

Managing Pain in Older Adults

The Benefits of Yoga Postures, Meditation and Mindfulness

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This article discusses some of the basic principles in the use of yoga postures, meditation, and mindfulness in managing chronic pain in older adults. It focuses on one's relation with pain and how that relationship can be changed or supported by these practices. The article concludes with a list of resources and styles of yoga suitable for older adults in chronic pain. **Key words:** meditation, mindfulness, older adults, therapy, yoga

Pain is a common condition affecting a large number of older adults and can have detrimental consequences. Up to 50% of community-dwelling older adults are affected by chronic pain¹ with approximately one-fourth to one-third of older adults experiencing lower back pain. In older adults, chronic pain is also associated with depression, decreased appetite, impaired sleep, and decreased quality of life.²

There is substantial evidence that chronic pain is not treated to many individual's satisfaction,² despite subscribing to conventional medical care.³ There are many approaches to managing pain with the most desirable approach being the eradication of disease and/or source of pain. However, this is only possible when a known and curable etiology exists. In cases where pain and illness may not be able to be fully eradicated, pain may be ameliorated through medication, exercise, and/or changes in lifestyle. But when pain cannot be eliminated nor ameliorated, one coping option that may be effective is for the individual to change their relationship to or perception of the pain.

Pain is commonly viewed as an unwelcome condition that causes much suffering for an individual. Although this is often the case, in this article, we propose that pain does not necessarily sentence one to suffering. Acceptance of pain, listening to pain, and viewing pain as a "lesson" in life may drastically increase the quality of life for an individual in pain.

The goal of this article is to discuss 3 specific practices related to yoga and meditation that may incite shifts in

mental awareness and facilitate more adaptive coping processes as related to pain: yoga postures, meditation, and mindfulness. These 3 methods may actually reduce pain by operating in a variety of ways; however, ameliorating or eliminating pain may not always be the ultimate goal or outcome. For example, postures may provide pain relief to older adults with chronic pain by offering relaxation through a reduction in muscular tension. Conversely, the techniques of meditation and mindfulness may also be beneficial, but through a different mechanism, namely, by helping to alter one's relationship to pain. In sum, in a myriad of ways, all 3 methods may play an important role in helping an older adult to navigate some of the challenges of living with pain.

YOGA POSTURES, MEDITATION, AND MINDFULNESS IN THE MANAGEMENT OF CHRONIC PAIN

The practice of yoga is believed by many to be beneficial to one's health, including that of older adults who are in pain. Although no studies directly examine yoga for widespread chronic pain in older adults, yoga has been demonstrated to help relieve pain associated with a variety of specific conditions that are commonly found in older adults such as low back pain⁴ and osteoarthritis of the knees.⁵ Yoga has been studied and found to be beneficial for mental and physical health in older adults in a number of other ways, such as alleviating depression,⁶ reducing hypertension, treating chronic insomnia, and improving mood.⁷ Furthermore, the evidence for the benefits of yoga for mental and physical health conditions in older adults continues to grow.

As this evidence base for yoga for older adults continues to expand, it enables practitioners to use various components of yoga (posturing, meditation, breathwork) tailored to an individual's mental and physical health needs. For example, if an individual is struggling with anxiety (which frequently accompanies physical pain), a yoga therapist may select anxiety-reducing yoga techniques such as meditation, relaxed breathing, or anxiety-reducing postures, such as child's pose (balasana) or mountain pose (tadasana). If an individual is struggling with low energy or depression, poses that increase energy, such as sun salutations (surya namaskar) may be pursued. Forward bending, such as paschimottanasana or pigeon pose, may help to encourage releasing of emotions. For pain management, a yoga

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practitioner would most likely select specific poses that strengthen muscle groups that surround the painful sites but typically avoid direct motion of acutely painful body parts.

There is no question that yoga may engender many physical benefits such as increased flexibility, increased lung capacity, and decreased pain. Many practice yoga solely for the physical benefits of the postures. Although to do some yoga is better than to do no yoga, solely practicing yoga for physical benefits is an incomplete practice. Awareness and acceptance of the body, incorporating breath, bringing stillness to the mind, focusing on the present moment, and not letting only rational considerations dictate life are the goals of yoga and will ultimately bring us closer to union with existence or the greater realm.

