

# Health & SCIENCE

## Yoga as Positive Addiction, Part 2

BY LONNY J. BROWN, PHD

Success stories abound of substance abusers finally discovering health and self-esteem after struggling in vain with other detoxification therapies. At 3HO--a 17-year-old holistic health center founded by American adherents of the Sikh faith in Tucson, Arizona--a vegetarian diet, counseling and massage are combined with meditation, breathing exercises, and 40 days of special yoga routines to "eliminate your dependence on external fulfillment by creating greater awareness and self control." The first holistic substance abuse facility accredited by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Health Care Organizations, 3HO ("Happy, Healthy, Holy") claims an impressive 91 percent successful recovery rate.

Arnie, a Vietnam war veteran, recovering alcoholic and yoga student of mine, put it this way: "Yoga opens you to much better feelings about yourself. Your body changes and your thinking changes. Addicts have lots of self-doubt, and doubts about life. If you can take away these doubts, you've taken away a lot of the reasons for using booze and drugs. That's what yoga did for me."

Because an exotic image of yoga often lingers in the public mind, part of my work at the hospital included attracting newcomers to the class, and dispelling some of their fears of being told to stand on their heads and bend like pretzels! In reality, half the session is spent sitting or laying down, but to overcome misconceptions (and inhibitions) we stopped referring to the classes at Beech Hill as "Yoga," substituting instead 'Easy-Does-It' Stretch Classes." Enrollment noticeably increased following this name change!

The yoga approach suits the temperament of the alcoholic as well as his body. It provides a much needed boost in confidence and can help repair shattered self-esteem. Recovering addicts mostly search outside themselves (in vain) for solutions and strength. Yoga is a direct experience of self-sufficiency and self-healing. Often, this reduces dependence not only on "recreational" and social drugs, but on such pharmaceutical crutches as sedatives, sleeping pills, and pain killers. And the only side effects of yoga are more energy, clarity, and strength!

Gloria Kaye, MA, an executive officer of Kripalu Yoga Helping Professions and author of a manual on teaching yoga to drug addicts, has concluded that this unique population of yoga students is well-primed by their drug experiences for the altered awareness and deep relaxation which the practice affords. It's a substitute, "positive addiction," which is free, legal, and has only healthy side effects. In one of the first controlled studies of its kind, Ms. Kaye documented "significant reductions in anxiety and psychosomatic complaints, dependence on welfare services, tobacco and drug use, and crime involvement" among 240 drug addicts participating in yoga classes for six months.

After a yoga class, recovering alcoholics often exclaim, "It's like getting high without the booze." I am happy to offer them a "positive addiction" that is natural, healthy, free, legal, and safe. (Far safer than aerobics or jogging, two other popular "positive substitute addictions.") Invariably, after first-timers overcome their initial fears (and laziness!), and experience 40 minutes of easy poses, they are pleasantly surprised at how approachable yoga can be. From wherever they begin, people can step onto this universally inviting path. Many participants express their intention to continue with yoga classes at home, and request information and book titles.

Because of the short-term exposure that students at a rehab center will have to my class, I try to teach them guiding principles rather than routines to remember. Centering, balance, focused attention, slow range-of-motion stretching, deep breathing, muscle release, and relaxation make up the basic tools which they can take home and readily

apply to their daily routines, possibly with the aid of books and cassettes, hopefully with other teachers. To demonstrate the commonplace opportunities to stretch at home and on the job, we frequently work with chairs (yoga for Chairmen!).

Like most over-stressed yoga students, Beech Hill residents loved the last part of the class, in which they would recline in "corpse" position, and experience guided progressive muscle relaxation to special soothing music. As often as not, someone would volunteer that they "haven't felt this relaxed in years." It's at

such groups that my work with these groups is most rewarding.

The limitations inherent in such a population not withstanding--including poor physical condition, lack of preparation (most wear street clothes to class), and a high rate of student turnover--for thousands of alcoholics, therapeutic yoga has made a significant contribution to the health recovery process. Without any overt reference to things spiritual, their experience nevertheless reflects the best sense of the term--people overcoming suffering and embarking on their path towards wholeness.

## Childhood asthma prevalence

Asthma is the most common chronic childhood disease. It causes more hospital admissions, visits to the emergency room, and school absenteeism than any other chronic disease in childhood.

Estimates of the number of children under 17 with asthma vary from 3 million to 8 million, but some experts believe the incidence is much higher than the statistics show.

Asthma may often be misdiagnosed as acute infectious bronchitis (inflammation of the bronchi) or bronchiolitis (infectious inflamma-

tion of the bronchioles), viral diseases, or recurrent pneumonia.

Though asthma can occur at any age, about 80 percent of the children who will develop asthma do so before starting school.

The common "trigger" is a viral upper respiratory infection. Childhood asthma appears to be increasing worldwide.

In American children 3 years old to 17 years old, asthma's prevalence rose 50 percent in the 1980s, according to the National Center for Health Statistics. The death rate for children

under age 14 doubled from 1977 to 1983.

Health professionals don't know why asthma is on the rise, but they think that air pollution or other environmental changes may be implicated.

Asthma is a bronchial disease in which the airways are so sensitive that they sometimes become blocked, making breathing difficult.

Of the many factors involved in this airway hypersensitivity problem, the one most experts are sure about is heredity.



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