

THE YOGA *re*

A group of people are practicing yoga in a bright room with large windows. They are sitting on mats in a meditative pose, with their hands resting on their knees. The room has a high ceiling and large windows that let in a lot of natural light. The overall atmosphere is calm and peaceful.

volution

Around the world, an increasing number of people are rolling out their yoga mats and practising *asanas* and *pranayama* as part of their ongoing commitment to health and wellbeing. EMMA PALMER explores the rise of yoga and the many ways it helps to cultivate wellness for mind, body and soul.

Twenty years ago, it was rare to find a yoga class, let alone a studio dedicated to the practice. These days, yoga classes are being taught everywhere from beaches to corporate offices, retreats, parks, prisons, on paddle boards on calm ocean waters, in private classes in the comfort of your own home, and even airport terminals. There are also plenty of community classes that cater for those who aren't in a position to be able to pay for a class, and can still attend by either donation or free of charge. There really isn't anywhere that you can't practise some form of yoga, and the yogi community is expanding on a global level. International festivals, such as the annual Wanderlust Festival, bring together thousands of yogis from around the world to celebrate mindfulness, healthy living, nutrition and spirituality.

It is abundantly clear that the practice of yoga is now centre stage in the wellness arena. So why has yoga gained such an immense following in the last few years, and more importantly, what is driving this rapid growth?

Cultivating connectedness

At the core of our being, humans have a desire to establish relationships, foster a sense of connection and feel completely and unconditionally accepted by others. Dr Brené Brown defines connection as the energy that “exists between people when they feel seen, heard and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship”. As a yogi and a teacher, I can confidently say that this type of relationship exists in every yoga space I have ever seen, and occurs in our own space at Moksha Yoga (mokshayoga.com.au) every single day.

As you move through the studio during the day, you hear students sharing their struggles, challenges, joys, hopes and dreams, and you come to realise this space has become their home away from home. Indeed,

the welcoming environment of a yoga studio helps to cultivate a sense of connectedness that is far opposed to the fractious disconnects that are occurring in areas within our global family.

Sociologically, there is a human need to come together as a tribe to make a positive change in our own small community, with the hope that these changes ripple out to the wider community. This sense of service is referred to as *seva* in yogic philosophy and it represents the powerful action of giving unconditionally to others without expectation, in return, giving us our greatest joy. Statistics back up these claims, as research shows that 79 per cent of those who practise yoga are more likely to give back to their communities in some way.

Who is practising yoga?

According to the new study titled *Yoga in America* conducted by Yoga Alliance and *Yoga Journal*, the number of practitioners in the US has risen from 20.4 million in 2012 to 36.7 million, with 80 million more likely to take their first yoga class in the next 12 months. The research also shows the percentage of Americans with a great level of awareness of yoga has climbed from 75 per cent to 90 per cent.

When you look at the statistics, the wellness movement migrates across both men and women, yet 20 years ago, it was sadly quite rare to see a male sign up for a yoga class. Statistics from the 2016 study showed that women represent 72 per cent of practitioners, while men make up 28 per cent. This is a huge leap compared to research from 2012, which highlighted that approximately four million men practised yoga. In terms of age, 43 per cent of practitioners are aged between 30 to 49 years of age, and approximately 38 per cent are over the age of 50.

So why are the anticipated 80 million practitioners about to start their practice in the next 12 months?

THE TOP FIVE REASONS ARE:

While these statistics confirm what I see in yoga classes every day, it's important to note that what originally draws a student to yoga is rarely what sustains their commitment to the practice long term. When students start yoga, they commonly speak of it as a means to better manage work stress or to counteract the toll that the modern Western lifestyle is having on their body. But with time, these same students begin to experience how yoga helps them to establish healthier relationships with loved ones, better connections with colleagues and a deep desire to live a more meaningful, conscious life.



FLEXIBILITY

61%

STRESS RELIEF

56%

GENERAL FITNESS

49%

IMPROVING
OVERALL HEALTH

49%

PHYSICAL FITNESS

44%



Managing disease and illness

Many health care practitioners refer their patients to yoga as a way to support an injury or improve the general health of people who suffer from disease. Several research papers have shown that yoga is one of the most cost effective ways to manage and aid an array of medical conditions such as spinal injuries, high blood pressure, the symptoms of type 2 diabetes, inflammation, sleeping cycles, cortisol levels and even support the treatment of cancer. Findings from the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center reveal that yoga is a powerful assist for women with breast cancer. Those who practised yogic breathing, postures, meditation and relaxation techniques had improved physical functioning, better general health and lower cortisol levels.

Psychological wellbeing

According to the Yoga in America study, 86 per cent of yoga practitioners reported a stronger sense of mental clarity compared to 77 per cent of non-practitioners. This latest data is further supported by the British Psychological Society, which found that the practices of asana and pranayama relieve the mind from worries and help to reduce negativity.

Research is also showing that yoga can be a preventative for anxiety in adult life. A study published in the *Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics* reported that teenagers who practised a variety of yoga techniques experienced better moods, lower anxiety levels and operated from a state of greater mindfulness. The study also showed that those who practised yoga had a more positive self-image.

Analysis of data from an array of research conducted between 2001 and 2014 has shown that consistent practice of yoga is fundamental to the reduction in the symptoms of fatigue, enervation and depression. We're also a lot happier when we practise yoga and a 2012 study found that yoga students showed not only reduced levels of the stress hormone cortisol but a significant increase in endorphin levels that provide a greater sense of happiness.

Moreover, yoga integrates the practices of meditation and mindfulness, which have also been shown to reduce the symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress. When the mind has the space for quietness and presence, we are more likely to experience lightness, focus and the ability to increase concentration for longer periods of time.

Teaching yoga

As a result of the inner changes we experience from our time on our mat, it doesn't take very long before we're drawn to not only understand the rich teachings and practices of yoga more deeply, but develop a profound desire to share these teachings with others in the form of teaching. Research shows that for every one yoga teacher there are two others who are interested in teaching. Moreover, 50 per cent of yoga teachers have been teaching for more than six years. The truth is that we will always be, first and foremost, students of this beautiful practice, even if we do choose the path of teaching.

The yoga compass

Yoga is far more than the movement of one posture to the next; all areas of wellness – mental, physical, emotional and spiritual – are evolved and strengthened by the practice. Embracing the yogic teachings and philosophy influences our daily lives, interactions and ways of being. It's no surprise, then, that in the next 12 months, 80 million more people are predicted to find their way to the yoga mat, and perhaps find their way home to themselves again. **ANH**



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