

Yoga and Shouldering your Responsibilities

By Carolyn Reynolds

The shoulders are a metaphor for strength, both mental and physical. Louise Hay, noted author, feels that shoulder pain is indicative of trying to do too much, of “shouldering” too much responsibility. On the other hand, Mike Klatka, my father, remarked how a road is like a woman, that is, dangerous curves and soft shoulders. The combination of soft shoulders along with the normal loss of strength that begins from the mid 30’s makes for rotator cuff problems and frozen shoulders. As far as responsibility goes, women have always had plenty of that. We are caretakers. “Give us your cold, your hungry...”

The shoulder is a ball and socket joint like the hip but more shallow and the socket is not a bone but a combination of tendons and ligaments. The shallowness allows for more flexibility but also requires more support from the several sets of muscles that hold the tendons (connects muscles to bone) and ligaments (connects bone to bone) in place. These make up the rotator cuff and this group, in turn, holds the humerus (upper arm bone) in its socket and allows unimpeded movement if all works well.

If a woman spends all of her time working with computers, food preparation, laundry, driving, paperwork, and the like, there is little strengthening going on. Then the children need to be picked up and they grow so fast that we forget just how heavy they’ve become. Or the grandchildren come over and a game of frisbee sounds like fun. Those shoulders get used in new and demanding ways. These are scenarios for rotator cuff problems. A massage therapist once told me that frozen shoulders were quite common complaints in women who seek her help.

First be aware of how you are carrying your arms. If you spend much time curved forward over a desk, driving a car, or walking with drooped shoulders, what part of your shoulder is carrying the weight of your arms? It is probably that rotator cuff area. Stand straight with arms stretched out to the sides, palms down. Now rotate your arms into a small half circle, turning the inside of your elbows and your palms to face upward. Feel the bottom of your shoulder blades tuck into your back. Now drop your arms to the sides and notice how the weight of them is now supported by the back instead of the top of the shoulder. This is helpful.

Keep those muscles strong and flexible if you want pain-free movement in the shoulder joint. A regular hatha yoga practice will serve you well, especially if you make sure you are doing several sun salutations every day. You don’t need a set of weights when you have a body that weighs over 100 pounds. Lifting your body and lowering it to the floor several times per salutation will do the trick. Look for a yoga class in your area and you will be using your arms and shoulders in ways that will keep them strong and flexible. But don’t think that once a week will do the trick. A daily practice is the only way to go. You go to a class for instruction on alignment and for learning new asanas. Also go with the intention of taking at least one thing home with you to add to your daily practice.

When you return to your class, ask questions. Probably someone else in class has the same question but is reluctant to ask. We teachers like involved students. We like feedback.

If you feel something in your life needs to shift or that you would like to go to a yoga class but just can't find the time, maybe letting go of unnecessary stuff that is preventing you from doing a daily practice would be a good choice. When you are at the end of your life and you look back, will you even remember doing some of this stuff that is draining your energy? A daily asana/meditation practice will have no parallel in enhancing the quality of your life experience.