

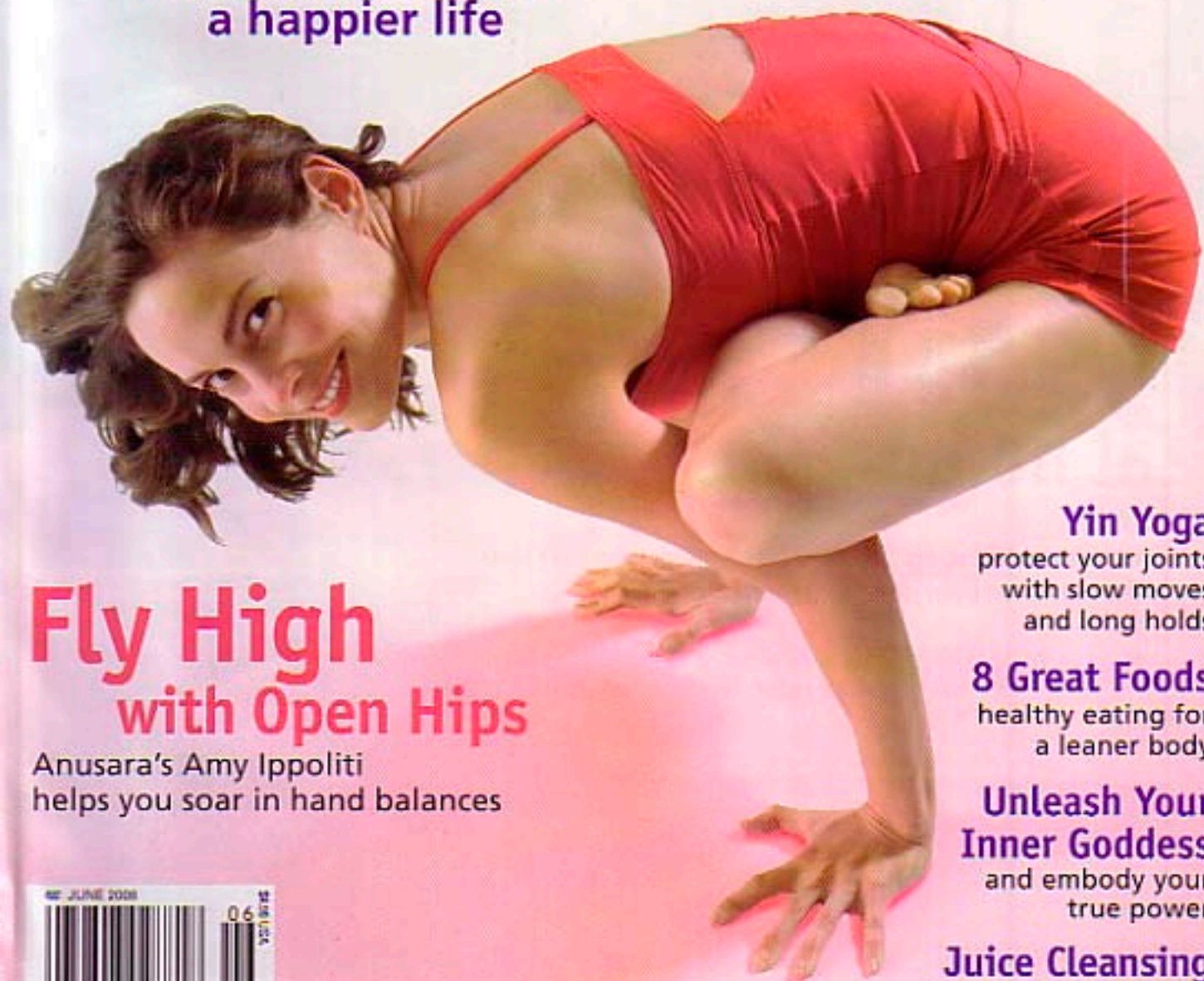
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The Power of CONNECTION

Just showing up to your yoga class can have a strong influence on your health and sense of well-being

by Karen Schwartz

The next time you roll out your mat for yoga class, take a good look at the people around you and consider this: Those folks might be playing an even greater role in your physical, mental, and emotional health than the asanas you're about to perform.

Although yoga may have started out as a practice of solitary seekers spending long periods of meditation on mountaintops in search of the truth, it has a decidedly more social feel in the West. Group classes proliferate, and new studios are cropping up everywhere. And while yoga therapy for specific injuries and health conditions is gaining a foothold of acceptance within the realm of western medicine, research is proving that connection and intimacy—the same kind

of connection you find in a group asana class—play an equally critical role in health and healing.

“The nature of studying yoga has changed in the West,” says Kelly McGonigal, PhD, a Stanford, California-based yoga teacher and psychologist who specializes in the relationship between health and social support. Referring to modern yoga's shift away from its traditional focus on the one-to-one teacher/student relationship, she adds, “Some teachers disparage that, suggesting the West has taken this wonderful relationship and made it a commodity. But there's something very powerful about

being in a group setting, filling a very powerful need that was missing from our culture.”