In addition, understanding and incorporating the wisdom that is found in yogic philosophy is critical in the full practice of yoga. Many of the yogic principles and teachings provide guidance on how to deal with pain. When living with pain, there are certain principles and philosophies from yogic traditions by which one can abide, whatever style of yoga an individual chooses.

First and foremost, the individual knows his or her body best. No matter how experienced the teacher, and no matter how new the student may be at yoga, listening to one's own body should always take priority. Increasing pain is not a desired effect of yoga. When the body experiences increases in pain, specifically joint pain, it is an indication to slow down, stop, or consult with a teacher. One of the Yamas of yoga, Satya, or truthfulness, plays a role here such that one must be honest and truthful about one's experience. If there is pain arising, it is important that the individual be honest with oneself and not allow the ego to take over. In other words, it is more important that the individual honor his or her body's actual limitations and not get caught up falsely displaying greater range of motion or strength, or risking injury to imitate postures that other people can do. In the current exercise culture of the United States, it is easy to succumb to the idea that all exercise is consistent with the following adage: no gain, no pain. This is not the case for yoga. The goal of yoga is to increase harmony and balance within all aspects of our being, the body included. Increasing pain in any area may raise tension in others.

Another principle of yoga, Ahimsa or nonviolence, inherently promotes listening within. Having compassion toward whatever one's experience is in the moment is essential for fostering mental attitudes that do not harm oneself. Training the mind to react in a gentle and compassionate way that creates nonviolence toward oneself and others can teach the individual to accept his or her pain or physical condition in a more loving way. For example, if an older adult who has pain is in a posture that creates more pain, the instructor can teach this student the principle of

nonviolence as a reminder to the student not to push him or herself beyond the body's limitations.

In fact, training the mind and its thoughts is one of the most central goals of yoga. The Yoga Sutras explain that the purpose of yoga is "Yogah Citta-Vrtti-Norodah," or "yoga is experienced in that mind which has ceased to identify itself with its vacillating waves of perception," as one interpretation explains.⁸ In other words, yoga, which is often translated as "union" with the Self, is experienced when the mind enters a place of stillness wherein it ceases to grasp onto the projections and perceptions of ego (ie, thinking mind). One common practice that assists in dampening down the thinking mind and allowing it to rest in a place of stillness is meditation.

There are many different types and styles of meditation. Some meditation techniques include focusing on or controlling the breath, eye gazing, gazing at a particular object, or focusing the mind on a mantra, such as "let go" or "so hum," a Sanskrit phrase loosely translated as meaning, "I am that, that I am." Meditation need not involve formal practice either. For instance, many musicians regard playing music as meditation or communication with the divine. Regardless of the technique chosen, the overarching goals of meditation range from clearing the mind of thoughts, to watching the thoughts come and go without identifying with them as truthful or valid. By practicing meditation, one is able to move past the thinking mind toward a more relaxed, compassionate, or intuitive state grounded in present moment experience.

Vipassana meditation, from the Buddhist tradition, is a technique that emphasizes awareness and self-observation of breath and physical sensations as a means to liberation from suffering through sitting meditation practice (<http://www.dhamma.org/en/vipassana.shtml>). This active awareness of ongoing personal experience in each moment is a way to practice mindfulness. Although mindfulness practices, stemming from Eastern philosophy and more specifically Buddhist traditions, have served as the foundation of many Western student's experiences of mindfulness, the philosophies and practices have also seeped into the domain of psychology.

