

Growing Old with Yoga

BY
ANGELA
AMBROSE

Janet Rae Humphrey had serious reservations about doing yoga. The 58-year-old had excruciating pain and stiffness from fibromyalgia, she couldn't kneel because one of her kneecaps had been surgically removed and she became dizzy when she put her head below her waist.

“I'd been wanting to do yoga for years, but I was scared because I didn't know anything, and I didn't want to look ridiculous,” says Humphrey. “I had been through 15 surgeries in my life, and I had always pictured myself as having major physical and mental limitations.”

She finally gathered up the courage to try her first class and loved the way it stretched and opened up her entire body and focused her mind. She kept coming back, and within a few months, she noticed improvements in her range of motion and felt less pain and stiffness.

Like Humphrey, many people are afraid to try yoga because they think they are too weak, inflexible or have too many health issues to overcome.

“The only thing you need to do to practice yoga is breathe,” says Carol Krucoff, yoga teacher at Duke Integrative Medicine in Durham, N.C., and co-director of the Therapeutic Yoga for Seniors teacher training (Yoga4seniors.com).

“More and more people are recognizing that yoga is not about standing on your head necessarily or turning into a pretzel,” says Krucoff. “Yoga is much more than just physical activity. Yoga also brings in the emotions, energies and thoughts, so it can really be very important dealing with the whole aging process.”

How Aging Affects the Body

Today an estimated 36.7 million Americans do yoga, and more than one-third of them are 50 or older, according to the 2016 Yoga in America Study. As we age, our spine and joints become stiffer, our muscles and bones become weaker, and we are at higher risk for a host of health conditions including arthritis, heart disease, dementia and diabetes. A growing body

of research suggests that a regular yoga practice may help slow down the effects of aging and improve our overall health.

Many older adults start doing yoga so they can maintain their physical health and independence. “They're not so much motivated by having yoga abs or trying to look like a cover model or do some sort of acrobatic pose. The motivation is much more to be able to function in daily life: to be able to get down on the floor and play with grandchildren, to be able to reach things on a high shelf, to be able to turn your head so that you can drive,” says Krucoff, author of *Yoga Sparks: 108 Easy Practices for Stress Relief in a Minute or Less*.

Finding the Right Class and Teacher

The popularity of yoga has opened up a mind-boggling array of choices – from the intense hot, power, flowing or acro-yoga classes to the more gentle beginner's, restorative and chair classes.

The challenge is finding a class that is appropriate for your age and ability and a teacher who is experienced in dealing with any major health conditions you may have.

“There are a lot of new teachers out there – a lot of inexperienced teachers – so I think you need to be a little more discriminating as we get older because we obviously have more things that we have to be mindful of,” says Baxter Bell, M.D., yoga teacher and medical acupuncturist who educates the older population through his blog, *YogaforHealthyAging.com*. “Make sure you have an up-to-date health exam and find out if you have any health conditions that could be impacted by a new yoga practice. Ask your doctor questions and ask your experienced teacher questions *before* you actually start practicing.”



Patrice Welsh-Benjamin's yoga practice and the support of fellow classmates helped her and her husband, Don, deal with her breast cancer diagnosis two years ago.

Photo by Angela Ambrose

Setting specific goals can help you reap the most benefits while reducing your risk of injury, says Bell. For example, the goal may be increasing your range of motion after a hip replacement, improving your balance to prevent falls or dealing with depression and anxiety after losing a loved one.

The range of fitness levels among older adults is very wide, so age is not always the best indicator of ability. An 80-year-old marathoner who has been practicing yoga for decades might be able to handle a vigorous yoga class while an out-of-shape 45-year-old may be safest starting out in a gentle class.

“If you're new to yoga, stick to beginner classes, experienced teachers and alignment-based styles of

yoga,” says yoga teacher Desirée Rumbaugh of Encinitas, Calif. She suggests looking for teachers with training in Iyengar or Anusara yoga, which emphasizes body alignment, and avoiding classes with a gymnastics-style workout or drill sergeant mentality. Using props such as blocks, straps and blankets can make poses more accessible and soften the stretches.

“Growing older gracefully is not trying to cling to the things you used to be able to do when you were younger, but be willing to change with the time and accept that this is the new way if you want to feel healthy and avoid injury,” says Rumbaugh. She also teaches her students the importance of sleep, cleaning up their diet by cutting back on sugar and alcohol and eating “lighter, greener meals.”

What to Expect in a “Seniors” Class

Classes for seniors attract adults well into their 60s and beyond. They typically offer a slow, gentle pace with numerous modifications to standard yoga poses. Depending on the class, the student may practice on a yoga mat, seated in a chair, standing and using a chair for support or a combination of the three.

Osteoporosis, high blood pressure, heart disease and glaucoma are known as “silent diseases” because people often have them, but may have no obvious symptoms; therefore, teachers should assume that this age group has major health conditions, even if they are undiagnosed.

Studies show that half of women and up to one-quarter of men 50 and older will break a bone because of osteoporosis. To reduce the risk of fractures, teachers should follow the guidelines from the National Osteoporosis Foundation when teaching a class for seniors, says Krucoff. For example, they should avoid bending forward from the waist with straight legs and end-range twists, in which you rotate your body to a point of strain.

Although some teachers shy away from twists altogether when working with older adults, they are an important functional movement and are generally safe when the twists stay in the mid-range and have a gentle quality of motion, says Krucoff: “If we don't twist, we're not going to be able to catch ourselves if we stumble. We're not going to be able to drive.”

Another common guideline in senior classes is to keep the head above the heart due to the risk of glaucoma, stroke, hypertension and cardiovascular disorders. Students should always inform their teachers of any major health issues *before* starting yoga because many conditions require further modifications.

