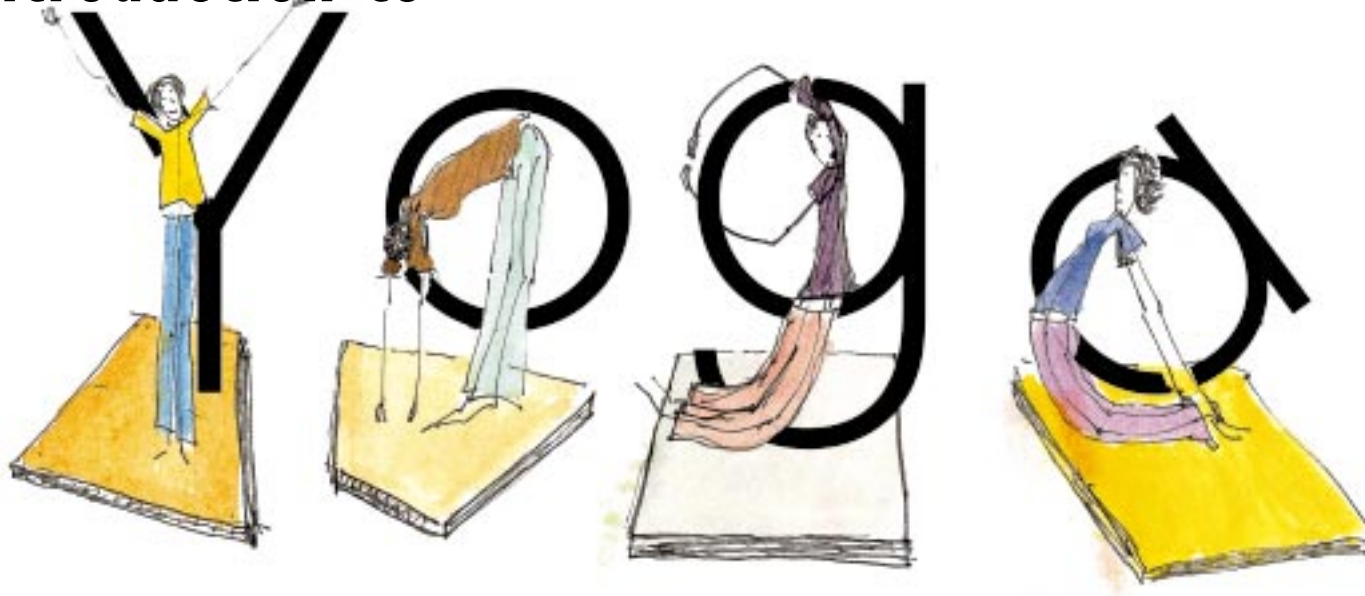


Introduction to



THE STARS LOVE IT. NEW AGERS THRIVE ON IT.

But what can yoga do for *you*? Probably more than you think. Besides being tried and true for 5,000 years in India, some studies say that yoga may heal. This deep but gentle form of exercise impacts almost every system in the body and can boost the immune system and — get this — help you cope with the side effects of anti-HIV drugs.

The word *yoga* in Sanskrit means communion, and that's precisely what yoga does. It bridges the mind, body and spirit. A series of postures (called *asanas*) combined with breathing (*pranayama*) and meditation, yoga calms the mind, strengthens the body and empowers the spirit. The physical discipline of this practice is called *hatha* yoga and is composed of more than 200 poses. Variations of hatha yoga include ashtanga (what Madonna does), Iyengar and Kripalu.

At its most basic level, yoga is a form of exercise. But it gives your body much more than a jog around the block or an hour at the gym can do. Yoga postures give your muscles — not just your calves and pecs but hundreds you've never even felt before — a deep stretch while gently increasing blood circulation and stimulating organs, glands and nerves. The results: stronger muscles, less muscle tension, more flexibility and better overall balance. Also, some studies say that yoga may invigorate the immune system, lower blood pressure and cholesterol levels, aid digestion, decrease nausea and reduce pain.

Yet yoga's true healing power lies in its impact on the mind-body connection. The deep regular breathing, gentle yet intense postures and the mental focus of yoga help reduce stress and anxiety, lift depression and improve sleep. People who regularly practice yoga often feel more in control of their lives, which in itself lowers stress and may strengthen the immune system. More profoundly, the philosophy of yoga — being present in the moment, cultivating compassion, being nonjudgmental and non-competitive — has helped many people with HIV/AIDS find spiritual direction and cope emotionally with their disease.

