

Yoga for Arthritis

Teacher-Training Intensive with Steffany Haaz

With a long-held dream to become “the Dean Ornish of arthritis” and seven years of rigorous research under her belt, Steffany Haaz, PhD, RYT 500, convened her first Yoga for Arthritis Teacher-Training Intensive last fall in Baltimore. Over three days, she would provide her first seven participants with a solid grounding in sixteen evidenced-based classes, tailored to safely and effectively impart Yoga’s benefits to people living with arthritis and its related conditions.

The foundation of this teacher-training intensive was the sixteen-class, eight-week Yoga for Arthritis series: the protocol used during seven years of research conducted at Johns Hopkins University. The intensive entitles the participants, upon successful completion, to use these sixteen sequential classes to teach this series, using a manual that covers the material contained in those classes.

Joining Haaz in the training were two guest speakers: Heather Keller, RN, BSN, 500 E-RYT, who taught two eight-week series as part of the study; and Marina Tompkins, director of an adult day program, who has rheumatoid arthritis and was a student in one of Haaz’s Yoga for Arthritis series.

The training required a minimum Yoga Alliance registration of RYT-200, and the participants were all committed Yoga teachers, from 30-somethings to 50-somethings, steeped in various Yoga traditions and orientations, including Integral Yoga, therapeutic and restorative Yoga, Iyengar Yoga, and Bihar School of Yoga.

BACKGROUND

Arthritis, which includes 100 different conditions under its umbrella, is currently the nation’s leading cause of disability, affecting about 50 percent of Americans, with increases projected over the next 30 years as baby boomers age. There is a growing need for Yoga teachers with training to serve this population.

Medication, surgery, and other procedures can reduce symptoms in the most common form of the disease, osteoarthritis (OA), which is usually caused by wear and tear on the joints, often with inflammation



Participant and Baltimore Yoga teacher Janet Indresano relaxes in a supported wide-angle forward bend.

present. However, OA, which affects 21 million people, cannot be cured. Safe movement and exercise such as Yoga and stress reduction are often recommended by healthcare providers to address symptoms.

The second major form of the disease, rheumatoid arthritis (RA), is an autoimmune condition affecting 1.2 million people in the United States. Its symptoms, such as severe fatigue and pain, commonly flare up and abate, with stress seen as a major factor. Recent advancements in medical treatment have resulted in some effective medications for helping to manage the disease; but again, safe movement and stress-reduction strategies are recommended by health-care providers to help people deal with their arthritis self-care.

Haaz and the research team at Johns Hopkins University found that the specific benefits of this sixteen-class Yoga series for those with arthritis included:

- A statistically significant improvement in overall physical health, flexibility, and balance.
- A significant reduction in symptoms of depression and improvement in positive affect (more joy and happiness).
- A significant improvement in pain symptoms and, for those with RA, a significant difference in the number of tender and swollen joints when compared with control subjects receiving the usual medical care.

(Study results are included in an article entitled “Yoga for Arthritis: A Scoping Review,” co-authored by Haaz and S. J. Bartlett¹)

Perhaps most important for those living with these conditions, Yoga has been shown by

many research studies to have a positive effect on quality of life. It’s an effect that, as Haaz points out, extends beyond Yoga classes and takes hold in people’s lives. “People with arthritis may enjoy Yoga more than traditional forms of exercise, and . . . are more likely to continue,” Haaz says.

For the 50 million adults in the United States with arthritis, or any of its related conditions such as Crohn’s disease and gout, symptoms can range widely from day to day and year to year. Yoga’s compassionate approach in meeting each individual with full acceptance in each moment is well-suited to this variability.

THE INTENSIVE

Overview

Each day of the intensive in the well-equipped and serene yama studio (Yoga, Ayurveda & Meditation Arts) began with a Yoga class taught by Haaz in a spirit of self-care that was a recurrent theme of the training. This set the tone as the days moved on, with lectures and group discussions backed by PowerPoint presentations and handouts. Topics covered included anatomy, the causes and symptoms of arthritis, research results, how specific yogic practices and principles relate to the conditions common to the disease, and how to reach the arthritis community.

The main focus throughout the intensive was hands-on exposure to the Yoga for Arthritis series so that participants were equipped to bring it back to their communities after completion. The first ten classes of the series offer a basic structure that begins with discussion and ten minutes of warm-ups tailored to individual needs, followed by fifteen to twenty minutes of *asana* practice, gradually introducing standing (when possible) and sitting postures with any props and modifications needed; ten minutes of *savasana* (relaxation pose); and five minutes of a closing that includes introductions to various awareness and meditation practices. Key to adapting each of the *asana*, relaxation, and meditation practices included in these classes is the broad range of recommended modifications, often with props, that are demonstrated, illustrated, and, most importantly, (continued on page 35)

experienced during this intensive. The adaptations address specific conditions such as wrist pain (a padded wedge) or overall weakness (chair and one-on-one support). The remaining six classes use the same basic structure but focus on some specific topics and concerns. There is a class on sciatica, for instance, and one that explores using a wall for those who need the support in such poses as half-moon or a seated twist. Another class is structured to prepare teachers offering the series to give their students the opportunity to lead a session. Each of the sixteen classes includes recommended homework for the yoga teachers' students, with suggested articles included in the teacher and student manuals on topics such as meditation and creating a personal practice.

