

Yoga is for every body—How to enjoy the benefits of yoga regardless of shape, size, age or ability

by Jen Saunders, BScOT, MBA, O.T. Reg. (N.S.)

A few years ago, Yoga Journal magazine did a study that estimated the number of Americans practicing yoga was 15 million. That number is now likely higher. That statistic highlights the popularity of yoga across North America, including Canada. If you are one of the millions of people who have discovered the joy of yoga, you understand how a regular practice helps you feel better – physically and mentally.

If you have yet to discover the benefits of yoga, maybe you’ve been hesitant to give it a try. Perhaps you think yoga is only for the thin, young, flexible and graceful – you wouldn’t be alone in that thought. But this is not true. Yoga is available and accessible to all of us. Regardless of age, ability, or shape, yoga is truly for *every* body. When practiced regularly, yoga builds strength and stamina in our physical body, helps us with our emotional health, improves mental ability and connects us with our spirit.

There are different types of yoga you can practice – from a vigorous, high energy class to hot yoga to gentle, restorative yoga. You may hear different names for these different types: Iyengar, Hatha, Yin, Kripalu, etc...

If you are contemplating trying yoga try not to let these different types and names put you off.

I practice and teach Kripalu yoga which is the yoga of compassion. My life, relationships and writing are all influenced by my practice. I believe Kripalu yoga is a great yoga practice for *every* body – young, old, fat, thin, able-bodied and less able-bodied.

Some of the benefits of Kripalu yoga include:

- Stress relief
- Improvement of muscular and cardiovascular health
- The practice of patience
- Strengthening of the mind-body connection
- Learning to let things go
- Connecting with your breath
- Enjoying better sleep

To fully appreciate the benefits of a regular yoga practice, you actually have to step on a mat and practice. This can be a scary thought if you are overweight, think you are too old, think you are inflexible (flexibility has nothing to do with it) and

are afraid of embarrassing yourself.

I can remember my first yoga class. Having struggled with my weight my entire adult life, I had just come off of another unsuccessful diet. I decided that I was going to stop putting off things I wanted to try just because of my weight. So I googled yoga teachers in my community and emailed the first one who came up. She described herself as having a round body and encouraged women of all shapes and sizes to try yoga. Bingo!

So I bought a cheap mat from Costco (nothing fancy, \$20) and off I went to my first yoga class. My teacher was warm and welcoming – this made a huge difference. Once we started practicing it became clear to me how much I was struggling with some of the poses and also with getting on/off the floor. My teacher helped me find ways to make the postures work for me and I slowly learned how to get on/off the floor more easily. But something happened in that class that changed me – I felt like I was coming home to myself.

I went back week after week, eventually two or three nights a week and after a few years I pursued yoga teacher training. Yoga has literally changed my life – from my relationship to food, to my relationships with others, to my physical and mental health. I am so grateful I was able to move past my fear and gave yoga a try.

As a plus-sized woman (or anyone who does not fit society’s stereotype of someone who does yoga) it takes a lot of courage to go to a yoga class. You can do it! Here are five tips to help get you on the mat and give yoga a try:

1. Sign up for a beginner series. These are typically in four or six week series and allow you to receive the benefits of a regular yoga practice. If you are new to yoga, I strongly recommend beginner classes. They are designed to help meet students where they are.
2. Find the right teacher for you. You should feel warmly welcomed when you are at yoga. Yoga is for everybody. You should feel included and connected regardless of your age, ability or size. If



you do not feel good when you are with your teacher, find a new teacher. This may take time. Do not give up!

3. Less is more. Try a gentle class. Start off with a gentle style of yoga and see where your practice takes you. You may really enjoy more vigorous styles of yoga, but starting with gentle classes allows our mind and body to open up to new experiences.
4. Ask your friends and coworkers if they have a teacher or studio they enjoy going to – this helps sort through all of the different options out there for you. There are a lot of teachers and a lot of yoga styles. Asking friends about their experiences helps sort through all of the information and offerings that are out there.
5. Do it. Show up. Get on your mat. Even when you’ve had a long day and the dog needs a walk and your house is a mess, practice. Stick with it for at least a month – even if you really didn’t enjoy your first class! Get on your mat. In all of my years practicing yoga, I have never regretted stepping on my mat for practice.

Jen is a certified Kripalu yoga teacher. She teaches women of all shapes and sizes in her home studio in Dartmouth. Connect with her on Facebook at www.facebook.com/hellojensauanders

Yoga teaches us to cure what need not be endured
and endure what cannot be cured.
~ B.K.S. Iyengar

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KNOW?

The Early Intervention Program (EIP) invites NSTU members to sign up for our Wellness email list at ***Be_Well@nstu.ca***.

Please contact Erin at ekeefe@staff.nstu.ca to provide your NSTU email address. The ***Be_Well@nstu.ca*** list will provide information about the EIP and other wellness topics.

