

Reflections & Commentary

On Yoga, Body, and Mind

SAM DWORKIS

A complete collection of 50 essays on yoga, the body, and the mind.

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A Brief History of Yoga

by Sam Dworkis

Somewhere in India about 5,000 years ago, groups of deeply religious people wanted to intensify their disciplines by spending prolonged periods of time in prayer. Their minds were willing, but not their bodies. In order to learn more about controlling their bodies, the ancients observed that in nature, the bodies of animals were almost always living in perfect balance and harmony with their environment exhibiting balanced flexibility, strength and endurance. When hungry, animals ate. When tired, they rested. And when injured, animals sought refuge in a safe and quiet place until they either healed or died. Animals, they observed, showed little fear or anxiety; but when they did, it was brief because animals did not appear to worry about their past or future (as most of us do today).

From generation to generation, for thousands of years, and in concert with a deeply involved system of spiritual practices, a codified method of physical exercises, which emulated the perfection of nature, developed. Those religious ancients were Hindus and they called their methodology for balancing the body and mind: “yoga.”

They lived mostly in a tropical environment, were strict vegetarians, wore minimal clothing, and lived literally close to the earth. As such, they were extraordinarily supple and used their exercises to help them sit for prolonged periods in order to enhance their spiritual practices.

Fast forwarding now to the turn of the twentieth century, history records that several Hindu yoga-masters traveled to the west in order to share their religious and cultural beliefs. Along with their faith and thousands of years of yogic practices behind them, these yoga disciples, or Swamis as they were called, began to lecture and teach. The Swamis initiated a number of different approaches to yoga; most were Hindu based spiritual practices and many of them incorporated the physical components of yoga. In actuality, the physical components of yoga were but a small part of most of their overall

teachings.

Yet there were a few Swamis who more or less specialized in those physically oriented approaches to yoga that our western youth-oriented society has embraced and which have become wildly popular today. Especially popular are yoga systems designed to reduce stress and enhance emotional and physical fitness, including weight loss and increased athletic performance, all of which have been scientifically proven.

Today's popular styles of yoga include; quiet exercises for restoration, moderate exercises for everyday fitness, and extreme forms of athletically challenging yoga. When yoga is appropriately practiced at any level, physical, emotional and spiritual health is enhanced. When it is not, injury often occurs.

Which brings us to yoga's potential problem: classical yoga was created by and for extraordinary individuals whose daily lives—sitting on the floor, walking barefoot, living close to the earth—built a radically different functional anatomy than that of a modern Westerner. Forcing a body shaped by office chairs, concrete pavement, and tight shoes into 5,000-year-old postures isn't just inefficient; it's a recipe for strain and injury.

However, when we translate yoga through a modern biomechanical lens, we don't lose its ancient power—we unlock it. By adapting the postures to fit the student rather than forcing the student to fit the postures, yoga transforms from a risky cultural import into a safe, sustainable methodology for lifelong health, balance, and calmness.

Yoga Is Not a Religion

by Sam Dworkis

The word, yoga, is derived from Sanskrit, one of the world's most ancient languages. In its simplicity, the word yoga means: "creating union or balance in a person's body, mind, and spirit."

Yoga originally developed in the tropical south of India many thousands of years ago, by ascetics living a strict and disciplined lifestyle. Through the millennia, the "yogis" as they were known, were vegetarians, wore minimal clothing, and lived literally close to the earth learning directly from nature.

They observed that the bodies of animals in nature were almost always perfectly balanced. They exhibited near perfect flexibility, strength and endurance and lived in equilibrium with their environment. When hungry, animals ate. When tired, they rested. And when injured, animals sought refuge in a quiet and protected environment until they healed or died. Animals, the yogis observed, showed little fear or anxiety; but when they did, it didn't last long because animals, they surmised, did not appear concerned about their past or future.

For thousands of years, the yogis among other things, developed and codified a system of exercises that emulated the perfection of nature. The ancient yoga texts described how their physical practices enhanced both their health and spirituality. Now, keep in mind that these ancient people lived in totally protected environments and spent virtually all of their time in devotional prayer, which included the exercises.

Until the beginning of the twentieth century, yoga was practiced only in India and only by Hindus. That's why yoga had originally been associated with Hinduism. But to be sure; the physical and mental components of the yoga most of us practice today here in the West have nothing whatsoever to do with anyone's religion or belief system. "Yoga," simply means "the movement toward union or balance."

Through the centuries, many styles of yoga developed from the religious to the physical to the

etherial, but only a few became popular in the West. Here in the West, some yoga practices still are based upon religion while other popular approaches focus primarily upon physical exercises while other approaches focus only upon breath control.

However most yoga taught in the West today is a combination of varying degrees of physical exercises and breath control, and is commonly known as "Hatha Yoga." And within Hatha Yoga, there are many different styles; some based upon more athletic forms that generate enormous physical stamina, strength, and flexibility while others focus upon remedial exercises for recovery of illness, injury, or just growing older; and there are many styles of yoga in between.

Whatever the form, yoga helps the practitioner move toward enhanced physical and emotional balance. Whether approached remedially, athletically, or anywhere in between, its ultimate aim remains unchanged. Just as the ancient ascetics looked to the natural world thousands of years ago to find stillness and equilibrium, today's practitioner uses breath and movement to quiet the noise of modern life. Ultimately, yoga bridges the gap between ancient wisdom and contemporary wellness, offering a timeless roadmap back to ourselves.

Yoga Means Different Things to Different People

by Sam Dworkis

When people think “yoga,” different concepts emerge. Some believe it is an Eastern religion while others believe it is only an exercise system. Some think yoga is passive meditation; others think it only consists of basic stretching exercises, while others believe it also promotes strength and endurance. Confused? Read on!

Yoga can improve physical conditioning, but it is not exactly exercise. Yoga develops concentration and quiets the mind, but it is not exactly meditation. Originally a part of the Hindu religion, contemporary yoga has absolutely nothing to do with religion.

So if yoga is NOT exercise, or meditation, or religion, then what is it? Well, that depends primarily on who’s teaching it. But first, a bit of history:

Derived from an ancient language, “yoga” simply means: “union or balance of body, mind, and spirit.” Yoga developed thousands of years ago in India by Hindu priests living a strict and disciplined lifestyle. Through the millennia, the “yogis” as they were known, were vegetarians, wore minimal clothing, and lived literally close to the earth learning directly from nature. They were more flexible than Gumby.

These ancients observed that in nature, the bodies of animals were nearly perfectly balanced exhibiting profound flexibility, strength and endurance. They were in balance with their environment. The ancient yogis observed that animals ate when hungry, rested when tired, stayed quiet when injured, and showed little fear or anxiety. But when they did, it was brief because animals did not appear to worry about their past or future. The ancient yogis developed yoga to imitate the effects of nature.

Through millennia, yogis developed and codified a system including both exercises and breath control, using it to enhance their health and spirituality. In our western youth-oriented society, the more popular forms of yoga range from the restorative and quiet, all the way to extreme forms of physically challenging aerobic yoga. Yet most are based upon an ancient system that tries to

enhance a person's flexibility. Unfortunately, people drop out because they are not flexible enough to "perform," or because they get hurt.

Personally, I rejected the older "classical" system many years ago because I believe appropriate yoga should create a balance between strength and endurance, as well as flexibility. When adapted to honor the variable nature of today's women and men of all ages and levels of capacity, I believe yoga can be a significant vehicle for both maintaining and improving health. It is also profoundly spiritual because when appropriately practiced, and when used in combination with gentle yoga breath control, the actual "balance and union" of nature can be experienced.

Through the years, I adapted yoga so that "normal" people could safely practice in a way that has absolutely nothing to do with flexibility, and especially with anyone's religion. In order to maximize yoga's potential and minimize its liability, the yoga I teach is based upon known physiological principles and laws, which are presented in my free yoga educational website, www.extensionyoga.com.

So, what is yoga? From a Western approach, it is a system that when appropriately practiced, promotes wellness of body, mind, and spirit. It promotes a physical and emotional balance between strength and flexibility, which builds functional endurance. In so doing, yoga quiets the mind and promotes a profound feeling of well-being.

It's at that point when yoga truly becomes: "Meditation in Action."

Modern Yoga Has a Different Style for Everyone

by Sam Dworkis

Yoga's momentum is building. It is no longer associated solely with counterculture idealists. Today, people everywhere are practicing yoga: from young to old, athletes to couch potatoes, students to educators, and white-collar to blue-collar workers. They are all conditioning their bodies, quieting their minds, and reaping enormous benefits from this adapted ancient practice.

Nationwide, it is estimated that over 20 million people practice modern versions of yoga. Locally, adult education programs regularly introduce new offerings, and classes are consistently packed at local gyms. Today's yoga extends far beyond what was originally taught by the traditional swamis of India; the discipline is undergoing a significant metamorphosis. From backyard gatherings to corporate boardrooms, organizations are now integrating yoga into employee wellness programs. Furthermore, its popularity is gaining validation through scientific scrutiny, such as recent NIH-funded research investigating yoga's effectiveness for back pain relief.

Today, numerous distinct styles of yoga exist to meet virtually any individual need—ranging from gentle, restorative practices where discomfort is strictly avoided, to high-intensity environments.

One prominent approach literally turns up the heat. Practiced in rooms approaching 100 degrees Fahrenheit, advocates claim this environment increases flexibility and delivers an enhanced cardiovascular workout. Ideal for younger individuals seeking extreme fitness, this and other high-intensity styles appeal to those who embrace a "no pain, no gain" ethos.

Conversely, extreme yoga can be difficult—and even dangerous—for those who are out of shape, recovering from an injury, managing a chronic illness, or navigating older age. Even if a practitioner's body can adapt to the physical demands, high-intensity approaches often lack the calming, restorative benefits that gentler yoga provides.

Teaching methodologies vary just as widely as the styles themselves. Some instructors approach the practice pragmatically, while others integrate quasi-spiritual and athletic elements, complete with burning incense and soft Eastern music.

In most standard yoga classes, the instructor demonstrates poses while students follow along as best they can. While this format works well for individuals in reasonably good health, students experiencing physical distress or those who struggle to keep up may become discouraged and drop out—or worse, suffer an injury.

If you are profoundly out of shape, injured, or chronically ill, almost any traditional exercise regimen carries risk or may feel unattainable. Along with a select group of colleagues nationwide, I teach *ExTension* and *Recovery Yoga* —a system designed for practitioners of all levels, but specifically engineered for those recovering from acute injury or illness. Interestingly, we utilize these exact same techniques to achieve outstanding results when training elite athletes.

Our primary focus is activating and enhancing the parasympathetic nervous system. This allows the body to enter a state of deep relaxation. From this foundation, practitioners can intelligently and safely build physical strength, flexibility, and endurance step-by-step without forcing movement or causing injury.

Because this approach is entirely counterintuitive to traditional exercise philosophies, it can be challenging to grasp initially—especially given how rapidly it yields results. That unique contrast is part of what makes this practice so compelling.

The logic and science behind *ExTension* and *Recovery Yoga* are available free on my educational website, www.extensionyoga.com.

Ancient Yoga Has Evolved into a Modern Exercise System

by Sam Dworkis

I am often asked if *ExTension* and *Recovery Yoga* is different from the yoga taught at local gyms, or if it compares to established styles such as Hatha, Kripalu, Bikram, or Iyengar.

My response is usually: "Well, yes and no."

To understand why, it helps to look at how yoga got here. Originating in India around 4,000 years ago, yoga was initially a system of physical and sacred exercises inseparable from Hindu spiritual traditions. It remained largely unchanged until the early 1900s, when prominent yoga masters sent disciples to the West to share both the practice and its underlying Hindu philosophy.

Yoga remained relatively unknown in Western culture until the 1960s when the counter-culture movement embraced its physical potential and holistic values. Taught primarily in its classical Hindu format, early Western yoga demanded exceptional innate flexibility and a deep commitment to its traditional framework.

During the 1970s and 1980s, new styles emerged that separated the physical postures and meditative techniques from their religious roots. Many of these adaptations attempted to make yoga accessible to less flexible practitioners. In practice, however, they often fell into two extremes: intense approaches that forced the body into compliance—frequently causing injury—or ultra-passive routines that left students unengaged.

With few exceptions, classical and high-intensity styles remained unsuitable for older adults, individuals with chronic illness, or those recovering from injury. Having studied and taught yoga for most of my adult life, watching students struggle, get injured, or quit altogether prompted a fundamental question: How can yoga be adapted so that anyone—not just the naturally flexible—can reap its profound benefits without risk?

My approach began to transform after I trained as a neuromuscular therapist. Applying neuromuscular principles and biomechanical laws to yoga postures completely reshaped how I taught. Encouraged by students who thrived under these new methods, I began writing my first book, *ExTension Yoga*.

Just as the manuscript was near completion, life intervened: I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and as the illness progressed, I found myself unable to perform even the modified exercises I had designed for *ExTension Yoga*. The harder I tried to push through, the worse my symptoms became. It took years of trial, observation, and patience to realize a new paradigm: how to "do less and get more."

Ironically, my own physical limitations provided the ultimate testing ground. MS forced me to refine these neuromuscular principles so that individuals with severe physical challenges—including myself—could use yoga-based movement to feel better safely. These adaptations laid the foundation for *Recovery Yoga*—a system engineered to restore lost strength, flexibility, and maybe some endurance to those navigating chronic conditions, injuries, or the natural effects of aging.

So, to return to the original question: What exactly is *ExTension* and *Recovery Yoga* ?

ExTension Yoga is a Western, biomechanically sound approach to yoga-based movement anchored in physical science. *Recovery Yoga* is its gentle, restorative evolution. Neither claims to be a standalone, dogmatic style. Instead, together they represent an adaptive methodology—a functional bridge that allows anyone, from elite world-class athletes to those aging or managing chronic illness, to safely honor their body's limits while expanding its potential.

Not All Yoga Is Alike

by Sam Dworkis

I always smile when people tell me, “I tried yoga, but I didn’t like it.” To me, that sounds a lot like saying, “I went on one date, but they weren’t my type, so I stopped dating altogether.”

I am less amused, however, when people say, “I stopped going because I wasn’t flexible enough.” But the response that concerns me most is: “Yoga hurt, so I quit.”

Historically, classical yoga was developed in India thousands of years ago by extraordinarily flexible practitioners. While those early pioneers could accomplish astounding physical feats, much of traditional classical yoga is simply inappropriate for modern Western bodies and lifestyles.

When yoga arrived in the West about a century ago, it began to evolve into many distinct approaches. Some forms remained strictly traditional, while others adapted to incorporate the tenets of modern exercise physiology. Today, yoga spans a vast spectrum:

Yoga Styles: Certain practices are purely physical, while others are entirely spiritual. Some styles are so aerobically intense that only the fittest survive, while others are so slow and meditative that students quit out of sheer boredom.

Teaching Styles: In “follow-the-leader” classes, instructors demonstrate poses while practicing alongside the class, leaving students to keep up as best they can. Other instructors demonstrate a pose first before guiding students into it, while some don’t demonstrate at all—relying solely on verbal cues to talk students through the movement.

Instructor Expertise: Some instructors teach strictly what they were taught, regardless of whether they can comfortably perform the exercises themselves. Others teach only what they personally can do. In these environments, students who thrive are those able to adapt to their teacher’s body; those who can’t often quit.

Training Backgrounds: While most instructors today complete a formal teacher-training program, these courses vary wildly—ranging from a single weekend to several months or even years of intensive study.

The core issue is that well-meaning instructors typically teach the single style they were trained in. When a style is designed for athletically supple individuals, it creates a major barrier for someone who is middle-aged, out of shape, naturally stiff, recovering from an illness, or dealing with a past injury. For these individuals, a standard class is often either far too demanding or completely ineffective.

Because yoga varies so wildly, prospective students must choose their instructors with care. I have made yoga my life’s work for fifty years. Throughout my journey, I have practiced as a fit athlete, but I have also practiced as a chronically ill and injured individual. To understand how yoga can be tailored to the full diversity of Western bodies, I studied kinesiology, anatomy, physiology, and numerous yoga disciplines across the United States, Europe, and India. It was through my time in India that I learned firsthand why classical yoga must adapt to fit our modern lives.

