

Yoga: THE THREE A's

by Abby Lentz

Search the web for "benefits of yoga" and you'll find millions of links to thousands of sources — from Harvard Medical to Oprah. Looking over the list, it's hard to believe that there's not a health condition that can benefit from Yoga. Even with all those benefits, yoga continues to suffer from an image of being available only to the "thin" who can turn their bodies into pretzel-like configurations.

My mission for more than 14 years has been to tell the world that yoga can be done by everybody. Does that mean I believe everyone can stand on their heads or touch their nose to their knees? Of course not. What it does mean is that after practicing yoga for more than 45 years, I know elements of yoga can be an appropriate tool for everyone so they can reclaim their health — regardless of size or circumstance.

My yoga technique, HeavyWeight Yoga, is built on the 3 A's: Awareness, Acceptance and Affection. This is a body-positive approach to getting to know yourself and finding the path to loving yourself just as you are today. Yep, just this minute — not 15 pounds from now or when those skinny jeans fit — right now.

3 A's OF HEAVYWEIGHT YOGA

Awareness

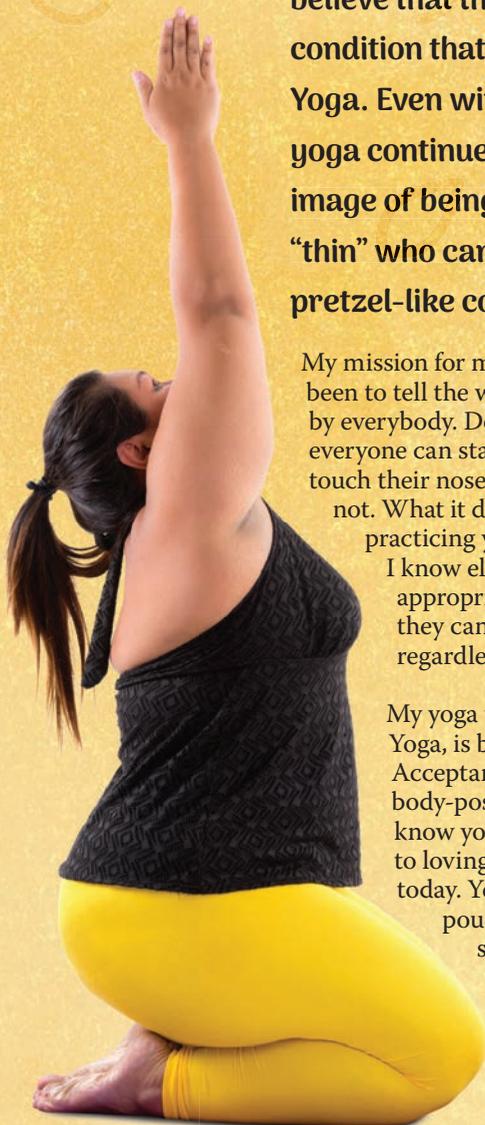
Before you attempt to do even a single yoga pose, awareness begins as you decide to use a mat on the floor or use a chair to do yoga. Discovering your body will be a continuous adventure because change is inevitable. Time on the yoga mat will help you become more aware of your body. Use your time doing yoga as an opportunity to practice observation without judgment. Take note, yet be encouraging — not critical. In time, this awareness will be a part of your life off the mat as well. With more awareness comes continuous range of motion with fewer missteps and injuries.

Acceptance

Come to accept your body and look for all it can do, not just what it can't do. Everyone is great at something. Being great at a pose on the mat translates to knowing you're also great at something off the mat. As a young mother, I used to be able to stand on my head while listening to Johnny Carson do his monologue. Being fully inverted is unsafe for me now. As a grandmother, I've come to accept the limitations of who I am today while I continue to safely build on what I can do. Practice accepting that which you cannot change.

Affection

Love your body just as it is in this moment while reading this article — love yourself. Stop reading and tell yourself, "I love you." While some people make short-term shifts through negative incentives — diatribes of body hate and shame — know that permanent, lasting change can only come from love. Say it again, and say it often: "I love you." Off the yoga mat, sing your favorite love song to yourself.



