

Can Yoga Wreck Your Body?

By Alena Gerst, LMSW, RYT

Many of you have asked what are my thoughts on the recent [New York Times Magazine](#) feature article entitled "How Yoga Can Wreck Your Body". As you can imagine, this has caused quite a stir in the yoga community.

In response, Kaitlin Quistgaard, editor of [Yoga Journal](#) magazine, wrote of how she tore a rotator cuff in a yoga class. She said, "I've experienced how yoga can heal. But I've also experienced how yoga can hurt- and I've heard the same from plenty of other yogis."

So many people have weighed in on the controversy, but I think my yoga friend [Dr. Stephanie Blake's](#) response to the article sums up my thoughts quite neatly:

She writes, "Yoga is a complicated and lifelong practice. Like all things, it comes with risk and serves as a reminder to both challenge and respect our bodies."

Herein lies what, I believe, sums up a foundational wisdom in the practice of Yoga. In the first (of 8) limbs of Yoga, one of the key principles is called *Ahimsa*, which means non-violence, or non-harm.

This can be interpreted to mean non-violence or non-harm against others, but just as important, it refers to non-violence or non-harm to the self. It is not for your yoga teacher or your therapist (or your parents, or your government, or...) to determine what is or is not harmful. It's up to us, the practitioners, to decide what that means.

But before we can make that decision, it is necessary to first become *aware* that we may be doing (or thinking) something harmful.

In my clinical training as a counselor, one of my favorite professors talked about what he called a "positive sandwich". Any time he had a critique, or was going to challenge a client on thoughts or behaviors that might be uncomfortable, he would "sandwich" it in a positive acknowledgement of what they were doing that was constructive. And once he finished expressing his challenging comment, he completed the statement with something else encouraging.

I strive to maintain this approach as a yoga teacher and as a counselor. But first, I've learned it is just as important to practice this habit with myself, and my yoga practice has been an ideal place to begin.

Each of us who practices yoga can expect to be instructed to try things which challenge our relative comfort. It's implicit in the practice that we learn to recognize, and discern, whether a posture is uncomfortable or if it is actually harmful.

I was surprised in the article when the seasoned yoga teacher (of 40 years) Glenn Black told the author that he had just undergone spinal surgery as a result of 4 decades of "extreme backbends and twists". This renowned teacher went on to say the "tenderness started 20 years ago". I wondered why, if he was experiencing tenderness in his back for 20 years, he continued to practice so rigorously. And I was reminded of the practice of *Ahimsa*, non-harm.

Yoga can have powerful effects during moments when we #1 understand that we have overcome something uncomfortable (to go upside down, to backbend, to balance on one foot, to sit quietly...), and perhaps even more powerful #2, to become aware that we alone are to determine our body's limits, and then honor them.

The Broader Concept

As Stephanie Blake said, yoga is complicated. It is a lifelong practice, a study, and contrary to popular belief, it ultimately has little to do with deep backbends and twists. It is about being respectful, non-harming, to our bodies, our selves, and to others.

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