To bridge this gap, I developed *ExTension* Yoga which is designed to accommodate all normal levels of fitness, flexibility and strength and *Recovery Yoga* which is specifically designed for anyone who is out of shape, managing chronic conditions, aging, or recovering from injury yet is eager to rebuild their physical well-being.

Ultimately, yoga is not a rigid, one-size-fits-all discipline, nor should it ever cause harm. The key is not forcing your body to fit a specific style of yoga, but rather finding a style of yoga that fits your body. With the right approach and proper guidance, yoga can safely build strength, endurance, and flexibility—helping you reclaim your mobility and vitality without risking injury along the way.

A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words

by Sam Dworkis

Cathy, my local post office clerk, excitedly asked me as I stepped up to the counter: "Did you see that yoga article in Monday's paper? I thought you said anyone can do yoga!"

Shipping books to readers around the world takes me to the post office several times a week. In a rapidly growing community, our local post office remains a welcome sanctuary of small-town warmth. Rich's corny humor and Cathy's upbeat nature consistently turn routine errands into pleasant visits. Over the years, we've shared light conversation about my work and what yoga actually is—and is not.

Which brings us back to that newspaper article.

Accompanying the text were prominent photographs of a young, extraordinarily flexible woman contorting her body into positions that Cathy—and most adults over thirty—would consider excruciatingly painful, if not outright impossible.

Even though the article itself accurately described five different approaches to yoga, ranging from gentle and accessible to highly athletic, those nuance-filled paragraphs didn't stand a chance against the imagery. Most readers took one look at the photos and declared "Forget it, I can't do that," and turned straight to the comics. A picture really is worth a thousand words.

Unfortunately, this highlights a systemic issue in how popular media portrays yoga. Time and again, outlets showcase nimble, hyper-flexible young people executing unattainable poses. On the rare occasion an older practitioner is featured, it is almost always someone who has practiced yoga for decades and possesses a body far outside the average norm.

Having studied exercise physiology and having taught movement for over thirty years, I know firsthand that yoga—when appropriately adapted—is arguably one of the finest exercise modalities available. It offers profound health benefits for individuals of every age and fitness level, not just the naturally flexible.

The biological reality is straightforward: younger bodies possess an immense capacity to handle extreme mechanical stress. In fact, evolutionary biology designed young adults to push physical limits, bounce back quickly, and thrive under stress. When a young person sees an extreme yoga photo, they feel challenged or inspired.

For older adults, or those navigating chronic illness and injury, that same photograph communicates a very different message: danger. Cathy's reaction was not an overreaction; it was a completely logical response to a visual narrative that systematically excludes average people.

This visual disconnect is further compounded in the studio. Many yoga instructors—whether young or old—are individuals who naturally excel at the specific style they teach. Naturally, they tend to teach what works for their own bodies, encouraging students to perform identical postures. Those whose bodies happen to fit the mold thrive, while the rest are left behind, assuming yoga simply isn't for them.

If there were an exercise system safer, more effective, or more transformative than properly adapted yoga, I would be practicing and teaching it today. But true accessibility requires looking past idealized books, photographs and rigid traditions. Real yoga isn't about forcing the body to mirror an extreme picture on a page; it is about adapting the principles of movement to serve the unique body that is you.

Yoga Is All About Balance

by Sam Dworkis

The term “yoga” is a process that simply means, “balance” or “union” and in its western and modern interpretation, has nothing to do with anyone’s religion, belief or lifestyle. In fact, when appropriately practiced, yoga can be done by anyone, at any age and in any physical condition. When appropriately practiced, the physical exercises of yoga are designed to enhance a person’s strength, flexibility, and endurance. Yet, yoga exercise goes well beyond the physical.

When appropriately practiced, yoga exercise is actually paradoxical: the harder you try, the less you get. That is to say; the harder you try to do yoga, the more apt you are to injure yourself. Or exacerbate previous injuries. Or create excessive and unnecessary body Soreness. Or even create emotional distress by being overly aggressive.

Any of these sets you up for failure and moves you away from the essence of yoga which is designed to help balance your body and quiet your mind. A strong argument can be made that an appropriate yoga practice is “meditation in action.”

When yoga is correctly practiced, you actually learn three things: 1) How to intelligently move your body in a way that reduces unneeded stress or strain; 2) how to minimize physical as well as emotional discomfort; and 3) how to integrate your breath with the movement of your body.

These are the primary mechanisms that eventually quiet your mind. Thus, as you learn how to practice yoga without forcing your body and as you learn how to control your breathing, your body adapts and accepts yoga exercise rather quickly.

Through a regular non-forceful practice, you begin to create a balance of flexibility, strength, and endurance, which enhances a feeling of well being. Because the body and mind are intricately connected; as you do yoga to balance your body, your mind will follow.

Conversely, when you are feeling “uptight”, is it any wonder that your body literally follows? How many times have you heard it said, “You are really uptight... take a deep breath and relax.” An appropriate yoga practice, which integrates body and breath, quiets and relaxes the body and the mind. Finally, through learning breath control and how to move your body to “get more by doing less,” you create an environment where you begin to pay attention to choices and

how you want to feel; both physically and emotionally.

By learning not to force your body during yoga, you are training your mind to become more “peaceful” and “observant” versus “noisy” and “agitated. The result is an emotional balance that many find elusive given today’s extraordinarily busy and hectic lifestyle.

Yoga: How Doing Less Gets You More

by Sam Dworkis

Today's culture is obsessed with winning and success. It is about working hard, playing hard, and constantly trying to accumulate more: more money, a bigger house, a newer car, the latest technology, and hopefully, better health.

However, as we navigate our complex lives, there is a steep price to pay for this relentless drive. Despite our best intentions, many of us find ourselves overworked, overstressed, out of shape, or all three. Those who actively try to stay fit often feel like they are fighting an uphill battle, while others find themselves trapped in a cycle of recurring injuries.

Have you noticed that with each passing year, keeping in shape feels a little harder? Have you noticed how old, long-forgotten injuries suddenly rear their heads again? Both physical and emotional stress play a massive role in creating these roadblocks.

Because stress runs 24/7, wouldn't it be nice to have a reliable way to access a quiet, centered space within yourself—a place where you can simply let go of tension and feel both body and mind instantly relax?

When appropriately practiced, yoga teaches you exactly how to do that.

Yoga when appropriately practiced consists of a series of non-competitive physical movements and breathing exercises designed to help you cultivate balance across body, mind, and breath. When correctly approached, yoga is accessible to anyone, regardless of current flexibility, strength, or physical condition.

Through practice, you learn to move your body toward structural balance while gaining control over your breath. You also learn specific relaxation techniques that allow you to access an alpha state—a state of meditation, mental stillness, heightened awareness, and clearer intuition.

In this environment, yoga becomes delightfully paradoxical: the harder you try, the less you get.

This doesn't mean doing less in life should be your ultimate goal—that might only cause trouble! Rather, given the constant stress surrounding us, yoga offers a rare haven where pushing hard is not the objective. You don't have to conquer it; you simply have to do it.

Yoga is not inherently difficult. By pairing gentle physical work with conscious breath control, it builds strength, flexibility, and endurance while quieting a noisy mind. Ultimately, an appropriate yoga practice acts as a grounding anchor—allowing you to stay calm, focused, and personally effective, even when everything around you is in perpetual turmoil.

The Paradox of Yoga

by Sam Dworkis

Merriam-Webster defines a paradox as "a tenet contrary to perceived opinion or expectation... a statement that is seemingly contradictory in nature."

The world of yoga is full of these apparent contradictions. Today, there are countless styles and teaching philosophies. Some strictly follow the teachings of a single guru, while others combine the insights of many. Some practices are purely physical, while others mix movement with spiritual philosophy. Some approaches are so aerobically intense that only the fittest survive, while others are so physically undemanding that their most vigorous moment is simply lying down on the floor.

The style of exercise-based yoga I teach is inherently paradoxical:

It is universal: World-class athletes and individuals with severe physical limitations can practice and benefit from it side by side. I enjoy training fit, high-performing individuals, yet I am equally committed to working with people recovering from chronic illness or injury.

It blends Eastern and Western thought: Although I studied yoga extensively in India and support alternative healing, I have rejected any esoteric or religious teaching and base my approach to yoga in Western anatomy, kinesiology, and physical medicine.

It ignores conventional markers of progress: Traditional yoga often focuses heavily on extreme flexibility, but I don't care if you ever touch your toes.

Regardless of physical ability, everyone starts my approach the same way: by slowly learning to control the breath and sync it with simple, easy-to-learn body movements. Paradoxically, by eliminating strain and refusing to force the body, you safely build far greater strength, flexibility, and endurance than you ever thought possible by using brute effort.

Even the breath itself is a paradox. Most people ignore breathing because it happens automatically. Yet when you consciously slow your breath while moving through yoga postures, something surprising happens: you feel deeply relaxed, yet your physical energy noticeably increases.

In fact, learning this approach is often slightly harder for naturally flexible people than for those who are stiff. Flexible practitioners tend to rely on their joint laxity rather than building controlled stability. While my students certainly improve their flexibility, strength, and endurance, achieving those physical traits is actually not the main goal.

So, what is the goal?

Beyond simply feeling better, there isn't one—because having a rigid goal causes you to "try," and trying gets in the way. The word yoga literally means "balance" or "union," yet even that definition holds a paradox. Because of how the human body is constructed, perfect physical balance is impossible to achieve.

That is why "trying" works against you. Trying implies aggressiveness, pushing, and forcing—all of which usually leads to tightness, strain, and injury. In this practice, doing less correctly gets you more.

If absolute balance is unachievable, why practice at all? Because non-forceful yoga quietens the mind, lowers stress, and encourages self-awareness, while simultaneously refreshing your outlook and conditioning your physical body. It makes you feel significantly better than when you don't practice—yet if you push too hard, you end up feeling worse.

The way I teach yoga is paradoxical, contradictory, and completely counterintuitive to modern fitness culture. But once you step on the mat and stop forcing, it simply works.

The Distinction Between Trying and Doing

by Sam Dworkis

Everyone knows exercise promotes good health. Right?

Not necessarily. When forced, any form of exercise—including yoga—carries real risks. These risks grow significantly higher for anyone who is chronically ill, managing an injury, or navigating the natural changes of aging. When appropriately practiced, yoga can be a powerful tool to help you rebuild your conditioning. Practiced aggressively, however, it can leave you worse off than when you started.

Yoga encompasses a vast spectrum of approaches. Some styles are aerobically intense, with instructors turning up the heat (both literally and figuratively). Others demand extreme flexibility or sheer physical stamina, with teachers pushing students to "work through the pain." On the opposite end of the spectrum are styles that emphasize sitting cross-legged, deep breathing, and chanting in a low-intensity, stress-free environment.

Yet across all of these approaches, one rule holds true: the harder you try to do yoga, the higher your risk of strain and injury. It makes no difference whether you are trying hard to achieve a difficult posture or trying hard to force yourself to relax—aggression in either direction can aggravate old injuries or create new ones.

Here is why:

When you are recovering from an injury, managing a chronic condition, or simply growing older, your body's soft tissue naturally contracts. Muscles, tendons, ligaments, and fascia all make up this soft-tissue network. When these tissues tighten, the nerves passing through them become irritated and stimulated. That irritation triggers a reflex action: the surrounding soft tissue contracts even further. Your body stiffens, tension builds, and pain increases.

To break this vicious cycle, we must stop trying to exercise and instead learn how to do exercise.

This is not merely a matter of semantics:

Trying is competitive, aggressive, and goal-focused. It pushes against your body's current limits, irritating an already stressed system and tightening soft tissue.

Doing is non-forceful, observational, and adaptive. It meets your body where it is, creating the safe environment necessary for true physical change.

By shifting from trying to doing, yoga becomes an invaluable method for overall conditioning, pain management, and aging gracefully—all without further stressing an already overtaxed body. Ultimately, progress in yoga does not come from pushing harder or forcing your body into submission. When you stop trying to accomplish a posture and simply focus on doing the movement correctly and without strain, your nervous system calms down, your soft tissue relaxes, and your natural mobility returns. Giving up the aggressive pursuit of results is precisely what allows real strength, flexibility, and well-being to take root.

Yoga as the Universal Body Conditioner

by Sam Dworkis

A foundational principle of exercise science is that physical adaptation occurs only in the specific body systems that are directly stressed during exercise.

For example, running produces favorable adaptations in the legs, heart, and chest wall, which directly improve running capacity. This response is known as the training effect. Systems that are not stressed show no adaptation; even heroic amounts of running will produce virtually no structural or functional changes in your arms. While the adaptations from running may transfer slightly to other leg-centric activities, such as cycling, that crossover remains surprisingly limited.

Understanding the training effect raises a crucial question for athletes and active individuals: how do specialized workouts or sports actually translate to overall, whole-body health?

The Limits of Specialized and Traditional Training

Many people turn to specific sports, conventional weight lifting, or gym machines to stay in shape. However, traditional strength and athletic training are extremely movement-specific.

For instance, performing isometric biceps exercises at a fixed 90-degree angle transfers surprisingly poorly to strength when the elbow is bent at 60 degrees. Executing arm curls at a slow, deliberate pace yields minimal improvement when you suddenly need to move quickly.

Even simple grip strength exhibits remarkable specificity based on wrist and elbow position, hand placement, and whether your hands are working above or below your head. Consequently, simple repetitive habits—like squeezing a rubber donut while driving—provide virtually no functional benefit for varied physical demands.

Traditional athletic conditioning and bodybuilding programs rely heavily on repeating the exact same isolated, symmetrical movements over and over in a single plane of motion. But real life—and dynamic sport—rarely happens in straight, predictable lines. Reaching, twisting, bending, and reacting require your muscles, tendons, and fascia to produce force at unpredictable angles and in asymmetrical positions that are almost never practiced on standard gym machines.

The Need for Movement Variation

When you train using rigid, repetitive movements—or—focus exclusively on a single sport, you condition your body to be strong only within those narrow lanes. To build functional resilience, movement patterns must be intentionally varied.

It is also important to recognize the difference between functional capability and unnecessary mass. Building excessive, bulky muscle mass in isolated areas often creates joint strain and chronic tightness. When athletes experience stiffness or hit a physical plateau, they often assume the problem stems from a lack of strength. Far more often, the real barriers are inflexibility, poor coordination, and a lack of systemic balance.

Conclusion: Yoga as the Universal Body Conditioner

Ultimately, the training effect reveals a fundamental truth: your body adapts precisely—and strictly—to how you use it.

Because most athletic pursuits stress only specific muscles through repetitive ranges of motion, they inevitably leave other parts of the body undertrained, overtightened, or structurally imbalanced. Running tightens the hamstrings and ignores the upper body; weightlifting often shortens muscle fibers and stiffens the joints; racket sports create one-sided muscular asymmetries.

This is precisely why yoga, when appropriately practiced, serves as the ultimate all-around body conditioner.

Unlike linear gym workouts or specialized sports, yoga works the body as an integrated whole. It moves every joint through its complete, natural range of motion, hydrates the fascial network, and balances opposing muscle groups. By pairing non-forceful movement with conscious breath control, yoga restores the flexibility, joint stability, and micro-circulation that specialized athletics drain away.

In the final analysis, athletes of every discipline—whether runners, cyclists, lifters, or weekend warriors—will profoundly benefit from incorporating yoga into their regimen. It does not replace your primary sport; rather, it undoes the rigid repetitive strain your sport creates. By bridging the gaps left by the training effect, an appropriate yoga practice creates a resilient, balanced, and fluid body that performs better, avoids injury, and lasts a lifetime.

Get More by Doing Less with Yoga

by Sam Dworkis

For decades, I have been advancing a fundamental premise: in exercise, you can "get more by intelligently doing less."

I did not reach this conclusion overnight. It evolved over a decade of practicing and teaching what was originally a very demanding, physical approach to yoga—a style so disciplined and powerful that it attracted both professional and amateur athletes.

Strangely enough, my perspective on exercise did not change much during those early years, even when I repeatedly injured myself. During that formative period, I demanded that my naturally stiff, inflexible frame transform so that I could place my hands flat on the floor, sit comfortably cross-legged, and do the splits.

