

Yoga: A tool for body and mind

By: Leviana Coccia

Author's Biography: Leviana Coccia is a graduate of the Media Studies program at the University of Guelph-Humber. For her undergraduate research paper, Leviana studied the relationship between Disney films' portrayal of femininity and beauty and how young female audiences are affected by these messages. She has studied males and eating disorders and is the Events and Communications Coordinator at Eating Disorders of York Region.

"Yoga has helped me a lot in my life," says Megan Jacobs, a certified Iyengar yoga teacher who works out of her studio, Dove Tail Yoga, in Aurora. "It's a wonderful tool."

Jacobs has personal experience with eating disorders, which she openly discussed in a brief group meeting. She says yoga has benefited her and her family in several ways, since not only has Jacobs found it to be a great stress reliever, but she also says yoga has helped her to become more aware of herself and her surroundings.

The Harvard Medical School's April 2009 issue of the *Harvard Mental Health Letter* says meditation and other techniques for reducing stress have been studied as possible treatments for mental health since the 1970s. "One such practice, yoga," the article entitled "Yoga for anxiety and depression" says, "has received less attention in the medical literature, though it has become increasingly popular in recent decades."

Also according to the *Harvard Mental Health Letter*, yoga classes vary from gentle to challenging. An individual may choose a certain style based on their physical ability and preference.

Iyengar yoga, that which Jacobs teaches at her home studio, is a detail oriented practice. It is very physical, Jacobs says, and uses a lot of props, like blocks, blankets and belts.

Jacobs used to teach yoga to people with eating disorders at Southlake Regional Hospital in Newmarket. She would take her own props to these classes.

"We are all built differently. [We all have different] heights and confidence levels. Props help everyone do the poses," Jacobs says, adding that though the technical term for the blocks, blankets and belts is props, she prefers the word "tool."

These "tools" teach the poses to the body and then the body eventually gets more comfortable with the various movements and stretches, Jacobs says.

According to the Iyengar Yoga School of Toronto, Iyengar Yoga works to develop flexibility, strength, stamina and balance.

"It emphasizes the importance of regulated breathing; the use of blocks, chairs, and other props; and the therapeutic value of adapting the poses to the needs of individual students," the website for the school says.

When a yoga class begins, the movements are very general, Jacobs says, adding that throughout the class and after numerous sessions, a stronger foundation is built, both physically and spiritually, where participants begin to sink deeper into each position.

"You then go deeper and deeper into yourself," Jacobs says. "And your mind is calmed and then you begin to learn about your body."

Iyengar yoga doesn't teach a lot of breath work, but, as Jacobs refers to it, "is meditation in action."

Though many of the studies on the benefits of yoga have been small, the *Harvard Mental Health Letter* says reviews of yoga suggest the practice can reduce stress and may be helpful for anxiety and depression. "...Yoga functions like other self-soothing techniques, such as meditation, relaxation, exercise or even socializing with friends."

Modulating stress can in turn decrease physiological arousal, like lowering one's heart rate, reducing blood pressure and easing one's breath. Studies also show practicing yoga helps to increase heart rate variability, also known as the body's ability to respond to stress.

In 2008, the University of Utah studied the relationship between stress and pain. They found that those who responded more poorly to stress were also more sensitive to pain.

"Endorphins in yoga can get addicting," Jacobs says. "As a teacher, I teach balance and how to find that connection between your heart, body and mind. Yoga can be harmful if, like anything else, it is abused."

The science of yoga illustrates that mental and physical health are more than just related. They are also equivalent. "The evidence is growing that yoga practice is a relatively low-risk, high-yield approach to improving overall health," says the *Harvard Mental Health Journal*.

One of the main practices of yoga is awareness. When we are aware, "the contentment and peace we find is not in our environment but in ourselves," Jacobs says. "We lose the attachment to sensory things when we practice."

This objectiveness connects an individual to his or her inner voice, where there is a need for sensitivity and thought about how much we let the rest of the world affect us.

Studies have yet to show how exactly yoga can improve a person's mood, but the *Harvard Mental Health Letter* says preliminary evidence suggests yoga's benefit is similar to that of exercise and other relaxation techniques.

A 2005 German study found women who had described themselves as “emotionally distressed” but took two 90-minute yoga classes a week for three months were reportedly less stressed and found improvements in well-being compared to women in a control group who maintained their normal activities and were asked not to begin any stress-reduction programs.

The *Harvard Mental Health Letter* says some of the women who took part in yoga initially complained of headaches, back pain and poor sleeping habits prior to participating in the German study. Afterwards, these women experienced fewer headaches, less back pain and better sleeping habits after participating in yoga.

When I was in my second year of post-secondary school, I took up yoga. I found the stress of school, my part-time job, living away from home and other personal battles overwhelming. There simply wasn’t enough time in the day for me to tackle everything on my to-do list, so I began to search for a way to unleash the stress and anxiety within me. Yoga was my answer.

The practice connected my body and mind in a way I had never seen before. Not only was I strengthening myself physically, but I was also strengthening my mind and the awareness I had of myself, my beliefs, my emotions and my body.

I learned how I felt physically, mentally and spiritually after every pose. I began to notice a transition between how I felt before class and after. Soon, I was able to use the positive energy I built in class at various points throughout my day.

A former yoga teacher of mine once said to my class, “Sometimes, the hardest part in yoga is the meditation.” Our days are filled with activity, decision-making, challenges and unexpected events, so when we have a few moments to ourselves to relax and repay our mind and body for the stress it may have been under, meditating can seem strange and almost foreign.

My yoga teacher then said, “Even if you don’t have time for an entire class, the most important part of yoga is this right here,” before instructing the class to lay down in shavasana (or corpse) pose, a common final pose in yoga classes.

In this pose, the body is placed on its back in a neutral position with hands and feet resting just outside the mat, comfortably. Palms are facing upward as the face relaxes, the body gently presses all its weight into the floor and the breath occurs naturally.

Yoga teachers often advise for thoughts to pass in and out of the brain without too much attention as the mind and body seep deeper into relaxation.

A yoga class is never complete without the final pose, as it gives the body time to process the new stretches and positions presented in the class and prepares the mind to go about the rest of the day with the same energy and positivity it had during practice.

Yoga is one of many tools individuals can use to relieve stress, anxiety and depression. Writing, art expressionism and/or music are some other healthy ways to cope with stress.