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Ask a Yoga Therapist

Find the Balance



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Ask the Yoga Therapist

This column is part of a new, ongoing column where you can submit your or your students' questions about yoga challenges and related health and safety concerns. Submit your questions to askatherapist@yogatherapy.com

Q: It seems my students' ability to balance can change dramatically from class to class. Of course my balance seems to vary from practice to practice too. How does Yoga therapy address balance challenges?

A: Falls are a major and growing health concern. More than a third of older adults fall each year and falls are the most common cause of non-fatal injury. Yoga therapy can increase balance and reduce the risk for falls. Understanding the common causes for loss of balance opens the door to Yoga therapy's many contributions to stability or Nirodha.

Fall risk increases through a cumulative effect of many factors to include: muscle weakness, history of falls, using a cane/walker, visual deficits, sensation changes, arthritis, depression, medications, fear of falling, and breathing/heart deficits to name just a few. Yoga therapy differs from traditional balance training approaches because it addresses all of these risk factors rather limiting itself to just balance and strength exercises.

The Yoga therapist takes the time to understand which of these factors are parts of the student's experience, and together with the student develop a plan for discovering both the causes and the remedies for their balance challenges. Central to the approach is shifting the focus inward for the student in not only modified asana, but also reflection of the yamas and niyamas that may be out of 'balance.' Here they discover together the misperceptions that lead to grasping, tension and imbalance. The ongoing careful study and introspection by the student of the roots of avidya and fear allow for stabilizing the mind, which coupled with an appropriate practice of asana, pranayama and meditation generates psychic and literal stability.

Too often in our externally focused, can-do culture balance training is initiated by charging head-on into the activities of greatest challenge. Yoga therapy differs by first generating stability as a platform to progress toward increasing levels of focus and balance demands. Establishing balance within the student's nervous system forms a foundation of stillness. Through simple, restorative postures and expansion of the exhalation of the breath, space is created within the otherwise frenetic noise of fear. Then by staying anchored in the moment via attention to alignment, sensation of the weight bearing surfaces of the physical body, and graded effort (tapas), the student discovers unfolding levels of the sensation of balance, i.e., the effortless effort.

Progression moves from supine and prone to all fours and kneeling, and then eventually to sitting and finally standing. The therapist carefully monitors the edge between success in stability and challenge of new levels of instability. When the breath halts and tension is observed, the two explore not only the technique of action, but also any emotions, thoughts or spiritual insight that accompanied that moment. Here trust, connection and courage develop which provides the safety for further discovery.

Students are taught to utilize their experience of balance in daily activities and instructed to return to non-reactivity through sensing, breathing, and the inward perception of their base of support. At home careful note is made of conditions that are most challenging and then addressed in subsequent Yoga therapy sessions. They also commit to a regular home quieting practice to develop their internal listening skills and awareness. Without such a practice, they will have to continue striving and grasping at balance as part of the cultural bias they swim in.

Their daily quieting practice is now known to literally change their nervous system to create the anna maya kosha of better nerve cell connection between the executive witness of the front of the brain and fear centers of the limbic system. These changes, coupled with enhanced communication via prana maya kosha throughout both the peripheral and central nervous systems creates internal stability and the visible external stability or 'balance.'

So avoid the trap of outward focus and efforting. Use your Yoga therapy to go inward yourself and explore the sources of imbalance, so that you can model stability for your students and relieve the future suffering associated with fear and falls.

Matthew J. Taylor, PT, PhD, RYT has a doctorate in transformational learning and change (a.k.a. Yoga) from the California Institute of Integral Studies. Matt is an AYA member living in Scottsdale where he and his wife have a yoga-based rehabilitation clinic. He has authored numerous articles in peer-reviewed journals and textbooks on yoga therapy. He has served on the board of directors of the International Association of Yoga Therapist, teaches nationally, and maintains a busy private yoga therapy caseload. He is an expert legal witness for yoga injuries and is passionate about yoga safety. For more information see www.drofyoga.com .