I was pursuing all those hyper-flexible feats people assume yoga is supposed to be about. Along with that flexibility focus, my early training emphasized a strong cardiovascular component that offered a complete, high-intensity fitness package.

Back then, in my thirties, I felt invincible. I held onto that mindset even after tearing my lower back muscles trying to touch my toes, tearing a ligament in my right knee trying to force a cross-legged seat, and tearing a groin attachment in my endless quest to become more flexible.

When we are young, we are blessed with a remarkably resilient body—or so I thought. My body seemed to bounce back at the time, but years later, those old injuries reemerge from time-to-time causing discomfort.

I still practice yoga today, but I have learned a great deal over the past decades. Not only have I grown older, but I have also grown wiser. I no longer push my physical limits the way I did in my youth, primarily because I experienced a profound paradigm shift in my approach to movement.

After years of studying anatomy, physiology, and kinesiology to truly understand how yoga has its effect on the human body, I arrived at two distinct conclusions:

Younger Bodies (Under 30): Younger individuals generally need to push their physical and mental envelopes. Aggressive physical exploration is largely how younger people learn their limits and understand how their bodies interact with the world.

Mature Bodies (40 and Beyond): As we age, our bodies undergo undeniable, natural evolutionary changes. The high-impact, forcing style of exercise suited for a twenty-year-old is simply no longer appropriate for people moving into their fifties, sixties, and beyond—and it is dangerously counterproductive for anyone recovering from chronic illness or major injury.

This does not mean we should stop exercising. On the contrary, staying active is essential for long-term health. However, as with every other aspect of life as we grow older, we must learn to work smarter, not harder.

That philosophy is the bedrock of the *ExTension* and *Recovery Yoga*. It is about learning to approach exercise from an entirely new perspective. In fact, this non-forceful method is so different from traditional fitness

conditioning that it initially feels counterintuitive.

By letting go of aggressive "trying" and instead learning how to intelligently "do" your exercises without force or strain, you stimulate your body to operate far more efficiently. Without pushing into pain, your soft tissue relaxes, your nervous system settles, and your physical system naturally yields—improving strength, flexibility, endurance, and overall vitality.

Ultimately, mature health is not achieved by battling your body or forcing it into submission. When you stop striving for superficial markers of flexibility and focus on intelligent, non-forceful movement, your body rewards you with lasting resilience. By learning to do less on the mat, you unlock the ability to get far more out of life.

Small Is Beautiful

by Sam Dworkis

When I was in graduate school, just a few years before I began practicing yoga, I studied the work of the visionary economist E. F. Schumacher, who authored the landmark book *Small Is Beautiful*. His central thesis was elegant and simple: in economics and business, bigger is not always better, and growing too large or too fast often leads to systemic collapse.

Decades later, I have never forgotten that lesson. In fact, it has become a guiding pillar of my personal philosophy and my approach to yoga.

In modern fitness culture, we are constantly bombarded with the idea that if a little exercise is good, more must be better. We are told to go bigger, push harder, train longer, and sweat more. But "more" is not always better. It is rarely better for the average person trying to get back into shape, and "doing more" can be outright harmful for aging bodies, weekend athletes, or anyone recovering from chronic illness or injury.

When you push a stiff or healing body too hard, the nervous system panics, the soft tissues contract defensively, and the risk of strain skyrockets. High-intensity effort often creates a cycle of soreness, fatigue, and reinjury that sets you back further than where you started.

An appropriate yoga practice flips this modern mindset on its head. It begins with small, subtle, non-forceful movements—actions so manageable that the body can execute them without a single grain of strain.

When you work within these modest, gentle boundaries, something remarkable happens:

The Nervous System Settles: By avoiding pain and strain, your brain stops viewing movement as a threat, allowing tight muscles and fascia to naturally release.

Consistency Beats Intensity: Small, painless movements can be practiced daily without requiring long recovery periods, building steady momentum over time.

Subtle Changes Accumulate: As strength, flexibility, and endurance steadily improve, your overall physical function and energy follow suit—without irritating an already overtaxed system.

In *ExTension* and *Recovery Yoga* as in so many areas of life, small truly is beautiful. You do not need heroic efforts or grueling workouts to reclaim your physical well-being. A modest, thoughtful practice performed consistently and correctly bypasses the body's defenses, restoring your mobility and strength from the inside out. By embracing the power of the small step, you discover the profound reality that doing less intelligently will always yield far more.

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Cats and Dogs Do It: What Animals Teach Us About Yoga

by Sam Dworkis

Have you ever noticed what happens when a dog or cat gets up from a nap? Almost without fail, she takes a long, luxurious stretch before moving away from her resting spot. Have you ever wondered what is really happening during that stretch, or why that simple animal habit has direct relevance to your daily life?

If you live with a pet, try a simple experiment. Reach down and gently pinch and lift the skin near her shoulder. Notice how pliable it is and how easily it slides over the muscle structures underneath. Now, gently pull the skin on the back of your neck, your own shoulder or upper arm with the same amount of pressure. If you are like most people, you will notice a significant difference in elasticity.

If you have ever suffered an injury to an arm, neck, shoulder or back, the skin over that specific area will feel even tighter and less forgiving than the uninjured side. Try that out on yourself or a friend who has had an injury and test that yourself.

Setting evolutionary differences aside, a fundamental question remains: Why are animals, on average, so much more flexible than humans? And why does human tissue stay so tight in areas of past injury? The answer lies in the underlying "fabric" positioned directly beneath your skin and above your muscle structures: fascia.

Fascia is a profuse, continuous network of connective tissue covering your body from head to toe. It sits just below the surface of the skin and tightly wraps every muscle, organ, blood vessel, and gland in your body. Understanding the nature of fascia reveals why your pet's post-nap ritual is so important. Those frequent "cat and dog stretches" are not intended as a workout for muscles or to stretch skin—they are designed to maintain the elasticity of the fascia. Because it is a soft tissue, fascia responds to physical strain, emotional stress, and trauma by contracting.

Humans routinely bombard themselves with stress day after day, month after month, and year after year. Without a regular release, our cumulative physical and emotional tension causes the fascial network to tighten like a drumhead. Animals, by contrast, instinctively stretch throughout the day to clear out the accumulated tension of daily living. Thousands of years ago, the founders of yoga developed many of their foundational postures by observing animals in nature and mimicking their natural movements to relieve physical stress.

When practiced mindfully and without forcing, yoga acts as a powerful system to unwind contracted fascia—helping to restore balance, flexibility, and functional strength while bringing quietness to the body and mind. By taking a cue from our four-legged companions and integrating simple, non-forcing stretches throughout our day, we interrupt the cumulative cycle of chronic stress. Just as animals use instinctual movement to clear daily tension, a gentle yoga practice offers us a deliberate way to reset our nervous system. Rather than carrying the weight of past injuries and everyday stress in tight, guarded tissue, brief and conscious movements allow our fascia to soften, unlocking greater physical vitality and restoring the natural elasticity and ease of movement we were always meant to have.

How to Pick a Yoga Teacher

by Sam Dworkis

Yoga is one of the fastest-growing segments of the fitness and wellness industry. Today, there are dozens of different approaches and styles of yoga targeted toward a broad diversity of people—from athletes in their 20s and 30s who care more about fitness than spirituality, to gentle, meditation-focused practices appropriate for people of all ages and physical conditions. There are also restorative yoga classes designed specifically for the chronically ill, injured, or aging. Yoga is hardly a “one-size-fits-all” program.

Currently, most yoga styles are taught by young, athletic instructors conducting wildly popular and physically demanding classes. While it might be a bit more difficult to locate classes designed for older adults—and even harder to find classes tailored for the chronically injured or ill—they are definitely available.

If you are under 35 and healthy, you can walk into just about any yoga class and give it a try. If you don't like what's being taught, don't think for a second that you've “tried yoga” and it's not for you. You owe it to yourself to take several different classes with different teachers at various studios. You are practically guaranteed to find an approach that resonates with you.

However, if you are older, out of shape, injured, or living with a chronic condition, finding an appropriate class requires a bit more care. Although most yoga instructors have completed some form of teacher training, the majority continue to teach strictly within one narrow style. If you don't fit the profile of their average student, you may quickly feel left out—or worse, pushed too far.

Younger teachers are generally not well-equipped to teach middle-aged or older students, especially those who are significantly out of shape, chronically ill, or dealing with long-term injuries. A younger teacher might slow the pace down for you, but they rarely possess the depth of knowledge, practical experience, empathy, or personal understanding of what it actually feels like to live in an aging or compromised body.

On the flip side, you might assume that older—and presumably wiser—yoga teachers automatically understand how to guide mature students or those dealing with chronic pain. Unfortunately, that is rarely the case. Just because an instructor is older or has been teaching for decades does not mean they know how to adapt their practice, especially if they have never been seriously injured or ill themselves. Many older teachers simply teach what they themselves have been practicing for years.

In fact, aging yoga teachers who have practiced for decades without experiencing significant illness or physical setbacks often have a hard time truly relating to people their own age, let alone to those with chronic pain. To teach yoga effectively to chronically ill or injured students, it generally “takes one to know one.”

So, how do you choose the right yoga teacher?

Start by calling a few instructors and asking them directly who their classes are specifically designed for. Even if their answer sounds promising, you may still need to try several classes with different teachers until you find someone you feel completely comfortable with—a teacher who approaches the practice with intelligence, sensitivity, and, above all, the flexibility to adapt their teaching for your particular body.

Yoga Helps Deal with Life's Challenges

by Sam Dworkis

Yoga is an amazing tool.

I first began teaching yoga in California in the 1970's where it was already considered mainstream. As a new teacher, I quickly realized I was a small fish in a very large pond. Hoping to make a bigger impact, I relocated to South Florida, where there were very few yoga teachers. With my training, I theorized I would immediately step into a role as a senior instructor.

However, I failed to recognize why there were so few yoga teachers in South Florida at the time. Most locals assumed yoga was a fringe religion—or worse. There was virtually no community support for it. Because my livelihood depended on sharing this work, I realized my survival required educating people about what yoga actually was, and what it wasn't.

There was just one major problem: I was terrified of public speaking.

Yoga is not a religion. It is a practical methodology designed to help restore your natural balance—physically, emotionally, and mentally. It is about learning to control your body and mind in ways you might never have thought possible.

Through yoga, I learned to confront my personal challenges and apply those lessons directly to my life off the mat:

Overcoming Fear: To educate the public, I had to face my fear of public speaking. By using yoga breathing and grounding techniques to manage my anxiety, I successfully entered the local lecture circuit to dispel myths about yoga. Since then, I have lectured across the United States and abroad, given countless television interviews, authored three books, and come to thoroughly enjoy speaking to audiences.

Overcoming Physical Stiffness: When I first started yoga, I was extraordinarily stiff and tight—in fact, those who knew me well would say I was downright "uptight." Within a few years, my increased physical and mental flexibility transformed how I navigated everyday stress.

However, those early obstacles were nothing compared to what lay ahead.

Fifteen years into my teaching career, I developed Multiple Sclerosis. I began losing my hard-earned flexibility, my shoulders became semi-paralyzed, I gained twenty pounds, had difficulty walking, and fell into a deep depression. Feeling as though yoga had ultimately failed me, I quit practicing and teaching altogether.

Then, four years later, a series of unexpected events prompted me to revisit my practice. In a twist of irony, I began using my own previously published book, *Recovery Yoga* as my sole guide and teacher.

Re-engaging with those non-forceful principles dramatically changed my life. It forever altered how I understood the needs of injured, ill, or aging individuals. I was no longer just an instructor relying on formal studies of anatomy and kinesiology—I was now living the experience firsthand.

Now well into my own recovery, I am able to share a uniquely grounded perspective on using yoga not only for healing and physical renewal, but also for teaching yoga to physically fit people, but from a different perspective. This particular approach improves strength, endurance, and flexibility without promoting injury or otherwise irritating an already stressed or injured body.

Ultimately, yoga is not about performing perfect poses when life is going smoothly; it is about giving you the resilience and tools to navigate life when things fall apart. Whether you are confronting fear, recovering from illness, or simply trying to get your body moving again, an appropriate practice meets you exactly where you are. It reminds us that no matter how far off track our health or circumstances may seem, we always have the capacity to adapt, rebuild, and reclaim our vitality.

Without Force: What Yoga Teaches Us About Relationships

by Sam Dworkis

An appropriate yoga practice teaches us to take charge of our physical well-being by listening closely to the subtle cues our body sends us. When we move without aggression or force, our soft tissue relaxes, our nervous system calms down, and our strength, flexibility, and endurance improve naturally. By refusing to push or strain, we guide the physical frame toward structural harmony—and in doing so, we quiet the mind and foster emotional balance.

The way we treat our bodies on the mat closely reflects how we interact with the people in our lives.

Success, trust, and genuine joy in relationships do not come through force, control, manipulation, or emotional aggression. Demanding that a partner, child, friend, or parent change to fit our expectations is no different than forcing an inflexible joint to yield before it is ready. In both cases, pressure and forcing creates resistance, tension, and eventual breakdown.

True interpersonal connection springs from a very different place: the simple, attentive delight of paying attention to the people we care about and appreciating them as they are.

Just as in a thoughtful yoga practice, we can still offer guidance, set healthy boundaries, and direct the course of our relationships. But we do so without trying to manipulate or force outcomes.

As our yoga practice matures, we cultivate a heightened sensitivity to subtle details—the quality of a single breath, a slight release in a shoulder, or a shift in focus. Learning to appreciate those quiet, subtle moments trains us to pay attention to the subtle dynamics of our human connections:

Attentive Listening: Noticing the unspoken feelings, worries, or needs of loved ones without immediately jumping in to fix or judge them.

Non-Aggressive Communication: Expressing ourselves clearly and calmly without using guilt, anger, forcing or pressure to get our way.

Respecting Boundaries: Honoring another person's emotional and physical limits just as we honor our own physical boundaries during yoga movement.

A healthy relationship operates on the very same principles as an intelligent yoga practice. It is fundamentally about balance, respect, and careful attention to detail. It thrives when we stop forcing, stop demanding, and start listening.

Ultimately, yoga is far more than a set of physical exercises—it is a practical discipline for living. By letting go of aggression on the mat, we train our minds to become more observant, patient, and peaceful. When we bring that same non-forceful awareness into our daily interactions, we create the safe space necessary for deeper trust, genuine harmony, and lasting, balanced relationships.

Yoga Is Like a New Year's Resolution

by Sam Dworkis

Ring in the New Year is much more than a night for celebration; it is an ideal opportunity for reflection and renewal. Looking back at where we have been, gives us a stepping stone for changing where we are going. By examining past habits with an eye toward the future, we can break recurring, unhelpful patterns and create fundamentally different outcomes. In this light, making and implementing a New Year's resolution serves as a powerful, positive vehicle for personal transformation and that is in effect what yoga offers.

However, making a resolution is virtually useless unless you first take the time to understand precisely what you want to change.

Making a resolution without that thoughtful follow-through is like telling everyone how much you want to travel—packing your bags, buying the guidebooks, talking about the itinerary—and then never actually leaving the house.

So, how does making a New Year's resolution compare to practicing yoga?

When a beginner asks me, "What can yoga do for me?" my answer is usually simple and startling: "Nothing."

Yoga cannot do anything for you, nor can it do anything to you. It is not magic. Yoga is simply a practical tool you can use to guide yourself toward physical, mental, and emotional balance.

Yoga is not about straining to achieve a dramatic result; it is about learning to pay quiet attention to your "current reality" and then doing whatever is appropriate at your current level of ability. In that sense, starting a yoga practice is just like making a resolution: you don't "try" to make one—you either commit to the process or you don't. Success is strictly a matter of intelligent implementation.

Just as there is no magic in a New Year's resolution, there is no secret trick in yoga. Both are structured frameworks that teach us to:

Pay attention to what needs attention.

Develop realistic strategies for positive change.

Move forward steadily, step by step, without strain or self-deception.

Sustaining a yoga practice is remarkably similar to keeping a New Year's resolution. Both require ongoing discipline, and both are extraordinarily easy to abandon when life gets busy or when initial enthusiasm fades.

