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Powerful Practice

Yoga And Ot Combine For Mindful Therapy

Tibetan lama Tarthang Tulku once said: "In brief tranquil moments when the senses are relaxed and responsive, when the heart is easy and the mind light, we can hear the voice of silent space speaking ... Awareness responds, and the blessing of healing knowledge flows forward."

A path to mind-body balance that winds back 2,000 years to India, yoga is emerging as one of the most popular forms of exercise in the Western world. Beyond boosting flexibility, strength, and serenity, many turn to yoga to combat depression and anxiety, prevent illness, and manage blood pressure and the effects of disease. Yoga has been used to treat musculoskeletal problems of the back, neck, and hips, which makes it a useful tool for occupational and physical therapists.

Mindful Therapy

One of the key elements to yoga is the mindfulness it inspires, says New York-based Richard Sabel, MA, MPH, OTR, GCFP, educational director of East West Rehab Institute and clinical assistant professor in the occupational therapy program at SUNY Downstate Medical Center. "Anxiety is often a limiting factor in a client's ability to participate in therapy and make functional gains. Yoga quiets the mind, which helps bring a patient's attention to what's going on this moment," he says.

The postures, whether it's chair yoga, restorative yoga, or traditional hatha yoga, can enhance body awareness and organization of movement. In turn, this can improve a client's ability to perform everyday activities, such as getting out of bed or reaching for something in the cupboard. Clients often report feeling calmer and having more energy to either participate in therapy or engage in meaningful activities at home or in the community, Sabel adds.

Although many people practice yoga at a local studio or gym, those recovering from injury or illness, or suffering certain physical conditions, may practice a modified version of the modality taught by an OT or PT in a home, hospital, or hospice setting.

"The parallels between yoga and OT are many," says Patricia Barnes, MS, OTR/L, a registered yoga teacher in Baltimore. "Both modalities take a holistic approach to healing, looking at the big picture and treating the mind, body, and spirit." According to Barnes, many yoga poses are really the same exercises that you see in PT and OT; for example, the "bridge" or "sphinx" (prone on elbows). "It's the mindfulness that sets them apart," she notes.

Breathe in, Breathe out

It all starts with the breath. "If I had only one way to treat a patient, I'd work on breathing," Sabel reveals. "It brings you to the moment. Plus, when we start breathing more efficiently, all these things happen psychologically, physiologically, and emotionally. It calms the nervous system and regulates metabolism. It works just as well for athletes [or] for patients who are completely immobile," he adds.

When you add posture work, remember that breathing is fundamental to all poses, says Kia Meaux, owner of Kaya Yoga studio in Davis, Calif., and author of "Dynamic Yoga." Meaux continues, "Secondly is to perform a posture with correct anatomical and biomechanical principles — learning correct posture is essential to healing muscular injuries. It's important to teach people how to be fully present in their bodies before teaching them

how to heal themselves.”

Injury and Illness Prevention

Yoga is regarded by many for its positive effect on the immune system. Daily practice of more vigorous types of yoga such as ashtanga or vinyasa (flow yoga) has been shown to improve lung capacity and oxygen conversion. And, thanks to the body awareness it spurs, yoga can avert injuries such as bad falls. The National Institute of Aging even recommends that senior centers offer regular yoga and tai chi classes.

“Yoga can prevent certain illnesses, but it’s not a cure-for-all,” notes Meaux, who adds that yoga’s popularity continues to rise not just with society’s increased levels of stress and anxiety, but with physical injuries that Western medicine has not been able to address from a holistic perspective. “People want to see a connectedness between their mental and physical well-being. Yoga makes us take a hard look at ourselves, our lifestyles, and how we may have contributed to our own injury.”

When using yoga as therapy, instructors and OTs need to be aware of existing medical conditions and the contraindications associated with each health problem. “It’s critical to adapt the poses to the individual,” Sabel says, explaining that someone with osteoporosis shouldn’t do forward bends with trunk rotation, while somebody who has suffered a stroke or a bleed in the head shouldn’t do inversions. “One of my concerns with the Western approach to yoga is that people often try to ‘achieve’ a pose rather than ‘being’ in the pose and accepting where they are right now. If you work slowly, gently, and with mindfulness, your body will find the right balance.”

Recovery and Coping With Disease

The positive effects of yoga can extend to those recovering from illness such as cancer and stroke. The exercises can help a patient relax and sleep better, and combat the depression often associated with serious health issues. Continuous practice teaches patience, along with a greater understanding of the problem at hand and what the healing process involves.

“As an OT, you have to help your clients address the psychological aspect of their disease or problem first,” Barnes points out. Yoga and meditation offer powerful tools for recovering addicts, Barnes continues. “The person learns to be present in the moment. You follow the breath and notice what’s happening in the body right now. You experience the cravings come and go.” In this sense, yoga can enhance coping skills and patience. “It helps you be calmer and to accept what is and what needs to change,” she explains.

Perhaps the most important role of OT and yoga instructors is to show people how to develop their own intuition, take control, and be more self-directed in the healing process, Barnes says. Adds Sabel: “If we help people find a way to be present in the moment, the body has an amazing capacity for change and will work toward the right balance.”

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