steffany Moonaz, PhD, a Baltimore-based yoga therapist, movement and health behavior analyst, on the effects of yoga practice on arthritis for both osteoarthritis (OA) sufferers and rheumatoid arthritis (RA) sufferers.

“A lot more arthritis is occurring these days, not just because people are living longer, but because the population is more overweight,” stated Moonaz.

“A sedentary lifestyle that excludes exercise and healthy eating, in addition to excessive stress, is a recipe for the onset of arthritis. To cope with the pain of arthritis, sufferers will avoid or reduce physical activity, in turn causing greater pain and immobility. And, to cause even greater difficulty with movement and activity, inflammation caused by arthritis will often cause depression (as is the case with any inflammatory diseases), which, of course, will be a source of greater immobility and increase in pain,” Moonaz added.

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Physical yoga will warm up the muscles and increase mobility of the joints, while meditation and breath exercises will decrease blood pressure and stress and anxiety levels that increase arthritis pain. Studies have also suggested that meditation may help to balance the immune system and resist disease.

Appropriate classes for those suffering from arthritis include gentle, restorative classes, beginner level classes, or classes specifically designed for arthritis sufferers. Students in classes with others that deal with arthritis pain is also a great way to generate support for the pain and motivation for staying active.

“Anyone with arthritis should make sure they have clearance through a clinician before starting a yoga practice or program,” states Moonaz, “students should also be sure to tell the instructor about the condition or any limitations prior to the class. A good teacher will also help the student modify the pose to fit their body’s needs and limitations.”

Yoga is a great way for any arthritis sufferer to make the mind-body connection that will open the door to understand the disease and its effects on the body. Yoga can also serve as a springboard to leading a healthier lifestyle.