Read on to hear what PHA yoga student David Spirrill has to say about his time on the mat. —*Diane Peters*

David Spirrill, 40



THE POSITIVE SIDE: WHAT LED YOU TO START DOING YOGA?

DAVID SPIRRILL: I'd always had an interest, so I just got my nerve together and walked into class one day. It was very casual and the teacher, Dory Korn, was great. I didn't find it difficult because she led us through the postures and told us where to put what where. It felt good. There were good people, and we were all in the same boat because it was PHA yoga — there's a common ground, which really helps. That was more than seven years ago, and I've been going once a week ever since.

DO YOU NEED TO BE A PHYSICALLY ACTIVE PERSON TO DO YOGA?

No. When I think "physically active," I think of cardio and muscle work, and that's not really part of yoga. Yoga is basically a series of stretches that you hold and relax in to, and you watch your breathing and do a little meditation. It's not rocket science. The more you do it, the more used to the postures you get. An added bonus is that if you're not a gym bunny, yoga will help your muscle tone.

WHAT BENEFITS HAVE YOU RECEIVED FROM YOGA?

I've learned how to centre myself and control my breathing. Physically, I have more balance and I'm more limber. Even though it's not really muscle work, it does stretch your muscles and make you more aware of them.

DOES YOGA HELP YOU WHEN YOU'RE FEELING STRESSED?

Oh, yes. I can't do yoga and still be stressed. It's a natural de-stressor. If you're holding tension somewhere in your body, you can learn how to get into a certain posture and release it.

Strike a Pose

These gentle, restorative poses are designed to introduce you to yoga, increase your flexibility and improve your breathing and ability to relax. Set aside about 45 minutes to try these at home (doing the sequence in order). Stay aware of how your body feels. Listen to your breath and only do what feels good – relaxation is key. Throughout your yoga practice, remember to breathe through your nose – it's quite easy to forget while you're stretching.

Though you can try out these yoga postures on your own, there's nothing better than personal instruction from a qualified teacher who can teach you the poses hands-on, correct you as you perform them and make adjustments for any physical limitations you may have. To get the most out of yoga, try a class designed specifically for PHAs. Many are inexpensive or free, are gentle enough for almost everyone with HIV/AIDS, focus on certain restorative postures that stimulate the immune system or combat side effects and provide a supportive, open environment.

HAS YOGA CHANGED YOUR APPROACH TO YOUR OWN HEALTH CARE?

Yes, it has. Yoga makes me more aware of my internal self; not just my muscles, but how racy I can get, because now I know the other end of the spectrum — being relaxed, tranquil, calm, centred and energized. If I can do certain postures and then suddenly I can't, I use that as a barometer in terms of what's going on internally. If I can't get there, I know I have to slow down and centre myself to find out what's going on.

DO YOU TAKE ANTI-HIV MEDICATIONS?

I was diagnosed with HIV in 1989, and I've been on the same cocktail for about five years: Crixivan, AZT and 3TC, with a little acyclovir thrown in for good measure when I need it, and Dapsone because I can't do Septra. I've been lucky, I haven't had many side effects. But sometimes I know there are Crixivan crystals in my urine because it hurts to pee. I think my kidneys are starting to bug me a little bit because I'm getting lower backaches. And sometimes I have a little dry mouth, sometimes things taste a little weird, and sometimes, boom, you've got no energy and you feel like crap, but I don't know if that's the meds or the HIV.

IS THERE A YOGA POSTURE YOU CAN DO FOR THE LOWER BACKACHES?

I do a lower spinal stretch that Dory calls the liver/gallbladder meridian [see *supine twist*, next page]. Or I'll lie on my side with a pillow between my knees. I've learned that the point is to not get flipped out about it. You've just got to sit back, take a deep breath and relax. Go inside, figure it out.

WHAT OTHER KINDS OF COMPLEMENTARY THERAPY DO YOU DO?

