

“Think of the Tin Man in the Wizard of Oz BEFORE Dorothy oiled him! That’s how fibromyalgia feels,” I said out-of-the-blue one day at home.

Reflecting on the mental image, my husband expressed instant understanding.



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Yoga in the Toolkit

By Karen Stansbury

Sneaking a Peek

If only it were possible to take a walking tour of our muscles and connective tissues. Imagine slipping under the skin and walking along the surface of the fascia, the layer of tissue that envelops the muscles like a body stocking. Lifting up the fascia’s edge, I’d peek under and shout, “What the heck is going on down there, for heaven’s sake?” I’d crawl under the fascia and along the muscles, jump onto the tendons that connect muscle to bone and traverse the ligaments from bone to bone. Along the way, I’d inspect each cell for anything out of the ordinary, providing I knew what ordinary looked like! Does anybody?

These structures are in the body’s collection of soft, connective tissues. SOFT? HA! Hear me roar BRITTLE! Or, so it feels. They’re stiff; they throb; they’re rock-hard; they hurt. They are probably not the only nemeses of FM patients. That would be too easy. (Where is that EASY button when you need it?) Soft tissues are inter-related and inter-dependent with so many other systems in this complex human machine. They could actually be the victims of a larger system gone awry. Or so it seems. Perhaps the next frontier for exploration is right under our skin.*

An Afterglow of Well-being

For years (literally) after a fibromyalgia mega-flare, my soft tissues were simply too over-reactive for

*For enlightening discussions of yoga and connective tissue, go to: www.ExtensionYoga.com/fascia and www.YogaJournal.com/practice/209.cfm.

exercise other than controlled physical therapy. Anything beyond that threw them into a protracted relapse. My physical therapist demonstrated beginning tai chi, a gentle Chinese martial art that uses slow-motion, relaxing, body movements. However, after a couple of five-minute sessions one weekend, pain symptoms flared. She and others also spoke of yoga. I yearned to try it but feared that the physical tension from holding the poses would likewise trigger a flare.

Finally, after conditioning myself enough to walk a half-mile or swim some laps, I was ready to take the yoga plunge. I went off to the library for a video. Ohmygosh, so many videos on the shelves! With absolutely no idea of the difference between one yoga video and another, I picked one with “beginner” in the title. Turns out that it was a 20-minute beginner lesson in Hatha yoga, a popular Western form. Perfect.

After two sessions, I felt a bright sense of well-being. Was it the yoga or coincidence? Either way, yoga became part of my regular therapy.

Regular Practice is Key

A regular practice of yoga gently stretches soft tissues that are tight from lost elasticity. I am particularly aware of tight fascia from head to toe, including the entire landscape of my back. Without daily movement and stretching, it feels as though my fascia turns into cold, brittle, shrink-wrap around my muscles. Inactivity, stress, or trauma causes fascia to contract (shorten) and thicken, lose its fluidity, tighten its grip on muscles, restrict circulation, and interfere with nerve conduction. Ouch ☹.

Pro-Active and Empowering

Yoga is not a passive therapy. Practicing it is pro-active. By engaging your mind and body, you empower yourself to control fibromyalgia, rather than it controlling you. Empowerment in itself is healing. Yoga’s benefits are incremental with every session. I am a believer. Still, consider it as only one of many active therapies in your toolkit.

Yoga requires keen mental concentration to control and train your body. I believe it has actually improved my concentration in other life tasks as well.

The stretching poses gently elongate muscles and fascia. Daily practice will keep them stretched and feeling supple. If practice is neglected, you’ll

feel the difference very shortly. To me, deep stretching also serves as a wonderful body massage. In my mind, the elongation of the muscles is, at the same time, compressing or massaging all underlying tissues.

Some of the poses emphasize correct body alignment. You will carry over your awareness of alignment as you stand, sit, and relax throughout your day. Poor posture can contribute to body stress and fatigue. You already know that. Our mothers told us years ago! I also bet your physical therapist, like mine, reinforces the lesson!

I didn't know that I was so out-of-balance until I started yoga. At first, some of the balance poses made me feel shaky, and I would have preferred to skip them. In time, I was very pleased with noticeable balance improvement. Now, I can even do one of those fancy poses standing on one foot with one arm stretched out in front and the other hand holding the second foot behind and above my head. But heed! Yoga is not about achieving fancy poses. It's all about flexibility, concentration, and body control through the poses.

Sweating detoxifies muscles and organs. Drink water aplenty before and after a session to help flush away those toxins and rehydrate.

As with any effective physical activity, yoga augments strength and endurance. Yoga leaders and enthusiasts also associate yoga with the enhancement of other systems such as circulatory, immune, and endocrine. It is also said to calm the mind, decrease stress, and improve sleep as well as open the spine, the hips, and the shoulders where all the stress hides.

What a release of tension after a session! I can feel my body let it go as though it has been waiting a long, long time to exhale.

No Fuss, No Muss

Yoga is on your terms. It is always there when you need it. You needn't make an appointment, drive, park, wait in line or a waiting room, take a pill, get stuck with a needle, get billed, or file insurance papers. Sensible? Yep.

An Ancient Practice

The word yoga derives from a Sanskrit (the classical language of India) word for yoke, meaning to join or unite, in this sense, the mind, body, and spirit. Originating from spiritual leaders in ancient India thousands of years ago, its history, language,

philosophies, variations, and adaptations over the ages are fascinating.

