

BENEFITS OF YOGA

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By Addie Alex

So many people do yoga, know of yoga or know someone who practices yoga. A 2012 Yoga Journal study indicated that “8.7 percent of U.S. adults, or 20.4 million people, practice yoga. Of current non-practitioners, 44.4 percent of Americans call themselves ‘aspirational yogis’—people who are interested in trying yoga.” The previous study (2008) showed that 15.8 million people practiced yoga. That’s an increase of 29 percent.

The many benefits of yoga can help explain the interest and the 29 percent increase in the number of people practicing yoga. We live in a pressure-cooker environment that contributes to high levels of stress. There are many ways that stress can show up: back and neck pain, TMJ, headaches, sleeping difficulties, inability to focus, digestive issues, to mention a few. Yoga is very effective in reducing stress and developing portable techniques to cope with every day stresses. The practice of yoga also offers assistance in reaching a more positive outlook on life.

Other benefits include:

- Increased flexibility and range of movement
- Greater ease in breathing
- Greater ability to focus and concentrate
- Reduced sense of pressure and stress
- Greater energy and vitality
- Sense of inner ease and well-being
- Increased calmness and peace
- Greater joy

The many benefits of yoga, including the above list, are the side effects of yoga. The main purpose of yoga is found in its meaning. The word “yoga” comes from the ancient Sanskrit language meaning to “join or yoke together”. Yoga is a practice and discipline in joining your individual sense of self with your higher, fully conscious, infinite Self. Practitioners of yoga apply themselves to consciously unify body, mind, emotions and spirit. This leads to the discovery of one’s fullest potential.

There are many paths or yogas to discover the infinite or your essential nature. Some of these other yogas include:

- Jnana yoga – wisdom
- Karma yoga – service
- Raja yoga – meditation
- Bhakti yoga – devotion
- Hatha yoga – harmonizing body and breath

In the West we are most familiar with Hatha yoga where the practice revolves around yoga poses and the awareness of breathing. There are many styles of Hatha yoga. Some are vigorous, like a workout; some are hot; some focus more on the breath; some on the flow of poses; some are meditative; some are fast or slow. What's important is to find a style that fits you.

With all the media coverage of yoga it's easy to think that having a perfectly strong, healthy, beautiful body that can twist into a pretzel is the point. But actually the body and breath are tools to connect with your higher self through being aware. It's not about how perfectly you can do a yoga pose. It's about your inner state of awareness while in the pose.

The purpose of all yoga is to turn inward to discover your inner essence, which is the source of all joy, love, healing, and wisdom. Stress relief through yoga is wonderful, *and* yoga offers more.

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