Yoga and Western Medicine Agree

The Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, long considered a gold standard in research and development in allopathic medicine, recently published a supplement to their monthly health newsletter entitled "The Power of Connection—Physical, Emotional, and Spiritual Intimacy." The issue mentions studies concluding that people who feel isolated and unsupported lead shorter, unhappier lives and are at risk for serious health issues. And for those who have cancer, heart disease, or an impaired immune system, their outlook improves with a support network. That speaks volumes for the potential power of the group.

"The power of people being together and doing the same thing in a deeply spiritual way is like going into a mighty river—the current takes you to a deeper level," says Nischala Joy Devi, who created the Yoga of Heart training program for cardiac-care patients. "If yoga practice in the West is meant to help the body, why is it that people keep coming back more and more to the classes? There is something that happens that connects them to themselves on a very deep level."

McGonigal says her classes always include a self-guided component so students don't use the class "as a crutch" to avoid personal explorations of their practice, but the group structure offers something equally valuable. According to the Buddhist tradition (her primary influence), "You cannot do the practice by yourself," she says. "You need the support of people on the path. You must do the spiritual work, but being in the community helps keep you honest about your practice and helps keep you focused."

Social benefits

The emerging emphasis on connection couldn't come at a more critical time. In a recent article for the IDEA Health and Fitness Association Journal, McGonigal reports that Americans are more socially isolated than ever before. In 2004, the average American had just two people to talk to about important matters; research shows that socially isolated individuals are 25 times more likely to die over a nine-year period than more socially connected people. Further, low levels of social support are associated with increased risk of death from cardiovascular disease, cancer, and other infectious diseases.

Dr. Robert Sheeler, medical editor of the Mayo Clinic newsletter, did his preliminary research for "The Power of Connection" supplement during a weeklong retreat at Kripalu Yoga Center in Lenox, Massachusetts. Inspired by 25 years of practicing medicine and his own personal

3 Nurturing Meditations

Yoga teacher and psychologist Kelly McGonigal, PhD, suggests these meditations to help you feel a deeper sense of connection with yourself and others.

• Gratitude Meditation

Take time to reflect on everyone and everything for which you feel gratitude. Realizing how much you have to be grateful for helps open your heart and keep you from feeling alone.

• Meditation on Interdependence

Take a moment to think about everyone and everything that facilitated your being wherever you are at this moment: This could include your parents; the bus driver who delivered you safely to your destination; the architect who designed the room you're in right now; and even the trees used to make the chair under you. The more you realize how many things came together to make this moment possible, the more strikingly obvious it will become that everything really is interconnected.

• Classic Lovingkindness Meditation

Drawn from the Buddhist tradition, the classic *vipassana*, or lovingkindness meditation, opens your heart and invokes caring and compassion as you ask for all beings to be free from suffering and to have health, happiness, and peace. McGonigal says it is important, but often surprisingly difficult, for people to include themselves in this meditation. If this is true for you, try thinking of an animal that you know. "We project onto animals our need to be cared for," she says. "When we see them, we see the part of ourselves that needs nurturing."

spiritual journey, he says he felt a powerful need to express those ideas, researching and writing the majority of the supplement himself. "Everyone needs a natural sense of community," he explains. "Studies show that people who feel they are connected get less infection, illness, heart disease, and cancer."

While successful medical advances such as penicillin, vaccinations, and various drug therapies may have shifted the traditional allopathic approach away from the whole person, Sheeler says both health-care consumers and providers are rediscovering that focus. "If you have bad arthritis or a bad back, the better your mind-body-spirit connection is, the more likely you are not to have as intense pain," he says. He also points out the findings of a now-famous breast cancer-patient study conducted at Stanford in 1989. Of the 86 women in the study, those randomly assigned to weekly support groups lived twice as long as the group who received only conventional care. While the results are not definitive, they had a great impact on the collective mindset of the health-care community.

Devi has also seen the positive results of connection within a group of cardiac patients she had worked with in

Wellness Solution

A new DVD series offers healthy remedies for 10 common ailments

Are western medicine and alternative health care finding a more harmonic relationship? Mayo Clinic, in conjunction with Gaiam, Inc., has produced *Wellness Solutions*, a 10-DVD series offering prescriptions of nutrition, yoga, and meditation for 10 chronic health conditions—obesity, type-2 diabetes, back pain, high blood pressure, osteoarthritis, heart disease, irritable bowel syndrome, fibromyalgia, menopause, and insomnia.

Each DVD begins with a 30-minute informative talk by Mayo Clinic specialists about the specific condition, followed by dietary recommendations. Rodney Yee then leads a restorative yoga and meditation sequence (except for the on the Menopause DVD, which Colleen Saidman Yee conducts).