Ultimately, neither resolutions nor yoga work through wishful thinking or aggressive effort. Real progress happens in the quiet, unglamorous consistency of showing up, observing where you are today without judgment, and taking the small, appropriate steps needed to move forward. By honoring your current reality and maintaining steady follow-through, both a resolution and a yoga practice become deeply rewarding, life-enhancing experiences.

Finding Your Center in an Uncertain World

by Sam Dworkis

Living in a rapidly changing world has profoundly altered how many of us view our daily lives. What once felt like a predictable, unfettered routine has given way to heightened caution, persistent uncertainty, and ongoing stress. As social shifts, economic pressures, and personal upheavals swirl around us, the safe and secure environments we once took for granted can easily feel compromised.

When anxiety and caution become constant companions in daily life, an essential question arises: how do we navigate an unpredictable world without allowing external uncertainties to darken us emotionally, physically, and spiritually?

Throughout human history, people facing times of profound transition have sought out ways to find renewal, stability, and transformation. When massive shifts occur around us, maintaining emotional stability and a quiet center becomes a daily struggle. This is precisely why an appropriate yoga practice is so vital when the ground beneath us feels unstable.

There is an old physical principle: as goes the body, so goes the mind; and as goes the mind, so goes the body. When external events create chaos and fear, that emotional tension instantly manifests in the physical frame—shoulders pull upward, breathing grows shallow, soft tissues contract defensively, and chronic fatigue sets in.

While we as individuals have little control over the rapid changes taking place around us, we hold substantial control over how we react and respond:

Recognizing the Cycle: Anxiety is a natural human response to an unpredictable world, but allowing that stress to sit unchecked in the body leads to physical breakdown and burnout.

Shifting Focus Inward: We cannot eliminate world uncertainty by worrying, but we can cultivate steady internal strength, flexibility, and physical endurance on the mat.

Refusing to Force: Yoga is not about forcing your body into extreme contortions, nor is it about sitting cross-legged for hours trying to achieve a mystical state. It is simply a practical, grounded method of self-observation and gentle change.

Appropriately practiced, yoga is not about "trying" to achieve something heroic. It is about learning to do what you can do today while letting go of what you cannot control. When you pay quiet attention to your breath and move without aggression, nervous tension dissipates, and anxiety evaporates within the clarity of self-understanding.

This practice is truly universal. Everyone—from high-performing athletes to individuals navigating chronic illness, aging, or limited mobility—possesses the capacity to use non-forceful movement to regain emotional balance and control over their lives.

Ultimately, *ExTension* and *Recovery Yoga* won't change the news or quiet a chaotic world. What it will do is provide a reliable, practical tool to restore centeredness when life gets overwhelming. By practicing

intelligently without force, you clear out internal tension—leaving you with the clarity, stability, and quiet strength needed to navigate whatever comes your way.

Finding Peace in an Angry World

by Sam Dworkis

When events in the world feel chaotic, threatening, or unjust, it is entirely natural to feel anger. Anger is a primitive, automatic self-defense mechanism—an emotional shield designed to protect us when we feel vulnerable, injured, or out of control.

However, while anger can briefly feel empowering, holding onto it comes at a tremendous physical and psychological cost. Left unexamined, habitual anger and the impulse to blame external circumstances become chronic sources of stress, quietly wearing down the body from the inside out.

There is a fundamental physical truth: emotional tension directly translates into physical tension.

When you harbor anger, resentment, or a constant desire to push back against the world, your body reacts as if it is under continuous attack:

Muscular Armoring: Shoulders elevate, the jaw clenched, and soft tissues contract defensively.

Shallow Respiration: Breathing becomes restricted, depriving tissues of optimal oxygen and keeping the nervous system trapped in a state of high alert.

Systemic Fatigue: The body spends vital energy sustaining an internal fight, leaving you drained, rigid, and prone to injury or burnout.

When people live in this guarded, reactive state, they often approach exercise with the same aggressive mindset. They try to "burn off" their frustration through high-impact, forcing workouts. But pushing an already overstimulated body with aggression only adds fuel to the fire, reinforcing internal friction rather than releasing it.

This is where an appropriate practice of *ExTension* and *Recovery Yoga* offers a fundamentally different path.

Yoga is not about ignoring life's conflicts or pretending that difficult situations do not exist. Rather, it provides a structured, non-forceful environment to observe how you hold tension and to consciously let it go.

When you step onto the mat and practice without strain or judgment:

You Acknowledge Your Current Reality: Instead of reacting impulsively to external stresses, you learn to pay quiet attention to where you are holding tension right now.

You Disarm the Physical Defense System: By moving gently within comfortable ranges and breathing rhythmically, you send a clear signal to your nervous system that it is safe to soften.

You Restore Internal Balance: As physical armoring releases, mental reactivity cools down.

Ultimately, holding onto anger or looking for external targets to blame does nothing to change an unpredictable world—it only destroys your own internal peace. *ExTension* and *Recovery Yoga* gives you a practical, grounded tool to step out of the cycle of reaction. By replacing force with intelligent awareness, you clear away defensive tension, creating a resilient space of calm, clarity, and steady balance regardless of what is happening

around you.

Yoga Breathing Counters Stress and Anxiety

by Sam Dworkis

The rapid pace, demands, and unpredictability of modern life constantly vie for our attention, disrupting the quiet balance of everyday living. Even while surrounded by modern conveniences and technology, many of us experience an underlying sense of stress and anxiety that feels both elemental and pervasive—a subtle background noise that simply does not seem to go away.

Yet anxiety and fear are not inherently evil; they are natural, physiological responses to perceived threats. They are nature's way of stimulating our nervous system to ensure we can respond to real danger. However, when stress becomes chronic and unexamined, it quickly escalates to the point of compromising our health and paralyzing our ability to make clear, effective decisions.

During periods of intense stress or extraordinary challenge, people almost universally fall into dysfunctional breathing habits—either holding their breath or shallowly hyperventilating.

From a physiological standpoint, this is the single worst response to stress. Inappropriate breathing triggers the fight-or-flight branch of the autonomic nervous system, escalating blood pressure, heart rate, metabolic strain, and muscle tension. Over time, this chronic stress cascade floods the body with corrosive stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline, wearing down tissues, dampening immune function, and clouding our mental clarity.

While we cannot always control external stressors, we hold complete authority over our internal reaction to them. Your single most effective, accessible tool for managing that stress response is learning to govern your breath.

Breathing occupies a unique place in human physiology. It is autonomic—meaning it continues automatically without any conscious thought—yet it is also under our direct voluntary control. Because of this dual nature, conscious breathing serves as a direct bridge between the mind and the nervous system.

For thousands of years, yoga traditions have utilized breath control to quiet the mind—a principle that modern neuroscience and cardiovascular physiology now fully validate. Conscious, slow, and rhythmic diaphragmatic breathing directly stimulates the vagus nerve, triggering the parasympathetic nervous system, which is the body's natural "rest-and-digest" response. At the same time, proper, unhurried breathing optimizes blood chemistry and gas exchange in the lungs, reducing unnecessary cardiovascular strain and lowering elevated blood pressure. By anchoring your attention on the physical rhythm of inhalation and exhalation, you systematically quiet the mental chatter that feeds chronic anxiety.

You do not need to learn esoteric, complicated pranayama routines, nor do you need to contort your body into a pretzel to receive these benefits. Simple, non-forceful breath awareness is scientifically proven to create immediate, positive shifts in brain chemistry and systemic health.

When you practice gentle breath control, blood pressure drops, oxygen utilization improves, and metabolic strain cools down—allowing you to think, act, and communicate with clarity, even under pressure.

A simple, basic breath practice yields immediate physical relaxation and mental calm. Over time, sustaining a regular practice builds a deep reservoir of emotional stability, physical resilience, and lasting health. People often say there are no magic solutions in wellness; but when it comes to regulating your nervous system and reclaiming peace of mind, simple, intelligent breath control is about as close as it gets.

Breath as the Bridge Between Mind and Body

by Sam Dworkis

“Come on,” I heard a friend say to someone who was clearly rattled. “You’re so uptight... why don’t you just take a deep breath and relax?”

Whether she understood the underlying physiology or not, she instinctively knew a fundamental human truth: controlled, deep breathing calms the mind, settles the emotions, and releases physical tension.

Around three to four thousand years ago, practitioners in India developed a systematic methodology combining physical movement with controlled breathing to counter stress and improve the quality of daily life. Designed to help individuals live in greater harmony with their bodies and environments, they called this system yoga.

Those early practitioners recognized what modern medicine took millennia to confirm. They understood that the core purpose of controlled breathing was to forge a direct body-mind connection, reduce stress, promote deep relaxation, and optimize overall vitality.

Despite thousands of years of empirical success, modern science has only recently begun to fully validate these benefits. Today, neurobiology and cardiovascular research clearly document the intimate link between breath, brain function, and blood chemistry.

Anyone who has experienced sustained, unrelenting tension knows the toll it takes on health and happiness. During periods of prolonged physical or emotional stress—whether triggered by real danger or mental worry—the body floods the bloodstream with stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline. This triggers the classic “fight-or-flight” response, driving up heart rate, blood pressure, respiration rate, and muscular tension. Left unchecked, this chronic state of alarm leads to physical exhaustion, systemic inflammation, and long-term health breakdown.

Fortunately, nature provides an automatic physiological counterbalance. In the 1970s, Dr. Herbert Benson of Harvard Medical School documented this mechanism, coining the term the relaxation response.

The relaxation response is a state of deep physical and mental quietude that directly counters the fight-or-flight mechanism. When activated, it slows the heart rate, lowers blood pressure, relaxes soft tissues, and cools down metabolic strain. Benson demonstrated that regularly evoking this state produces lasting improvements in immune function, cardiovascular health, and emotional stability.

Controlled breathing is the primary key that unlocks this state, but an intelligent yoga practice takes it further. During a research study I participated in at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base examined the effects of yoga on brain function and we confirmed Dr. Benson’s findings: easy, quiet, yoga-based activities slow brainwave patterns and significantly reduce stress markers. More remarkably, we also documented that even dynamic and complex movements, when practiced thoughtfully without force or strain, suppress the hyperactive brainwave patterns associated with anxiety.

It was not long ago that Western medicine viewed the mind and body as completely separate entities. Today, science acknowledges what yoga has taught for thousands of years: the breath, mind, and body form a single, interconnected system. By using the breath to regulate your nervous system, you take active control of your physical health, clearing away stress and restoring lasting balance from the inside out.

Understanding Your Stress Threshold

by Sam Dworkis

Almost everyone assumes that stress is inherently bad. It is not. Without the biological capacity to process stress, our distant ancestors could never have survived immediate threats, and our species could not have evolved. Stress is an undeniable byproduct of daily living and an absolute requirement for human growth. At its best, positive stress spurs us to adapt, build resilience, and formulate effective strategies for navigating life's challenges. It tempers our character, sharpens our minds, and builds physical strength and endurance up to a point.

Yet individual responses to stress vary dramatically. One person might thrive under high-pressure demands, using stress as a springboard for productivity, while another feels overwhelmed by the slightest unexpected obstacle. A person's baseline tolerance for stress is shaped by a complex mix of genetics, life history, emotional conditioning, and overall physical health.

Every individual possesses a personal threshold for managing stress—an internal baseline of resilience. When stress remains within your manageable capacity, your system easily absorbs it, allowing you to handle daily physical and mental demands with clarity, energy, and composure.

However, when you face chronic illness, physical injury, emotional burnout, or the natural processes of aging, your baseline threshold drops while the body's internal stress load rises. When total stress exceeds this reduced threshold, your nervous system perceives every new input as an invasive threat.

Operating above your stress threshold causes your tolerance for basic environmental stimulation to plummet. Concentration becomes fragmented, memory slips, patience wears thin, and personal relationships begin to suffer. Even worse, operating in this hyper-reactive state exacerbates existing physical ailments, causing tight muscles to contract further and making minor discomforts feel excruciating.

Understanding this biological mechanism changes how we approach recovery and exercise. When your stress threshold is low, pushing through high-impact, aggressive workouts does not build strength; it simply overloads an already overtaxed system, triggering physical fatigue and protective tension.

This is where an intelligent practice of *ExTension* and *Recovery Yoga* makes a decisive difference. Instead of adding more strain to a compromised system, an appropriate practice works safely below your pain threshold. By engaging in small, non-forceful movements and conscious breath control, you avoid triggering the body's defensive alarms.

Working gently within your current capacity allows your nervous system to downshift out of fight-or-flight mode. As physical tension unwinds and internal stress cools down, your biological threshold naturally begins to expand again, rebuilding the quiet margin of resilience needed to meet life's daily demands with strength, clarity, and ease.

From Aggressive Willpower to Intelligent Awareness

by Sam Dworkis

The husband of a yoga student once asked me a straightforward question: if he took up yoga, would it make him stop smoking? My response was simple: "No."

Yoga does not make anyone do anything. It possesses no inherent power to force behavioral shifts, break longstanding habits, or alter lifestyle choices on its own. Semantics aside, yoga is not an external force acting upon you; rather, *ExTension* and *Recovery Yoga* serves as a practical, physiological tool designed to cultivate self-awareness. It provides a structured framework for learning how to first govern your breath, then control physical movement, and ultimately bring clarity, quiet, and conscious control to your mind.

There are many ways to approach yoga today. Some styles offer high-intensity, aerobic workouts suited primarily for younger or exceptionally fit individuals. Others center on classical approaches that demand extreme flexibility, while still others rely entirely on quiet, sedentary meditation. *ExTension* and *Recovery Yoga* take a fundamentally different path. They are Western methodologies grounded directly in established physiological principles, working in harmony with the laws of human anatomy and neurology.

The process begins by mastering simple, accessible exercises that focus primarily on the breath. From that foundational anchor, breath control is systematically integrated into movements that progressively enhance both flexibility and strength.

While these foundational exercises are easy to learn, they can be adapted to become deeply challenging—physically and mentally—always tailored strictly to what an individual can safely accomplish in the moment. *ExTension* and *Recovery Yoga* teaches you to do what you can do, rather than striving after what you cannot.

That distinction may sound subtle, but its implications are profound.

In a traditional gym environment, people frequently try to force strength and flexibility through strain, repetition, and aggressive willpower. In *ExTension* and *Recovery Yoga* you learn to exercise entirely without forcing. Discomfort is not something to push through; if an exercise hurts, it is a clear biological signal to modify the movement and eliminate the pain immediately.

As you build upon these foundations without aggression, your strength and flexibility expand naturally, yielding a noticeable increase in both physical and emotional endurance. The yoga mat becomes a microcosm of your daily life. As you gain mastery over your breath and physical frame, it becomes entirely natural to apply that heightened control, awareness, and understanding to other areas of living—including habits, choices, or patterns that cause you physical or emotional distress.

Anything that creates discomfort in your body or mind responds well to this expanded self-awareness. While yoga itself cannot force a habit to stop, replacing aggressive willpower with intelligent awareness makes it an invaluable tool for losing weight, reducing or quitting smoking, cutting back on alcohol, or managing anxiety

and depression.

Furthermore, as you learn to listen closely to the subtle messages your body sends you, your capacity for attentive listening increases across the board. Tuning in to your own physical signals fosters deep self-compassion, which naturally expands your capacity for patience, empathy, and care toward others.

Ultimately, while yoga holds no magical power of its own, practicing it consistently feels remarkably transformative. It offers a rare approach to complete wellbeing: an exercise system grounded in sound science that delivers profound physical, mental, and emotional benefits with maximum efficiency and minimal effort.

Transforming Depression Through Yoga's

by Sam Dworkis

Depression affects millions of adults each year, cutting across every demographic and lifestyle. While major depression can be completely disabling—interfering with the basic ability to work, sleep, eat, and enjoy life—there are also less obvious, lingering forms of depression that quietly erode your capacity to function or feel good.

The causes of depression are complex, involving a mix of genetic, psychological, and environmental factors. However, depression is also frequently triggered by the physical toll of chronic illness, long-term injury, or normal hormonal shifts. Whatever the initial trigger, neurological research confirms that depression is directly reflected in changes to brain chemistry and nervous system function.

