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Podcast Script #2 Dr. Steffany Moonaz

Part 4_Script 2: Introduction to mindfulness, meditation, and breathing exercises

Jessica

Welcome back, or if you are just joining us. I'm Jessica Boles, Licensed Social Worker with Global Healthy Living Foundation and ArthritisPower. I'm joined by Dr. Steffany Moonaz of Yoga for Arthritis. In this podcast session, Dr. Moonaz will be providing us with a brief introduction into mindfulness, meditation, and breathing exercises. Steffany thank you again for taking the time to share these exciting insights.

Steffany

You're very welcome. I am passionate about this and happy to share.

Jessica

As a social worker, I have often recommended individuals to explore the therapeutic technique of mindfulness as part of helping patients to become present in the moment. But what I'm wondering is, how would you say does the concept of mindfulness fits in to the wonderful world of the yoga practice?

Steffany

So, aside from poses and movement that we associate with yoga, mindfulness meditation, deep relaxation, and breathing, are yoga practices that can be used in the management of arthritis and other conditions.

At the closing of yoga class, most teachers incorporate some type of relaxation from anywhere between just a minute to 15-20 minutes. This is usually done in what we call Savasana, which translates to Corpse Pose, so in that position your lying on the back with eyes closed. The purpose of that relaxation is to let the body rest in a neutral position and absorb the benefits of the physical practice, like reduced stress and tension, so a sense of calm and ease will carry over from the practice after the class had ended. It actually also relates to the original purpose of Hatha Yoga practice, which was bringing the body into balance so that it can remain completely quiet for a more meaningful meditation. Now, in American yoga classes, that deep

relaxation is often considered a reward at the end of class, almost like dessert after a healthy meal, but for the restless it can often be the most challenging.

So, deep relaxation is beneficial for anyone and usually requires no modification. If you are pregnant, or if lying on your back for a long period of time is painful, your yoga instructor can suggest alternate poses for relaxation. Some people also like to put a cushion under the knees or a little bit of support behind the neck. You want to make sure you feel comfortable enough to remain still and relaxed, but if you need to make an adjustment during relaxation, that's perfectly fine.

Some classes include brief periods of seated meditation before or after the postures. During that time, some instructors give guidance on how to approach mindfulness. It is a time to quiet and focus the mind, so generally you'll focus on something like the breath or repeating a word in your mind, your trying to relieve the mind of the trivial thoughts that stream in and out during the day. This discipline of the mind is said to provide relief from the day's stresses and it actually even changes the way your brain responds to stress, allowing clearer thinking. We now know that meditation actually grows grey matter in the brain, and especially in some of the regions affected by chronic pain, so I like to think of meditation as an antidote for the effects of pain on the brain. Mindfulness can have any focus, so as I said your can on your breathing, you can hold an image in your mind, an idea or affirmation, a sound, or even a personal prayer.

Going back to what you said earlier, it is training the mind to stop going to the future, to stop re-visiting the past and to anchor in the present moment. Which is really is a great life skill, but it does requires a lot of practice.

Modifications to, you think about meditation as being done in a seated cross-legged position and that's not possible or comfortable for everyone especially for those with arthritis or those who have limited flexibility. You can use other seated positions; you can use props like a chair or sitting on a yoga block. Sitting upright is said to allow a better flow of energy, but if you're in pain, you are not going be able to focus the mind. It is more important to be comfortable than to be in a certain position. You can even meditate lying down as long as you aren't going to fall asleep.

Jessica

I heard you mention a few terms that I had never heard of. I'm not even sure I'll pronounce them correctly, *Asanas* and *Pranayama*. Can you talk more about these? Maybe give our listeners some background as to how are these concepts applied in a yoga class?

Steffany

You are correct it is sometimes pronounced, Asana and Asanas and that is a Sanskrit word and it basically refers to the physical poses that we think of as yoga poses. Those are intended to bring the body into balance. There is also evidence that they are associated with greater health

and wellbeing. The poses are generally combined in sequence that addresses strength, flexibility, and balance of the whole body. Poses can be held for variable lengths, depending on the experience on the participant, the characteristics of the pose and the style of yoga. Most poses can be easily modified to account for a student's level of experience and physical condition. Some teachers use props, like blocks, straps, or blankets to help students adjust challenging poses. While originally, those postures were developed to prepare the body for sitting still in meditation, they've actually evolved as a physical practice often used for its own merit and they are considered by many to be a moving meditation themselves. Now, Vinyasa, which is another Sanskrit word, is the term for a fluid sequence of asanas that are strung together like a kind of dance, so you are moving in between the poses, instead of holding each pose.

Asanas and vinyasa are the yoga practices that require the most guidance and special attention for people with arthritis. If something seems too challenging or it causes discomfort, you and the instructor can arrive at an appropriate modification. You want to speak with the instructor beforehand to make sure they are comfortable working with you to find workable variations.

Traditionally, yoga *always* incorporates learning how to breathe. You may say we all know how to breathe, but do we breathe properly for optimal health? Breath is an important aspect of most yoga classes and some actually consider it the most powerful of the yoga practices. Movement should be connected with the breath throughout yoga practice. In some poses, that means moving one direction on an inhale and the opposite direction on an exhale. Some teachers also instruct students to hold a pose for a particular number of breaths. Independent of the poses though there are other breathing practices to invigorate or calm the body and mind, and those should be learned from a qualified instructor. So, a good resource for those who are interested in learning more about the breath is a book called the "Science of Breath: A Practical Guide" and that's written by Dr. Alan Hymes. It's important to note that also some people forget to breathe when they are concentrating on something that's really challenging, but on a biological level, if you aren't breathing sufficiently, your muscles aren't getting the oxygen they need to fuel that physical activity. From a yoga perspective, breath control is very much related to the movement of the practice. It's also thought to be connected to how energy flow through the body, we call that *prana* or life force.

Jessica

Thank you so much, Dr. Moonaz, for sharing your wisdom. I'm really seeing how and why yoga is more than just a fad or pop topic but rather an instrument or a tool that patients can use to support their treatment approach.

Steffany

Absolutely, it's an important topic. And it's certainly not simply a fad - to the contrary, the basic teachings of yoga have been practiced for thousands of years.

Jessica

Yes, and that's important to note. As we conclude this session, I'll just add one thing we mentioned, and actually you reminded me when we spoke offline, was that we know that from research as well as what we hear from our CreakyJoints community is that there is just a significant emotional impact on patients living with chronic pain and also in turn their caregivers if they have one. Research even shows that patients living with arthritis, for example, are at even higher risk for depression. With all that mind, we're happy to learn from you Dr. Moonaz, that yoga is a tool a patient can consider when trying to actually manage their chronic pain, and things they can talk about with their treatment team really to address not just the physical but also the emotional aspects of pain. So, thank you so much again, Dr. Moonaz. To our listeners, we'll chat about the science of yoga and we'll learn more, a lot more in just a minute.