

# **Yoga Therapy: An Emerging Modality**

by Elizabeth Gibbs, M. A., RYT 500

## **Background**

The emerging field of Yoga therapy is steeped in the history and tradition of Yoga, which goes back 2,000 years in terms of recorded history. One can say that modern Yoga and Yoga therapy began to be developed about 200 years ago when western science and medicine began to notice and study Yoga.

The creation of modern Yoga is a product of traditional influences and modern innovation. According to Mark Singleton, author of the book *Yoga Body*, There is little or no evidence that Yoga postures other than seated postures for meditation were ever a primary part of traditional Indian Yoga practice (Singleton, 2010, p. 3). The first institutes of modern Yoga began in India in the 1920s while India was under British rule. During that time, new teaching forms were brought in from the English education system, such as Yoga for people who were not spiritual seekers and group classes as opposed to one-on-one study with a guru. These were departures from traditional spiritual culture. So, modern Yoga and modern Yoga therapy are in many ways new creations, rather than a continuation of a specific Indian spiritual tradition (Le Page, March 2007, *Yoga Therapy in Practice*, p. 20).

Since the 1970's in the United States:

- Yoga has become more integrated with Western culture.
- Yoga Journal, a popular Yoga magazine, estimates that as many as 15.8 million people practice Yoga.
- There is a growing body of research seeking to quantify the benefits of Yoga in the prevention and treatment of a wide variety of conditions
- Yoga is gradually being accepted as a complement to allopathic medicine.

All of these factors have given rise to the emerging modality of modern Yoga therapy.

## **What is Yoga Therapy?**

The current 'short' definition developed by the International Association of Yoga Therapists is:

“Yoga therapy is the process of empowering individuals to progress toward improved health and wellbeing through the application of the teachings and practices of Yoga.”

The practice of Yoga therapy is aimed at developing self-knowledge through a process of personal witnessing and understanding the self. From the Yoga perspective, self-knowledge is health in the most complete sense. It focuses on healing at all levels of the person: physical, energetic, psycho-emotional, and spiritual. It's a modality that can be applied to groups or individuals with specific health challenges. Yoga therapy is non-sectarian and non-hierarchical. The goal of Yoga therapy can be summed up by this quote from B. K. S. Iyengar:

“Yoga teaches us to cure what need not be endured and endure what cannot be cured.”

Yoga therapy recognizes that relief of symptoms is just one facet of the healing process and that not all illness and disease can be cured. It does, however, provide a methodology to heal lives, reduce pain, and stress, and relieve physical symptoms and psychological suffering. Yoga therapy recognizes that the healing journey is unique to each individual and so selects, adopts and modifies all practices appropriately for the individual and/or group depending upon age, physical condition and ability, religion and culture.

### **Who Can Benefit From Yoga Therapy?**

Yoga therapy is valuable for all those who sense the need for a customized approach to Yoga and has a special value for:

- People with specific health conditions who are looking for a Yoga program specifically designed and modified to meet their needs.
- People who are out of shape and need a slow and personally designed program to guide them towards optimal health.
- People who, through their current Yoga practice, have developed imbalances and/or injuries that are severe enough to prevent them from continuing in a public class format.
- Professional groups, such as teachers, health care specialists, or businesses who would like Yoga classes tailored to meet specific needs.
- People who would like to use Yoga to explore the full spectrum of their being, including feelings and emotions, in a safe, non-judgmental environment.

### **What is the Difference Between Yoga and Yoga Therapy?**

All Yoga is considered therapeutic but Yoga therapy is Yoga with a specific focus on health and healing. It is distinct from other systems of Yoga where the class structure and content may be pre-structured and the student molds him/herself to the form of Yoga being taught. Yoga therapy is based in creative, student-centered education, where the teachers are facilitators rather than gurus in the traditional Indian sense, because it is only by awakening the student's connection to his or her own true source of wellness that healing can occur.

### **What are the Benefits of Yoga Therapy?**

The benefits of Yoga therapy are many. For example, the practice of Yoga therapy can decrease: cholesterol levels, insulin requirements in people with diabetes, frequency of asthma attacks, coronary artery disease, chronic pain symptoms, heart rate, respiratory rate, panic, anxiety and depression.

The practice of Yoga therapy can improve levels of physical fitness, exercise tolerance, body image, cardiac output, blood glucose levels, thyroid functions, functional mobility,

flexibility of muscles and joints, oxygen consumption, heart and lung function, digestion, healthy alignment of the skeleton, bone strength, and effectiveness of the immune system.

The practice of Yoga therapy can also balance the nervous system, renew vitality and appreciation of life, relieve the negative impacts of stress and calm the mind.

### **What is a Therapeutic Yoga Class Like?**

Classes combine a variety of Yoga postures, breathing, guided imagery, deep relaxation and meditation. In a therapeutic Yoga class, postures are important but guided imagery, deep relaxation and meditation are just as important in helping students with specific health conditions reach a relaxed state of awareness, which reduces stress levels and leads to increased feelings of mental clarity, and well-being. Modifications are offered and all students are encouraged to participate at their own level of ability and comfort. A therapeutic Yoga class is typically 90 minutes in length.

### **What is a Private Therapeutic Yoga Session Like?**

Each Yoga school has its own methods but private sessions for graduates of the school of Integrative Yoga Therapy are based on a therapeutic model developed by Joseph LePage, M. A. founder of Integrative Yoga Therapy: [www.iytyogatherapy.com](http://www.iytyogatherapy.com) and are typically 90 minutes in length. Private sessions include a variety of Yoga postures, breathing, guided imagery, deep relaxation and meditation based on the needs of the individual. One difference between a class and a private session is the amount of time spent on the *Intake* and *Feedback* process. Because each session is dedicated to one person, there is ample time for the Yoga therapist to listen carefully to what the client wants and needs and then address those wants and needs in the sessions.

### **What are the Training and Educational Standards for Yoga Therapy?**

In order to establish Yoga therapy as an independent profession with particular skills and tools beyond that of a Yoga teacher, educational standards have been set by the Yoga community. The International Association of Yoga Therapists: [www.iayt.org](http://www.iayt.org), which supports research and education in Yoga and serves as a professional organization for Yoga teachers and therapists worldwide. The standards include the following:

- A full definition of Yoga Therapy
- A competency profile covering Yoga philosophy, perspectives on health and disease, contemporary biomedical knowledge and principles, skills and ethics for working with individuals and therapeutic groups
- Minimum admission and practicum requirements for training schools and programs
- Length of training (current standard is a minimum of 1,000 hours)

New concepts and life lessons are often best told through story. The “Autobiography in Five Short Chapters” by Portia Nelson sums up the role and goal of the emerging modality of Yoga therapy:

Chapter One. I walk down the street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk I fall in. I am lost ... I am helpless. It isn't my fault. It takes me forever to find a way out.

Chapter Two. I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I pretend I don't see it. I fall in again. I can't believe I am in the same place, but it isn't my fault. It still takes a long time to get out.

Chapter Three. I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I see it is there. I still fall in ... it's a habit. My eyes are open. I know where I am. It is my fault. I get out immediately.

Chapter Four. I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I walk around it.

Chapter Five. I walk down another street.

The role and goal of the emerging modality of Yoga therapy is to help clients and students 'walk down another street' toward optimal health and wellbeing.

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