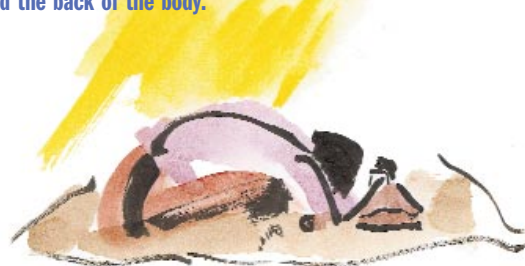
I take basic vitamins: C, E, a really good multivitamin without iron, NAC, selenium. I kind of bounce around depending on how I've been abusing myself. I'm a regular massage-goer, I've done acupuncture and I see a chiropractor regularly. Whenever certain things come up, I usually run for the traditional >



1. CHILD'S POSE (*Virasana*)

Kneel comfortably, resting your buttocks on your heels, tops of your feet flat on the floor. With your big toes touching, spread your knees slightly apart and bend forward, your buttocks still resting on your heels, until your forehead gently touches the ground (if it doesn't reach, place a pillow or folded blanket underneath it). Your belly should hang comfortably between your legs. Place your arms in a relaxed position either stretched out in front of you with palms facing down or back by your heels, palms up. Breathe deeply into your belly. Hold for up to 5 minutes.

This pose is good for relaxation and introspection. It helps with knee pain and stretches the tops of the legs and feet and the back of the body.



2. EASY POSE (*Sukhasana*) WITH FORWARD BEND

Sit in an easy cross-legged position. Pull the flesh out from beneath your buttocks so you can feel your sitting bones on the floor. Bend over and rest your head comfortably on a pillow or folded blanket. Cross your arms above your head or gently lengthen them out in front of you. Hold for up to 5 minutes.

This pose opens the hips, which helps release tension. It is good for relaxation and helps relieve back pain.



3. CHAIR FORWARD BEND (*uttanasana*)

Place a chair against the wall with the back of the chair facing you. Stand with your feet hip-distance apart, about a leg's length away from the chair. Slowly bend at the waist and hold onto the back of the chair, keeping your arms straight. Let your head hang between your arms. Try to keep your back as straight as possible. Hold for 1 to 5 minutes.

This pose stretches the hamstring muscles. Because your head is below your heart, it calms the brain and helps alleviate anxiety and depression.



5. CHEST OPENER

Roll up a blanket and place it on the floor. Sit with your knees bent and lean back so that the roll is under your shoulder blades. Gently slide back until your head reaches the floor; stretch out your legs. Make sure the blanket is just below your armpits. Relax your legs and place your arms either above your head or by your sides, palms up. Hold for 5 minutes. To come out, bend your knees in toward your chest and roll over to one side.

This pose is good for depression, lung function and kidneys.



7. SUPINE TWIST (*jathara parivartanasana*)

Lie on your back with your knees pulled up to your chest and your arms spread out to the sides in a T-shape, palms up. Slowly drop your knees over to the right. Look up at the ceiling or over your left shoulder. Try to keep your left shoulder on the floor. If your legs don't reach the ground, gently rest your right hand on the top leg, near the knee. Hold for 5 breaths. Repeat on the opposite side. Try this 3 times on each side.

This pose helps relieve lower-back pain and liver, spleen and pancreas function. It strengthens the intestines and helps with gastritis. Imagine your spine wringing out gently, releasing toxins and aiding digestion.



4. DOWNWARD DOG (*adho mukha svanasana*)

STEP 1: Get on all fours on the floor in a table-top position – knees hip-distance apart, hands directly under your shoulders, palms flat on the floor, arms straight. STEP 2: Inhale and arch your back, sticking your buttocks out behind you. Tilt your head slightly upwards, lowering your shoulders down away from your ears. Chest is lifted. STEP 3: As you exhale, tuck your toes under and lift your buttocks all the way up into the air, straightening your legs. Push your chest toward the floor and let your head hang heavily between your straight arms. Feel an opening in your armpits. Strong arms and legs. The weight is even on your hands and feet. Heels stretch toward the floor. Focus on lifting your buttocks up and back, and on flattening the top of your back. Pull your lower belly in. Try to hold for 5 slow, deep breaths; come down into Child's Pose for a few breaths, and try again.

An invigorating pose that helps eliminate fatigue. It tones the legs, helps relieve shoulder stiffness and rejuvenates the brain.



6. LEGS UP THE WALL (*viparita karani*)

Sit with your right side next to the wall, knees bent and palms touching the floor on either side of you. Raise your right leg until the heel touches the wall above you, then swing your left leg up to meet it and swivel around to face the wall. Gently lower your torso to the ground. Place your arms either above your head, elbows bent, or by your sides, palms up. Once in position, your legs are vertical up the wall and your torso is relaxed. Hold for up to 5 minutes. If your hamstring muscles feel tight, move your buttocks several inches away from the wall.

This pose is good for the legs and liver and increases circulation throughout the lymphatic system. It tones the abdominal organs and helps ease gastric trouble like flatulence. Women should avoid this pose during menstruation.



