

I went to my first yoga class four years ago. My sister was encouraged by her doctor to yoga and she needed a work out buddy, so I agreed to go with her. I quickly noticed the benefits of asana yoga including increased flexibility, stress reduction, and even a desire to be more physically active. I practiced yoga at the gym for an hour two times each week and I fell in love. About three years ago, I met a man from India, and we became fast friends. He explained that the asana yoga I was practicing was only one facet of yoga and introduced me to karma yoga and pranayama.

Unfortunately, my work schedule changed and I was no longer able to attend my yoga classes. Instead of yoga, I began running since running could be done at any time of the day, and a gym wasn't required, but after a serious IT band injury and ankle sprain, I had to take time off of running as well. As my physical activity decreased I noticed mental health issues that had always been nonexistent started to pop up, and I was ill equipped to handle them.

As most millennials do, I turned to the internet for help and I came across an article on yoga as a means of reducing stress and anxiety. These articles reminded me of the time I was the healthiest, both mentally and physically, and I knew I wanted to practice yoga again. I found more articles that not only addressed the benefits of yoga in regards to mental health, but there were several which were directed specifically at the benefits of yoga in schools. As a high school math teacher, I knew that I also wanted to bring yoga to my students who battle depression, anxiety, and high stress levels.

In taking yoga this semester at Salt Lake Community College, I have been able to manage my stress levels through yoga asana. Practicing yoga asana allowed me to release negative energy through the poses. I was so afraid to begin running again, as I was afraid of aggravating my old IT band injury. But through yoga, I learned some amazing stretches that help to stretch and exercise the IT band. Because I knew how to take care of my body through proper stretching, I felt more comfortable running. I would stretch before and after running, practicing the poses taught in class, and have not aggravated my old injuries! Although I don't practice meditation nearly as much as I should, the few times that I have meditated, I find that my mind is focused and I accomplish more in my daily tasks.

Yoga has helped me manage my stress in several ways. Not only do I find yoga to be cathartic, as it helps me let go of negative energy, in practicing the poses, I have improved my flexibility which has allowed me to get back into running which was always a great stress reliever in the past. When I have encountered specific challenges, I have been able to connect them to specific chakras that have been blocked, and in meditating on these specific chakras, or choosing specific poses to open these chakras, I have been able to deal with the challenging situations more efficiently.

My physical health has improved as a result of yoga. I have lost nearly ten pounds since the semester started. I attribute this to an improved diet, an increase in physical activity, and an awareness of what my body is telling me about what it needs. I have increased my water intake which has greatly improved my complexion and digestion and energy levels.

My emotional health is improving as a result of my recent yoga practice. I have always been very high strung, and very reactive. As a new teacher, it has been very challenging as my adolescent high school students do so much to make me crazy. This year, thanks to yoga, I have kept a much more even keel with my students. I am more patient and understanding, and don't react as quickly or as harshly if I am unhappy with something. In the past, I have been very strict about student behavior including no talking, no getting up during lecture etc. But early in the year when I noticed these behaviors in my students, specifically excessive talking and walking around the room, I didn't react. Instead, I was able to analyze the situation, and I discovered that the student who walks around the room has ADD and allowing him these breaks to wander actually helps him focus his mind. And because I didn't react harshly and quickly to my students who talk too much, I was able to listen to their conversations and recognize that they are actually improving their thought processes and deepening their understanding by conversing with one another. I am a much better teacher because I have learned to be more patient and less reactive. This ties in very closely to thinking before I speak. I try to observe the situation a little longer than usual so I can react appropriately. When I think back to my first year of teaching and compare it to now, I know I am much more patient and kind in my reactions. I hear all of the time from my students how kind and "chill" I am. These are adjectives that never would have been used to describe me in the past, and I attribute my increased awareness of ahimsa to motivating me to be a kinder person.

