

The Power and Potential of Yoga, Meditation and Breathing for the Caregiver

by Sherri Baptiste

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As counselors and coaches, you want to help your clients enjoy fulfilling personal and professional lives. Supporting caregiver clients so they can achieve a healthy balance in their lives can be challenging because they tend to be focused on helping other people rather than themselves. One way to assist caregivers is to introduce them to simple, doable techniques from yoga, meditation and breathing.

Yoga is the oldest system of self-development known and is actively used today by the millions of people. Yoga practices incorporate slow, steady natural weight-bearing, flexibility-enhancing postures that are ideal for everyone.

Yoga, meditation and breathing can help your clients learn about themselves, listen to their bodies, increase flexibility and range of motion, release stress, handle challenges, grasp opportunities, improve concentration and respond to life in a more joyful way. Yoga is a positive foundation for life because of its well-balanced approach for body, mind and spirit.

What Research Shows

Why are body-mind-spirit techniques so helpful? While many practitioners experience numerous benefits in their own practices, research has documented some specific benefits.

Benefits of Yoga. Yoga offers **physical** benefits for people of ages, including:

- increased strength and resiliency
- improved immune function
- decreased pain
- decreased blood pressure
- increased respiratory efficiency
- increased energy level
- improved sleep
- improved flexibility and range of motion
- improved posture (Lamb 2001)

Yoga also produces **psychological** benefits, including:

- increased quality of life, increased concentration and better mood (Casden 2005)
- increased coping skills during periods of stress (Oleshansky 2004)

- lower levels of anxiety (Sharma et al, 1994)
- increased self-acceptance, attention and memory and decreased depression and hostility (Lamb, 2001)

Benefits of Deep Breathing. Pranayama breathing is a practice of voluntary breath control that refers to inhalation, retention and exhalation performed either quickly or slowly (Jerath 2006). Research has demonstrated that it can positively improve psychological or stress-related disorders, immune function, hypertension and asthma (Jerath, 2006).

Benefits of Meditation. Research shows that even brief training in a simple meditation technique can improve negative mood and perceived stress in healthy adults (Lane, Seskevich & Pieper, 2007).

Another study looked at the techniques of mindfulness meditation, with its emphasis on developing detached observation and awareness of the contents of consciousness. It found that meditation may represent a powerful cognitive behavioral coping strategy for transforming the ways in which people respond to life events (Astin, 1997).

Why Mind-Body Techniques Help Caregivers

While yoga is helpful for all people, it can prove especially beneficial for caregivers. Caregivers' jobs typically require them to be emotionally and sometimes physically strong in the face of daily challenges and change. When working with clients who are scared or suffering, caregivers need nourishment for their own tolerance, spiritual and emotional flexibility to thrive. Practicing body-mind-spirit techniques will improve the caregiver's well-being which will have a positive domino effect on the care of the patients.

Caregivers may have moments of doubting their own ability, potential and control. While they may feel like they need to give their all to their clients and ignore their own needs, the truth is that they do have a choice. They have the right to take charge of their own lives first and then offer a great quality of care, understanding and compassion in the long run. Yoga, meditation and breathing techniques can help them still their minds and tune into what they want and need. These techniques offer an essential and sometimes life-changing experience of transformation, freedom and inner peace.

Caregivers may feel like they don't have time to take care of their own health. The problem is if they don't take care of themselves, they won't be able to help their clients as well. Not taking the time for self-care may mean they perpetuate unconscious and self-destructive patterns and end up getting sick or injured. They may feel resentful of their clients and take out their negative feelings on them. This, of course, will impact their jobs and well as their health! If they don't think about their own health, they can intensify stress and depression, feel more isolated and perhaps even become numb.

Your clients may feel like they don't have the time or energy to devote to techniques such as yoga. The good news is that they can do gentle exercises in a small amount of time with a big payoff. Just a few moments of deep breathing, yogic stretches and postures can quickly make your clients feel more at ease, well and in charge. Caregivers can practice the yoga exercises anytime and anywhere with very little space or equipment required.

What Research Shows. Unfortunately, researchers have not done much specific research about how mind-body techniques can help caregivers. Here's what a few studies have found:

A small study looked at family caregivers of female dementia patients who did a yoga-meditation program. The majority of caregivers found the intervention useful and reported subjective

improvements in physical and emotional functioning (Waelde, Thompson, & Gallagher-Thompson, 2004).

Another study looked at family caregivers for elderly people who participated in a program that included relaxation training. All caregivers were found to have lower scores for depression, anger-hostility, tension-anxiety, confusion, general illness, social dysfunction, suicidal depression, anxiety and dysphoria, which is a state of unease or generalized dissatisfaction with life (Mizuno et al., 1999).

While barely any research exists about the benefits of mind-body modalities for caregivers, other research has shown that these practices have been helpful for fellow health care professionals.