Within the psychological literature, mindfulness has become an increasingly popular topic of research as well as practice within clinical settings. For example, one specific meditation technique, Transcendental Meditation (Maharishi Foundation, USA, Fairfield, Iowa) (meditation that is based on increasing one's concentration through the use of a mantra), has been demonstrated to impact alertness and longevity in older adults⁹ and to positively impact cognitive functioning.¹⁰ Another meditation technique that may assist older adults in coping with pain is mindfulness. Mindfulness, from a yogic perspective, has a variety of meanings and applications. It is subjective to each individual and his or her own practice, beliefs, and intention

of practice. From Western psychology practice, mindfulness may be defined as nonjudgmental awareness that arises through attending to one's moment-to-moment experience.^{11,12} From an Eastern philosophical conceptualization, mindfulness is often associated with specific meditation techniques or the implementation of those techniques into daily life. For example, Zen meditation practices, such as those offered by the Vietnamese Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh,¹³ actively incorporate the skills of mindfulness into the mundane tasks of day-to-day living, such as walking and eating. Being fully aware while engaging in such activities is key.

One of the most popular applications of mindfulness, with substantial empirical support, is that of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR). It is an 8-week course and home practice that utilizes mindfulness meditation practice and gentle hatha yoga as a "vehicle to relieve suffering."¹² It was initially created and offered through a stress reduction clinic for medical patients who, despite medical treatment, still experienced chronic pain and stress. The practice of MBSR emphasizes that mindfulness is not expected to occur solely during the traditional sitting for meditation, but rather in day-to-day activities such as walking or bathing, thereby infusing the individual's daily experience with present-moment awareness and experience. It has also been found to be beneficial for older adults with chronic low back pain by increasing pain acceptance, physical function, and activities engagement.² Overall, mind-body therapies such as MBSR are described as well-suited for the older adult with chronic pain because of their gentle approaches and positive emphasis on self-exploration,¹ although more rigorous methods of testing are needed.¹

By being mindful of one's body while practicing asana, one is able to be aware of exactly how much pain one is in. In summary, being mindful prompts one to

1. assess where one's pain level is, as it may vary from day to day.
2. send breath and energy to the parts of the body that are in pain.
3. deflect some of the pain to other parts of the body.
4. not overexert or increase pain or cause injury in already painful areas of the body.
5. confront, acknowledge, and accept the painful condition as it is at that time.

KNOWING IS HALF THE BATTLE; ACCEPTANCE IS THE OTHER HALF

It is common for individuals, including older adults, to attempt to minimize or ignore pain for various reasons, including denial and fear. When one has a practice that encourages sitting and being present with whatever is arising, physically, emotionally, and spiritually, it becomes obvious that one cannot ignore pain. Acknowledging and allowing

pain in as part the experience at that moment helps one to manage the pain. Although trying to ignore pain is not helpful, neither is focusing too much attention on the pain. Greater attention to pain has been demonstrated to be related to increased pain intensity and disability.¹⁴ Learning to be present with pain, while not allowing it to consume all of one's attention, and acting in alignment with one's personal values, is a way to learn to live with pain. Acceptance of pain plays a key role in this process.

The construct of acceptance appears to play an important role in governing how people cope with chronic pain. The acceptance-based approach to pain is based on a model of cognitive behavior therapy that promotes using tactics of acceptance and behavior change to address emotional and physical pain rather than employing control-based strategies. In psychology, *acceptance* has been defined as a willingness to acknowledge thoughts and feelings without having to follow them or change them.¹⁵ With regard to chronic or disease-related pain, *acceptance* may be defined as experiencing pain without negative reaction, disapproval, or attempts to reduce, avoid, control, or change it while living a fulfilling life in accordance with ones values.^{16,17}

Acceptance has been an integral facet of the blending of Eastern and Western approaches to psychology such as those approaches mentioned earlier. The concept of acceptance has been explored, written about, and practiced for thousands of years in the Buddhist tradition and other streams of Eastern thought. According to some Buddhist teachings, suffering is a product of human beings' attachment to pleasant sensations and aversion to unpleasant ones. Tools such as meditation and mindfulness practices have been employed over many generations to cultivate acceptance of the present moment to overcome suffering. These teachings have been passed on throughout centuries and many teachers in the West have embraced Buddhist insights about acceptance and the relief of suffering. The Vipassana meditation tradition explains that acceptance has 2 parts: seeing clearly and holding one's experience with compassion.¹⁸ These 2 facets of acceptance, in particular, have also been integrated into the scientific literature through the rise of various techniques that address physical pain and psychopathology. From a Zen Buddhist perspective, acceptance has been described as active engagement with life even in the presence of physical or emotional pain.¹⁹ Furthermore, acceptance is acknowledged as a process of learning to be present for all the moments of life, not just the moments we prefer.¹⁹

