

THE BENEFITS OF YOGA FOR AN AGING POPULATION

By Conni Ramsey

While the benefits of yoga are touted for a wide variety of people and abilities, one group in particular is often overlooked. As I have witnessed in my Yoga-Pilates practice, men and women age 50 and over can reap great benefits from yoga, regardless of their age and current physical condition. Mature Baby Boomers generally share three priorities that can be addressed by yoga: quality of life, freedom from the limits of health concerns and physical problems, and stress management.

Seniors age 65 and older are the fastest growing segment of the population, and their numbers are projected to more than double to over 80 million by 2050.¹ Many of these people have over-use injuries from years of repetitive activities, chronic pain issues, poor balance and limited flexibility and strength. All of these areas can be improved with yoga. However, yoga offers many anti-aging benefits, beyond just the physical. It also provides emotional, spiritual and social advantages. It offers the additional advantage of accessibility – it can be practiced any time, any place, without special equipment or clothing.

Many seasoned yoga professionals have already recognized how a yoga discipline can benefit older practitioners. Working with scientists from the University of California at San Diego (UCSD), the Stein Institute for Research on Aging at UCSD, and physicians at Scripps Health in San Diego, they have developed Silver Age Yoga. This unique discipline combines hatha yoga and principles of gerontology.²

My Personal Mentor Is a Lifelong Yoga Devotee

In my personal life, I have been fortunate to have the influence of Phyllis Pilgrim for the past 23 years. Phyllis has been my mentor since meeting her when I worked at Rancho La Puerta, where she was fitness director for many years. I recently sat down with Phyllis to gather her opinions and outlook about yoga. She said, “Good health as we age is about more than yoga. For example, people in England live a simple life. They don’t allow their lives to become as over-

¹ Carol Krucoff and Kimberly Carson, “Therapeutic Yoga for Seniors,” IDEA Fitness Journal, March 2011. Pages 78-80.

² “Silver Age Yoga,” www.idealife.com

committed and stressful as Americans do.” She also told me, “Conni, you have been doing the work since the day I met you. You were just not feeling the benefits. “

Now 74 years old, Phyllis has a remarkable life story. Her mother, age 99, was a strong influence at a very young age. She practiced yoga in England and during her years in three World War II prisoner-of-war camps in Java. Yoga helped Phyllis’s mother survive some very challenging experiences.

When I asked Phyllis how long she has been doing yoga, she shrugged and said, “Maybe since I was 20 years old at university.” In those days, she was told to sit and not think of a thing during meditation – until she found the right teacher. Her Iyengar asana practice, which started in Barbados, has been ongoing for 35-plus years, including several trips to India to study with B. K. S. Iyengar . She left Barbados and a troubled marriage and has been on staff at Rancho La Puerta for 33 years.

The Three Beneficial Components of Hatha Yoga

Asanas are key to maintaining or improving health. Inverted poses are the heart of a yoga practice for people over fifty. However, instructors need to be aware that postures may need to be adapted or incorporate props for older students. Rather than a strict emphasis on form, mature students should be encouraged to enjoy the feeling of achieving or holding a pose. Meditation calms the mind and relieves stress, a known condition among the Boomer generation. In addition, it is being proven to reverse heart disease. Pranayama – breath control or life force – is the third important component of hatha yoga. Helping older students learn how to breathe deeply and freely reduces the stress response, and sends a direct relaxation message to the mind and the parasympathetic nervous system.

Physical Benefits of Yoga

A small study of a 12-week yoga class in Vermont revealed significant improvements in function, flexibility and strength for 16 women with an average age of 78. Subjects who met twice weekly improved their strength by approximately 25 percent. Function increased by 22 percent and flexibility improved by four percent.³

³ Shirley Archer, “IDEA Member’s Study Shows Yoga Benefits Older Adults,” www.ideafit.com.

Maintaining agility and balance in midlife and beyond helps to avoid injury and falls. Standing poses are an ideal way for older students to improve their posture, balance and agility safely and without strain. Students who have balance problems can gain strength and confidence by first practicing Triangle Pose and other weight-bearing standing poses against a wall.⁴

Keeping the spine straight and supple is a proven antidote to aging and loss of flexibility. According to a famous concept in Yogi philosophy, a person's age is determined by the flexibility of the spine. After our mid-20s, the venous supply to the disks of the spine atrophies.⁵ Exercises that stretch, lengthen and bend the spine improve blood flow to all the extremities, and revitalize major glands and organs, particularly the pituitary, thyroid, adrenal and sex glands.

Osteoporosis is the main cause of bone fractures in older people and post-menopausal women in particular.⁶ In fact, osteoporosis affects 90 percent of US women over age 75. Inactivity leads to bone loss. Unlike walking, swimming, and other forms of exercise that strengthen bones in specific parts of the body, weight-bearing yoga postures help to strengthen bones throughout the body. The best postures for preventing osteoporosis include Downward-Facing Dog and other inverted poses, as well as standing, seated and lying-down postures.