This is precisely where an intelligent, non-forceful yoga practice makes a decisive difference—particularly for depression tied to physical illness and injury.

I know that yoga eases depression not merely because academic literature supports it, or because I have witnessed it in my students over the decades. I know it works because of my own direct experience as a patient navigating a chronic illness.

In 1993, I was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis. By 1995, the disease caused near-total paralysis in both of my arms. A clinical depression followed, because my life as a yoga teacher and practitioner—as I had always known and defined it—appeared to be over. Overwhelmed by loss and pain, I completely abandoned my practice and soon gained over twenty pounds.

Eventually, I made the decision to return to the mat, renewing the specific, gentle protocol I had developed after falling ill.

That system—what I call *Recovery Yoga* —is built on absolute simplicity. There is no forcing, no trying to meet arbitrary goals, no pushing into pain, and no heavy, strained breathing. It is simply a well-thought-out, accessible practice performed for fifteen to forty-five minutes a day.

Recovery Yoga helps manage both the physical and emotional burdens of chronic illness. When practiced appropriately without straining or forcing, movement and conscious breathing increases oxygenation and circulation throughout the body and brain. In the body, improved blood flow supports tissue repair and reduces inflammation. In the brain, this increased circulation helps stimulate the production of essential neurotransmitters—such as norepinephrine, dopamine, and serotonin—which are critical for regulating mood and restoring emotional balance.

When I restarted my practice, I was both depressed and significantly overweight. It took nearly a year of quiet, daily practice to feel a profound shift, but the results were undeniable.

While I still live with MS and manage its ongoing physical realities, the dark haze of depression cleared. Reestablishing my practice also allowed me to shed the excess weight, which dramatically reduced the

metabolic strain on my body and restored my vitality.

I did not choose Multiple Sclerosis, nor did I choose the physical and emotional adversity that accompanied it. But I could choose how to respond. By practicing yoga in a way that respects the body's current limits rather than fighting them, the return on investment far exceeds the physical energy expended. *Recovery Yoga* offered me a sensible, practical pathway to minimize liability, maximize potential, and rebuild a life of quiet strength and purpose.

My Life as a Movie: Rewriting the Script

by Sam Dworkis

If life were a movie, my script would feature a full spectrum of genres—vibrant dramas, lighthearted comedies, and more than a few uncomfortable scenes born of my own mistakes. But my story also contains an extraordinary, stranger-than-fiction movie-like twist—the kind of pivotal moment that snaps the main character out of resignation and saves him from giving up on his own life.

That movie-like twist came only after I had faced trials I would never have chosen. Despite my best efforts to maintain a healthy, active lifestyle, I began experiencing strange body sensations, followed by a frozen shoulder and unrelenting fatigue—mystifying symptoms that ultimately led to a diagnosis of Multiple Sclerosis.

In the wake of a life-altering accident or chronic diagnosis, almost everyone instinctively asks the same question: “Why me?” We rarely believe such things will happen to us until they do. Psychologists point out that people facing sudden physical loss typically move through predictable stages: denial, anger, depression, and eventually resignation. It is this final stage—resignation—that carries the quietest danger and most harm.

As my initial denial, anger, and depression began to lift, I settled into a prolonged period of quiet surrender. My overall health deteriorated, I gained weight, and I felt as though I were trapped watching a bad movie that I couldn’t leave and refused to end. After decades of dedicated practice, teaching, and writing books on yoga, I felt as if yoga had failed me. Disillusioned and exhausted, I quit entirely.

Then came the plot twist I never saw coming.

A friend of mine, an incomplete quadriplegic, asked if I would help her adapt the protocols in my book, *Recovery Yoga*. Reluctantly, I agreed—guiding her through the very lessons and practices I had abandoned in my own life. Months into our work together, we met for lunch. She shared that her breathing had deepened, her blood pressure had normalized, and her sleep had dramatically improved. But what struck me most deeply was when she declared that she had subtly increased the mobility in her arms and hands—and for the first time since her accident years earlier, could actually feel her abdomen again.

While I felt immense joy for her, I felt a sudden, profound embarrassment for myself. Here was someone using the very tools I had designed to reconnect with her own body, while I sat as a passive spectator in mine.

That moment was a watershed. Quitting yoga had been an understandable human reaction to grief and frustration, but staying resigned was a choice. I realized that while I had no control over having a chronic illness, I still held the power to choose how I responded to it.

That realization isn’t unique to me. Unpredictable circumstances will always interrupt our lives, bringing changes we would never actively choose. Yet in the space between an unchosen event and our ultimate outcome lies our power to choose our response. By rejecting resignation and returning to a gentle, intelligent yoga practice, we can once again become the active director of our own life.

Long Hours at the Computer May Be Hazardous to Your Health

by Sam Dworkis

Even after many decades as both a neuromuscular therapist and a yoga teacher, I am as guilty as anyone when it comes to sitting at a computer for far too long without taking a break. When I get deep into writing an article or developing new material, my focus locks in, and I can easily remain glued to my chair for hours on end without a break.

From an evolutionary standpoint, sitting motionless in front of a screen is simply not what the human body was designed to do. Prolonged sitting creates a subtle, cumulative stress on your physical structure—whether you consciously register it in the moment or not. And as with any physical or mental stress, the body's universal response is ... soft-tissue contraction.

How intensely your body reacts to this repetitive strain depends on several factors: your overall health, past injuries, genetics, and age. Over time, unaddressed physical stress impairs both mental focus and physical vitality.

During extended computer sessions, soft-tissue contraction concentrates primarily in the neck, shoulders, upper back, and often in the lower back—the core areas responsible for supporting the weight of your torso, arms, and head. Left unchecked, this constant static load creates a vicious cycle: prolonged sitting leads to slumping or poor posture; poor posture increases mechanical stress; increased stress produces stiffness and discomfort; and that discomfort causes you to slump even further.

To interrupt this insidious loop, I often recommend using a wide, flexible back-support belt. Similar to the elastic supports worn by warehouse workers and builders, a supportive belt provides light, tactile feedback to your lower back and abdomen. By offering gentle structural reinforcement while seated, it reduces postural fatigue and helps break the cycle of slouching, stress, and mounting discomfort.

Of course, equipment alone is no substitute for movement. It remains vital to stand up periodically and move around, even if only for a minute or two.

When you stand up, taking just sixty seconds to perform a few gentle, non-forcing movements can yield remarkable benefits. Simple desk or table stretches—where you use a stable surface to support your weight while gently lengthening your spine and legs like what's shown in *Recovery Yoga* in chapter 7—provides an immediate release for compressed tissues.

As counterintuitive as it may seem, these brief, effortless movements yield far better results than deep, aggressive stretching. Forceful stretching provokes a defensive contraction in already tired muscles, whereas gentle movement communicates safety to the nervous system, allowing tight tissues to release naturally.

Prolonged computer work also takes a toll on your vision. Beyond simple eye dryness, the delicate muscles that control eye movement and focal depth operate under the exact same physiological principles as the larger muscles in your body. Staring at a fixed screen at a constant distance for hours can induce severe eye-muscle

fatigue and strain.

Whenever you stand up to stretch, you give yourself a two-for-one benefit: as your body moves, looking around the room or out a window forces your eye muscles to shift focal length. This quick change in focus relaxes the ocular muscles, relieving eyestrain at the same time your body lets go of postural tension.

Prolonged desk work doesn't have to dictate how your body feels at the end of the day. By wearing supportive gear while seated, stepping away from your desk regularly, and letting your vision reset, you interrupt the cycle of chronic tension before it takes hold. By integrating a non-forcing yoga practice into these brief breaks can transform how you feel—using these simple, gentle table stretches help to: restore spinal length, quiet muscle guarding, and help to keep both body and mind feel better throughout your workday.

Practicing Yoga Saves Time

by Sam Dworkis

Media reports frequently highlight the wide-ranging benefits of yoga, emphasizing how it reduces stress, builds strength, and increases flexibility. While you might be intrigued, your initial reaction is likely a practical one: "I barely have enough time to sleep, let alone add another activity to my day." If you regularly awaken feeling unrefreshed, adding one more item to your to-do list can seem overwhelming.

Consider a perspective you may not have explored: practiced appropriately, a 30-minute daily yoga session can actually reduce the amount of sleep your body requires each night by up to twice the time spent practicing.

This is not magic; it comes down to energy efficiency. Both physical trauma and day-to-day emotional stress cause soft tissues to contract defensively. When these tissues remain tight and guarded, your vascular system must work significantly harder to transport oxygen and nutrients throughout your body. By the end of the day, your system is exhausted—not just from daily activities, but from the continuous strain of forcing circulation through contracted, resistant tissues.

Much of the sleep you require each night is spent attempting to recover from this constant, high-effort state. When you awaken feeling tired despite spending seven or eight hours in bed, it is often because your body spent the entire night working overtime just to overcome soft-tissue resistance and maintain your basic physiological balance.

An intelligent, non-forcing yoga practice systematically releases this chronic soft-tissue tension and restores natural, unrestrained circulation. As your body begins to operate with greater mechanical and vascular efficiency, it stops burning through precious energy reserves just to get you through your normal routine.

By investing just 30 minutes in releasing held tension through an appropriate yoga practice, you dramatically reduce cumulative fatigue, elevate the restorative quality of your sleep, and wake up genuinely refreshed—effectively gaining back more time, alertness, and vitality than the practice itself required.

Doing vs. Trying: How to Use Yoga for Chronic Illness and Injury

by Sam Dworkis

If you are living with a chronic illness or serious injury, you know what it feels like to lose more than your physical health. You know what it feels like losing control over your daily life, the gradual fading of joy, the threat to your personal independence, and the quiet fear that you are losing your mental clarity along with your physical capacity.

Despite endless doctor appointments, laboratory testing, prodding, and poking, you still feel terrible. Whether you have received a definitive diagnosis or remain in medical limbo, the daily reality is the same. Your medical team prescribes a new medication or orders another physical therapy protocol, and you comply without hesitation. What choice do you have? You simply want to feel better and regain some semblance of normal life.

Deep down, you know you should be more actively involved in your health maintenance and recovery, but previous attempts to take charge may have left you feeling even worse. Waking in the morning from dreaming of being whole, a profound sadness settles in as your mind clears and reality asserts itself. As the day progresses, an emotional burden weighs as heavily on you as your physical symptoms, leaving you at a loss for what steps to take next. When you lose your health, you lose your fundamental sense of self.

I know this terrain intimately. When I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis after practicing and teaching yoga for decades, I felt as though the rug had been yanked out from under me. Desperate to reverse my decline, I pushed harder, applying intense willpower and aggressive effort, only to find that forceful exertion made my symptoms dramatically worse. Struggling against my own body brought only physical exhaustion and depression, ultimately leading me to abandon my practice entirely.

The turning point came when an acquaintance, who was an incomplete quadriplegic, asked if I would guide her through the adaptive protocols in my book *Recovery Yoga*

Reluctantly, I agreed—finding myself in the surreal position of coaching someone else through the very lessons I had deserted in my own life. Guiding her forced me to look at yoga through an entirely new lens. It was during these sessions that I truly grasped the profound physiological difference between doing yoga and trying to do yoga. I was able to impress upon her that she did not need to try to do anything, but always, in every lesson, just to simply begin where she was and to use that place to begin her exploration of yoga based movement.

"Trying" is rooted in willpower, muscle tension, and striving for what your body currently cannot execute. When you try to force a posture or reach beyond your present physical threshold, your sympathetic nervous system perceives a threat, triggering a subtle fight-or-flight stress response. This protective muscular guard creates friction, systemic inflammation, and metabolic waste, leaving you drained and sore.

"Doing," on the other hand, begins by meeting your body exactly where it is in the present moment, working skillfully and non-judgmentally with what you can do. This distinction may sound like simple semantics, but its physiological and psychological impact is transformative.

For anyone managing chronic illness or physical trauma, appropriate yoga begins not with complex postures, but with basic breathing techniques that speak directly to your nervous system. Conscious breathing sends an immediate signal that it is safe to let go. Downshifting out of that constant fight-or-flight state eases chronic muscle tension, quiets a racing heart, and lowers stress levels—creating the quiet baseline that helps you move toward better physical function and increased peace of mind.

By focusing exclusively on what is possible right now rather than grieving what used to be, you establish a reliable foundation for future progress. Each small, non-forceful movement performed within your pain-free range restores neural pathways and helps you rebuild trust in your body. Ultimately, intelligent yoga is not about athletic performance, speed, or extraordinary flexibility; it is a systematic method for maximizing your current physical potential while minimizing unnecessary strain.

Linda's Story: Yoga and Recovery

by Sam Dworkis

Three years ago, Linda was in a severe automobile accident. She wanted to take whatever time was necessary to recover fully, but life's pressing realities could not wait. With a husband, two active children, dogs, horses, and a new house under construction, Linda was forced back into her routine almost immediately. She was up and running—except for one major obstacle: she kept falling down.

Along with her other injuries, Linda suffered damage to her vestibular nerve, compromising her brain's ability to process balance and head orientation. Whenever she stood up, she lost her equilibrium. When she closed her eyes, she lost all sense of which way was up. Constantly dizzy and nauseated, her entire perception of spatial awareness had been disrupted.

Before the accident, Linda and her family were exceptionally active, sharing a love for horseback riding, rollerblading, cycling, and motorcycle trips with her husband. After the injury, none of this was possible. She was literally out of balance. Linda desperately wanted to exercise and rejoin her family's active life, but every attempt exacerbated her symptoms, leaving her frustrated and disheartened.

After more than two years of conventional therapy with little meaningful progress, Linda decided to try a different path. She was drawn to yoga because she intuitively sensed it would not carry the rushed pace of her standard physical therapy sessions, and she was intrigued by the idea that yoga could serve as both exercise and a system for injury recovery.

She scheduled her first yoga lesson. After just six months of a regular, adaptive yoga practice, Linda's balance issues were all but resolved, allowing her to comfortably return to the family activities she had feared were gone forever. While her results were dramatic, they were far from unusual.

An appropriate yoga practice moves you systematically toward balance—a integration of body, breath, and mind. What distinguishes intelligent yoga from standard exercise programs is that you do not try to do yoga; instead, you begin by establishing a fundamental awareness of the breath. From that quiet baseline, you learn to move incrementally with your breathing, working strictly within what your body can do, rather than forcing what it currently cannot.

At first glance, this approach might sound slow or repetitive, but the reality is quite the opposite. Working this way becomes deeply engaging and challenging, regardless of your starting physical condition or flexibility. Appropriate yoga works deep within the nervous system by reconditioning and reeducating your proprioceptive pathways—much like the way you originally learned to coordinate your movement as a child.

Through this non-forced practice, you enhance not only your physical balance, but also your strength, flexibility, and endurance. There is no magic to yoga, nor do you need to be strong, flexible, or even healthy to begin. By meeting your body where it is, yoga provides a practical foundation for restoring balance to your movement and your life.

Intelligent Yoga Reduces Physical Distress

by Sam Dworkis

Not long ago, I clipped an article from my local newspaper and saved it, though I did not actually read it until recently. The piece, titled “Body never forgets yoga theory, but I forgot about the pain,” was part of an ongoing series written by Lisa Pierot, a woman living with metastatic breast cancer.

Two things about her writing immediately struck me. First, Lisa lives every day with a condition that feels like a ticking time bomb. Second, despite the weight of her diagnosis, she refuses to adopt the mindset of a victim. Though she downplays her own bravery—describing herself on her website as simply a survivor sharing her story—I see something far deeper. She is a genuine inspiration. She perceives life’s fragility with uncommon clarity—much more clearly than I do as someone living with multiple sclerosis—yet she refuses to allow illness to dictate how fully she lives.

Her column described stumbling upon an old yoga book she had used in college twenty-five years earlier. Remembering how easily she had mastered its twenty-eight exercises back then—and the profound sense of physical, emotional, and spiritual grounding that followed—she decided to reconnect with the practice.

Hoping to recreate those same feelings, she “tried” to practice yoga just as she had when she was younger. But her body no longer responded the same way. The harder she pushed, the more pain she experienced. Unfortunately, for the majority of us, this is a trap into which far too many people fall.