In one study a self-care program consisting of yoga, tai chi, meditation classes and Reiki healing sessions was designed for nurses at a university-based hospital. Outcomes of the self-care classes included becoming aware of an enhanced problem solving ability and noticing an increased ability to focus on patient needs (Raingruber & Robinson, 2007).

Another study looked at the impact of meditation on physicians, nurses, chaplains and other health professionals. Evidence suggested this program reduces stress and may enhance mental health (Oman, Hedberg & Thoresen, 2006).

Embracing Yoga in My Own Life

How did I become such a big proponent of yoga and eventually a yoga teacher and teacher trainer myself? I was born into a family of pioneers in health, yoga, dance and fitness. My parents Magana and Walt Baptiste believed in the benefits of Western health and fitness practices, but also understood the Eastern philosophy of everyone having an inner spirit. Dad was a former Mr. America, and my mother a renowned dancer and one of the first women to bring the science of bodybuilding to women. Through the years, they had radio shows and appeared on TV countless times. They opened the finest fitness centers in San Francisco's financial district and the first yoga center in San Francisco.

My work in the yoga and fitness world began early; you might say that training started in the womb! Our family ate healthy, fresh foods, exercised regularly in the gym, practiced yoga postures and dance and spent time in nature. Music surrounded us in our work, and a lively group of diverse and dynamic students always filled the studio.

With my background, it's no surprise that I became a teacher as well. My work in the yoga field has been to translate a lot of the wisdom of the ages into modern, meaningful terms. I teach group and private classes for about 17 sessions a week. I also teach at the leading conferences and retreat centers. (My teacher training programs are recognized by Yoga Alliance and International Yoga Alliance.) My first book, *Yoga with Weights for Dummies* (Wiley Publishers) was released in 2006.

A Real-Life Story of Yoga and Caregiving

As a yoga teacher, I have been privileged to help many students discover the benefits of yoga. One student is Nancy, who is her mother's caretaker. Her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer and Hodgkin's lymphoma. Nancy used to work full time in a local school and was in the process of attending graduate school in order to acquire higher levels as an educator in her job. In her early 30s, she has put off her education, worked part time and placed on hold her friendships and the pursuit of a love interest. Her mother makes her feel guilty for not being with her every moment of every day. Nancy is resentful of her brother and his family who live out of state and don't help with the caretaking.

The steady decline in Nancy's mom's health, with numerous hospital stays, constant care and many decisions to be made have sunk Nancy into despair and fatigue during the caretaking process. She knows time is precious with her mother and tries to give her all she can. However, she also feels guilty that she isn't doing enough. A year and a half into the caretaking process, she really wanted some time for herself--a break from the constant care of her mother.

After hearing about my yoga classes from a friend, she began coming once a week at first and now attends twice a week. She also practices the techniques at home. The good news is that yoga has helped Nancy with the negative effects of being a caretaker. How?

Yoga gave her the ability to stand back and observe the situation with her mother rather than becoming caught up in the drama of it. Yoga has helped her become more awake and aware of her own emotions and those of other people.

Yoga helped Nancy let go of her inner struggle and surrender to the rewards of being a caregiver rather than draining her precious resources of energy and joy. Yoga techniques have given her greater freedom from fear and helped her learn that she has the power and ability to choose her course of action and response. Much of this has to do with how breath work, meditation and yoga postures have helped her create a more positive inner dialogue. She has greater resources and reserves and a sense of potential to make the situation more positive in the process of doing the daily tasks.

Yoga taught Nancy that she can regulate any situation before it takes over, overwhelming her emotionally and physiologically. Instead of being controlled by a negative situation, she has learned to empower herself. She now knows that she has the right to set boundaries and make time for herself. She has learned to make her own health and well-being a priority. She is the best caretaker she can be, but also knows when to say enough is enough. She values the nurturing she gives herself during yoga.

Implementing Yoga Techniques

Your clients may think that they can't do yoga. They may picture poses that require them to twist their bodies in uncomfortable ways for hours on end. The truth is that they can perform a few simple, gentle yoga techniques to help them feel better. You can lead them through the yoga techniques first during a counseling/coaching session and then encourage them to do them on their own time.

When bringing the following yoga techniques to your clients, suggest they build a home-based practice of their own. Teach them to use exercises each day. Share with them how just a few moments in practice can shift their perception and attitude so they can better embrace their work and lives. Let them know that you are offering these simple practices that they can use wherever they are--at home, on the road or at work during break time.

Exercise #1: Double Butterfly

Benefits: Relieves hip tension and tightness

Technique: Clients can sit on the floor or a yoga mat.

Feel free to use the following sample script with your clients or to instruct them using your own words.

