Yoga for Fibromyalgia

By JJ Gormley

An increasing number of Yoga students tell me that they have Fibromyalgia. I’ve researched the diagnosis and treatment of this disease, in both the Western and holistic worlds of medicine. I haven’t discovered a cure, nor even the reason why people have this disease. What follows are simply some collected observations from my experience working with Fibromyalgia sufferers.

Fibromyalgia comes from the Latin fibro, meaning connective tissue, myo meaning muscular, and algia, meaning pain. Sufferers experience chronic pain in their muscles and joints. The pain can leave them able to sleep for only a few hours a night. The pain often leads to depression and chronic fatigue, and an inability to function mentally at work.

According to the National Fibromyalgia Association (www.fmaware.org), the causes of Fibromyalgia are unknown, but may include genetic factors and a triggering illness or injury that dysregulates how the nervous system processes sensation.

The medical establishment treats this chronic pain with anti-inflammatory drugs, tricyclic antidepressants, acetaminophen, non-narcotic analgesics, and/or anti-anxiety agents. Conventional and complementary therapies generally have not produced lasting relief for Fibromyalgia sufferers. According to follow-up studies, patients using conventional treatments at Fibromyalgia specialty clinics show no overall improvement over the baseline condition, although different patients improved and deteriorated in specific areas [1]. Chiropractic and acupuncture treatments are sometimes used to alleviate pain, but from what I’ve been told by my Yoga students, the relief is only temporary.

Based on simple questions asked during private sessions, I’ve noticed a general profile of students who suffer from Fibromyalgia. Typically, they give selflessly of their time and energy, often putting others’ needs before their own. The energy these students expend dramatically exceeds the energy returned. This leaves their energetic body depleted. Over time, the physical body follows.

I believe that the energy of these students is directed outward, with little to no ability to turn inward and listen to their bodies. These students are out of touch with their bodies, to the point of wanting to turn their bodies over to whatever healthcare professionals they are seeing at the time. They have very little idea how to help themselves, because they’ve been helping everyone else in their life and putting themselves last.

Because sufferers do not reverse this energy expenditure on their own, the body forces them to take care of themselves. The disease’s debilitating symptoms compel self-care. But permanent behavior shifts need to occur as well. Sufferers need to take time for themselves before attending to others’ needs. This is the first step toward healing, and a major and difficult step for many students. This is where Yoga comes in. Taking the time to practice Yoga in a healing way is a vital step toward reversing energy expenditure.

Students with Fibromyalgia coming to me for private therapeutic work find me bluntly talking to them about their habit of putting others first. We talk about how this habit has energetically affected them, and how the symptoms of Fibromyalgia may now be forcing them to look at healing and helping themselves first.

Upon hearing this analysis, many students begin to cry, as they feel heard and understood for the first time by a professional. This new awareness of how they can begin to heal gives them a renewed energy and direction. Coupled with a Yoga practice individually designed for each client, healing can begin to take place.

Looking at the typical Fibromyalgia sufferer, I see that the physical body is out of balance, out of sync with nature, and in need of nurturing. My first instinct is for the person to give themselves hugging types of poses: child’s pose, egg balance (from a seated position, hug the knees to the chest), and supine knees-to-chest pose.

The body also needs to experience rhythmic movements, such as gentle sun salutes. Sun salutes are Yoga’s way of getting the body back in sync. Salutes are rhythmical and repetitive, mimicking the cycles of nature. Most Fibromyalgia sufferers cannot perform a classical salute, so a modified form must be given, perhaps even done sitting in a chair. In place of the middle typical poses (plank to cobra/updog to down dog) I give table spine movement into a backbend, then forward bend (also called cat/cow).

I always recommend starting with just one or two rounds of sun salutes, followed by a resting pose such as child’s pose or supported supta baddha konasana. This sequence can be done several times in a row, for a 10 to 20 minute routine. 5 minutes of rest (savasana), with the eyes kept open (to counter depression), should complete the overall session.

For the most part, Fibromyalgia sufferers should avoid a practice that focuses on forward bends, because of their potentially depressive effect on individuals with already low energy. Backbends can be added into the sequence, at a level appropriate for the individual’s ability.

I have been giving this type of practice to students for ten years, and have had success with students suffering from not only Fibromyalgia, but also chronic fatigue and depression. By no means would I suggest it as a cure for those suffering from these illnesses, but it is a way to encourage the self-healing process.

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JJ Gormley began her Yoga journey in 1979, has been teaching since 1989, and still considers herself a student of Yoga, most recently under the guidance of Kausthub Desikachar and the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram. She is the founder of the Sun & Moon Yoga Studios in Virginia. Contact: jj@sunandmoonsstudio.com.
