

Yoga Therapy

by Carolyn Reynolds

The definitions of yoga therapy are as varied as are the approaches. A few follow:

Yoga comprises a wide range of mind/body practices, from postural and breathing exercises to deep relaxation and meditation. Yoga therapy tailors these to the health needs of the individual. It helps to promote all-round positive health, as well as assisting particular medical conditions. The therapy is particularly appropriate for many chronic conditions that persist despite conventional medical treatment.—Yoga Therapy and Training Center (Ireland) Marie Quail

Yoga therapy consists of the application of yogic principles, methods, and techniques to specific human ailments. In its ideal application, Yoga therapy is preventive in nature, as is Yoga itself, but it is also restorative in many instances, palliative in others, and curative in many others. —Art Brownstein, M.D.

Yoga therapy is of modern coinage and represents a first effort to integrate traditional yogic concepts and techniques with Western medical and psychological knowledge. Whereas traditional Yoga is primarily concerned with personal transcendence on the part of a "normal" or healthy individual, Yoga therapy aims at the holistic treatment of various kinds of psychological or somatic dysfunctions ranging from back problems to emotional distress. Both approaches, however, share an understanding of the human being as an integrated body-mind system, which can function optimally only when there is a state of dynamic balance.—Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

Georg Feuerstein is one of the founders of the International Association of Yoga Therapists (www.iayt.com), a very credible association that shares a wealth of information on published studies involving yoga and health on all levels. Therapies can range from structural (anatomical), to medical, to emotional.

Since everything that manifests on the physical level is a direct result of goings-on on our more subtle levels, it seems that going to the source would be the most efficient way to approach the troublesome physical ailments that plague us. Going through the body, back to the source of the problem can yield astonishing results. Michael Lee, M.A. is the founder of Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy (www.pryt.com). Michael tells this story: He was at Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health practicing yoga with his fellow ashram residents. Michael was feeling discomfort in his hip while holding a posture. His friends encouraged him to stay with it and “work the edge.” (Kripalu teaches how to find your edge and stay there, breathing into it and relaxing the area of concern with each out-breath.) Michael stayed with it. Suddenly he was back in Australia facing three bigger boys in the schoolyard who were about to beat him up. He relived the situation while holding that yoga posture. His hip never hurt again. His amazement at the power of the body/mind connection was the beginning of Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy. Hundreds of therapists have been trained since then. This therapy is one-on-one whereby the therapist assists the client in a yoga posture. Together they find the client’s edge, a place that is a

good stretch but not a painful one, and they use the breath to work in that place. The therapist merely asks for feedback and clarification on the client's experience. This is something you can do yourself if you are disciplined to stay with it past a comfort level. The most amazing experiences can surface, things we have long ago buried and forgotten. But the body remembers.

The Body Remembers: The Psychophysiology of Trauma and Trauma Treatment by Babette Rothschild is a fascinating book on how the body of a traumatized individual refuses to be ignored. Babette has worked as a psychotherapist since 1976 in the treatment of posttraumatic stress disorder. In a space of trust and respect for the body's wisdom, healing happens. When the memory is dislodged it takes with it a release from the body's holding and pain.

Aparigraha, the fifth yama, teaches us that letting go is essential if we are ever to reach enlightenment. Sometimes people hold onto their traumas because they think that identifies them. "I am a cancer survivor," or "I am a recovering alcoholic," is often touted. Well, no, you are not that. You are so much more. Let go of the trauma. And then your body won't have to deal with that burden. Sitting in meditation, contemplating how that experience can help you on your spiritual path, can attenuate it. However, if you have nagging physical anomalies and can't remember how they could have manifested, yoga therapy can help bring it to the surface so that it can be let go. Your body is your best therapist.