I was particularly moved by her sharp wit—especially lines like, “I am no quitter! I’m going the distance! I’m not ruling that out as a possibility,” followed by, “I will get this if it kills me.” Yet beneath the humor, I picked up on an underlying, understandable frustration: the realization that the very practice that had served her so well in college seemed to be failing her when she needed it most. Ironically, the fierce determination and drive that helped her cope with her illness were actively working against her on the yoga mat.

Throughout my career, formal studies in anatomy, physiology, and kinesiology have provided me with a strong theoretical foundation. But in truth, I have learned far more about how yoga actually functions—and why standard approaches fail when the body is compromised—through my own experience with MS and the aging process.

One truth has become unmistakably clear: when our bodies are distressed, we only accelerate that distress when trying to force improvement through aggressive physical activity. That is not to say we shouldn’t exercise; movement is essential if we want to maintain and improve our health. But when health is compromised, we must work more intelligently, definitely not harder.

When illness or injury is present, exercise must be adjusted and adapted to release tension rather than exacerbate it. After decades studying movement mechanics and human physiology, I continually return to adaptive yoga. When practiced with intelligence and subtle awareness, it maximizes physical potential while systematically reducing both physical and emotional distress.

Recovery Yoga is not about conquering the body or reclaiming a youth long past; it is about learning to listen to where you are right now. For Lisa—and for anyone navigating serious illness or injury—the path forward isn’t

found in fighting through the pain with sheer willpower. It begins when we drop the struggle, honor our current limits, and let progressive movement become a source of relief rather than another battle to win.

Yoga and Fibromyalgia

by Sam Dworkis

As a yoga teacher and former neuromuscular therapist, I frequently work with individuals living with chronic pain. Many experience a cluster of symptoms collectively known as fibromyalgia or myofascial pain syndrome (MPS). For some, it presents as a minor, persistent annoyance; for others, the discomfort and pain are so severe that normal daily life grinds to a screeching halt.

To understand how this happens, it helps to understand fascia. Visualize preparing chicken for dinner: as you remove the skin, you notice a thin, nearly transparent membrane wrapping the meat. That is fascia. You have fascia, too—a vast, continuous network running directly beneath your skin, surrounding you from the top of your head to the tips of your toes.

Fascia wraps each individual muscle fiber, separates adjacent muscle groups, and encapsulates every organ, gland, and structure in your body. It is literally the continuous web holding your body together. And when fascia stops functioning properly, there is a heavy physical price to pay.

In its natural state, fascia provides a slippery, Teflon-like surface that allows muscles to slide effortlessly over one another as you move. However, when you experience physical injury, chronic illness, severe emotional stress, or simply the wear and tear of aging, fascia responds by contracting.

In the short term, this contraction serves a protective purpose: it restricts movement to guard against further injury. But when fascia remains chronically tight—or contracts without an obvious trigger—it can leave you feeling as though you were hit by a truck.

Soft-tissue contraction is not strictly physical; emotional trauma triggers the exact same reflexive tightening. Chronically contracted fascia leaves you feeling exhausted, irritable, and depleted. It disrupts sleep, impairs concentration, and can make even the gentlest touch feel uncomfortable or painful.

The most challenging aspect of fibromyalgia and MPS is how quickly it becomes a self-reinforcing cycle of pain. The worse you feel physical discomfort, the more your psychological stress elevates. As stress increases, your fascia responds by tightening further, escalating both your physical pain and your emotional strain.

Conventional treatments often rely heavily on pain medications, and because some clinicians view myofascial pain as largely psychosomatic, it is occasionally treated primarily as a psychiatric issue. Psychosomatic or not, the physical reality is undeniable: when fascia is chronically contracted you will feel very uncomfortable in your body.

Just as "fibromyalgia" serves as a broad diagnostic label, "yoga" encompasses many different modalities. My approach centers on a simple principle: As goes the fascia, so goes the body; and as goes the body, so goes the mind.

Rather than trying to forcefully stretch tight muscles, intelligent adaptive yoga focuses on releasing contracted fascia and restoring its natural elasticity. Because of the deep interconnectedness of our physical and mental systems, releasing restricted fascia has a profound, soothing effect on the entire body-mind connection.

Living with MS for decades has given me an intimate understanding of this terrain from both perspectives—as an athlete and yoga teacher, and as someone navigating a chronic condition alongside aging. Combining this personal experience with formal studies of the human body, I know firsthand how targeted, non-forced yoga can interrupt the cycle of chronic pain and help to move with greater ease.

Bridging the Gap: Where Yoga Meets Modern Medicine

by Sam Dworkis

For years, a debate has raged over holistic and alternative approaches to health and healing versus conventional Western, or allopathic, medicine. While many hold strong opinions on either side, many others remain confused about what holistic and alternative medicine actually entails.

Currently, holistic and alternative medicine is defined as systems of healthcare outside traditional Western practice, including acupuncture, homeopathy, chiropractic care, herbal medicine, yoga and others. Rather than focusing solely on symptoms, holistic care centers on a cooperative relationship between an individual and a practitioner to foster optimal physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being. It considers the whole person—evaluating physical health, nutrition, environment, emotional state, lifestyle, and values. Holistic practitioners, including yoga teachers, emphasize education and personal responsibility to help individuals achieve balance.

In contrast, conventional Western medicine has traditionally operated on a doctor-driven model centered around accepted science, differential diagnosis, prescription medications, routine checkups, and, when necessary, surgical intervention. In this framework, patients are often encouraged to follow physician directives without question.

Having practiced and taught yoga for decades, I am deeply invested in the discipline. At the same time, I strongly value conventional Western medicine. I believe in regular medical checkups, taking prescribed medications, and undergoing surgery when required. Living with multiple sclerosis for the past nine years has given me a profound appreciation for everything Western medicine offers.

Simultaneously, my yoga practice has taught me the vital importance of personal responsibility. For me, yoga is not a religion; it is a system of exercises designed to adapt to my body's ever-changing flexibility, strength, and endurance in any given moment. What I value most about this approach—both as a practitioner and as a teacher—is that it adapts to meet individual needs without competition or pressure to perform.

Yoga teaches proactivity. It trains me to listen to my body's subtle signals and adjust when something feels off. If a movement causes discomfort or risks injury, I modify it. In this way, yoga provides a framework for making thoughtful adjustments in life to maximize benefits and minimize risks.

Ultimately, this approach to yoga serves as a microcosm for daily life. When my body feels out of balance, I am prompted to adjust my lifestyle habits or take a more active role alongside my physicians. It motivates me to research options, explore alternatives, and participate directly in managing my healthcare.

Fortunately, the traditional dynamic between Western physicians and patients is evolving. Practices like yoga—which foster self-awareness, proactivity, and personal accountability—are increasingly recognized as valuable complements to conventional medical care.

Beyond "No Pain, No Gain": A Smarter Approach to Yoga

by Sam Dworkis

Most of us have experienced—or will eventually experience—a physical injury, largely because we were raised on a single cultural axiom: "No pain, no gain." From childhood, family, teachers, coaches, and peers encouraged—and sometimes demanded—that we give every pursuit our absolute maximum effort, even when hurt.

We carry this mindset directly into adulthood, regardless of whether we consider ourselves athletic. The most visible consequence of this philosophy is the deep ache felt the day after working or playing too hard. Worse yet, as the years go by, that "day-after" discomfort intensifies, and recovery takes significantly longer.

When we exercise, a degree of soreness over the following day or two is entirely normal. It is simply the natural process of muscle tissue breaking down and rebuilding—a cycle that enhances strength and flexibility, particularly in our younger years.

As we age, however, pushing past physical boundaries stops building strength and begins causing chronic damage, both physically and emotionally. There is a critical difference between routine post-exercise soreness and acute injury pain. Normal soreness subsides within a day or two. Persistent pain, on the other hand, signals a longer-lasting injury where traumatized tissue is replaced by inflexible scar tissue. As mobility decreases and pain escalates, rehabilitative yoga becomes an invaluable resource.

Injuries hurt for a clear reason: pain is an explicit signal from the body that an area needs rest to heal. Ignoring that signal leads to chronic conditions that worsen over time. Trying to "work through the pain" exacerbates minor injuries, creating additional scarring and muscle atrophy.

Furthermore, an injury rarely stays isolated. Soft-tissue structures surrounding the injury site—muscles, tendons, ligaments, joint capsules, and especially fascia—contract defensively. When fascia remains chronically tight, it becomes a primary driver of ongoing pain, weakness, and loss of flexibility.

Non-painful yoga therapy offers a highly effective pathway to rehabilitation. Practiced mindfully, yoga targets the fascia directly by helping to release tightness, thus improving flexibility, and encouraging better circulation throughout the recovery process.

Additionally, yoga therapy provides a major advantage over traditional clinic-based therapies: once you learn the fundamental movements, you can easily practice them at home. This empowers you to take control of your own recovery on your own schedule.

Beyond the Quick Fix: How an Accident Survivor Found True Relief

by Sam Dworkis

I recently taught a five-day *Recovery Yoga* workshop in Massachusetts, and one attendee stood out in a way I will never forget. He was only twenty years old when a catastrophic car wreck abruptly took away his youth. Along with traumatizing his brain, the impact crushed his pelvis and severely mangled his abdominal organs.

Six years later, he lives with a single kidney, persistent urinary dysfunction, and chronic pain so severe that living a normal life feels nearly impossible. Sitting for longer than twenty minutes causes his pain to escalate to unbearable levels.

He has consulted with numerous top medical specialists who have aided his recovery immensely, yet he still lives in 24/7 chronic pain. You would never guess it simply by looking at him: he is tall, exceptionally handsome, brilliantly intelligent, and remarkably upbeat despite his relentless discomfort.

He is fiercely committed to finding anything that can help him reclaim a normal life. You have never seen anyone try so hard to get well. He stays abreast of the newest medical literature and travels constantly to confer with specialists across the country who might offer a breakthrough.

Brian (not his real name) had also become a dedicated yoga practitioner. He attends classes and workshops whenever possible because, a few years ago, an instructor in a class encouraged him to "go deeper" than he ever had before. Miraculously, following that intense session, Brian experienced a couple of hours completely free of pain.

Although Brian was never able to replicate that one specific experience or the relief that followed, he never stopped trying. It is difficult for anyone living without constant pain to comprehend how intoxicating those few pain-free hours were for someone whose daily life is dominated by suffering.

To be fair, Brian had also tried stopping physical activity altogether, but that strategy failed as well: as his body tightened from inactivity, his pain only intensified. And so, he kept searching for yoga classes that might help him recapture that lost moment of peace.

He finally found that peace during our workshop in Massachusetts. As paradoxical as it seemed to him at first, he learned that he could thoughtfully stretch and strengthen his body while simultaneously relaxing his nervous system and allowing his pain to diminish.

Pain naturally causes soft tissue to contract, making us both physically and mentally tight. That is a protective biological response: pain is nature's way of forcing the body to slow down so it can heal.

However, when dealing with a chronic injury, "trying" or "forcing" your way through tightness almost guarantees that pain will worsen. Forcing a stretch triggers the exact same defensive contraction as pain itself, causing muscles and fascia to grip even tighter. The harder you try to force the exercise, the more it hurts.

Brian experienced relief in that one past class not because pushing through the pose healed him, but because the extreme intensity most likely temporarily stunned or anesthetized his nerve endings. It was similar to a deep pressure-point massage that momentarily overrides pain signals—a temporary mask, but one where the pain almost always returns once the nervous system resets.

Real rehabilitative yoga operates differently. There is a way to practice that systematically calms physical and mental stress while safely building strength, endurance, and flexibility. This was the breakthrough Brian experienced during the workshop: learning to work with his body's reflexive guarding mechanisms rather than fighting against them.

Because this gentle, non-forcing approach runs counter to almost everything we are taught in modern athletics and fitness, it can be difficult to grasp at first. Yet, as Brian discovered, when we stop forcing movement and start guiding the nervous system, the body finally receives the permission it needs to release tension, rebuild, and to begin the healing process.

Yoga Can Be an Effective Post-Surgery Treatment for Back Pain

by Sam Dworkis

Back problems in the United States remain one of the most common reasons people seek medical care. Extensive studies, including research from Duke University, estimate that treating back pain costs Americans over \$26 billion annually—accounting for a substantial portion of total national healthcare expenditures.

Statistical estimates suggest that up to 90 percent of adults will experience severe, debilitating back pain at some point in their lives. We are not talking about a minor twinge after a long day in the garden; but the kind of acute, incapacitating episode that leaves you bedridden for days and hobbling for weeks afterward.

Back pain stems from a wide spectrum of issues. Causes range from soft-tissue issues like muscle cramping and tearing to structural problems such as spinal misalignments and disk abnormalities, including bulging, herniated, or degenerated disks. Another frequent culprit is spinal stenosis—bony overgrowths along the vertebrae that narrow the spinal canal, often accompanying osteoarthritis or the natural aging process.

Having spent many decades in the field of movement education and natural healing, one might assume I am entirely opposed to spinal surgery for chronic back pain. In fact, a landmark study by Arthur Klein and Dava Sobel (referenced in my book *ExTension*) evaluated various modalities for back pain relief—including physical therapy, acupuncture, chiropractic care, osteopathy, neurosurgery, and massage. Surprisingly, yoga instruction ranked highest in providing "moderate-to-dramatic long-term relief" for chronic back conditions.

While I firmly believe that an appropriate yoga practice is one of the most effective ways to maintain spinal health, I also recognize that there are times when surgical intervention is necessary to relieve debilitating pain and restore quality of life.

From a movement education perspective, many people view back surgery as a last resort rather than a first step—choosing to explore an adapted, non-forcing movement practice first. When a gentle practice does not lead to noticeable improvements over time, or if movement consistently exacerbates pain, seeking an evaluation from a qualified medical professional becomes a logical next step.

Although modern surgical techniques have advanced significantly—offering higher success rates and better outcomes than in previous decades—post-surgical rehabilitation remains critical. When practiced appropriately, yoga can be one of the finest post-surgical therapies available. When practiced inappropriately, however, it can be among the worst.

Most classical approaches to yoga—particularly modern classes offered in generic health clubs and gyms—are designed for healthy, uninjured bodies. Because many standard postures compress the spine and place excessive leverage on delicate soft tissues, they can easily retard healing, aggravate post-surgical sites, and worsen pain.

Conversely, when guided by teachers with a firm foundation in how the body works—who understands soft-tissue injury and the mechanics of healing—a targeted recovery practice offers an exceptional therapeutic environment. By decompressing the spine, supporting gentle circulation, and respecting surgical boundaries,

Recovery Yoga helps move you toward restored mobility while minimizing the risk of further injury or compromising your body's structural healing.

Why Old Injuries Resurface—and How Yoga Can Ease the Pain

by Sam Dworkis

Why do old athletic injuries seem to resurface as we age—the very ones we assumed had fully healed decades ago?

You might have been in your twenties or thirties when you badly sprained an ankle, pulled a groin muscle, or injured a shoulder. You were eager to get back in the game, so as soon as the acute pain subsided, you returned to your sport. Before long, you barely noticed the discomfort and were competing at full speed again.

Fast forward a few decades. Setting aside the ordinary stiffness that comes with growing older, pain from those long-forgotten injuries starts creeping back. It begins interfering with your favorite activity or sport—if you can even play at all anymore.

To understand why old injuries re-emerge, it helps to explore how different soft tissues heal and how the body adapts to past trauma.

Most people understand that athletic injuries damage muscles, tendons, and ligaments—collectively known as soft tissue. Muscle tissue generally heals the fastest because it is deeply infused with rich blood circulation. Tendon injuries heal more slowly due to reduced blood supply. Ligaments, having minimal direct blood flow, heal the slowest of all and sometimes require surgical intervention.

However, there is another critical, highly responsive soft tissue that plays an overlooked role: fascia.

Fascia is a continuous, web-like sheet of connective tissue lying directly beneath the skin, enveloping the body from the crown of your head to the soles of your feet. It encapsulates every muscle, surrounds individual muscle fibers, and merges directly into tendons, ligaments, and joint capsules.

