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A way to healing

Originating in India thousands of years ago, the practice of yoga has become popular in the Western world due to its therapeutic benefits. Sandra Helou speaks to Garth McLean, senior Iyengar yoga teacher, about the benefits of yoga for people living with MS.



After practising Iyengar yoga over many years, Garth McLean has mastered some of the more difficult poses.

Garth McLean initially took up the Iyengar style of yoga after he was diagnosed with MS in 1996. "I was in hospital due to a major exacerbation when my doctor recommended Iyengar yoga to help with stress," recalls Garth. "I had just been diagnosed and I could barely walk, so two days after leaving the hospital I found a yoga studio and enrolled. I was placed into poses that made me feel so much better. After a few sessions I never looked back."

Yoga Australia describes yoga as the regular practise of a range of different techniques such as postures or poses, breathing awareness and exercises, relaxation and concentration, self-inquiry and meditation. It is this combined focus on physical movements, breathing and mindfulness that is believed to deliver therapeutic benefits, both mentally and physically. Yoga poses, in particular, can strengthen and invigorate the body to help all physical systems – the nervous system, skeletal and muscular structures, circulation and respiratory systems – to work properly.

"I believe yoga helped me to be able to walk steadily again so that's given me the confidence to continue with the daily practise," says Garth, who is now an Iyengar yoga teacher. "Sometimes there is a misconception that yoga is an exercise program. I mean, yes, there is a physical

aspect to it but yoga is all-encompassing – a union of the body, the mind and the breath."

There are various styles of yoga, and although poses are integral to all styles, there are differences in how these poses are approached and where the attention is directed. For example, some styles may focus on mastering and holding the pose, strict alignment, breathing or the flow of movement, while others will turn up the temperature in the room to cause perspiration. Iyengar yoga, which



Garth with Mr Iyengar,
founder of Iyengar yoga.



Garth has been teaching since 2000, is alignment-focused and incorporates the use of props such as ropes, chairs, wooden blocks, blankets and straps.

In the Iyengar tradition, Garth explains, there is a highly standardised certification process. The process is governed and overseen by Mr BKS Iyengar, the founder of Iyengar yoga, and the various Iyengar Associations around the world. "In particular, you need a good understanding of the physiological benefits of the practice and how it applies to a certain condition," he says. "In Iyengar yoga we adapt the postures to the individual's ability and needs."

Garth himself has come a long way in learning and understanding the Iyengar style of yoga. "At first I was reluctant to even use the props," he admits. "I thought 'no, I don't need that, I am not handicapped'." But he was quick to realise the purpose of the props. "The props enable a person to position the body in a way that they may not otherwise be able to achieve on their own. This helps to ensure they gain the full benefits of that particular pose. At times, I notice that I can actually get feeling in parts of my body where I don't usually have feeling."

Garth often uses the analogy of recharging an appliance to explain the concept to his students. "If we can align the body in postures so that it 'plugs in' correctly, slowly the transmission flows through, we nourish the nerves and the muscles, and the body is given a chance to heal itself and realise its potential, not only physically but mentally."

In general, yoga can help with flexibility, strength, muscle tone, pain prevention, better breathing, mental calmness, stress reduction and body awareness. Garth has also used Iyengar yoga to specifically combat some common MS symptoms, including: ▶

Common yoga practices

- **Ashtanga** – a physically demanding yoga practice where the attention is placed on the breath and the journey between the poses, rather than perfect body alignment.
- **Bikram yoga or hot yoga** – performed in raised temperatures, it is highly focused on fitness and promotes flexibility and detoxification. Those who experience heat sensitivity should be cautious as an increase in body temperature by 0.5 degrees Celsius can induce or worsen MS symptoms.
- **Hatha yoga** – the most basic form of yoga and the foundation of all yoga styles. It involves gentle stretching, simple breathing exercises and seated meditation. It is popular for stress management.
- **Iyengar yoga** – poses are generally held for longer than in other styles of yoga. Props are used to enable people of all ages and abilities to participate, and it is slow paced so that emphasis is placed on achieving correct body alignment. Sequencing the poses is also considered beneficial to reach a more powerful cumulative effect.
- **Kripalu** – referred to as the yoga of consciousness, this is a gentle and introspective practice where poses are performed to recognise and release spiritual and emotional blockages.
- **Kundalini** – a style focused on awakening the energy at the base of the spine and drawing it upward. As well as poses, this form of yoga is characterised by chanting, meditation and breathing exercises.
- **Viniyoga** – a gentle healing practice suited to those who have an injury or who have recently completed surgery.

Take a look at the websites below to access more general information about yoga, as well as information to help you find a yoga style and school that suits you:

- www.iyengaryoga.asn.au
- www.yogalife.com.au
- www.yogaaustralia.org.au
- www.findyoga.com.au

- Fatigue
- Numbness and tingling
- Optic neuritis (doing restful poses while wearing an eye wrap can help rest the eye nerves)
- Depression
- Pain
- Loss of feeling (from the navel down)

“There are poses that people can do to activate the pelvic floor muscles even if they can’t feel everything,” explains Garth. “This can be embarrassing for people, so I talk about it and get people to try the exercises without them having to disclose anything.”

So what would the yogi’s advice be to those who are considering yoga? “A lot of people find it hard to include something into their life but I suggest they start off with 15 to 20 minutes a day – it’s a coffee break. As people begin to realise the benefits, they will likely increase this over time.

“Go slowly and approach with courage and caution. These are the steps to a healing process and a wellness strategy. For me, if practising yoga 20 to 30 minutes a day is going to help me feel better, that’s a small price to pay.”

Although Garth advocates the benefits of yoga, he is also quick to emphasise that “Iyengar is not a cure for MS. It’s a wellness strategy that may help symptoms and delay or prevent future exacerbations through daily practise. In my situation, I certainly found that to be the case”. ■

To read more about Garth McLean and his journey with Iyengar yoga and MS, visit www.yogarth.com



After travelling to India and stumbling across yoga, Ingrid has used the practice as a way of maintaining her health and wellbeing.

How long have you been practising yoga?

I discovered yoga in 1993 when I was travelling in India. Over the years, I tried various forms and styles of yoga until about 2002, which is when I started Iyengar yoga.

Did you find it difficult to learn?

Not at all. Once you identify the style of yoga that works for you, part of the process is then finding the right school and the right teacher. Once you have those, it just takes practise and dedication.

What initial changes did you notice and what have been the benefits for you?

The initial changes would have to do with strength and flexibility. In terms of MS, it was the ability to use the postures to affect my mood. In 2004 I was struggling with depression, which is highly prevalent in people with MS anyway, but at that time I was also taking one of the immunotherapy treatments of which depression is a side effect. I began doing poses that are specifically helpful for depression and that was my strategy for that symptom. I did that for a number of years and it was very successful. That is the benefit of Iyengar yoga; depending on what I am hoping to achieve mood wise or physically, I can select postures that will be effective.

Would you recommend it to other people with MS?

The thing with this style of yoga is that it works with injury and illness. The props help you to work with whatever is going on and to modify the postures and adapt them to suit your symptoms. I would recommend this form of yoga to anyone, not just people with MS.

Did you find it easy to integrate it into your life?

It was easy because I actually notice the physical difference if it is not there. A few years back the school was closed over Christmas and I wasn’t confident enough to practise on my own just yet. In that time it became obvious to me that, physically, my body didn’t feel as good.

I also had a relapse a couple of years ago that was all in my eyes, and I managed to work through it but I would crawl home, get upstairs and do about three poses, which were half an hour in length. The effects after that were amazing. It was something that I could not live without during that time. It actually supported me through that relapse.

If you are feeling burnt out and you become familiar with Iyengar yoga, you can do your own practise at home. You come to recognise when energy is low and how your body is feeling and you can choose what poses and props to use.