I used to be seriously addicted to caffeine in the form of energy drinks, requiring one to two each day to feel energized. A month ago, I decided to quit drinking energy drinks, and I focused on other, natural ways to build energy. During this time, I increased my water intake, so my body was hydrated enough to perform all of the functions that it needed to. During this time, I focused my practice on meditation. In doing so, I was able to focus my mind better and relax quicker to fall to sleep quicker.

I have experienced some interesting changes in my relationships with my family members, and even some friends. As I have learned more about yoga, I have been anxious to share yoga with my family members. As such, we have grown closer as we communicate about our spiritual beliefs and opened up about many other things. Although one normally thinks of building stronger relationships because of yoga, this class actually helped me to recognize that I had been participating in a toxic friendship for far too long. This friendship ended this semester, and I ended up having a break down in class. This was an amazing moment for me. After class that day, several classmates reached out to me and I realized that important relationships can be found even among strangers. This same day, the yoga instructor encouraged me to find someone I could talk to as communicating about my challenges was an important part of facing them and moving on from them. Because of her advice, I opened up to my sister and we are now closer than ever.

My husband and I have focused on cleaner eating for the past year, but this class motivated me to go even further. We visited local farmers markets, switched from conventional to organic foods where possible, and cut out energy drinks from our diet, and I find I crave sugar a bit less than I usually do. As mentioned before, these changes have resulted in weight loss and improved energy levels.

I most definitely look forward to my practice, but even so, I do struggle to find time for it. I love asana yoga, and when the weather was warmer, I loved doing my asana yoga outside. Now that it is colder, it is a bit more challenging to find the space in my house to do yoga consistently. I should do more meditation, but I recognize that my own energy is not where it should be, and I'm a little bit afraid of what I'll find out about myself if I meditate. I have signed up for a meditation course next semester specifically to help me overcome this fear and to really appreciate the benefits of meditation.

Above all else, I have found the most interesting things of yoga to be the Kundalini Yoga system and the astral body. These two aspects of yoga make sense of so many of the mysteries of life. When I struggle with certain aspects of my life, like when I am struggling to communicate, I know I need to focus on the throat chakra to get it spinning again. This knowledge of the astral body and Kundalini Yoga system has truly been life changing for me. At the beginning of the semester, I intended to earn my yoga instructor certification to start a yoga club at my school and bring yoga to my students. As the semester progressed, however, I learned that yoga is so much more than just the physical exercise I saw it as before. When I do yoga asana, I choose my poses for flexibility to help me run, and strength to improve weak muscles, but I also choose them based on which chakra needs attention. This is a side of yoga I hadn't ever really known about prior to this class. Knowing about the Kundalini Yoga system helps me to understand the my reactions to various personal struggles as they relate to a chakra that may be closed or overactive. My spirituality has strengthened as I have practiced throughout this semester. This makes it challenging for me to think ahead to a yoga club at my school, as I know I will need to be careful to keep my own spiritual feelings out of the teachings at the public school.

The most profound insight I have discovered through meditation, is that I am afraid of the person that I am and the person I will find if I meditate too much. I am working on making some changes in my life so that I am comfortable seeing inside of myself through meditation. I look forward to my meditation course next semester when I will be forced to see inside myself and become a better person.

Although I knew there were many difference facets to Yoga, I was shocked as to how deeply they resonated with me. I had always enjoyed the asana of yoga, but I found the other yoga teachings to be interesting and profound. I think deep down, we are all seeking the mysteries of the universe, and the truth to our own purpose. I have by no means found that, but I am very excited to say that I recognize how closely the yoga teachings coincide with the things I have wanted to believe. The understanding that we are all connected through our energy has been profound for me.

Yoga is so meaningful to me. The instructor said Yoga changed her life, and she hoped by the end of the semester, we would be able to say the same thing. I most certainly can say that yoga has changed my life. When I practice yoga, I am balanced. I feel healthier and happier, and my relationships with others are better. I want my students to experience these same things, so I intend to earn my yoga certification and start a yoga club at my school so I can share these amazing benefits with the students who mean so much to me.