Strike a Pose

Yoga practice can add a twist to today's HIV therapy

July 1, 1998 By Nicholas Mulcahy

In 1996, I was in the hospital, on my deathbed with PCP, 38 T-cells and a 250,000 viral load. My sister handed me a magazine with an article about a local yoga class for people with HIV," says Frank Holliday, a New York City artist. "I decided to go to the class if I survived the hospitalization."

Now attending classes two or three times a week, Holliday has a CD4 count of 500, an undetectable viral load and renewed energy. "My improved health is undoubtedly due mainly to my protease cocktail, but the yoga also played an important role," he says.

"Yoga cleanses and heals the body—it doesn't just 'work it,'" continues Holliday, whose most recent show of paintings was a New York Times Critic's Pick. "Yoga addresses both the body and the spirit. I need both to be strong to deal with HIV."

Appropriated from a centuries-old Indian philosophy, yoga is practiced today mainly as a physical regimen composed of hundreds of postures or poses—the best known is the crossed-legged, seated lotus position—to promote relaxation and improve quality of life. Although yoga's utility for PWAs has never been researched as extensively as, say, aerobics, yoga teachers and their students with HIV report a wide range of benefits, from increased physical strength to stress reduction and related emotional and spiritual well-being. And non-HIV research has found that yoga can reduce heart rates—a sign of physiological restfulness. Yoga and yogic breathing have also been shown to improve lung function.

"You don't need to be flexible or acrobatic to do yoga," says Niranjana Zisa, an HIV positive instructor at New York City's Integral Yoga Institute. "The purpose of yoga is to find a sense of stillness wherever you are—in a posture and in life." This stillness is at the center of yoga's healing potential, according to Avra Diamond, an instructor at AIDS Project Los Angeles. "The postures quiet the mind and open up the body. The process relieves tension and allows energy to circulate, releasing the body's natural power to heal and regulate itself."

Zisa of the Yoga Institute gives this specific example: "The liver is one of the organs most stressed by HIV. In the posture known as half-spinal twist, the torso is twisted and liver compressed, pushing out blood and toxins. When you release the pose, new blood goes in and organ tissue is

effectively toned.”

Yoga’s ability to release toxins also raises a red flag for people with HIV, says Jason Heyman, who has taught yoga to PWAs for three years in San Francisco. “Beginners sometimes get sick before seeing the health benefits of yoga because toxins are released as the body is opened up.” Heyman recommends gentle yoga classes for beginners and encourages HIV-specific group classes. "One of the foundations for a successful yoga practice is having a sangha, or a spiritual community of fellow practitioners.”

Heyman says that a substantial portion of his classes is devoted to meditation. “The physical benefits of yoga are great, but the emotional and spiritual benefits are outstanding. In fact, yoga was created so that yogis could meditate more comfortably and transcend the difficulties of the body.”

Enzo Lombard, a San Francisco freelance writer, emphatically agrees. After six months of daily practice, along with a macrobiotic diet (but no other change in treatment), Lombard saw his CD4 count jump from the low 200s to 400 and his viral load decrease from 200,000 to 100,000. Yet he is even more impressed with the subjective changes: “Since I began taking yoga seriously, I’ve had a dramatic improvement in my emotional stability, even more remarkable than the improvement in my lab results. I feel a powerful calm for the first time in my adult life. It’s great.”

Resources: The video Living With AIDS Through Yoga and Meditation i*s available from Kripa West, 388 Point McKay Gardens NW, Calgary, Alberta, Canada T3B 4V8 (phone: 403.270.9671). The book* Yoga: Moving Into Stillness *by Erich Schiffman (Pocket Books/New York) is also a good introduction.* Alive and Well: A Path for Living With HIV *by Peter Hendrickson (Irvington Publishers/North Stratford, New Hampshire) has an excellent section on yoga.* The National Yoga Teachers’ Directory *appears annually in the July/August edition of* Yoga Journal *(510.841.9200). The website of the Yoga Group, a Colorado based PWA organization (www.yogagroup.org) includes yoga information and listings of classes in 17 cities.*

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