Benefits of Belly Breathing

At the heart of the yoga practice is the breath. “Breath can be used for lots of different things,” says Bell. “Breath can be used to calm the nervous system and quiet your mind. Breath can be used, conversely, to excite your nervous system and sharpen your mind.”

In Krucoff’s classes, she instructs seniors to use a relaxed abdominal breath. Also known as diaphrag-

matic or belly breathing, it can help you feel calmer during periods of high stress or discomfort. Sleep disturbances are more common with age, so many older adults use a slow, relaxed breath to help them fall asleep at night.

“Breathing is probably the single most important thing that we teach as yoga teachers because it affects so much,” says Krucoff, who is releasing a new book this fall called *Relax into Yoga for Seniors*, along with co-author Kimberly Carson. Slow, controlled belly breathing can help reduce stress, which may have a positive effect on heart disease, high blood pressure, respiratory problems and mood.

Traditionally, students are taught to breathe in and out through their nose during yoga class because it helps warm, moisten and clean the air. However, this can be challenging for students with asthma, emphysema or other breathing disorders. Krucoff encourages students with respiratory issues to breathe in through the nose and exhale through pursed lips: “When there’s a slow, smooth exhalation through pursed lips, it can help create a back pressure that helps release some of the trapped air that’s problematic for people with lung disease.”

Keeping the focus on your breath can help calm the mind and prevent unhealthy habits such as holding your breath or using shallow chest breathing.

Support During Tough Times

Yoga helps us prepare for the inevitable losses and health problems that come with age – the impaired functioning and the anxiety and fear when dealing with a chronic disease, cancer diagnosis or coping with the death of a family member or friend.

Patrice Welsh-Benjamin knows firsthand the power of yoga to get through tough times. Ironically, a year after retiring from her job as an oncology nurse, she was diagnosed with breast cancer during a routine mammogram.

“The diagnosis was very disruptive – going through the testing, choosing all the care providers and having to wait six weeks for the surgery. During that time, there was a lot of fear, a lot of uncertainty of what was going on,” says Welsh-Benjamin, who attends SilverSneakers Yoga classes with her husband Don several times a week at the YMCA in Scottsdale, Ariz. “Yoga brought a calmness and groundedness to my life and a sense that I can meet the challenge. I can find the strength. It frees me in a lot of ways to step back and let go of the fear and uncertainty.”

Having recently retired, Welsh-Benjamin missed the daily interactions and comradery of her co-workers.

When she joined the yoga class, she was surprised by the warm welcome and support she received from the students and teachers.

“What was quite an incredible experience for us was the way people in class reached out to us with their expressions of concern. There were cards, flowers, food and people calling and checking in to see how I was doing,” says the 69-year-old.

Attending classes regularly can help combat the feeling of isolation that older people often feel when they retire or move into assisted living centers away from family and friends. Many of them come early to class to socialize, go out for coffee or lunch together, and call each other if someone is out sick. The social aspect of yoga may not be the initial reason why people show up to yoga, but it’s often the reason they keep coming back, says Bell.

Transforming Fear into Gratitude

Although Humphrey felt a reduction in pain and stiffness a few months after starting yoga, the most profound changes came years later. She progressed very gradually from one class a week to practicing six days a week and took a few private yoga lessons to receive more personalized instruction. Yoga helped eliminate her fibromyalgia, reduce her scoliosis curve, increase her strength and flexibility, and improve her memory. She also tapered off six prescription medications.

“I had such a dramatic improvement in my body and mind that I wanted other people to experience that, too,” says Humphrey. At age 70, she became a certified Therapeutic Yoga for Seniors instructor, and by sharing her story of hope and healing, has motivated many skeptical seniors to give yoga a try.

Along with the physical improvements, she has seen positive changes in her mental and emotional well-being. “I’ve gone from being quiet and reserved to much more outgoing and relaxed. With all my neurosurgeries, I had lost my ability to assemble new information, but now my mind is so sharp,” says Humphrey, who wrote and self-published *Age without Limits: Over 200 Chair and Standing Yoga Poses for Seniors and the Health-Challenged*. “Yoga has helped me break free from the label of being ‘disabled’ and peel away the layers of fear and negative thinking.”



Where to Find Classes for Seniors

Community senior centers • Yoga studios
Religious organizations • Health clubs or local YMCA

Online at:

SilverSneakers.com • Silver&Fit.com
YogaAlliance.org • Yoga4seniors.com/graduates

Like Humphrey, Welsh-Benjamin has used her yoga practice to transform her fears and worries into gratitude. Since her lumpectomy and radiation treatment, she has undergone numerous tests, biopsies and mammograms to ensure she remains cancer-free. Every time she faces another test or goes back to the oncologist, the fear and anxiety float to the surface.

“What yoga does for me is bring me back to the moment with a gratefulness that I’m alive today. This is my breath, this is who I am – and being able to let go and being able to say that it will be alright. That doesn’t mean that there aren’t going to be problems or illnesses, or there isn’t going to be death. It means this life is a gift. And it’s a gift now.”

Angela Ambrose is a Phoenix-based writer with nearly 30 years in magazine, corporate and video scriptwriting. As an ACE-certified group fitness instructor and yoga teacher, she combines her writing expertise with her passion for healthy living. Angela loves sharing the gift of yoga with the seniors in her SilverSneakers classes, and they, in turn, share their wisdom and warm hugs with her. Angela recently served as editor of Janet Humphrey’s recently released book, *Age Without Limits*. Contact her at:

AngelaAmbrose.com [@AAHealthFitness](https://twitter.com/AAHealthFitness)



Desirée Rumbaugh photo by Agathe Padovani