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Why I . . . practise yoga

Gastroenterology registrar Rabia Topan talks to **Helen Jones** about how yoga helps her, her community, and her patients

Helen Jones

Rabia Topan practises a form of yoga called Ashtanga Vinyasa, which synchronises movement with the breath in a flowing sequence of postures. What began as a hobby when she was at university has evolved into something that is much more than a lifestyle choice for Topan. Her daily practice is an essential part of her routine.

“Most days, my personal practice takes between 10 and 30 minutes,” she says. “If I know I have a busy working day then I leave my mat rolled out the night before. It’s about creating a setting where it’s harder not to practise than to practise.”

Topan, who is currently a research fellow at the Wingate Institute for Neurogastroenterology, studying the role of lifestyle factors on disorders of gut-brain interaction, says that yoga has significant benefits for her mental and physical health. “In modern life we are prone to our bodies under-functioning or over-functioning, but yoga offers the ability to strengthen our skeleton, to prevent joint problems, to increase our muscle tone, and move in ways outside our automatic patterns.”

Topan says that yoga is not only about serious practice, it’s also about playfulness. “That’s why I suggest it to patients,” she says. “It’s permission to just play again in a joyful, childlike exploration of our bodies and our environment. Play doesn’t get talked about a lot in relation to physical exercise, but it’s key.”

Yoga has also given her a sense of perspective. “Yoga helps me to expand my perceptions beyond the troubles I have in daily life,” she says. “I encourage colleagues to try it because the pace and demands of our jobs as doctors mean that we become honed in on the task at hand and yoga can definitely help reframe our perspective.”

Topan teaches monthly private yoga classes to her Ismaili Muslim community and, since the onset of covid-19, has been asked to do more workshops and online events. She also runs webinars for patients and has created bespoke mind-body tools to help them manage their digestive health.

“A lot of digestive health advice focuses on food, but that’s only part of the story,” she says. “There is an intrinsic connection between the gut and the brain. So, I work on aspects of physicality including breathwork and yoga, and also include some cognitive tools.”

“When patients come and see us primarily with physical health problems, we tend to focus on the physical but overlook the mental health component. Patients say they find the sessions useful and they can access the audio recordings or YouTube videos when it suits them.”

How to start practising yoga

- Create your space. You don’t have to have a yoga mat but it’s important to find a space in your home where you have solitude for personal practice
- Give yourself permission to practise
- Find a teacher that inspires you. There are lots of yoga teachers online. Topan suggests trying a few until you find one with whom you feel a sense of connection
- Consistency is king. Just five or 10 minutes per day of consistent practice allows you to reap the benefits of yoga. Establish a routine so yoga becomes a part of everyday life—like brushing your teeth
- You don’t have to be flexible to do yoga, but you come out of practising it feeling much more flexible.

For more information visit www.doctor-rabia.com