At a certain age, the body does decay, and if you are not active you are not even supplying blood to the areas previously supplied. Asana practice allows the blood to nourish the depths of the body. If you say, "No, I am old," naturally the blood circulation recedes. It's like the rain – if it doesn't come it causes drought. And if you don't do yoga you don't irrigate the system. Then when you have a drought in the body, as incurable diseases, you accept them and prepare to die. Why would you allow the drought when you can do yoga? No to do so allows the offensive forces to increase and the defensive forces to decrease.

While quality of life means different things to different people, good health is a vital ingredient for everyone. Yoga increases resistance to disease by bolstering the immune system. To quote B.K.S. Iyengar, "Disease is an offensive force; inner energy is a defensive force. As we grow, the defensive strength gets less and the offensive strength

⁴ Suza Francina, "In Praise of Props," The New Yoga for People Over 50, Health Communications, Inc., page 38.

⁵ "Yoga Slows the Aging Process," www.yoga.org.nz, accessed 03/09/11.

⁶ Francina, *ibid.*, "Weight Bearing Yoga Postures Help Prevent Osteoporosis," page 38.

increases. That is how diseases enter into our system.”⁷ The deep relaxation components of yoga help to break the cycle of stress, help the body recuperate and rejuvenate. Even our sex life doesn’t need to disappear as we age. As noted above, increasing blood flow throughout the body affects the sex glands. In addition, just improving the sense of well-being and potential can extend sexual virility well into old age. Vision and hearing, too, improve with a yoga practice. The nerves and blood vessels that supply the eyes and ears have to pass through the neck. Keeping the neck flexible results in better eyesight and better hearing.⁸

Emotional Benefits of Yoga

The emotional benefits of practicing yoga as we age are just as important as the physical advantages. In addition to providing tools for stress management, gaining body confidence gives us a sense of control and security. Yoga’s effects on the glands and nervous system, which includes the brain, contributes to a positive mental and emotional state. The inverted poses of yoga help to reverse the effects of gravity, making us look and feel younger. Yoga’s restful inversions are often called the elixir of life. Benefits include more confidence, enthusiasm and optimism.

I am convinced that Phyllis Pilgrim’s yoga practice, and her yoga and meditation teaching, have helped her maintain a positive outlook. Phyllis directed the fitness programs at Rancho La Puerta, including managing 20 prima donna instructors, and handled it all gracefully. For me personally, Phyllis has always finished a session with a reminder to “surround yourself with white light.”

Phyllis’s meditation classes include yoga sleep mode instruction, which has its roots in her Western perspective and understanding of sleep deprivation. But she also incorporates Yoga Nidra and her Eastern ways of thinking. The study of Yoga Nidra is Phyllis’s direction in life at age 74.

⁷ B. K. S. Iyengar, “Yoga and Aging,” Adapted from The Tree of Yoga, www.shambhala.com

⁸ “Yoga and Aging,” Yoga for Life, www.yoga-for-life.org, accessed 03/09/11.

Spiritual Benefits of Yoga

Yoga, when diligently practiced, is a continuous course of self-study and discovery. Yoga helps us grow and expand psychologically and spiritually. It offers a foundation for conscious living, conscious aging and conscious dying.⁹ In fact, Phyllis still ranks *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* as one of her favorites.

Meditation helps to quiet the mind and gain knowledge of our inner selves. Practicing the eight limbs of yoga can be a lifetime pursuit, incorporating such spiritual pursuits as Dharana, concentration and cultivation of inner perceptual awareness; Dhyana, devotion and meditation on the Divine; and Samadhi, union with the Divine.

Social Benefits of Yoga

Aging often leaves us feeling alone, without the interaction with a spouse, partner, friends or family network we enjoyed in earlier years. Aging can become isolating. Yoga classes provide a sense of community, of shared interests and values that often translate to lasting friendships beyond the studio.

Conclusion

As yoga instructors, we should encourage older students to do as much as possible, given any physical limitations, with the understanding that poses can be modified to fit the student's needs. Practitioners such as Phyllis Pilgrim continue to inspire me since she never misses an opportunity to gain more knowledge and live her yoga life.

As B.K.S. Iyengar has stated, "It is never too late in life to practice yoga. If it were, I should have stopped my practice long ago. ...I have been doing yoga for over fifty years... You can do it, but do it judiciously, knowing your capacity. ...Yoga cannot be rushed."¹⁰

⁹ Francina, *ibid.*, "Tips on Teaching and Hints for Home Practice," page 252.

¹⁰ B. K. S. Iyengar, *ibid.*