



Assessing Your Student's Progress Part 2

Yoga can result in dozens of benefits, some of which your students may not be expecting.

by Timothy McCall, MD

In Part 1, we discussed some signs that indicate that a student is benefiting from his or her yoga practice. In Part 2, we'll broaden the focus.

We are a results-oriented society, and students who come to yoga therapy will reflect this. But by focusing too heavily on results—or by narrowing their focus only to those results they're looking for—your students may be missing the bigger picture, and even undermining their chances of success. And in many ways, obsession with outcome is precisely what the ancient yogic texts teach us not to succumb to. The Bhagavad Gita advises us to do our work and dedicate the fruits of our efforts to God. In other words, give up the illusion that you are in control of what happens—even if, with skillful action, you may be able to affect it.

Focus on What You Can Control

Focusing on your ideas about what is supposed to happen as a result of your practice takes you out of the present moment and into an imagined future, which is the antithesis of yoga. It's natural to have hopes and aspirations, but what's most important is what you do now. On a practical basis, since we can influence but can't control what happens as a result of our efforts, insisting on results that may not happen is a setup for frustration. And anxiety or dissatisfaction over a perceived lack of results tends to keep the body's stress response system activated, undermining attempts at healing by lessening immune function, making sleep less restorative, shifting blood flow away from the internal organs, undermining wound healing, and so on.

In therapeutic yoga, rather than focus on results (as natural as that may seem), it's more useful to ask your students to focus on what they can control. And the biggest thing they can control in regard to yoga therapy is how much and how regularly they practice, which is, of course, the biggest predictor of long-term success in yoga. You can set your students up for success in this regard by asking them to set realistic intentions for their practice.



Then start them off slowly and gradually ratchet their practice up over time, as conditions permit.

Broader Measures of Success

While yoga therapy can be an effective approach to a wide variety of bodily conditions, yoga's traditional focus has been on the mind. Consider a student who comes to you hoping to lose weight but who, many months into her practice, has only dropped a few pounds. She may be frustrated at her perceived lack of progress, but you may be able to help her understand that other, beneficial things are happening to both her body and her mind, even if they may be more difficult to assess than her weight. This perspective may help her maintain the motivation to practice.

From the regular exercise of her asana practice, for example, she is likely to have changed the composition of her body, adding muscle and losing some fat, even if the number on the scale hasn't changed much. She may be becoming more graceful in her movements, have less joint pain, or feel less stressed-out. She may have gained a community or built individual friendships among her teachers and fellow students. She may be bringing more mindfulness to eating, and by studying herself may be starting to see emotional factors that are contributing to dysfunctional dietary habits (yoga teaches us that to change something, first you must see it clearly). Once she's experienced the joy and peace that yoga brings her, she may become more accepting of her body. When you give up the illusion of controlling what happens and learn to appreciate the gifts you've been given, you may discover that a lot of self-induced stress melts away. And the funny thing is that when that happens, the pounds may start to melt away, too.

In the Yoga Sutra, Patanjali talks about the signs of a successful yoga practice. Among those he lists are cheerfulness, friendliness, and greater equanimity in the face of life's inevitable ups and downs. Students who experience these results, even if they aren't cured of their medical problems, may find themselves with an improved quality of life and a better ability to cope with their symptoms. If such psychological changes aren't happening in long-term practitioners, however, think about suggesting a shift in the focus of their practice. Service is a useful tool in this regard. When you volunteer to help others, your own problems may seem small in comparison. You might also consider adding more meditation to the mix. Not all yoga students are ready for a sitting practice, but if we are to believe the ancient texts, it is the yogic tool with the greatest power for personal transformation.



Perhaps the most reliable indicator that yoga is reaping benefits is the student's desire to keep practicing. In my travels around the yoga world, I've found that the reason that people first came to yoga is often not why they are still at it. So yes, practicing yoga can do all kinds of great things. It can lower stress, improve a wide variety of health conditions, help you drop weight, and make you more energetic. It may even bring you a gorgeous-looking Eka Pada Rajakapotasana. Just don't count on it.



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