Instead of emphasizing the changing and restructuring of our thoughts and experiences, mindfulness and acceptance-based approaches that deal with pain focus on changing awareness of and relationship to thoughts, feelings, and sensations such as pain. The ultimate goal is to develop a sense of greater awareness and nonreactivity

to difficult feelings and experiences. The ability to embrace painful stimuli without automatically reacting to or avoiding the pain can be viewed as a form of acceptance, achieved through training of the mind, which may foster response rather than reaction.

Mindfulness-meditation protocols, such as MBSR, which have their roots in Buddhist meditation practice, have been developed for chronic pain and incorporate acceptance training as a key part of the intervention.²⁰ Kabat-Zinn²⁰ defines *acceptance* as having the willingness to see things as they actually are in the present moment. He explains that meditation practice helps to cultivate acceptance, which does not mean taking a stance of passive resignation to the events of one's life. Rather, acceptance helps an individual to be more at ease with whatever circumstances arise in life.

Hand in hand with acceptance comes the responsibility to continue moving on with life in the direction that is valued. As paraphrased from a popular adage, one way to move in that direction is to, "Accept the things we cannot change, find courage to change things we can, and gain the wisdom to know the difference." It is within our means to know ourselves enough so that we may have a greater sense of what aspects of our condition can be changed and those we must accept. Traditions of meditation and mindfulness offer teachings and practices that can help us to align ourselves with our own inner truth, helping to clarify our own values, teaching us how we can move toward them, and whether that means changing or accepting our circumstances.

MINDFULNESS IN DAILY LIFE

Although mindfulness and meditation are not synonymous, they are intricately linked. One could say that to achieve a state of meditation, you need to be mindful, or to be mindful, you need to meditate. In addition, one could be "mindful" and not be in the state of meditation, and one could be meditating, but not being mindful. Being mindful may manifest in a myriad of ways, from walking in a way that is conscious, to awareness of breath and sensation, even to interacting with a loved one.

Meditation strengthens self-sufficiency and independence.²¹ When this occurs, one's innate sense or inner teacher is strengthened. For one who is in pain, this could result in trusting oneself in assessment of pain and treatments, as well as reduced dependence upon medical supports. For example, if one cultivates an awareness that pain for him or her is generally greater at certain times of the day or year, she/he may learn ways to prepare for and deal with it more effectively, rather than repeatedly consulting a physician when suddenly overcome with a type of pain that may be mindfully managed independently.

As mentioned earlier, Thich Nhat Hanh teaches skills of mindfulness as applied to mundane tasks, such as walking

and eating. For those who are in pain, what may seem like simple day-to-day activities, such as doing the dishes and getting dressed can become a challenge. Bringing mindful awareness and attention to these types of activities can turn them into meditations in and of themselves. Using dish-washing as an example, one may experience pain in the hands while holding a dish and also simultaneously experience the warm water showering their hands, the soapy suds, and the breeze of a fan. The pain becomes just one part of the person's experience. Practicing mindfulness has the potential to broaden one's view and perspective of life, allowing us to see one's whole experience, which may include pain. One woman with chronic pain describes her experience as follows:

I hopped right out of bed this morning, feeling well rested, actually great. My legs felt really strong. But when I went to open the door to my room I noticed how tender my fingers were. Even the slightest pressure or effort hurt. I took a few deep breaths and went to use the bathroom. When I got back to my room I knew that it was time to get dressed. Sometimes, the many layers needed this time of year scare me. But not today. I slowly opened my drawers, carefully selected my warmest layers and placed them out on my bed. I pulled up the chair next to my bedside. I picked up my thermal leggings, slowly inserting one foot at a time. Socks came next. They can be hard. I sang a little song to myself as I put on the first sock. My hands needed a break, so I made a phone call in between. By the end of the conversation, I was ready to continue dressing. I noticed the sun shining through my window. I knew it would be a slow day, but a beautiful one.