8. FINAL DEEP RELAXATION (*savasana*)

Lie on the floor on your back. Rest your arms comfortably just a few inches away from your sides, palms facing up. Your legs are a bit more than hip-width apart, feet splayed naturally. Create a feeling of ease in the back of your neck and shoulders. Allow all the muscles in your body to release. Imagine relaxing and exhaling the tension from each part of your body, working your way up from your toes, to your feet, ankles, calves, and so on, to the top of your head. Hold for 5 minutes or longer.

The ultimate pose to initiate relaxation. It is an opportunity to allow all of the postures to be absorbed by your muscles, to calm your body and to visualize the positive.

Chinese herbs, which are inexpensive. Or I run back to [Traditional Chinese Medicine doctor] David Bray and say, “I need a fine-tuning, and I know it may take a few weeks, but I have total faith in that.” Traditional Chinese stuff isn’t just a Band-Aid, it’s a life awareness. You can’t just go running there and say “fix me.” It doesn’t work that way.

I think that people who come to yoga class have become more open to looking at ways of taking care of themselves other than just popping meds because that’s certainly not for everyone. We’ve got many years before finding out how good it is for anyone.

WHAT’S YOUR FAVOURITE PART OF EACH CLASS?


Just getting there and knowing the next two hours is going to be everything I want it to be. I like the start of the class, seeing who’s going to arrive, because I like the intimacy of the group. My second favourite part is coming out of class and feeling centered, energized and stretched. A lot of times I’ve gone in feeling cruddy and come out feeling really great. And, like everyone else, I enjoy the final relaxation pose. But you just can’t lie down and do it. It’s almost like you have to earn it. I haven’t actually fallen asleep during it, but I’ve definitely drifted off and gone somewhere else and didn’t want to get up.

WHAT IS IT ABOUT DORY AS A TEACHER THAT YOU LIKE SO MUCH?

I’ve taken yoga elsewhere, and I found that the love element, the spiritual element was missing. Dory really brings that to the class. It’s about loving yourself and being comfortable with where you’re at — whether it’s in a posture or where you are as a person. At the end of the class when everyone feels so wonderful, Dory often talks about how we have this inner light and we should beam it out and let other people feel it. I think it’s very true, you get what you give.

HAVE YOU NOTICED ANY CHANGES IN YOURSELF SINCE YOU STARTED YOGA?

I don’t get flipped out as often if something freaks me out. It certainly can happen but I’ve learned to recognize it coming on within myself. If I start getting anxious about something, I’m like, “Whoa Nelly! Calm down, do some deep breathing, a little meditation, and just take it somewhere else.” It’s hard to say where I’d be if I wasn’t doing yoga. I’d probably be less fit because I’m not a gym person. My posture and balance wouldn’t be as good. And

maybe I wouldn’t have a certain aspect of sharing part of myself or my environment that I do. I’m really glad I found yoga and I wouldn’t like to think of what it would be like if I didn’t have it. 

STAY TUNED FOR AN INTERVIEW WITH PHA YOGA TEACHER DORY KORN IN THE NEXT ISSUE.

David Spirill takes PHA yoga in Toronto at the 519 Community Centre. Classes are free for PHAs. For more info about dates and times, call the PWA Foundation at 416.506.1400 or the 519 at 416.392.6874.

Tips and cautions:

- Consult with your health care provider before beginning a regular yoga practice.
- It is best to practice on an empty stomach, with empty bowels and bladder.
- Fatigue can only further weaken the immune system. Do not overexert yourself. Avoid overheating in any of the poses.
- Any pain or discomfort in a pose should be mild and temporary. Sharp or persistent pain may be a sign of a physical problem or incorrect practice. Consult with your doctor and/or a qualified yoga practitioner.

Yoga resources:

The Yoga Group

www.yogagroup.org

This website, from a Colorado nonprofit that’s provided free yoga classes to PHAs since 1988, is chock-full of valuable info on yoga for PHAs, with lots of good links to articles and other websites.

Living with AIDS Through Yoga and Meditation

This video includes demonstrations of gentle, supportive yoga postures for PHAs, even if in a state of fatigue, as well as a segment on meditation and breath awareness.

To order, call Kripa West Charity at 403.270.9691 or write to Kripa West Charity, 110, 1330 – 15 Ave. SW, Calgary, AB, T3C 3N7.

Yoga Journal

www.yogajournal.com

See “Health, Hope and HIV,” August 2001

POZ magazine

www.poz.com

See “Free Your Mind,” February 2000