

## Benefits of Yoga

# Find Your Inner Strength

by Mary Jo Blackwood, R.N., MPH

In this fast-paced, high-stress world, do we really need our workouts to be driven and competitive? Yoga instructors and adherents don't think so. Michelle Maue, owner of Bella Yoga, was a professional tennis player and very competitive in her younger years. She started taking yoga nine years ago after the birth of her daughter because she had lost her attention span. She says she has regained that and more.

"Some people start out with yoga for the physical conditioning or because they had an injury and want to move the body correctly," she says. "Then they discover the other benefits. Yoga captures the joy of who we are. It has a focus on breath that helps us learn to just be and increases our inner resilience." Now Maue teaches at corporations and court-houses and gives private lessons in addition to group classes at Bella Yoga.

She teaches a variety of yoga styles, including vinyasa yoga and restorative yoga. Vinyasa is a combination of breath and movement. Restorative yoga is a stress-reduction yoga she does for working people on Friday nights.

"There's a saying in yoga that 'our issues are in our tissues,' which is a way of saying that tension and traumatic incidents in our lives make our bodies rigid over time," Maue says. "Yoga increases the circulation and oxygen flow to muscles. It enhances our digestive functioning because we are stretching our organs. It can greatly increase flexibility. People can start yoga at age 8 or 80."

Kelly Ruesing, owner of Studio Rue Yoga, explains that there are many different yoga styles that people may want to try. "Hatha yoga is meditative and has been around thousands of years," she says. "One of the reasons yoga is so mainstream now is that it has been around for so long. People don't question it. Hatha forms the basis for other types of yoga." Flow yoga starts with gentle postures and builds up with a continuous flow of movement; there is no stopping and holding a pose. Triyoga combines postures, rhythmic breathing and focus. It increases physical, mental and spiritual energy and gives people a clearer focus on life. Ruesing calls it relaxation in action.

"Restorative yoga has quieting, nurturing poses done passively on the floor with the body supported. Normally, it is for deep relaxation involv-

ing stress-releasing gentle stretches with some poses held from one to 20 minutes," Ruesing explains. Although she doesn't offer hot yoga, she says that practice allows people to get deeper into flexibility and stretching, but it is recommended only for those who are well-hydrated and in good cardiovascular condition. Yoga in general, says Ruesing, is an excellent balance of flexibility and strength training, using breath control and focus. It's no pain and all gain.

One 74-year-old she knows uses it to train for the Ironman triathlon because he needs focus. Kids who do it improve their concentration in school. "The important thing about selecting a yoga program is to find the style, environment and instructor that are a good match," says Ruesing. "Instructors should be credibly certified with more training than just a 12-hour course. They should

also correct bad form, not just lead the class. As with any exercise, if you don't do it correctly, yoga can hurt you."

Colleen Valley, owner of YogaDoc, says that in India, yoga is practiced only by men, and more men here are recognizing the value of it. "My main demographic is women and men ages 30 to 60," she says. "Some types of yoga, like power yoga, tend to attract more athletes and men because they offer a fast-paced workout. Also called ashtanga yoga, it's popular with stars like Madonna and Sting. The first couple of times you do it, you may feel awkward, but when you learn the routines, it becomes appealing in its predictability, and peo-

ple can forget about what comes next and get deeply into it."

Other styles of yoga include Iyengar, which involves precise alignment and slower movements with more props. Valley says hot yoga has become popular because it allows the body to open up quickly and release toxins through sweat. Bikram is a style of hot yoga. Anusara yoga, sometimes called American yoga, uses different alignment techniques and a flowing style that focuses on the spiritual and emotional aspects. "It flows from the heart," she says. You have to do it to understand it.

Valley suggests trying a couple classes of each kind with different instructors, and at different times of the day. "You won't feel the same in the morning as in the evening," she says. "And when you decide what you like, that may change over the years. Staying with yoga will always affect your life. It changes your decision-making and even how you relate to your world."

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