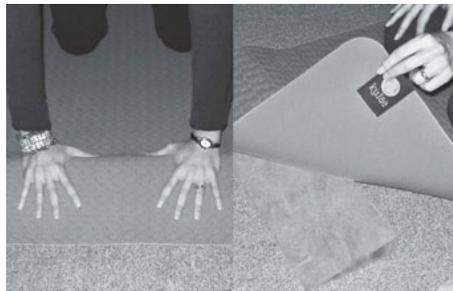
Day-by-Day

Day One: The first day laid the foundation, with one of the first assignments—practice classes—adding the incentive of performance evaluation to the training. Each participant, as a requirement for course completion, was to practice-teach one of the sixteen Yoga for Arthritis classes outlined and illustrated in the teachers' manual, sometimes with a partner. The rest of us, as “students,” would role-play, taking on the symptoms and challenges we would learn about in other parts of the intensive.

The day continued with explorations on why Yoga works with arthritis, a refresher on anatomy, and a detailed rundown on the research behind the series that allowed the nonresearch types among us to be able to understand the charts and statistics and professionally communicate the results in health-care settings. Guest speaker Keller told of the initially daunting prospect—and ultimately life-transforming satisfaction—of working with people living with these conditions.

Day Two: The second day included the first two practice classes that each of the participants had been assigned to present; a discussion on the difficulties faced by those living with RA; and a brainstorming session on how to reach and serve this community that included record-keeping, questionnaires, and outcome-measure strategies.

The day continued with one of the training's most illuminating segments: “Application of Yogic Principles.” The presentation used the structure of the eight limbs of Yoga to present issues likely to arise in teaching this series. Looking at arthritis in the context of *ahimsa* (nonharming) or *satya* (truthfulness), for example, created the



A wedge beneath the mat can mean more support and cushioning and less pain for a person with arthritis.

groundwork for deeper understanding of how to teach to this population. As Haaz says, “This population has knowledge. Your role is not to fix them, but to provide a positive experience in a safe way, to allow the pain to be.” With arthritis, often, pain is the fact, the truth of an individual's experience.

This day also featured the ultimate in the intensive's multiplatform, multisensory presentations. Starting in small groups, then reuniting for each group's report and a whole-group discussion, we explored the dramatic web-based comics documenting author Sara Nash's experiences with Yoga and RA.²

Day Three: This day gave real meaning to the word *intensive*, with emotions, information, and experience all heightened by the awareness that this was the final day of our training. After the morning Yoga class, featuring some background Beatles music, the day included discussions on teaching strategies for classes of mixed abilities, two more practice classes, evaluations, a beautiful closing ritual, and, on top of all that, guest-speaker Tompkins, who shared her moving story of finally being correctly diagnosed after years of struggling with the knock-you-to-your-knees condition of RA—a story of the gratitude one young woman feels having found her path of transformation in one of the research study's Yoga for Arthritis series.

Tompkins's story, and her powerful personal presence on that last day, allowed us as Yoga teachers to clearly see the value of learning as much about arthritis as we can. “You need to have an instructor who meets you where you are,” Tompkins said. “You need to have someone who is asking, ‘Is there a pain here?’ Someone who says, ‘We're all in different places; there's never any rush for anything.’ That's important.”

By the closing ceremony, a *sangha* (community) had formed. The bond led to the creation of a Facebook group where participants and future trainees can share information, marketing materials, photos, links, and

experiences. Do a Facebook search for “Yoga for Arthritis” and see what the intensive's participants are offering.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Haaz will be teaching a five-day Yoga for Arthritis Teacher Training Intensive at Yogaville, Integral Yoga's Satchidananda Ashram in Buckingham, VA, in June of 2011. Plans are also in the works for a three-day intensive at Integral Yoga Institute in New York City. (I am planning to assist at both intensives.)

Both trainings qualify those who successfully complete it for 30 hours of credit with the Yoga Alliance. Student manuals and the use of the logo are also available when participants present their own Yoga for Arthritis series.

The initial seven years of this research was funded in part by the Arthritis Foundation and the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine. The next step to further validate the research findings is for another researcher or researchers to conduct additional trials on how these sixteen classes, which were presented in a medical institution, translate into a community setting.

To any interested researchers, Haaz says, “Email me!” (info@drHaaz.com).

As therapeutic Yoga steadily makes inroads toward bringing Yoga to individuals who, research shows, stand to benefit so profoundly, the prospect of a growing number of Yoga teachers equipped to safely teach some of the millions with arthritis is indeed hard-won progress to be celebrated. **YTI**

References

1. Haaz, S., & Bartlett, S. J. (2011). Yoga for arthritis: A scoping review. *Rheumatic Disease Clinics of North America*, 37(1), 33-46. Abstract retrieved from ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21220084.
2. Nash, S. (N.D.) Single in the city with rheumatoid arthritis . . . Hello Baltimore! (J. Samborski, illus.). HealthCentral. Retrieved December, 2010, from healthcentral.com/rheumatoid-arthritis/sara-nash-comics-baltimore.html.



Nancy O'Brien (nancy-obrienYoga.com), a Yoga teacher and wellness writer, editor, and speaker who specializes in mind-body practices for elders and those dealing with health challenges, last wrote for this publication

“Our Best Defense,” about Bethesda Naval Hospital's plans to bring a full-time Yoga therapist on staff at a primary-care clinic.