

beyond the asana



Discover the
healing art of
yoga therapy

.....
By Alex Ivetic
Photography by
Amy Jean Harding

It's well known that yoga benefits the mind, body and soul, improving strength, flexibility, tone and peace of mind. Yet there still remains a common misconception that yoga is only for the fit and flexible. But the reality is that absolutely anyone can practise. Even a person with severe physical restrictions can practise and benefit, particularly if they embrace the many therapeutic aspects of what is known as yoga therapy.

WHAT IS YOGA THERAPY?

Yoga therapy encompasses a lot more than the postures and common sequences you'll find at gyms and yoga studios. In fact, yoga therapy has been used for centuries for the recovery and healing of a variety of ailments and conditions.

Yoga therapy is typically conducted one-on-one and more closely resembles an appointment with a physiotherapist or a rehabilitation therapist than it does a typical yoga class. During your first appointment, your yoga therapist will holistically assess your health and your needs. They'll then prescribe a practice that takes your individual condition, strengths, weaknesses, overall personality and goals into consideration.

The practice will be personally tailored to help you manage your condition, reduce symptoms, restore balance, increase vitality and improve your outlook. It will incorporate a unique combination of yogic tools, such as postures or movements (*asana*), breathing techniques (*pranayama*), meditation (including visualisation or *yoga nidra*), chanting, gestures (*mudras*) and self-reflection. In addition to yogic practices, your yoga therapy session can also include general lifestyle counselling and dietary advice.

ILLUSTRATION: CLICK BESTSELLERS/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM





“Yoga therapy is emerging as one of the more successful methods for combating the physical discomfort of cancer and cancer treatment”

WHAT CAN YOGA THERAPY HELP WITH?

Yoga therapy can provide integrated recovery from common muscular-skeletal ailments and conditions such as chronic back pain (including bulging, herniated, slipped or prolapsed discs), joint injuries, scoliosis, arthritis and osteoporosis. But it can also help with everything from chronic fatigue syndrome and hormone imbalances to obesity-related problems, eating disorders and fertility issues.

Even people with acute, debilitating or terminal diseases can find comfort in yoga therapy. For example, cancer patients who practise yoga as therapy during their treatment often refer to their yoga practice as a lifesaver. No matter how sick from treatments and no matter how little energy, many find the one thing that can bring relief is a gentle set of therapeutic yoga poses geared for cancer patients.

When someone is battling cancer, the worst part is not just

the symptoms of the disease itself, but often the discomfort and debilitating fatigue brought on from cancer treatments. Whether faced with scar tissue from surgery or ongoing nausea and weakness from chemotherapy or radiotherapy, cancer patients endure a long road of physical trials. Yoga therapy can help these patients on their journey – in addition to removing toxins, it can help dissipate tension and anxiety and enable patients to settle into a greater sense of ease and wellbeing. In fact, as the interest in more holistic approaches to health and healing grows, yoga therapy is emerging as one of the more successful methods for combating the physical discomfort of cancer and cancer treatment.

People with mental health issues – including depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, eating disorders and agoraphobia – have found yoga therapy can transform their lives. This form of therapy can increase alpha brain wave

activity and lower blood pressure, pulse, respiration rate, metabolic rate, oxygen consumption and anxiety levels, producing a greater sense of wellbeing. Over time, patients develop an ability to shift into a more relaxed state in the midst of stressful situations, restoring balance, harmony and joy back into everyday life.

WHY CHOOSE YOGA THERAPY?

It's the holistic aspect of yoga therapy that sets it apart from many other physical therapies. The focus on linking breathwork and mindfulness in each moment or movement can encourage peace and equanimity for the patient as a whole. The mind and emotional state is released and liberated while the physical body is restored.

There are some situations when a client is having chemotherapy or radiotherapy where the therapist may suggest that the entire practice consist only of breath awareness and visualisation. Such work has shown remarkable



“A good yoga therapist is knowledgeable, but a great one will be able to design a personalised program that motivates you to practise on your own”

results in allowing the body's innate intelligence to shift and release stagnant blockages.

FIND A YOGA THERAPIST

If you're looking for a yoga therapist, it's important to be aware that there's not yet a recognised standard of certification in Australia. Many yoga therapists will have different levels of training, experience and areas of expertise. They'll also be from a wide variety of yogic traditions and styles. While the Australian Association of Yoga Therapists provides quality assurance and contacts for selected accredited therapists, word of mouth is still an effective way to find the right yoga therapist. Here are some specific qualities to look for when contacting yoga studios and asking around for a yoga therapist:

Appropriate training If you have a condition that requires knowledge of the physical

body, like back pain or arthritis, find someone with substantial training in anatomy and physiology. If you have a more serious medical condition, such as cancer, heart disease or lupus, you'll need a therapist who understands the disease, the effects of medications and contraindications to practising.

Experience Ask potential therapists how long they've been practising yoga therapy and how often they've worked with people who have your condition.

An inspiring approach A good yoga therapist is knowledgeable, but a great one will be able to design a personalised program that motivates you to practise on your own. The key to success in yoga therapy is to feel connected to your own healing.

BECOME A YOGA THERAPIST

Yoga teachers wishing to become a yoga therapist must complete further studies and practical training in both yogic and Western models of anatomy, physiology and psychology in relation to various conditions and ailments. Development of skills in client assessment and therapeutic program design is also needed. The following organisations provide certified, reputable training in yoga therapy:

- The Australian Association of Yoga Therapists – yogatherapyaustralia.org.au
- Yoga Australia – yogaaustralia.org.au
- International Yoga Teacher Association – iyta.org.au ❖

Alex Ivetic is a qualified yoga teacher and yoga therapist who has practised and studied yoga for 15 years, both in Australia and internationally. To find out more head to innersenseyoga.com.au.