REDUCING YOUR STRESS

Most people start yoga for improvements to their physical self — flexibility, core strength, better balance, etc. What they soon find is that it's the sense of well-being that brings them back. Relatively new to the list of reasons why people do yoga is a mash-up of the physical and the emotional benefits — to reduce the effects of stress. It's important to realize yoga cannot change a situation that's causing your stress such as traffic, a disagreement or being late.

What yoga can do is change your reaction to your stressful situation.

The best and most efficient way to reduce stress and tame our minds requires no special equipment or ability. It's deep belly breathing, which can be effective on its own or when combined with meditation. No special range of motion is necessary. No body size is too large or too old or too young. You only need to breathe, which is what you're doing anyway. So why not start breathing deeper now?

TIPS FOR BREATHING DEEPER

- While sitting or even lying down, get as comfortable as you can. On your inhale, soften your diaphragm and fill your lungs from bottom, middle to top. Feel the expansion deep at the base of your lungs, as it widens toward the sides of your rib cage and ends by filling high up to your collarbone.
- On your exhale, empty your lungs from top, middle to bottom. Do a final squeeze of your belly button back towards your spine, but don't hold it there — start your next inhale.
- To visualize this flow, see your lungs as a pair of pitchers. On your inhale, you are filling them from bottom, middle to top. When you pour out from the pitchers on your exhale, they empty from top, middle and then bottom.



This foundational breath of yoga, in addition to stress reduction, will improve your cardio-vascular exchange to make your heart more efficient. If you feel some stinging, just know that you're reaching parts of your lungs that haven't been used in a while. If you feel dizzy, it's important to stop and return to normal breathing. To build a consistent practice, link that deep breathing to another activity you do regularly — like waiting for the coffee to brew or stopping between chapters when reading a book.

CONCLUSION

By sprinkling yoga throughout your day, you'll find it appear without effort when you need it most. With all the driving I do every day, my favorite place to sprinkle-in yoga is when waiting at a red light. I think of this breath as my invisible net that catches me whenever I falter, which we all do sometimes.

You may want to think of your breath as a wave coming onto the shore and then retreating to the sea, making room for the next wave. I love this image because it reminds me that to inhale, I must exhale. To receive, I must release. This “letting go” technique can apply to old clothes in the closet, but it's more beneficial to let go of the obsolete structures that are no longer relevant to who I am today. I had to silence my former negative thoughts of being “old and ugly” if I am going to hear messages of love and joy that are meaningful to me today.

About the Author:

OAC member and Bias Buster of the Year Award winner, Abby Lentz, is founder of HeavyWeight Yoga — bringing yoga to everybody since 2004. Her yoga was chosen by Fitness Magazine as one of the Fit 50 Best Breakthroughs for Your Health. Her work has been featured nationally on PBS, CNN, US News and other national publications including Prevention, Redbook and More Magazine where her DVDs were awarded Best Yoga and Best Workout DVDs. She participated as an expert panelist on the PBS Civic Summit on Obesity, Weight Loss and Body Acceptance, and was the subject of the “All of Me” documentary short. An avid San Antonio Spurs fan, mother of two and grandmother of four, she lives in Austin, Texas with her writer husband Ron Seybold and their yoga dog Tess Harding.



ABOUT THE OBESITY ACTION COALITION (OAC)

The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) is a National non-profit organization dedicated to giving a voice to individuals affected by obesity and helping them along their journey toward better health. Our core focuses are to elevate the conversation of weight and its impact on health, improve access to obesity care, provide science-based education on obesity and its treatments, and fight to eliminate weight bias and discrimination.



VIBRANT COMMUNITY



NATIONAL AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS



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ADVOCACY



PUBLIC EDUCATION

LEARN, CONNECT, ENGAGE

The OAC knows that the journey with weight can be challenging but we also know that great things happen when we learn, connect and engage. That is why the OAC Community exists. Our Community is designed to provide quality education, ongoing support programs, an opportunity to connect, and a place to take action on important issues.

Through the OAC Community, you can get access to:

- Weight & Health Education • Community Blogs
 - Community Discussion Forum
 - Ongoing Support • Meaningful Connections
- AND MUCH MORE**



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