Classical, ancient yoga has many dimensions called "limbs." Each limb embraces a pursuit of personal devotion such as meditation, knowledge, concentration, selflessness, morality, physical well-being, and spiritual enlightenment. (My goodness, a better world it might be if we all...).

Contemporary Yoga

Most contemporary classes and DVDs on yoga focus on controlled breathing synchronized with a progressive series of poses called asanas.

Usually, the session starts and ends with breathing and meditation, if only briefly to filter out external distractions and center your thoughts on the moment and your body. The poses, or asanas, which you may adapt to your own level of comfort and agility, include standing, sitting, and lying. By all means, condition your body ever-so-slowly into the yoga poses. Your body should not flare-up after a session. Until you know how your body will react, don't fully extend into a pose, and be sure to minimize the time that you hold it. A good instructor will encourage beginners to modify the poses.

You will be moving and stretching your body in new ways! Some will be uncomfortable at first, but the afterglow will drive them back!

Find Your Level and Place

Practical, gentle introductions to yoga can be found in yoga for beginners, seniors, the chronically ill or overweight. Borrow from the library a video or DVD in one of these or a similar category. When you are ready (and DO get ready), a class is a good next step for its regularity, camaraderie, and encouragement. After a 65-year old friend touted regular classes and demonstrated her flexibility by folding her legs into a pretzel, I found a class! Not that I want to be a pretzel, nor have I become one.

Oh, by the way, I have shared classes with all ages, conditions, sizes, and weights. No need to be shy, self-conscious, or dress stylishly. You may need a \$15 yoga mat, but many classes provide or rent them. However, be aware that all classes and instructors are not created equal. Is the pace right for you? Is the instructor positive, encouraging, and flexible enough to allow modifications for individual comfort and agility? You might explain privately in advance to the instructor that you have special considerations.

Are Teachers Certified?

Some organizations establish standards and award credentials for yoga teachers or schools which meet their criteria. For example, one nonprofit, Yoga Alliance, sets teacher standards and registers teachers and schools.

Some yoga disciplines such as Dahn and Bikram require many hours of specialized training to teach at one of their centers. Bikram requires nine weeks of immersion in intensive training.

Yoga classes are offered in health and fitness clubs, at community and senior centers, by local recreation departments and YMCAs, and at studios that specialize in a specific yoga practice such as Dahn or Bikram. Don't forget to ask for discounts that may apply for seniors or the disabled.

Bikram for the Bravehearted

Learn about Bikram before you plunge. The poses are not extreme. You won't be standing on one hand with your legs wrapped around your head, but the session is challenging. It is a 90-minute, 26 asana (pose) series in a studio that has been heated up to 110°. Each session begins and ends with focused breathing. Prior to trying Bikram, have some yoga already under your belt, if only as a beginner, for at least six months.

Why Bikram? A neighbor told me about it at 10 a.m. one Saturday morning. I was in a class by 4:00 p.m. It was the only therapy from which I ever walked away elastic, energetic, and euphoric! It took several sessions for my psyche and body to acclimate to the heat and rigor, but the rewards were worth every drop of sweat and uncomfortable stretch. It may not cure FM, but regular Bikram practice came very close to making me feel that my symptoms were transparent.

Why heat? The warmth softens the connective tissue and allows a deeper stretch without inflammation. Think of taffy. Try to stretch cold taffy and what happens? It snaps. Warm it in the palm of your hand, and it becomes pliable and is easily stretched.

All the practical cautions apply here. Tailor the poses to your comfort level. For instance, each pose is repeated twice. The first is held for one minute; the second for 30 seconds. Teachers will encourage beginners to shorten the poses or rest rather than repeat a pose. By all means, show a diagram of the poses to and discuss the heat with your physical therapist or fibromyalgia practitioner to rule out contraindications for you.

If you listen closely, you might hear me faintly whisper "cure-all" under my breath. NO, I didn't really say that because I have neither a right nor credentials to make such a claim. Also, as we all know, a treatment which works well for one person with FM may not necessarily work for another. However, my sick fascia IS happy after Bikram. It's an elixir that I can count on during those special painful times or for a regular weekly practice.

Scientific Proof?

The connection between exercise, fitness and one's overall health and well-being is well established. For yoga, though, finding published endorsements by traditional Western medical authorities is difficult. However, I believe that research is on the ground level, and we will begin to see a groundswell of interest.

The National Institute of Arthritis, Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases (NIAMS), of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), supports and encourages fibromyalgia research. Excerpts from their web site (www.niams.nih.gov) state:

*"Though pain and fatigue may make exercise and daily activities difficult, it's crucial to be as physically active as possible. Research has repeatedly shown that regular exercise is one of the most effective treatments for **fibromyalgia**. People who have too much pain or fatigue to do vigorous exercise should begin with walking or other gentle exercise and build their endurance and intensity slowly."*

*"You can improve your balance with activities like tai chi and **yoga**."*

*"You can improve your flexibility through tai chi, swimming, **yoga**, and gentle stretching exercises."*

RESOURCES

Health Information

www.health.nih.gov
www.medlineplus.gov
www.webmd.com
www.nccam.nih.gov/camonpubmed/

Musculoskeletal Research—NIH National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases:
www.niams.nih.gov/

Alternative Medicine Research—NIH National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM):
www.nccam.nih.gov/