



## **Inspiring Your Students to Practice**

The key to success in yoga therapy is getting your students to develop and maintain a home practice.

**by Timothy McCall, MD**

**Q:** How many yoga teachers does it take to change a light bulb?

**A:** Only one, but the light bulb has to practice.

OK, I admit coming up with that fairly lame joke, but it does contain a central truth: How your yoga therapy students fare depends more on what they do at home than on what you do in your sessions together, brilliant as those sessions may be. The best yoga therapy in the world won't work if the student doesn't practice.

So your job is more than just analyzing your students' problems and coming up with the ideal sequence of postures, breathing techniques, and other yoga therapy tools to improve their situations. You've also got to inspire them to put in the effort necessary to reap the benefits. Most students should be at least moderately motivated, since they're probably paying out of their own pockets to see you. Still, it can be problematic to get them to carve out the necessary time, overcome logistical barriers, and keep the practice groove going.

### **Be a Role Model**

Probably the best advertisement for yoga is the people who practice it regularly. Not only do their responses to stress, energy levels, posture, and a host of health symptoms improve, but they tend to become friendlier, more compassionate, and easier to get along with. Yogis don't even necessarily need to talk about the transformation; it's something that you can simply sense in their presence.

This means that, above all, you have got to practice. And in this regard, teaching classes really doesn't count. For you to cultivate the deep inner experience that enables you to appreciate and convey the subtleties of yoga, you need to consistently spend quiet time on your yoga mat and meditation cushion, and, of course, bring the awareness you develop there to your daily life. You can then teach what you know from direct experience, not simply repeat what you've read in a book or have been taught in a teacher training program.



## **Foster Hope, Not Unrealistic Expectations**

Yoga can improve health and well-being in countless ways, and it may be useful to enumerate some of them to your students and to cite scientific studies. But the specifics of what will happen to any particular student as a result of practice isn't always predictable—nor is the timetable. I was incredibly stiff when I first committed to a daily practice, and I hoped that a regular routine would make me more flexible. After one year of practicing asana 90 minutes a day, however, my flexibility had improved only a little. What I noticed, though, was how life's small frustrations weren't getting to me the way they used to. It wasn't what I'd been hoping for, but in many ways it was a lot better.

And so it is with yoga therapy. Your student may come with a serious condition, looking for major improvement in symptoms or even a cure—and this may or may not happen (though yoga in conjunction with other healing approaches can improve the odds). Still, I know many people who, like me, have found other things in their practice that keep them coming back to their mats, whether or not the health condition that first brought them to yoga was resolved.

So while discussing yoga's transformative potential, never promise your students a specific outcome. The Bhagavad Gita teaches us to give our best effort, but that what happens as a result is in God's hands. Still, the fact is that most people who come to yoga for back pain or heart disease or stress-related burnout do improve. So it's fine to speak of what you've seen in your own practice and in your work with clients. If you've had good luck treating people, by all means share the results with your students. You should also tell them that the likelihood of their improvement and how quickly they improve is highly correlated with their level of commitment.

## **Get Your Students to Establish a Practice Groove**

While Patanjali taught that the key to success in yoga is a dedicated practice maintained over a long period of time, you want your students to focus on short-term, achievable goals, not the long-term picture. B.K.S. Iyengar recommends taking a single step, no matter how small. Your job is to get your students to take that step.

While it may be tempting to recommend a whole array of practices, and a daily commitment of an hour or more, for most busy people that's just not realistic. Setting the bar too high is a setup for failure and frustration. Usually 15 to 20 minutes per day is a reasonable place to start; for some highly motivated students



more may be possible, and for others you may need to recommend less. Stress to your students that a little bit every day is more effective than longer periods of practice done less often. And it's a daily practice of any length that most effectively turns individual steps into a long-term groove.

It's often useful with students to go over the logistics of when and where to practice. Try to anticipate potential obstacles and come up with solutions. For example, if your student says he can't get time alone to practice at home, suggest that he close his office door at work for ten minutes during lunch hour. If some of your students have a hard time staying motivated, encourage them to practice at least a little every day even if they don't feel like it (though they may need to adjust their practice if they don't feel well enough physically). Maybe they could do a single Dog Pose or meditate for one minute. If you can get them to do just one thing every day, often they will decide to do more.

Particularly if the mind is the problem—as evidenced by students who make excuses, forget to practice, or decide not to even though they could—try to get them to look at what's really going on. A useful tool is to get such students to keep a yoga journal. On days they practice, have them write down how long they practiced, a brief description of what they did, and how they felt as a result. If they don't practice, have them write down why. A journal can provide them and you with useful information and is, in and of itself, a tool for mindfulness and self-study. Even if they never make it to their mats (though let's hope they do), they will already be doing yoga.



**Timothy McCall, MD teaches yoga therapy seminars worldwide. He is a board-certified internist, the medical editor of *Yoga Journal* and the best selling author of [Yoga as Medicine](#). This article originally appeared in *Yoga Journal*. You can download a PDF of this article and other articles and view his teaching schedule at [DrMcCall.com](#).**