

How's Your Comfort Level: Some Serious Concerns About Yoga

By Alena Gerst, LMSW, RYT

People have serious concerns about yoga.

"It's too hard," a nurse at the hospital where I work declared to me recently. "I heard yoga hurts," came from another prospective yogi. It is true for some, that the idea of practicing Yoga brings up powerful feelings of fear: Of being injured, or fear of failure, or simply fear of being uncomfortable.

Recently I took a couple of intense yoga classes, and found myself curled and folded and twisted and arched into a handful of challenging poses. When the classes were over, I reflected on the messages of pain, and fear, I hear time and again from people who are curious about yoga, but also cautious, and rightly so.

These classes I referred to were challenging. And being an experienced yoga practitioner, here is a little of what I felt: I felt a stinging in the belly of my quadriceps on the front of my thighs as they stretched. My hamstrings were shaking and trembling as I breathed deeper into the pose. I felt my shoulders and sides stretching (and sometimes resisting) as I lifted and turned into twists.

Yes, I was stretching my body and increasing flexibility, building strength and endurance, all good things. And it's natural to catch yourself thinking, "WHEN is this going to be over?!" But the real "practice" for me was to allow my mind to continually keep perspective as I challenged the comfort of my body.

This is a prime example of how the powerful work of yoga lies not only in working with the body, but in the inner work of the mind.

Richard Brown, MD, a New York City psychiatrist and expert in Yoga, meditation, and complementary practices for mental health, writes, "Yoga postures and stretches are most effective...when combined with yoga breathing, positive affirmations...and cognitive restructuring."

Yoga means "to yoke", or union, and to practice yoga can be the ultimate union of mind and body. To feel an intense stretching in your body, while at the same time reminding yourself you are "Ok" in your mind, or maintaining an inner calm, has a lot to do with the magnificent work of Yoga for the mind/body connection.

For instance, many of you who know me know that in general I tend to struggle with changes. This could be as simple as jet lag between NYC and Arizona, change in climate (unless it's going from cold to warm!), or change in work or living environments.

Of course we all know that changes are inevitable. So when the winds of change are upon me, I can call on the calm practice I have cultivated in my mind during yoga, especially during poses that feel "hard" or "painful", for extra support.

The thoughts I practice in nerve-wracking situations are sometimes similar to thoughts I whisper to myself when I'm in an intense pose during yoga. The same is true when the subway stalls, when I'm stuck in traffic, or when I can't seem to fall asleep and start worrying about how tired I'll feel the next day.

Whisper "It's ok. All is well." Or often, just "breathe".

The Broader Concept

Speaking to ourselves in positive, conscious ways is important. Learning it in your body is crucial. Like insurance, you don't need it...until you need it. A regular Yoga practice is like insurance. The practice is important. It's fun to challenge your body in new ways and watch your progress. Learning to do new things and continuously overcoming fears is exhilarating. And of course it's nice to make new friends in class!

But we all confront challenges in our lives, whether they are everyday life stressors, or major life events, where the practice becomes our default. We have some say over how we react when our comfort is threatened.

This is not to say we won't feel emotions, on and off the mat, which can sometimes be very powerful. Emotions are vitally important in guiding us to our true selves, and are part of the human condition. What Yoga teaches us is to practice having that still, consistent whisper. "It's going to be ok. All is well. Just breathe."

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