



Yoga: You CAN do it!

Following a brain injury an individual is often bombarded by the numerous life changing experiences that become part of the recovery process. These occur to the physical, mental, emotional and often spiritual aspects of the person. Injury can leave an individual feeling disconnected and overwhelmed. How does one start the process of taking all of the tools of rehabilitation, education, and strengths developed to re-gain a sense of wholeness? Yoga! Yoga can be a powerful ally in this process. But what is Yoga? Is it a religion, a form of exercise that requires you to bend like a pretzel, done by a bunch of tree hugging hippies, sitting around and chanting “OM?” How does it apply to brain injury rehabilitation?

Yoga is a 5000 year old philosophy that is as diverse as the nature of brain injury itself. To help conceptualize this philosophy it helps to define Yoga. The Sanskrit word itself means “to yoke” or “union”. As Yoga teachers we think or explain this to be the union of the Self, bringing all parts of one self and their environment back to union. The harmony of these parts, body, mind and spirit is essential in experiencing peace and integration following a life-altering injury. Yoga as a practice can be a path to this harmonization. It can be practiced by any person and works in harmony with any spiritual practice. The misperception that Yoga is just another form of exercise limits access for many individuals who could benefit from the practice. Yoga is more than a method of exercise. Yoga is comprised of physical postures, breathwork and meditation, that combined begin to settle the mind and body in order to find serenity. Physical postures can be accessed both actively and restoratively. Active postures engage the body in a way that builds strength and length to muscles, increasing proprioceptive awareness. Restorative postures lead to a training of the mind to become calm and quiet, leading to deep relaxation. This deep relaxation is what is often associated with Yoga and more recently is becoming linked to promoting healing after trauma. With the assistance of a well trained teacher the physical postures can be modified dramatically to make them accessible. Individuals experiencing limited mobility can access their bodies through modification to poses with the use of props, adjustments and visualization. Yoga teachers are not meant to replace physical therapy by a qualified and regulated practitioner, however, a Yoga practice can work in conjunction to a physiotherapy program. Besides assisting the physical body, why engage in these physical postures? Postures are utilized in Yoga to still the body. This stilling of the body prepares one for sitting in stillness to meditate. What is meditation? Simply, it is moment to moment awareness. Meditation teaches one to live in the moment. It helps one come to understand the constant jumping of the mind. This jumping of the mind is what precipitates our actions or behaviour. Calming the whole system allows an individual to listen to their mind and body. Learning to listen objectively to these thoughts, and the feelings associated with them, supports one to step back from the thoughts and consciously choose actions. With the barrage of changes, appointments, information, and lack of privacy that goes hand in hand with therapy, developing an ability to live in the moment consciously can be a key factor in remaining

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balanced through tumultuous times. Living in the moment can assist with the concept of acceptance that is necessary in working with grief associated with brain injury. The gateway to cultivating body and mind harmony is the breath. Breath is vital to life and an essential part of a Yoga practice. It is one of the most accessible resources we have. Breath affects many systems in the body; cardiovascular, neurological, endocrine, gastrointestinal, etc. Yoga teaches us to stretch, lengthen, strengthen and direct each breath. This control can assist an individual in inviting rest or energy to the body. Breathwork encourages the body and mind to work in harmony. Therapeutically, when wanting to reduce stress a teacher will engage a student in the three part breath or the extended exhale breath. Both of these breaths serve to engage the parasympathetic nervous system, promoting a rest in the systems of the body. During some practices individuals pair affirmations and visualizations with the breath. This provides an opportunity to invite positive thoughts into the conscious mind. In addition to a calming effect, breathwork can work in accord with Speech and Language Therapy. It can teach an individual about breath support; how to engage the anatomy utilized in breathing, to encourage access to speech and language exercises. Relaxation, awareness about breath and skill acquired can provide essential tools in the recovery process. Essentially, Yoga can be a non-intrusive practice that works in harmony with a contemporary rehabilitation process. The healing happens behind the scenes, it moves one away from their injury story and simply allows one "to be". It assists in the healing journey by engaging the mind in "what is", with acceptance. Yoga meets each individual where they are; it has no expectations of success, failure, loss, acquisition, ability or disability. It is about being. At a time when an individual is experiencing constant striving for improvement, a Yoga practice can be the one space in a day where it is right to be exactly where you are and who you are. Yoga provides many tools that can be practiced in any environment, empowering survivor's of a brain injury to find self-acceptance with their new path.

By Arlene Martin

For more information about Yoga you can access the following links:

www.yogajournal.com; www.iayt.org

To assist in finding a qualified Yoga teacher or studio utilize these links:

www.yogaalliance.com; www.iayt.org

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