In this example, this person was able to bring a practice of patience and mindfulness into her everyday activities. The pain in her fingers became a focal point of her morning reminding her to dress with awareness. In this situation, maybe this woman physically had no choice but to carry out her morning activities slowly, without hurry. Instead of resisting the pain in her fingers, she listened to it. She let it guide her morning in a way that allowed her to sing a little song and see the sun shining through her window.

Through mindfulness, we can recognize the pain when it is present and not simply do everything in our power to push it away. Mindfulness suggests that we embrace our pain and simply accept it as part of our experience. It becomes our teacher compelling us to stay awake and conscious of our experience in the moment. The bare experience of pain itself, within a larger context of moment-to-moment experience, can be linked to a state of presence.

CULTIVATING GRATITUDE

One benefit of mindfulness in yoga posture practice may be the cultivation of gratitude. Gratitude is not meant to minimize one's experience or perspective or to negate an individual's pain. Rather, cultivating gratitude merely generates a shift in perspective. Many wise persons see gratitude as a critical avenue to happiness. As Osho,²² a great sage from India, once prescribed:

Feel as grateful to existence as possible ... just for sheer breathing. We don't have any claim on existence, so whatever is given is a gift...[Misery] is hooked with complaints and with the complaining mind. Misery is impossible with gratefulness.^(p6)

One of the key points in Osho's teaching is that we do not have any claim on existence, which can be interpreted as not knowing how life, or our body, "should be." Is pain necessarily a "bad" thing? Can we view it as a teacher or lesson for our lives? Is it telling us to slow down? Is it telling us to be more compassionate toward ourselves and others?

We can find gratitude in just about anything. For example, a lesson that one of the authors of this articles playfully shares in teaching yoga is stating to her students:

Cultivate gratitude. If your right knee hurts, be thankful that your left knee doesn't hurt as well. If your left knee hurts too, be grateful that your right shoulder doesn't hurt, and if that hurts too, be grateful that you have a knee and shoulder.

Working toward acceptance of whatever comes in life, whether it is health-related or the death of a loved one, we can embrace it as a part of our existence. When an individual begins to be able to shift perspective in this way, the individual loses entitlement to life and begins to appreciate and become grateful for what he or she has. With awareness of the body and bodily pain, one begins to appreciate the physical body and the self. One's attention becomes focused more inwardly and on fully experiencing one's body, instead of shifting the focus outward.

CONCLUSION

It is hoped that this article offers insights and methods for helping older adults manage pain. One critical message is that it is important that the yoga instructor not offer these skills in a way that minimizes the older adults' experience with pain. These methods should only be offered in a gentle, compassionate way that avoids conveying the message that pain is not a very serious and real experience for those who are living with it.

RESOURCES

There are a number of styles of yoga and specific sequences that are particularly suitable for older adults. The following are offered as suggestions, but each individual must carefully research the traditions/techniques for him or her to determine the appropriateness for the individual.

1. The Joint-Freeing Series, from Structural Yoga Therapy
2. Viniyoga
3. Integral Yoga
4. Iyengar Yoga
5. Kripalu Yoga
6. Swaroop Yoga
7. Phoenix Rising Yoga

Mukunda Stiles,²³ founder of Structural Yoga Therapy, gives recommendations as to how to select an appropriate yoga teacher. He suggests asking some of the following questions before beginning a regular practice with a yoga teacher:

- Do I have confidence in and rapport with the teacher?
- Is the teacher certified; by what organization? How long was their training?
- Is yoga a part-time hobby or full-time profession? The more special needs a student has, the more important it will be to work with teachers who have devoted their lives to the study of yoga.
- Does the teacher continue to study with a teacher or attend classes and seminars to increase his or her knowledge and practice?
- Does the teacher have his or her own daily yoga and meditation practice?

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