"Please sit on the floor (or yoga mat) with your back upright and erect. Stretch legs forward. Then, using the breath as a sensory guide, inhale and take hold of both feet. Pull feet toward you, in a V-like butterfly pose. Next move the knees up and down about 10 times while holding the feet in the hands. Inhale while you bring knees up and exhale while you press down the knees.

Pause and do a second set. Take a moment to feel and notice how the breath in yogic movements, like this one, will open up and release held areas of tension while helping muscles and connective tissue to gently stretch.”



Exercise #2: Child Pose

Benefits: Restores well-being and brings comfort to the spine and back

Technique: Feel free to use the following sample script with your clients or to instruct them using your own words. They can lie on the floor or a yoga mat for this exercise.

“Please kneel on the floor (or yoga mat) with your forehead on the ground and the top of the forehead gently touching the ground. Relax your shoulders and neck. Breathe in to the count of four and out to the count of six. Relax your forehead and throat and let your thoughts be on the sensations of the body, noticing how the exhale releases muscles that felt tight before. Do this for 10 breaths, then rise and enjoy the lighter, more integrated feelings in your body and mind. Know that you have the power to change the way you feel in just a few breaths while holding this yoga pose.”



Exercise #3: Knee Bending Pose

Benefits: Strengthens and restores the body; brings comfort to the entire back, while gently massaging the organs

Technique: Clients can do this exercise on the floor or on a yoga mat. Feel free to use the following sample script with your clients or to instruct them using your own words.

“Please lie on your back. Stretch out your body with legs close together. Reach the arms up and over the head. Breathe in through your nose and relax shoulders, chest, ribs and abdomen. Breathe from your diaphragm as this type of breath naturally massages the abdominal organs. Keep inhalations and exhalations deep and smooth. You should also feel the breath in the sides and back of your body. Bend one knee and pull it in with both hands toward the belly. Hold this position and breathe in and out for 3 breaths. Finish that side by stretching open once again. For a moment feel the stretch here with both legs long. Take a full, deep breath in. As you exhale, pull the other leg in. Try not to strain. Stay aware of your body and breathing.”

Using Breathing Techniques

Breath is the foundation of yoga. The Yogic Sanskrit (language of yoga) word for life force prana (pronounced prah-nah), is the same as the word for breath. Breath is life, and the quality and the way your clients breathe influences everything in their lives. Caregivers may say they already are breathing, but many people fall into shallow breaths that are not as beneficial as deeper ones. Here are a few basic practices you can teach caregivers to help them breathe more deeply. You can lead them through the breaths in your office and encourage them to use them at home.



Exercise #1: The Complete Breath

Benefits: The complete breath is a wonderful breath to help caregivers live their lives. It's the basis of all other breathing techniques and at the very heart of the yoga exercises. The complete breath engages the entire respiratory system. Besides raising and gently opening your collarbone and rib cage area, you extend engage your abdomen evenly and lower activate your diaphragm naturally. It helps reduce stress and empowers people in daily life situations.

When Caregivers Should Do It: When they are feeling angry, impatient or nervous

Technique: Feel free to use the following sample script with your clients or to instruct them using your own words.

“Breathe through your nostrils. Take about six complete breaths per minute, inhaling to a count of four to six counts and exhaling to a count of for six to 10 counts. It's ideal to have a longer exhale than inhale.”

Exercise #2: The Abdominal Breath

Benefits: Relaxation; feeling a greater connectedness between mind and body; shift from upper chest, short shallow breathing to deeper abdominal breathing.

When Caregivers Should Do It: When they are feeling tense, stressed or fatigued

Technique: Feel free to use the following sample script with your clients or to instruct them using your own words.

“Concentrate on your breath and try to breathe in and out gently through the nose. With each breath, allow any tension in your body to slip away. Once you are breathing slowly and with your abdominals, sit quietly and enjoy the sensation of physical relaxation.”

Teaching Caregivers About Meditation

You may also wish to share meditation techniques with the caregivers. They can do these practices at home or during a break from work.

Clients can sit comfortably in a cross-legged position on the floor, using a small firm cushion or folded blanket under their sit bones with legs and knees resting on the floor if needed. Or they can sit at the edge of a hard chair, with feet on the floor, resting hands on the thighs, or knees with palms up or down.

You can guide them through the following 3- to 5-minute meditation technique during a session. Practice saying this script and leaving time between sentences, depending on how long of a meditation you want to lead.

Sample Script: “We are beginning a meditation. Please be patient with yourself in the process and don’t have any expectations of yourself. Breathe smoothly and evenly, using the lower, mid and upper lungs without forcing the breath. Establish a breath that is gentle and uninterrupted in quality and flow. Know that ‘the breath rolls in like a wave and out like a wave.’ Expand on the inhale and relax on the exhale. Notice your thoughts and step back from those thoughts watching them for a moment as they pass by. Then bring your awareness back to your breathing. Step back from the thoughts and activity of your mind. Become the observer. Feel the breath moving throughout your body, in a wave like action, bringing the mind and thoughts to the breath. Feel the stillness of your body. Notice the body breathing. Observe and notice any areas that may still be constricting, and then simply let them go, letting these areas completely release. Be here in the moment as it unfolds. Place your hands on your chest for three deep cleansing breaths. Open your eyes slowly.”



Clients can use the same meditation techniques themselves. Share these suggestions to help them meditate at home.

Find a Quiet Place. Create a space in your home. Set aside a daily time in your busy schedule just to sit and practice meditation. The space should be warm and draft free, with phones turned off and lighting and music soft and unimposing.

How Often and How Long. Begin with three to five minutes as a beginner, and let the meditation grow to 20 or more minutes with a consistency of practice. Practice a minimum of three times a week with the ideal being daily. Meditation evolves over time. When conditions are right, meditation will flow.

Cultivate the Mind. Perhaps the biggest challenge to meditation is working with the mind, but the harvest and rewards can be the richest and most empowering for daily life. Use your breathing as a tool, to calm the active mind and to direct the consciousness into new and deeper levels of awareness and insight. Physically notice the relaxation response from deep and rhythmic breathing that allows tensions to dissolve. Be at peace . . . just being.

Food for Thought

Sharing yoga, meditation and deep breathing techniques with your clients will give them powerful tools they can use on their journey as human beings and caregivers. They will gain great insights into the bigger picture at work and learn to better cope with anxiety, tension, anger, negative memories and conflicts. Yoga can help your caregiver clients cultivate and strengthen healthy attitudes such as mindfulness, generosity, equanimity, simplicity, calm and joy. Yoga can help them develop gratitude for their special abilities and for the people they are caring for. Treasuring their clients on a deep soul level will give them greater satisfaction in their work.

I believe that caregivers are crucial in this world. Born into a family of yoga teachers, I deeply value people who have dedicated their lives to serving others. One of the highest ideals in yoga is to help shape the lives of others and leave things a little better than you have found them on the planet.

By helping your caregiver clients to tap into their abilities to nurture themselves, you empower them to heal themselves and live up to their full potential. The more they can heal themselves, the better able they'll be to help heal their clients--and ultimately the world.

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Additional Resources

Baptiste, S. (2006). *Yoga with Weights*, a for Dummies Brand of Book. Wiley Publishers.

For more information on yoga, to purchase yoga related products or to find a qualified yoga instructor, visit the following websites (retrieved 1/28/08):

www.yogajournal.com

www.abc-of-yoga.com

www.yoga.com

www.healthandyoga.com

www.yogasite.com

For yoga research and studies, view the following websites (retrieved 1/28/08):

www.iayt.org

www.traditionalyogastudies.com

www.powerofyoga.com

About the author:

Sherri Baptiste is an inspirational yoga teacher at the forefront of training in America. She is the daughter of America's yoga pioneers and master teachers Magana and Walt Baptiste. Founder of Baptiste Power of Yoga, she offers classes, workshops, retreats and teacher training. Her retreats and teacher training programs provide an empowering, peaceful oasis in a hurried world, a place where students can find within themselves the tools and knowledge to support and maintain a happier, healthier and more spiritual lifestyle. Sherri presents for Western Athletics Clubs's Bay Clubs, Gold's Gym, Yoga Studios Larkspur and San Francisco, Nautilus, Loyola Marymount University's Yoga Therapy Rx Program, Equinox, IDEA World Fitness and Inner IDEA

Conferences, Body Mind Spirit, ECA, AFPA, Can-Fit-Pro, Rancho La Puerta spa and Yoga Therapy Conferences. She has instructed for the International Himalayan Yoga Teachers Association (under Swami Veda Bharati's guidance) and conducts yoga retreats at locations such as Kripalu, Omega, Haramara, Green Gulch Zen Center and Feathered Pipe Ranch.

A member of the International Association of Yoga Therapists (IAYT), Sherri's teacher-training and continuing education programs are recognized by Yoga Alliance at the highest designated level of E-RYT 500. She is also recognized by the International Yoga Federation as an honorary member of the World Yoga Council. A radio and television personality, she is featured in video, DVD and CD programs that include "Power of Yoga" and "Power of Meditation." Sherri is the author of *Yoga with Weights for Dummies* (Wiley Publishers 2006). She also serves as the online yoga expert for VoiceofDance.com and is a published writer in *Best Body Magazine* (2006) and *Alternative Medicine Magazine* (2006).

Sherri's specialties include breath-based yoga flow (for all levels), chakras, breath work, meditation, yoga with weights, yoga personal training, yoga for older adults and therapeutic yoga applications.

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