How Occupational Therapists Can Improve Your Life with Yoga

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With its rising popularity, yoga is moving beyond the mat and into health care settings. Health care professionals are taking yoga classes for their own health and well-being and are bringing it to their health care practices as a treatment modality.

Occupational therapists (OTs) are joining other health care providers in incorporating yoga into their treatment offerings. OTs bring a unique perspective to yoga and can guide you deeper into your practice for personal health, well-being, and prevention of disease.

The Health Benefits of Yoga

Yoga’s popularity has grown in the past five years, likely due to an onslaught of research showing the many health benefits. Physicians are taking note, and now some prescribe yoga to their patients. Studies show that yoga may be able to lower stress, anxiety, pain, fatigue, depression and insomnia, reduce risk for cardiovascular disease and hypertension, alleviate the side effects of cancer treatment, improve recovery from neurological conditions such as stroke, symptoms of multiple sclerosis and Parkinson’s, prevent or lower risk of disease, and improve a sense of overall well-being.

Several studies show that yoga postures, also known as asanas, meditation or a combination of both can improve strength, flexibility and functional mobility for a number of conditions that cause chronic pain and disability. Pain medication may be reduced or completely eliminated in certain cases.

Yoga may also improve gait functioning in elders and prevent falls.

Yoga and meditation practices have been shown to decrease addictive behaviors. Thoughts of self-inflicted harm and disrespect toward oneself were able to change to more loving, caring, and respectful thoughts and behaviors. Yoga has also been found helpful in recovery from eating disorders and improving poor body image.

Research shows that yoga can help reduce stress by creating the relaxation response, helping you to feel calmer, focus on the present, and decrease the stress or flight-or-fight response. It can lower blood pressure, lower cortisol levels, and increase blood flow to vital organs.

Yoga & Occupational Therapy
Yoga and occupational therapy can be complementary in their concepts and methodologies. While yoga has an emphasis on activating the parasympathetic nervous system, occupational therapy encompasses goals and objectives toward functional independence or living one's life purpose. Both sciences accentuate the use of mind, body, and spirit in daily life in order to function within a new perception and new skills all while being in a calmer state.

When working with an OT trained in yoga, they can assist you with the eight limbs to help you reach your health goals and live a meaningful and purposeful life.

The eight limbs, or stages, of yoga, are:

1. Yama: Universal morality
2. Niyama: Personal observances
3. Asanas: Body postures
4. Pranayama: Breathing exercises, and control of prana
5. Pratyahara: Control of the senses
6. Dharana: Concentration and cultivating inner perceptual awareness
7. Dhyana: Devotion, meditation on the Divine
8. Samadhi: Union with the Divine

How OTs Can Be Uniquely Qualified for Yoga

Not all OTs go on to receive specialty training in yoga and incorporate into their practices. If you are interested in seeking out this kind of intervention, you will need to find the right OT to meet your needs.

When you do find the right OT, though, they have unique qualities that they can bring to yoga instruction and therapy. These unique qualifications include:

1. Their schooling

Occupational therapists, certified occupational therapy assistants, and those with a doctorate in occupational therapy receive between two to five years of education in anatomy and physiology, psychology, biology, the mind-body connection, spirituality, neurobiology, kinesiology, cognition, psychosocial components, sensory integration, biomechanics, ergonomics, disease and illness, and how the environment can affect health and healing.

The path to becoming a yoga instructor is less standardized. Some are considered instructors after a quick 12-hour class. Others are an instructor after 200 hours if they are Registered Yoga Teacher (RYT) certified.

2. Their licensing
In all 50 states, in order to practice occupational therapy, an OT must be licensed by the state. This licensing certifies that they have met strict guidelines in their education, that their scope of practice is supervised by the state, and that they must demonstrate that they continue to educate themselves on best practices throughout their careers.

Yoga instructors are not currently licensed by states. The best way to ensure the quality of your instruction is to inquire about your instructor’s education regarding yoga and whether they are registered with any national yoga organizations.

**3. Their ability to bill insurance**

Because OTs meet these strict standards, occupational therapy services are often billable by insurance, as long as they are incorporating yoga treatments into the scope of practice of their license.

