

Just Say 'Om'

Yoga is Booming with Older Demographics and for Good Reason



WRITTEN BY KENYA McCULLUM

"I WOULDN'T KNOW A RELEASE if I met up with one," joked 85-year-old Sue Harris, who started taking Sally Goodwin's class at a San Francisco senior center about a year ago at the recommendation of a friend. Although Harris admitted that the poses are challenging for her at times, she credits them with alleviating some of the pain in her hands caused by arthritis.

But a yoga class at a senior center? Though some may believe that yogis should be as young and malleable as Gumby, that's simply a myth — and an unhealthy one at that.

Harris' claim of arthritis relief isn't a shot in the dark. A study published in the *British Journal of Rheumatology* found that people had greater handgrip strength after three months of practicing yoga. And Johns Hopkins University is in the middle of doing a more comprehensive study of the arthritic benefits of performing yoga three times a week for eight weeks and following up with them years later. Steffany Haaz, M.F.A., R.Y.T., is leading the study at Johns Hopkins, which is funded by National Institutes of Health and the first ever study done on rheumatoid arthritis and the quality of life with people performing yoga. While the data books haven't even been cracked, Haaz said: "I am just

astounded. Every class they come in and tell me how much energy they have, how much more they can do with their everyday lives."

Goodwin, the senior center's literacy project director, originally started dabbling with yoga in the '60s, but it wasn't until 15 years ago, when she was 50, that she started practicing regularly after she found a compatible teacher. And in classic karmic fashion, Goodwin began passing the joy of yoga on to others when the center needed an instructor.

Golden-Year Yogis

When you consider the benefits that yoga has for seniors' bodies and minds, it's not surprising that Goodwin's class continues to grow in popularity.

"The yoga asanas really do wonderful things for maintaining health, and it's not just physical health, it's mental well-being as well," said 70-year-old veteran yoga teacher Liliás Folan. Over the years, Folan has produced several yoga videos and DVDs, including "Liliás!: AM & PM Yoga Workouts for Seniors." "When problems come, and they will, yoga gives you the tools on how to sail the boat when the ocean gets choppy."

According to Haaz, beginner yoga classes provide guidance to moments that build strength, balance and flexibility, all beneficial for arthritis and joint health. Yoga is also a proven stress fighter and “stress can exacerbate arthritic symptoms,” said Haaz.

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Lilias Folan

Goodwin doesn't need a study to prove the effects of yoga, though. She suffered from chronic low back pain for most of her life, but after her first six months of yoga it went away. “If I skip my practice for a week or so it comes back, but I can always fix it by doing a few easy stretches, like forward bends and lunges,” said Goodwin. “My blood pressure is good and I've learned, through deep breathing, I can lower it.”

But Folan believes the benefits of yoga can affect the overall quality

of life, too. “The results for a senior who begins yoga can be really dramatic — things like walking up and down stairs is more comfortable, sleep comes easier and knowing what to do when you wake up in the middle of the night and your mind is whirling comes easier.”

Frank Iszak, founder of Silver Age Yoga, a Del Mar, Calif., organization that provides free yoga classes to seniors who cannot afford them, said he has noticed another important benefit for seniors practicing yoga: In some cases, Iszak has been told that students were encouraged by their doctors to reduce the doses of certain medications.

“There are instances that the doctor told them they can get off some medications for a while and see how it works,” said Iszak. “Eventually they stayed off — not only temporarily — but permanently.”

Changes in medication use is one of the data being studied in Haaz' clinical trial.

In India, one of the most surprising clinical studies to date has to do with high blood pressure and the slowing of the buildup of fatty deposits inside arteries. Researchers divided hypertensive people into three groups: yoga, medications only or no therapy. Those in the yoga group did yoga for six hours weekly. After 11 weeks, those in the yoga group saw their systolic blood pressure — the pressure in the arteries when the heart is pumping — drop 33 millimeters of mercury, nine more than the medicated group. That correlates to a person with a blood pressure reading of more than 150/100, which is considered life threatening, going back to what is considered normal, 120/80.

Additionally, Iszak noted that his students often change their eating habits, in favor of healthier choices, when they start a yoga practice. “In some of the senior centers, they have changed their menu in order to accommodate the yoga-induced changes in the students' eating,” said Iszak.

While the mantra at many gyms is “no pain, no gain,” when it comes to seniors doing yoga, there is no gain from pain. Safety in these classes is paramount and students are encouraged to modify poses as necessary to prevent discomfort from becoming pain.

“Yoga is about stretch and release,” said Goodwin, as she goes from student to student, adjusting the form of their poses to ensure they get the most out of the asanas while avoiding injuries. ■