A foundational principle of human physiology is that whenever a nerve is stimulated, the associated soft tissue contracts in response. Furthermore, the fascia surrounding a joint is governed by the exact same nerve roots that supply the muscles and tendons attaching to that joint. When an injury occurs, the corresponding nerve root fires, triggering a protective contraction across all associated soft tissue—including the surrounding fascia.

In the short term, this reflexive contraction serves a vital purpose: it is nature's splint, slowing you down and guarding the injured area against further damage. However, when contraction becomes chronic, it restricts joint mobility, alters movement patterns, and sets the stage for persistent stiffness and soreness.

Here is where the mechanics become particularly interesting: when a severe injury persists, the affected nerve and root can become a facilitated pathway. Think of it like a deeply worn groove in a dirt road. Years or even decades after you believe the injury has resolved, even mild physical strain or emotional stress can cause those hyper-sensitive nerves to re-fire along that established pathway, triggering old patterns of contraction and pain.

Compounding this issue is the natural aging process. As we age, fascia undergoes a natural, gradual tightening. Under normal circumstances, this age-related contraction is simply why we become naturally less flexible over

time.

However, if your nerves and soft tissues are already facilitated from old injuries, that age-related fascial tightening acts like a spark on dry tinder. As fascia compresses around a previously injured area, it stimulates hyper-sensitive nerve roots, awakening old pain signals and making long-healed areas hurt just as they did years ago.

Over-the-counter painkillers or anti-inflammatories may temporarily quiet the noise of pain, but they act merely as a mute button—they hardly resolve the underlying mechanical and neurological loop. Finding long-term relief as we age means shifting our strategy—focusing on releasing fascial tightness without triggering the protective nerve reflexes around past injuries.

When you force a stretch or push through resistance, the nervous system interprets that aggression as a threat. In response, it fires a defensive contraction, signaling the fascia and surrounding muscles to grip tighter. Unlocking these long-held patterns requires a gentle, non-forcing approach to movement.

By staying within a comfortable, pain-free range of motion and coordinating movement with deep, steady breath, you communicate safety directly to the nervous system. Reflexive muscle guarding begins to melt away, allowing fascial fibers to lengthen smoothly and circulation to flow more freely through long-restricted areas.

As defensive tension eases, joint mobility naturally expands and strain on surrounding tissues reduces. By showing the body that it no longer needs to brace against old movement patterns, you begin to alleviate long-held tightness in joints and tissues that help to restore comfort, fluidity, and ease in everyday movement.

Beyond the Quick Fix: Why One Yoga Pose Can't Cure Everything

by Sam Dworkis

I frequently receive inquiries from yoga practitioners and dedicated students around the world asking variations of the very same question: “I have [this specific condition or injury]. What single yoga exercise do you recommend to fix my situation?” It is easy to understand why people look for isolated, targeted solutions. Modern culture conditions us to seek immediate, symptom-specific remedies for every physical discomfort.

Furthermore, as yoga has evolved in the West, its expressions have broadened into a vast, almost overwhelming spectrum—ranging from gentle, laid-back restorative practices to heart-pounding, sweat-drenched cardiovascular workouts that challenge even the most athletic individuals. Yet despite this wide variety of options and styles, many people still treat yoga like a pharmacy counter—hoping to find a single, specific posture to prescribe for a specific ailment.

While certain poses certainly “focus in” on particular muscles or regions of the body, relying on a single exercise to resolve a complex structural or physiological issue—whether it is scoliosis, chronic back pain, or even a systemic illness—misses the fundamental nature of the discipline. At its core, the word yoga itself signifies “a union: the act of yoking or bringing disparate parts together to function as a harmonized whole.” Yoga’s true therapeutic power lies not in isolated muscular mechanics, but in its unique ability to stimulate every system of the body simultaneously, including blood circulation, neurological pathways, and brain chemistry.

Consider what happens when physical movement is intentionally paired with controlled breath work. Medical research demonstrates that incorporating breath regulation into movement does far more than simply increase oxygen saturation in the bloodstream; it actively regulates the nervous system and accelerates an “alpha-wave high”—a state of high-congruent brain activity in the alpha spectrum. Through this conscious synthesis of breath and movement, an experienced practitioner can access a profound state of emotional well-being, mental clarity, and systemic release within minutes.

Remarkably, this mental and physical state is achieved without the sustained, gut-wrenching, joint-wearing strain that endurance athletes, such as marathon runners, typically must endure to reach a similar neurochemical high. In my decades of practicing and teaching—as well as navigating my own personal experience living with multiple sclerosis—I have consistently seen that as we move through and beyond our 30s, yoga yields its greatest benefits when practiced without aggression, forcing, or competitive drive. When we shift away from aggressive willpower and learn to work intelligently at the level of connective tissue, the body responds by dropping its guard and establishing lasting balance. For instance, gentle movements targeting the body at the level of fascia—such as the “Wiggle and Waggle” sequences as detailed in Chapter 7 in *Recovery Yoga*—are extraordinarily effective at releasing deep, chronic tension and resetting persistent muscle guarding. Yet, as much as I value this specific fascia-releasing movement in my own daily routine, it remains only one component of a much larger picture.

No single exercise, no matter how restorative or brilliantly designed, can independently move the entire complex system of the human body into lasting equilibrium. The best response to any specific injury, illness, or structural imbalance is not to search for a single magic pose or quick fix. Rather, the most effective path toward long-term health and genuine recovery is to maintain a consistent, intelligent, and well-balanced overall yoga practice—one that honors your body's daily fluctuations and restores true union to the entire system.

Beyond Buns of Steel

by Sam Dworkis

Imagine a weightlifter who trains only the left side of his body. Picture huge, bulging muscles defining the left half of his chest, arm, and leg, contrasted with a weak, puny, and flaccid right side.

It is an absurd image, isn't it? Yet, focusing exclusively on firming your body or building muscle while ignoring appropriate stretching is functionally no different than training one half of your frame while abandoning the other. It creates a severe physiological imbalance—one that modern fitness culture often encourages under the guise of hard work.

To make matters worse, human bodies undergo predictable "ages and stages" shifts. Beginning around ages 28 to 32, and recurring roughly every decade thereafter, our tissues undergo a natural contractive phase. Soft tissue—comprising both skeletal muscle and the intricate web of connective tissue known as fascia—gradually loses its natural hydration and with that, elasticity.

When you layer high-intensity strength training on top of a body that is already naturally tightening with age, the muscle fibers do not just grow; they shorten. Over time, chronically shortened muscles pull constantly on their tendons, misaligning joints, compressing spinal discs, and restricting healthy range of motion.

Furthermore, this systemic tightness extends far beyond simple stiffness in your hamstrings or shoulders. When fascia and muscle remain in a state of permanent chronic tension, they act like a tourniquet on the rest of the body. Fundamental internal processes—including micro-circulation, lymphatic drainage, deep diaphragmatic respiration, and digestive motility—become physically constricted and impaired.

While a tight, hyper-toned physique in youth or bulging muscles in manhood may appear aesthetically desirable on the surface, that unyielding rigidity inevitably catches up with you. The very muscles built to protect and strengthen the body end up trapping it in a cage of its own making. True, long-term health does not require spending endless hours in the gym grinding toward a rock-hard "six-pack" or "buns of steel."

Ultimately, true physical well-being isn't measured by bulking up or forcing your body into a tight mold; it's measured by resilience, ease of movement, and internal harmony. A healthy body certainly needs to be strong, but it must also learn when and how to yield. When you pair intelligent strength with deliberate, non-forceful stretching, you allow your body to age gracefully instead of defensively.

When appropriately practiced, yoga provides the essential counterweight to modern exercise. By creating a sensible balance between strength and flexibility—which naturally improves overall endurance—you can create a fluid, fully integrated body that carries you comfortably through whatever life brings.

Ballet on Horseback: What Dressage Teaches Us About Effortless Movement

by Sam Dworkis

One of my longest-attending students was a professional dressage instructor. For those unfamiliar with the discipline, dressage is often described as ballet on horseback. The rider, dressed in traditional formal attire, sits atop a powerful horse that executes intricate, highly disciplined movements, all while the rider appears to be doing almost nothing at all.

Having taken dressage lessons myself, I can attest that it is a remarkably demanding sport. Maintaining that illusion of effortless control requires exceptional coordination, core stability, subtle body awareness, and physical endurance. Even at the entry levels—let alone competitive higher tiers—it demands complete harmony between rider and horse.

Because of the physical demands of this sport, this student became one of my most ardent supporters, frequently encouraging her own dressage students to take up yoga to improve their posture, seat, and balance. Recently, however, one of her riders resisted the idea, explaining that she had tried a yoga class in the past and quit because "it hurt too much."

Hearing that always frustrates me, because yoga should never hurt.

In our culture, pain is often glorified as proof of hard work—a badge of honor indicating that a workout is "working." But in yoga, pain is not progress; it is a vital warning signal. It is your body's nervous system communicating that a specific movement, depth, or technique is inappropriate for your unique anatomy at that given moment.

Unfortunately, many modern yoga environments encourage students to force their bodies into standardized shapes, striving to imitate a teacher's flexibility or match the person on the mat next to them. When we push through sharp discomfort or mechanical strain, the body's natural defense mechanism kicks in: muscles contract defensively to protect the joints, soft tissue inflames, and the risk of chronic injury increases dramatically. Pushing through pain actively defeats the entire purpose of the practice.

The correct, intelligent response to discomfort is to never force—it is to adapt.

When a posture creates strain, the exercise must be modified to suit the individual, not the other way around. By adjusting a pose's angle, or by reducing its range of motion, or utilizing supportive props, a student can learn to move mindfully, breathe freely, and steadily build functional strength and endurance without triggering defensive tension.

When yoga is tailored to meet the individual where they are, it ceases to be a source of stress or physical damage. Instead, it becomes a safe, sustainable, lifelong tool for recovery, movement, and overall well-being.

Yoga Firms Your Body: Beyond A Cosmetic Quick Fix

by Sam Dworkis

Approaching middle age and beyond, many of us complain about losing our youth, vitality, and firm physical appearance. As we age, skin loses its natural resilience and begins to wrinkle and sag. Before we fully register the change, excess skin gathers around our midsection, face, and the backsides of our arms—a constant physical reminder that time is moving forward.

While cosmetic surgery can alter our external appearance, it cannot reverse the aging process. Cosmetic procedures might adjust how we look in a mirror, but looking healthy is ultimately an illusion if systemic health is neglected. There is simply no substitute for genuine, deep-tissue health.

Loss of body tone is a natural phenomenon of aging that extends far beyond aesthetics; it impedes circulation and contributes to cumulative health decline. While activities such as running, racquet sports, swimming, and weightlifting effectively build muscle and stimulate circulation, they present practical hurdles as we age. Bad weather, gym access, time constraints, and the sheer physical resistance of an aging body make maintaining rigorous workout schedules increasingly difficult.

Furthermore, when time is tight, people frequently jump straight into intense activity without adequate warm-up or cool-down sequences. At best, this "just do it" approach leads to boredom and burnout; at worst, it causes chronic injury. While cross-training across multiple disciplines is ideal, few people have the time or energy to manage several sports while properly caring for their joints and muscles.

This is where an intelligent yoga practice becomes uniquely advantageous. Yoga is not only an exceptional cross-training tool for traditional sports, but it is also a complete, standalone fitness system. Depending on your abilities and/or needs, appropriate yoga can provide a vast array of exercises— aerobic and/or non-aerobic—yoga combines precise breath regulation with targeted movements that can enhance strength, endurance, and flexibility. Beyond muscle tone, yoga specifically acts upon “fascia”—the continuous connective web that holds your physical body together.

Fascia encapsulates everything: muscles, organs, glands, and nerves. Crucially, it is also the foundational "fabric" lying directly beneath your skin. When fascia loses its resilience and contracts due to age, stress, or inactivity, it directly contributes to sagging skin and poor underlying circulation. By practicing yoga mindfully and without forcing, you stimulate deep circulation and restore essential elasticity to the fascial network. As the connective tissue directly under your skin regains its resilience and tone, your overlying skin responds in kind—appearing firmer yet more supple, healthier, and backed by genuine vitality rather than a cosmetic illusion.

The Yoga Paradox: From Healing to High Performance

by Sam Dworkis

As a yoga teacher for decades, I specialize in the recovery and remedial aspects of yoga as well as training for general overall fitness. Given that focus, you might assume you'd need to look elsewhere for strong cardiovascular fitness.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Yes, there are some styles of yoga so aerobic in nature that only the youngest and fittest can survive them. On the other end of the spectrum, there are styles so laid back and relaxed that the most vigorous thing about them is sitting on a chair or getting down to lay on the floor—and there are many styles in between.

What I appreciate most about both the *ExTension* and *Recovery Yoga* styles of yoga is its building-block approach to fitness. It doesn't matter if you are chronically ill, injured, or even a world-class athlete—I will introduce you to your yoga practice the exact same way. And why is that?

Because the very first thing you did when you came into this world, and the very last thing you will do when you leave it, is breathe. Yet most people pay very little attention to breathing. It is a truly remarkable phenomenon: Do nothing, and it is there; exercise vigorously and your breathing increases and then subsides all on its own. But with yoga, as you learn how to consciously direct your breathing, amazing things begin to happen.

First, you will notice how relaxed you feel. Paradoxically, as you begin to coordinate your breathing with your movements, you will soon notice how energized you feel as well.

In fact, learning yoga is full of paradoxes. To be successful, you don't have to be strong or even flexible when you begin.

As you continue practicing, your strength and flexibility will naturally increase, but success has nothing to do with how flexible or strong you are—or become—because flexibility and strength are simply the byproducts of an appropriate practice.

If the goal of yoga is not merely to increase flexibility or strength, then what is it? I am not entirely certain there is a single answer. The word yoga literally means "balance" or "union." Yet that definition yields another paradox: The human body is simply not built equally left-side to right-side and front-to-back; and therefore absolute human balance can never be obtained. Regardless of how hard you try, a perfect "balance" is impossible.

So if perfect balance is impossible, why practice yoga?

Because it feels right. Yoga helps to quiet the mind and helps to move the body toward balance and union. Why? Because practicing yoga lowers stress, improves physical functioning, and gradually enhances strength, flexibility, and endurance—even without forcing.

Whatever your current health or physical condition, as you begin to practice and build gradually; increased movement, strength and flexibility progress. But what about all those crazy yoga poses you see but you know you could never do, be rest assured; they have nothing to do with how you practice *ExTension* and Recovery Yoga.

Yoga Helps Control Your Weight

by Sam Dworkis

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that 56 percent of adults fail to get the recommended minimum of 30 minutes of exercise four days a week. “These recommendations,” the CDC stated, “are just the minimum to prevent people from developing chronic diseases.”

The Institute of Medicine then responded: “In order to lose weight, people should double the CDC’s recommendations to 60 minutes of moderate exercise a day.” To which the CDC promptly retorted, “If you really, really want to lose weight, you have to do more than that.”

The CDC most likely hasn’t studied yoga—because although it is rarely categorized as conventional “moderate” exercise, losing weight is entirely possible when yoga is appropriately practiced.

What constitutes “moderate exercise?” According to the CDC, their list includes recommendations such as “playing in a marching band, shoveling snow, and moderate housework such as scrubbing floors, washing windows, and vacuuming.”

Pul-leeze! Who do you know that gets their four-days-a-week of regular exercise from shoveling snow, marching in a band, or intensely washing windows, vacuuming, and scrubbing floors? Given our often hectic and demanding schedules, finding time for exercise is challenging enough. But if we do carve out the time, wouldn’t we rather spend it doing something genuinely relaxing and nurturing?

When we are out of shape, growing older, or managing physical limitations, merely thinking about vigorous exercise can take our breath away.

That is where yoga comes in. We are constantly told it reduces stress, yet for many, the mere thought of forcing oneself into a human pretzel induces cringing. In fact, people who previously tried yoga often disliked it because they felt inflexible, bored, overwhelmed, or turned off by an overly pious atmosphere.

However, yoga styles vary widely. Think of them like automobiles: Any car can take you down the road, but some models get you there more quickly while others get you there safer. Some are easy to drive, while others are complicated while others can be outright dangerous.