"It's a wonderful thing to begin to broaden the [healthcare] horizon by acknowledging traditional western medicine along with eastern approaches," says Yee who, along with Saidman Yee, are both strongly involved in the integrative medicine movement and have worked with designer Donna Karan's Urban Zen initiative.

Dr. Brent Bauer, director of Complementary and Integrative Medicine at Mayo Clinic, says these 10 health conditions are the most common chronic medical problems facing adult Americans today—and all 10 of them respond significantly to lifestyle changes. For the chronic nature of conditions such as back pain and high blood pressure, Dr. Bauer notes, managing them effectively with yoga and meditation are especially important. In fact, he says, more and more people have been coming to the clinic looking for alternative or complementary-care approaches.

Both Dr. Bauer and Yee point to a large body of evidence-based research backing the effectiveness of the treatment plans for each health condition, lending credibility to the "alternative" approaches. "Basically, it comes down to what works," says Yee. "When the billions of dollars being spent on alternative health care are coming out of the clients' pockets, it's something to pay attention to."

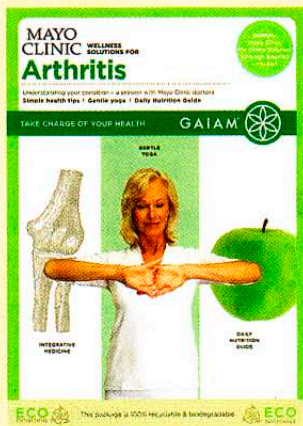
Although with his 28 years of yoga experience, Yee is quite familiar with each of the 10 health conditions in the DVDs, he and Saidman Yee still did considerable research before designing their programs. While the yoga and meditation sequences provide general templates, Yee says, every individual would need a formal therapeutic approach tailored specifically to his or her needs.

Dr. Bauer agrees, noting the tension between the western scientific approach, which strives to create high-quality studies with reproducible results, and Chinese or Ayurvedic approaches, which believes "so much of [the treatment] should be personalized."

Mayo Clinic, which has been providing acupuncture for 20 years, formally developed its complementary care clinic about 15 years ago. Part of the clinic's goals, Dr. Bauer says, are empowering people to better self-care, as well as offering a resource both for conventional and alternative medicine practitioners. The *Wellness Solutions* DVDs are a follow-up to *The Mayo Clinic Book of Alternative Medicine* (Time Inc. Home Entertainment, January 2007), for which Dr. Bauer is the medical editor-in-chief.

While Mayo Clinic continues to engage in ongoing research on the effectiveness of alternative treatments, "eventually we'll get rid of all these complicated terms," says Dr. Bauer. "Complementary, integrative, alternative—eventually what we'll get back to is just good medicine."

For more information, visit mayoclinic.org or gaiam.com.



1985. Those who practiced yoga and met weekly for satsang and support as part of their care are still meeting weekly, more than 20 years later. "They have become like a family," she says.

A New Definition

As yoga integrates into the fabric of western society, its very definition is evolving, with connection becoming a central theme. "The common definition of yoga points toward union with the spirit and higher intelligence," says Ganga White, president of the White Lotus Yoga Foundation in Santa Barbara, California, "but I feel yoga certainly implies personal reintegration as well as connection with others, with nature, and with all aspects of life."

Connection and community are central features of White Lotus retreats, which include sessions of *vichara*, or spiritual inquiry, and "council circles," a Native American tradition where the one holding a talking stick speaks freely on any topic and then passes it to the next person. "The best transmissions of insight and understanding take place in dialogue, communication, and communion between people," says White. "Practicing, talking, and inquiring [with others] are the keys to sharing yoga. The council circle is an unparalleled means of connection at our gatherings at White Lotus."

Perhaps you don't even know the names of the other students in your class, but it turns out those "regulars" tend to notice each other's absences—and your presence may well be missed. "You don't need to be best friends with the people in a spiritual community," McGonigal says. "Just knowing you have the space and can always show up is important, both to you and to them."


Technological advances

Even the age of technology offers opportunities for meaningful connections.

In 2006, McGonigal ran an online class called “The Yoga of Connection,” in which she presented reflections for practice and invited students to correspond with her and with each other via message boards. Students had the opportunity to connect with people from all over the country.

McGonigal found both parallels and differences between the ways people participated online and in her live classes. The online format stripped away many of the typical roles people unconsciously play in social interactions that might foster competition and actually create separation, she says. Without these role restrictions and accompanying judgments, self-consciousness, and other feelings of limitation, people often felt freer to express themselves honestly.

On the other hand, some students simply “lurked” online, reading the boards but not engaging in the exercises. Some engaged only with her and not each other. McGonigal encouraged students to notice how these patterns might influence their sense of connection (or lack thereof).

But most people *do* want to connect. Dr. Sheeler says the “Power of Connection” supplement received more feedback than any issue they’ve ever published. So, as you’re waiting for your next yoga class to begin, send a mental “thank you” to the person on the mat next to yours. Even if you don’t know each other, you could be making both your lives a little happier and a whole lot healthier. 

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