**How OTs Are Incorporating Yoga into Their Practices**

There are several paths that an OT may pursue in combining their knowledge of occupational therapy and yoga.

**1. By using yoga techniques as a treatment modality within a traditional occupational therapy session**

When yoga techniques are evidenced based and used to work toward a goal outlined by an occupational therapist in a plan of care, they can qualify as occupational therapy treatment and be billed to insurance.

This can be done in any setting an occupational therapist may work in, including:

- Hospitals
- Schools
- Long-term care and skilled nursing facilities
- Out-patient clinics
- Home health
- Mental health settings
- Early intervention programs

**2. By providing yoga therapy to clients on a cash basis as an occupational therapist**

Cash-based therapy allows occupational therapists to work outside of the restrictions for reimbursement as set by insurance companies. This freedom may allow them to provide therapy over longer courses of time and provide treatment techniques beyond what is reimbursed by insurance.
However, if the therapy is to still qualify as occupational therapy and the practitioner is operating under their OT license, they must still adhere to the scope of practice outlined by their state. Working with an OT who is practicing under their license ensures that you have some protection from the state, as they are held accountable for their services.

3. **By providing yoga therapy to clients as a yoga therapist or yoga instructor**

Some OTs may provide yoga services outside of insurance regulation and outside of their license and thus would no longer be practicing occupational therapy. These therapists may be practicing as a yoga therapist, which is not subjected to state licensing and regulations.

**OT and Yoga Therapy**

Yoga therapy is a broad term that has emerged over the past 100 years to denote the specific use of yoga to meet a health goal related to physical, psychological, emotional or spiritual stress, pain, or trauma. A person may be taught specific asanas, breathing techniques, pranayama, meditation, yoga philosophy, spiritual or psychological counseling, chanting, imagery, prayer, or ritual to reach their health and wellness goals.

Yoga therapy may be used to denote yoga used as a treatment technique within occupational therapy. As mentioned above, OTs may also pursue this as a separate practice.

**OT and Adaptive Yoga**

Adaptive yoga teaches universal principles of yoga that are accessible to all students, with any body type, age, ability or health condition.

Modifying activities for clients to be successful and more fully independent is an integral part of training for occupational therapists. An occupational therapist may use props such as belts, blankets, bolsters, and chairs to help modify the poses for clients. Again, an occupational therapist may utilize adaptive yoga within an occupational therapy session.

**Client Story with Yoga and OT**

Mandy Lubas, OTR/L, RYT, AWC is an Ayurvedic Wellness Counselor who integrates yoga and Ayurveda into her OT scope of practice. She shares her experience of incorporating yoga into her OT practice.

“Because of my educational background in Occupational Therapy, I have a unique perspective and interpretation of yogic philosophy that benefits my patients. For example, if I see someone with a physical injury suffering with physical pain and
emotional trauma who can no longer participate fully and optimally in their daily lives such as playing sports, home management tasks, or engage in their work/play life balance, I am able to utilize specific frames of reference I have learned from OT school. I can combine sensory integration, biomechanics, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Model of Human Occupations (MOHO) with a traditional yoga practice to improve their function and participation in their daily occupations.

Planning out a yoga class sequence is so much easier as an OT because we know the body so well and we’re able to work at so many levels based on medical/scientific approaches while combining them with eastern yogenic philosophy practices. Our training in reflexes and reflex integration allows us to adapt a combined yoga and OT practice to those with disabilities and those without.

Adding knowledge of OT to a yoga practice can heighten yoga even more. For example, I worked with sand bags during my yoga training, unprompted by my yoga teacher, because through my OT training I knew this would improve proprioception; providing information to your body so it knows where it is in space for individuals with poor body awareness. I have had patients who could not stand when they first came to me and through a combined yoga-OT practice they have vastly improved their standing or sitting balance.

I worked with a client who experienced three seizures a night over a 10-year period along with regular panic attacks. He was on seizure medication but continued to have seizures despite it. I instructed him to practice daily affirmations and chanting to start. He practiced these nightly and did a yoga pose, Viparita Karani, commonly known as “feet-up-the-wall.” After six treatment sessions, he was no longer experiences either the panic attacks or seizures. He developed clarity of mind that he did not have before allowing him to sleep longer at night and safely drive longer distances.”

Reference:


