

What is Therapeutic Yoga?

“Think of it as a fusion between physiotherapy and psychotherapy,” says Carina Raisman. “People come to regular yoga classes for all kinds of issues: sciatica, lower back pain, depression, to get off medications like antidepressants and sleeping pills, etc. In regular classes, many are benefitting. In private therapeutic yoga sessions, however, teachers can customize the sessions, focusing on breathing and postures that are most beneficial to help the condition, avoiding those that may aggravate it, and addressing the emotional matters that may give rise to the physical issues.”

Tea and Yoga

Over tea, Carina learns about a client’s health, digestion, and general condition, and determines how yoga can help. A yoga session will improve almost everyone’s state, she feels. “Just look at their faces, eyes, posture...” you can see a transformation! New neural pathways, new behaviours, new skills come from a yoga practice. Muscular tension held as a stress response dissipates. Better circulation and oxygenation (prana) put the body in a positive state that feeds back to the mind. In this state, more of the body’s natural healing responses emerge.”



Yoga teachers should respect their own limitations, however. “Unless we have other training, it is not our role to diagnose, prescribe or give dietary advice. This way we can work effectively with doctors, osteopaths and other professionals to help people with all kinds of problems.”

Carina Raisman offers therapeutic yoga sessions from her studio on Boul. St. Joseph on The Plateau. She also offers Anatomy of Yoga classes for teachers and students.

One-on-One Approach

Rana Waxman notes that all yoga is a therapeutic practice. “With yoga, we feel better, think better, live better.” However, her introduction to yoga practice was a one-on-one experience.



“A large yoga class is more like a stretching experience, and while there are benefits, a one-on-one approach magnifies them.”

“The individual story is really important. It is our guide to developing answers.” People with insomnia, headaches, depression or fibromyalgia, to mention some of the cases Rana has treated, can benefit from a plan of private yoga classes and massage. Often the therapy session can work as “pre-hab,” for example by preventing sleep problems from developing into acute insomnia.

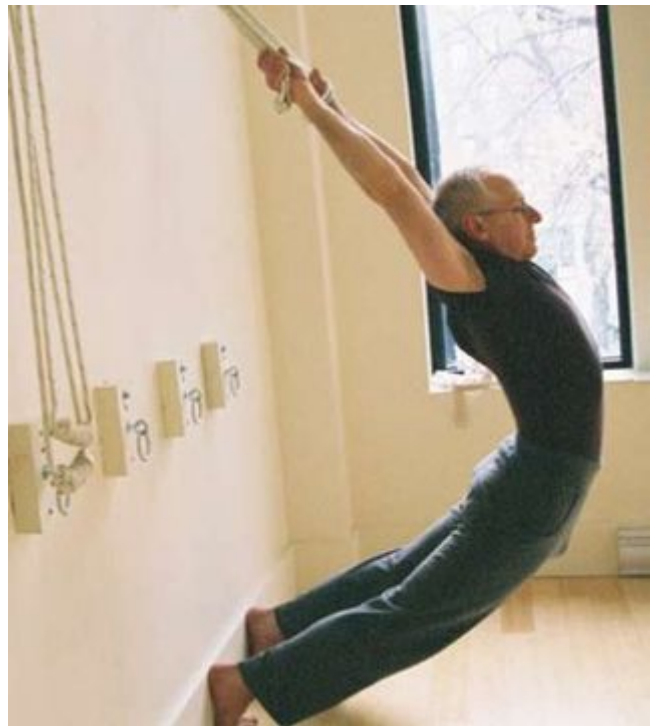
Rana offers her blend of therapeutic yoga and massage from a space in the Queen Elizabeth Health Complex. Referrals come from various practitioners. “When a dentist sees

someone with headaches, jaw or neck pain, he can deal with part of the problem, but may send the patient to me to get at the source of the tension.”

The Pain, Inflamed, is Mainly in the Brain

Len Blum asks people in his “Yoga for Your Pain” class at United Yoga Montreal where they hurt, and what they think causes the hurt. “This gives information about the brain. Pain originates in the brain not in the injured tissue,” he asserts. “When you hit your thumb with a hammer, the signal to the brain is about a drastic change in pressure. The brain immediately sends the signal to the thumb: ‘intense pain.’ Inflammatory agents, immunofluids are released, the thumb feels the pain, it turns red, etc.

“The thumb appears on the brain’s pain map, to remind us to avoid doing whatever caused the injury, and to let the injury heal.” After six months, however, most injuries will have healed. But the brain’s pain map may still be lit up and the pain now chronic. In other cases, the pain may



occur as a result of emotional trauma. “If you spend two weeks worrying about a biopsy result that will tell you that you have throat cancer, whatever the outcome of the test your body will remember the trauma: and it could manifest near the throat, for example as shoulder pain.”

With deep breathing, calming the heart and the brain, the pain generator can be subdued. With careful manipulation or through very specific yoga postures, the injured tissue can be soothed, or the brain convinced to take that part of the body off the pain map.

Len has seen a preponderance of neck and shoulder pains. “The positions people work in (at a desk, over a dentist chair, cutting hair, etc.) often cause these problems,” he notes. Lower back pain is another common complaint. While a doctor might prescribe an anti-inflammatory, “I like to find out what caused it, and address that trauma at both the physical and the mental level. If you take time and use informed intuition, this is possible.” More complex problems such as cancer require a more humble approach, he says. “Therapeutic yoga can help turn down the pain, strengthen the body and improve attitudes, but the effective treatment will be found in hospitals, and it is very important for yoga teachers not to get in the way of that.”

Len Blum’s open therapeutic class is now a heated yoga class, and he provides Friday morning counseling to United Yoga practitioners to help them deal with their pain.

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