

Foreword to *Yoga for Pain Relief*

by Timothy McCall, M.D., c. 2009

Yoga, which includes everything from the poses to meditation, may be the most powerful overall system for pain relief ever discovered. Part of the reason is that yoga is so effective at dealing with stress. Enduring chronic pain can keep your body's stress response system—including the sympathetic nervous system and hormones like cortisol—stuck in the “on” position. Being in such a state of “fight or flight” prepares you well for an imminent threat to life or limb, but it's usually counterproductive when it comes to chronic pain. When you're stressed out, you tend to breathe more quickly and erratically. Muscles tense. Your mood may plummet. All of which can make your pain worse.

While doctors often underestimate the role of stress in causing and worsening a host of conditions, including chronic pain, and often don't know what to advise stressed-out patients, yoga understands that repatterning the nervous system is essential. A number of yogic tools, starting with simple breath exercises that almost anyone can do, can reliably shift the body from the “fight or flight” stress reaction, to the “rest and digest” mode of relaxation. It is even possible, using yogic tools, to shift your nervous system into a relaxed state when you are in pain. Yoga can also help those whose nervous systems don't mount an adequate response to pain and other stressors (sometimes as a result of too much stress for too long) to balance stimulation and relaxation. The longer and more steadily you practice yoga, the more profound the changes to the wiring of your brain and nervous system.

Crucial to the yogic perspective on pain relief is understanding the difference between pain and suffering. Pain is the physical (or emotional) hurt, whereas suffering is how our minds react to that pain, which often ends up fueling its fires. We imagine the worst. We worry that things will never improve. We decide our life is over. That's suffering. And it's a problem that most doctors were never taught how to treat in medical school. But the relief of suffering has been a central aim of yoga for thousands of years.

Ironically, suffering—just like pain itself—can keep the body's stress reaction system activated, which in turn can worsen sleep, promote weight gain, fuel inflammation and promote bad habits (such as not exercising or eating unhealthy food), all of which may serve to make your underlying physical condition worse. Thus, besides making you feel better, yoga's effect on relaxation and relieving suffering can have measurable benefits on your physical health, too.

One of the lessons of yoga is that the body, mind, breath and nervous system are all intertwined. In yoga, we use the body and breath, which we can control to some degree, to calm, stimulate and ultimately strengthen the nervous system and the mind, which normally are beyond our control. When your nervous system and mind are balanced in this manner, you are poised to react to whatever challenges arise. In addition, various yoga tools help lessen pain and improve quality of life in other ways, for example, by stretching tight muscles, improving posture, and increasing the oxygen supply to the tissues.

Keep in mind, though, that while powerful, yoga isn't a quick fix. But unlike pain pills, which tend to weaken over time, yoga becomes more and more effective over the weeks, months and even years with regular practice. And unlike many other treatments that get lumped into complementary and alternative medicine (like vitamins, herbal preparations or other supplements), a carefully-chosen yoga practice is unlikely to interact negatively with any of your other pain treatments, be they conventional or alternative.

In fact, the evidence is that yoga makes many other treatments more effective than they'd otherwise be. It's not uncommon for yoga practitioners to see their drug doses or number of prescriptions drop. What's more, yoga also appears to diminish the side effects of drug therapy, as well as how much those side effects bother you. Better still, the side effects of a carefully chosen yoga program are almost all positive. Besides its benefits for pain, yoga is likely to make you happier, healthier, stronger, more flexible and relaxed, and more effective in your life.

If you are coming to yoga seeking relief from long-term pain, or are a yoga teacher, health care professional, friend or family member of someone who is, you are in excellent hands with Dr. Kelly McGonigal. Kelly is well-versed both in yoga, based on her years of teaching and practice, and, due to her academic background, the science behind it. She understands that a combination of different yogic tools is likely to be more effective than any one alone, and that people will differ in which ones appeal to them most, so she offers many choices. *Yoga for Pain Relief* is beautifully written, hopeful and clear guide to a path out of pain and into a more joyful, fulfilling life. May it help you, as the Buddhist blessing goes, be free of suffering, and the causes of suffering.