

YOGA: WHAT'S ALL THE FUSS ABOUT?

BY LAURIE HYLAND ROBERTSON, RYT

Lately, I've heard some pretty incredible claims being made about yoga—Lower your blood pressure! Eliminate headaches! Improve your relationships!

Thing is, most of it's absolutely true! Science is beginning to provide data that backs up what yoga practitioners have long known through experience. A number of recent studies show that yoga has often-dramatic positive effects on asthma, blood pressure, depression, back pain, and other conditions.

And everyone who knows me personally can vouch for one particular (and particularly incredible) benefit of regular yoga practice: Even hardcore Type-A personalities can be completely transformed.

Although most of us in the West focus on the physical aspects of yoga, the practice of asanas (poses) and breathwork (pranayama) are just two elements of a broader philosophy that aims to gain mastery over the mind. It doesn't matter what your personal beliefs might be, though—yoga is a broadly inclusive philosophy, and there are countless mental benefits to be had even through a purely physical yoga practice.

Send straight out the window all thoughts of an anorexic model-type twisting herself into a human origami shape. ANYONE can do yoga—and benefit from the practice. It doesn't matter one bit whether you stay seated in a chair the entire time, or if you have to modify every pose to make it accessible for your body. Here again, yoga is supremely inclusive (and beginner-friendly).

In addition to the health benefits that are just beginning to be explored, you've probably heard about yoga's reputation for general stress reduction and relaxation. Part of this benefit comes from a simple focus on staying in the present moment. The movements and breath of yoga become a meditation of sorts, even when you haven't set out to meditate. Being truly present is much easier said than done, of course, but it's incredibly freeing when a good teacher helps guide you there.

More vigorous forms of yoga are also highly effective weight-loss tools. Some classes elevate the heart rate to provide an efficient cardio workout, all the while improving overall flexibility and tone, and of course enhancing breathing. (You'll be amazed at how different your body feels—and how much better everything functions—when you start taking full, complete breaths.) These types of cardio classes use your own body for resistance. And science has shown that muscle stretching and strengthening combined with joint mobilization will yield the best rehabilitation results when trying to heal from an injury or chronic postural problem. Yoga combines all three—just what the doctor ordered!

This time, it's OK to give in to the hype—try yoga. (Give Pilates a go, too; I've posted more information at www.WholeYoga.net.) I promise, it really does feel THAT good!

Laurie Hyland Robertson, RYT, is the director and co-owner of Whole Yoga Healthcare and Whole Chiropractic Healthcare, a holistic clinic and studio in Odenton. (The studio is open to the public and welcomes both beginners and drop-in students.) As a former healthcare editor, writer, and speaker, Laurie brings an objective eye to her classes, making sure students experience the full range of benefits the practice can offer. She is also a certified Pilates instructor.

