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Yoga Therapy for Lower Back Pain



The Consumer Reports, September 8th article, Try Yoga for Back Pain ^[1] is very affirming for the emerging complimentary healthcare field of Yoga Therapy. It is great to see that research is showing that Yoga is just as effective as Physical Therapy for treating Lower Back Pain without the use of pharmaceuticals.

This article gives us three Yoga asana-s to try to relieve Lower Back Pain, but if we want to examine it with more precision, we must assess the root cause of our pain and practice accordingly.

For the next two weeks of our Group Therapeutic Yoga classes ^[2], we will be exploring both standing and supine/prone practices for alleviating Lower Back Pain. Many of my private clients ^[3] come to me because of Lower Back Pain as well. Here on some of the principles that I use when designing the practices or both Group and Private Yoga Therapy classes ^[4].

Back Arches or Forward Bends ? Which One Feels Better?

Does extension (back arches) or flexion (forward bends) hurt? My teacher DV Sridhar teaches to start where the student gets relief and move towards the opposite movement of the spine.

Strengthen your Core/Lower Back Muscles

Also, is the core weak? Weak abdominal muscles (mula and uddiyana bandha-s) as well as weak lower back muscles often lead to gripping by the gluts/psoas (hip muscles) to stabilize

the pelvis.

Aligning & Relaxing your Hips

Is one hip gripping/tighter than the other? Is one weaker than the other? This also needs to be assessed, and imbalances need to be addressed. Are the hips aligned? Is one higher or rotated forward? Is the back swaying back (lordosis) or is the tail tucked under? Alignment is also key.

Hamstrings ? Relax or Strengthen?

How tight are the hamstrings? They can pull the back out of alignment too, leading to the tail being tucked under when they are too tight or lordosis (sway back) when they are loose & weak.

Balancing Sides of the Body

Is one side of the back tighter/weaker than the other? Especially with scoliosis, this alignment issue needs to be addressed. Lateral bends on the tight side can really help. On the other side, we have to focus on extra strengthening. De-rotating the spine can also be crucial when that is a factor.

Bulging Discs ? Back Bends Usually ? Forward Bends Sometimes

Is there a bulging (herniated) disc? Which way is it bulging? Do forward or back bends relieve the pain? There can be "flexion intolerant discs" (most common) where we can't fold forward but find relief with back arches, and "extension intolerant discs" (less common) where we can't do back bends comfortably, but find relief from bending forward.

Relaxing Muscle Spasms

Is there muscle spasming/gripping of all the surrounding muscles of the lower back? Do we need to work on traction of the lower back/de-compression? Or do we just need to rest with bent knees resting on a bolster while we belly breathe with a prolonged exhale, relaxing the lower back and nervous system? Sometimes the best thing to do is just relax on the floor and do gentle breathing with arm movement. Just lying in bed is not considered the best approach anymore.

Relaxing the Mind & Emotions

Finally, what is going on emotionally? There is often comorbidity between pain in the lower or upper back/neck/shoulders and emotional pain/trauma. Sometimes counselling is the key therapy along with svādhyāya (self reflection/contemplation) of principles within Yogic Philosophy. Prāṇāyāma (breathing exercises) and Meditation are also wonderful tools for healing our emotions, calming our nervous system and centering in our changeless Observer/Inner Knower/Self.

Final Take Away

All of these factors need to be assessed before a Yoga Therapist designs an appropriate personal practice for best results! A general group practice might work for minor issues since

all Yoga is Therapeutic by nature. But having an individualized practice designed just for you will bring faster results and might be the only way for more serious problems.

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