When guided by well-educated instructors, yoga can be adapted so that everyone can successfully practice and benefit; from the chronically ill and injured—to couch potatoes—from normally healthy people to world-class athletes.

Yoga is not magical, nor is it inherently difficult, but it does require a degree of discipline. It involves learning over time, how to appropriately practice attainable exercises that encourage the body to move toward homeostasis—nature’s natural equilibrium.

You rarely see overweight animals in the wild. Even when presented with an abundance of food, nature consistently seeks homeostasis. So how exactly does yoga help manage weight?

When practiced appropriately and without forcing, yoga promotes balance throughout the entire body—not just in the skeletal muscles. It works internally to help balance the endocrine system, which exerts a profound influence on metabolism and, ultimately, body weight. In fact, under an appropriate practice, those who are overweight tend to lose weight, while those who are underweight generally gain it.

Appropriately practiced, yoga offers far more than weight management alone. You will sleep better, enjoy enhanced concentration, and handle stress with greater ease. When your time is limited, an appropriate yoga practice simply gives you a whole lot more bang for your buck than conventional exercise.

Yoga Is for Men

by Sam Dworkis

Why is it that men think yoga is only for women?

Is it because men assume you have to be flexible to do yoga because everyone knows women are inherently more flexible than men? Or is it because men think that doing yoga requires sitting quietly in some awful cross-legged position to contemplate their navel? Or is it because men think they would have to adopt someone else's religion?

Well, if that is what yoga is, forget about it! No way! Guys wouldn't want any part of it. They want to do things—they want to run, play ball, work on the car, or watch sports on TV. Heck, men would rather go shopping than practice yoga. You would naturally think that yoga isn't active enough for guys, right?

Wrong.

I am here to tell you that yoga, when practiced appropriately, is one of the most demanding and physically challenging activities there is. Let's take a closer look at what "yoga" really means. The word literally translates to "balance" or "union." First of all, a man absolutely does not need to be flexible when he begins. When men become proficient with yoga, they move toward a balance between their strength and flexibility. In other words, yoga is about creating physiological balance, which is far more challenging than one might think.

I am also here to tell you that once the initial learning curve is behind you, an appropriate yoga class can challenge a man in ways he never thought possible. Yet even when demanding, yoga is practiced in a way that minimizes the propensity for injury. In fact, an appropriate practice actually helps the body to heal older injuries and correct chronic imbalances.

What most guys don't realize is that yoga was developed thousands of years ago by men, and for centuries, only men were allowed to practice it. It wasn't until relatively recently—perhaps the last hundred years or so—that women were even permitted to practice. When yoga was brought to the West, because women are inherently flexible and could do the classical yoga exercises, they became the predominant practitioners. (Here's why, guys: a woman's pelvic and ligament structure is genetically designed for childbirth, giving women a natural flexibility that men inherently lack.)

In any event, through its balancing effect on soft-tissue structures, men who practice yoga find that their athletic performance dramatically improves. There is no magic to it: a well-balanced body, that is; a balance of strength with balanced flexibility simply allows the body to operate with greater control and lower risk of injury.

In addition, beyond physical balance, a regular practice cultivates mental balance—giving you greater self-control and a far more effective way to manage daily stress.

Lastly, guys, here is the honest truth: building a disciplined practice isn't easy. Yoga is very much the opposite of falling in love—it's tough to get into, but exceptionally easy to get out of it.

Lower Your Golf Score Through Yoga

by Sam Dworkis

I've played a lot of sports through the years, but without a doubt, golf is the most demanding. It is not as purely physically demanding as basketball, tennis, or racquetball, but it is demanding in significantly different ways. If you play golf, you know exactly what I mean.

You would think that once you purchased your first set of clubs and took a few lessons, you'd be set for years of play. Wrong. Once you start playing, it doesn't take long to realize just how inadequate everything feels. For instance, no matter what you spent on your clubs, you soon realize you didn't spend enough. Then there are the lessons: as soon as you think you've mastered one basic fundamental, you discover that 1) you haven't mastered it at all, and 2) there is so much more to learn.

And let's not forget the thousands of dollars spent on clinics, magazines, books, videos, and gadgets—all in the quest to improve your game. Yet most of us completely overlook the single most important piece of golfing equipment. When appropriately maintained, this piece of equipment will improve your game far more than anything else you can buy, making it one of the least expensive and best investments you will ever make.

Of course, I am talking about your body—and maintaining it through yoga.

What makes golf (and life) so demanding is that it is as much mental as it is physical. Quite frankly, I don't understand why more serious golfers don't practice yoga; because both golf and yoga are ultimately about balance—the balance of body and mind. Have you ever posted a good score when you were agitated or preoccupied? You obviously play better when you can focus completely on the fundamentals, and heightened concentration is one of the very first benefits you experience through yoga.

If you've ever played on a day when the air was heavy or smoky and you couldn't quite catch your breath, think back to how you played. Breathing is another crucial area that improves with yoga. Breath is the gateway to the mind and affects virtually everything in your life—not just your golf game. Through yoga, you learn to regulate your breath and control your emotions under pressure.

It is a remarkably powerful tool. By learning an appropriate yoga practice, you will increase your range of motion while improving your flexibility, strength, and endurance—both physically and emotionally. You can obsess over your golf mechanics until the cows come home, but learning to manage your emotional and mental reactions will usually have a far greater impact on your game.

The bottom line? By learning how to coordinate and integrate body, breath, and mind, you will be able to lock in your focus and concentration when standing over that crucial drive or high-stakes putt.

Adaptation: Making Yoga Work for Your Sport

by Sam Dworkis

To master your favorite sport, your body must adapt to it. In sports science, this process is governed by the SAID principle (Specific Adaptations to Imposed Demands). The body adapts specifically to the exact nature of the stress applied. If your passion is running, for example, regular training produces favorable physical adaptations in your legs, heart, and chest muscles.

Adaptation for runners promotes deeper breathing and improves leg stamina, which enhances your capacity for future runs. However, muscles not primarily used for running—such as those in your arms—do not undergo the same adaptation.

Similarly, if softball is your passion, consistent batting practice helps adapt the specific muscles needed to become a better hitter. Yet batting practice does not enhance base-running, just as base-running does not improve batting.

While adaptation can transfer to other sports that rely on similar muscle groups and physiological systems, that transfer is rarely as significant as you might expect. Running does not necessarily make you a better cyclist, nor does swinging a softball bat translate to becoming a better golfer.

Weight training offers another clear example. Repetitive, weight-bearing exercise certainly builds strength, but building strength without maintaining flexibility actually impedes skill transfer to other sports—such as using weightlifting alone to improve your golf game. While your arms and legs may grow stronger, prioritizing raw strength can compromise the fine-motor coordination required for a smooth golf swing. Furthermore, the forceful exhaling required in heavy lifting is completely counterproductive to the fine, slow, quiet, and relaxed breathing required for accurate putting.

Focusing exclusively on adaptation to a single sport creates two major problems: the repetitive overuse of specific body systems, and the under-use of systems not directly involved in your sport. Both conditions invite injury. You will always perform better in your favorite sport when your entire body is well-balanced—when you are both strong and flexible, and when you have precise control over your breath.

Exercise physiologists have long known that cross-training allows the body to work more efficiently while reducing the risk of injury. Cross-training develops your entire body by distributing the overall training load across various physiological systems. Appropriate cross-training also keeps you active during recovery. If one part of your body is impaired, you can continue training using other parts. Finally, cross-training adds much-needed variety to your routine, helping to prevent mental and physical burnout.

Because most people assume yoga is primarily about stretching, you might think it serves as the a good cross-training tool. Usually, it does not. Although stretching is an important component of any athletic regimen, yoga stretching by itself can actually lead to neuromuscular imbalances and frequent muscle, tendon, or joint injuries.

Just as there are many different types of shoes, the same holds true for yoga. A heavy steel-toed boot, a high heel, and a running shoe all serve a purpose, but wearing the wrong one for a marathon will leave you injured. The holds true for yoga: There are numerous styles and methods of yoga, with some being far safer and more suited to your body's actual needs than others.

Most traditional styles are "classically" influenced, with their origins rooted in ancient India. Developed and originally practiced by ultra-flexible vegetarians living literally close to the earth, classical yoga is often ill-suited for the modern Western body.

On the other hand, there are approaches to yoga that focus directly on its true definition: "balance and union." Without forcing, these methods, such as *ExTension* and *Recovery Yoga* promote both strength and flexibility across all of the body's various systems.

These approaches to yoga teach you how to work with your body rather than against it, showing you how to build range of motion without straining ligaments, joints, and tendons. An intelligent, building-block practice doesn't just stretch tight muscles; it also strengthens them. Instead of creating new physical imbalances, it restores natural alignment and teaches you how to control your breathing under physical stress. That is when yoga becomes the ideal cross-training tool—one that elevates your performance, sharpens your focus, and helps protect you from injury in whatever sport you love.

Weekend Athletes Think This Class Is Too Easy

by Sam Dworkis

“OK, you weekend athletes, listen up. Look at the person to your left. Now look at the person to your right. By the time of your next yoga class, some of you will have quit. By the time of your class after that, more of you will have dropped out.”

I know that my yoga class is not law school or an extreme fitness regimen, but many of you will quit because in spite of everything I say or do. You dropouts will still think this course was too easy—not challenging enough. Too much talk and not enough action. But mostly, you will think what I’m teaching is counterintuitive to everything you’ve ever learned in sports.

Most of you have been injured as a result of your sport—by not properly warming up, or by pushing yourself too hard. You want to just get out there and do it! And that’s just the kind of old-school thinking that got you into trouble in the first place. It’s why you can’t seem to shake those nagging old injuries. That’s why you run out of breath far too soon. Or that’s why playing hard on Sunday makes it painful to roll out of bed on Monday—that is, assuming you can even play anymore.

You know who you are. You’re the guy or gal who thought you’d stay physically active and at the top of your game forever. Sure, you were able to maintain your athletic skills even after landing a full-time job, getting married, and starting a family. It wasn’t that long ago that you were working out or playing sports several times a week.

But now that life is more hectic and complicated, you’re lucky if you can get out there once over the weekend. Even so, you still want to compete. Yet things are changing. Your legs get tired way sooner than they used to. Your breath can’t keep up with your determination. You don’t bounce back from minor injuries as quickly as you used to. Worse yet, you might hurt all the time and have given up sports altogether.

Maybe it’s time for something different.

If you stick this course out, you’ll discover that this yoga-based exercise system is both physically challenging and an extraordinarily intelligent exercise modality. During this course, I won’t ask you to blindly believe anything I say, even though everything I teach is directly rooted in human anatomy and physiology.

Instead, I am going to ask you to experience this duality of exercise for yourself: the traditional way you have exercised (and how it felt) as compared to the yoga method you are about to learn now.

As confusing as it may first seem, I am going to show you how to do less in order to gain more. In fact, I’m going to ask you not to try to exercise—because “trying” is precisely what got you into trouble in the first place. That’s why so many of you will drop out of yoga. You’ll feel like you aren’t working hard enough because you aren’t gritting your teeth or sweating. But stick around long enough, and you can sweat plenty.

This work is subtle. It’s not about forcing yourself to get flexible; it’s about learning how to guide your body toward true balance—a balance of strength and flexibility that naturally promotes reliable endurance.

Stick with it, and this just might end up being one of the hardest—and most rewarding—exercise classes you have ever taken.

Intense Yoga Exercise as We Age

by Sam Dworkis

I know a 48-year-old man who has been practicing extreme yoga for 30 years. If you saw him practice, you'd call him "Gumby." But he isn't just remarkably flexible—his high-intensity, aerobic style of yoga regularly leaves other athletes who try to do what he does, sweat-drenched and exhausted.

Yet he has a major problem. After years of extreme yoga, he lives in chronic pain. He reached out to me for advice because he felt his style of aerobic yoga had ultimately failed him.

He had come across my website, where I explain the mechanics of an "appropriate yoga practice" and the logic behind the principle that less, done correctly, gets you more. He read how chronic pain tightens the body, along with the physiological mechanisms that make exercise increasingly difficult as we age.

Because of his age and chronic pain, he assumed he needed to abandon his advanced aerobic practice altogether, slow down, and practice with far less intensity. "In other words," he told me, "my goal now is to learn *ExTension* Yoga because I believe it's healthier than what I'm currently doing. My goal is no longer to do advanced yoga, but to be able to do yoga at an advanced age."

My response surprised him. Here is what I told him:

Learning *ExTension* Yoga can certainly take your practice in a new direction, but you don't necessarily have to give up aerobic yoga.

ExTension Yoga students learn proper body mechanics and the functional differences between muscles, tendons, ligaments, and fascia (collectively known as soft tissue). They learn how stress tightens soft tissue—especially in aging bodies or those dealing with chronic illness and injury. They also learn the critical difference between 'trying hard' and simply 'doing,' and how that distinction affects soft-tissue stress.

By applying these concepts, students learn to adapt their movements in a way that minimizes stress and maximizes potential. Yoga becomes a thoughtful process of doing rather than trying. It teaches you how to move non-aggressively toward a boundary rather than pushing recklessly to it. The result is a practice that reduces inappropriate stress while allowing us to maintain strength, endurance, and flexibility as we age.

In other words, practicing *ExTension* Yoga doesn't mean you have to forgo jumping, sweating, or vigorous movement. Nor does it mean you are forced to practice slowly and softly forever. It means learning how to consciously adapt your practice on any given day so you don't hurt yourself.

I offered my own situation as a personal example. I have multiple sclerosis, and I can never predict how it will affect my body on any given day. When I feel well, I can practice advanced, energetic yoga. But when my MS symptoms flare up, advanced yoga isn't just difficult—it's nearly impossible as well as dangerous. On those days, I return to foundational work: minimal movements paired with controlled breathing.

Even though I am nearly 60 and living with a major chronic illness, my overall exercise capacity exceeds that of most 40-year-olds—even when I am unable to sustain vigorous practice for extended periods.

How is that possible? An appropriate *ExTension* Yoga practice stimulates the nerves, organs, and glands while conditioning the primary structural, circulatory, respiratory, and digestive systems. Most importantly, it accomplishes this without over-stressing the body, allowing you to maintain true physical fitness regardless of how intensely you practice on a given day.

As I concluded to him: "It isn't the quantity or brute force of doing yoga that yields results—it is the quality of the practice."

Yoga for Both Injured and Aging Athletes

by Sam Dworkis

It wasn't that long ago that you could move your body however you wanted. Maybe you weren't the greatest athlete in the world, but you were competitive and thoroughly enjoyed your workouts and your sports.

But things are different now. Maybe you suffered an injury that never completely healed, or maybe age has finally caught up with you. Either way, exercising isn't fun anymore. Now your body hurts all the time—or at least for days following a workout or a game.

You don't want to be a quitter, so you allow work and family responsibilities to provide a convenient excuse to give your body a break. But when you try to get back in the groove, it feels impossible. You don't have the time, you're constantly exhausted, and every session leaves you sore.

It's completely frustrating. With less time, you try harder. But trying is insidious: the harder you try, the worse you ultimately feel. You become stuck in a vicious cycle—you feel worse, so you push harder, and after a while, nothing seems to help.

That's exactly what happened to me. I was considered an expert yoga practitioner and teacher, yet my body reached a point where traditional exertion simply backfired.

It took me years to adapt my practice into a methodology that could rebuild my strength, endurance, and flexibility—all without increasing my pain. It became a way to restore my body without “trying.” No, it is not a magic pill. It is a specialized approach to yoga-based exercise that is so simple, it is extraordinarily difficult for most athletes to grasp.

It is counterintuitive to everything you've ever learned in sports. In this program, the harder you try to force it, the slower it works. In fact, gritting your teeth and pushing through only increases your chance of re-injuring yourself.

This approach, doing less to get you more, requires that you learn how your body is actually constructed. This demanding approach requires that you understand how your body works—from your muscles down to the all-important fascia. With this foundation, you will learn to exercise with intelligence rather than by sheer effort, restoring strength and endurance by doing less, not more.

Stop trying so hard. Start moving intelligently. That's how you can get your body back.