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Yoga Nidra: Pretzel-free relaxation

There are several types of yoga, including the relaxing and calming form Yoga Nidra. Yoga Nidra is an ancient, guided meditation that has gained renewed popularity thanks to its use as an effective tool in treating post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD.

The protocol is being used at Walter Reed Army Hospital Medical Center at the Deployment Health Clinical Center (DHCC) with active duty soldiers suffering from PTSD, insomnia and anxiety from wartime experiences. It's also being used with others suffering from a multitude of ailments, including children, abused women, college students and the homeless.

And, if your New Year's resolution is about finding a non-narcotic, healthy way to deal with stress, you can put Yoga Nidra on your check-this-out list.

I first heard about Yoga Nidra from Jeanne Dillion. Dillion is the director for Yoga for Wellness and a certified yoga therapist in Boise. She had sent me information about the yoga form, that is also called "yogic sleep" or iRest (short for integrative restoration).

I called Dillion, and she invited me to try Yoga Nidra at a class she was teaching. I decided it was 15 bucks of research well spent.

I went with trepidation.

I have tried yoga before. It was not the euphoric, mind-body-spirit experience I had heard of (and hoped for). Instead of bending my willowy form into balletic, graceful positions and breathing my way to ecstatic bliss, I found myself painfully contorted into a human pretzel, huffing and puffing through clenched teeth, sending an S.O.S. to the universe: PLEASE, SENTIENT BEING, LET THIS END SOON.

I went as an empty vessel to Dillion's class. I had purposely not researched Yoga Nidra. I only knew what Dillion had already told me.

Here's what HAPPENED:



I set my hat, coat and shoes alongside the other class participants' cast-off outer clothing. Inside, the room was set up with inviting, rolled out blankets, pillows and more blankets, folded. Every blanket but one was inhabited by a person. I took the last place, sat down and peered at my peers. There were about 15 or 20 of us.

There was a sense of anticipation and smiles all around. Dillion introduced herself to the class, then went around the room so we could introduce ourselves and tell a bit about why we were there.

Most had experienced Yoga Nidra before. There were a few newbies, like myself. Many said they sought the practice because they were living with chronic pain. They said nothing had helped as much as Yoga Nidra. A few said they kept coming back because they were addicted to it. One woman, who said she'd come because of chronic

pain, insisted that practicing Yoga Nidra also had improved her guitar playing. A bonus, Dillion said.

When my turn came, I revealed myself as a reporter, there for research, to record and report my experience. No one stoned me. In fact, the sense of community, of camaraderie seemed to increase as the evening went on.

Next, Dillion gave a brief introduction to Yoga Nidra. She said that while we might feel the urge to sleep during the class, we should try to fight that urge and remain awake, if possible.

Not a problem, I thought. I can barely sleep at night. Reporters with deadlines often are wound up and stressed out.

After some simple movements with breath - nothing even remotely pretzel-like - we were told to lie down and get comfortable, to close our eyes and relax.

The next 75 minutes are pretty much a blur.

When I try to remember the experience, it comes to me in a disjointed fashion, much like the morning remnants of a dream. I don't think I ever actually fell asleep, although I kind of jerked at hearing myself snuffle-snore a couple of times. I remember keeping track of Dillion's voice. I would hone in on it and then sort of drift off. I remember distinctly feeling out of my body for awhile, tethered by Dillion's voice.

At one point, Dillion said something about being aware of one side of my body, then the other. (In a later conversation, Dillion said this came about halfway through the class; in my memory, it seemed to happen near the beginning.)

Then, Dillion told us to wiggle our toes and fingers and when we felt ready, to open our eyes and sit up.

One thing I do know and am quite certain of: I have never felt so relaxed and stress-free in my adult life. Was this the euphoric sensation I had always heard of? I asked Dillion the next day.

"You had a true yogic experience," she said.

A few days after the class, I talked with a few of the other participants to see what they thought.

Boise State University math professor Sharon Walen has been practicing yoga with Dillion for about a year

and a half. Her doctor recommended it to manage the pain and stress for her chronic pain from fibromyalgia.

She took a gentle yoga class at first, after she got over the "notion of me in stretch pants," she said, laughing. Then, she tried Yoga Nidra.

"I started for pain management but (the benefit) is so much more than that," Walen says. "It's a wonderful way of finding and connecting with who you are."

It so happens that one of the goals of the practice is to break down the barriers that, as adults, we have all built.

"When you're very young, you come into this world so open and full of joy," Walen explains. "As we grow up, we drop down barriers and forget how to connect with that joy."

Yoga Nidra helps you to reconnect with that, she says.

"You connect with who you are, who we all are; in a bigger sense, to connect with everyone."

Jane Keith of Boise, turned to yoga after she found out her husband had cancer. "I felt like I needed to do something to keep myself strong so I could take good care of him," she says. After her first session of Yoga Nidra, "I felt so many benefits that I vowed I would always continue Yoga Nidra."

Keith's husband also began taking Yoga Nidra classes. "The doctors were amazed at his positive results with fewer side effects than most patients," she says. "My husband and I believe that the yoga classes made the chemotherapy more tolerable for him."

Keith admits she sometimes falls asleep, but says "the one experience I always have is complete relaxation and peace of mind following the class."

And that's what it's all about, Dillion says.

"Yoga is a philosophy and a way of living more that it is about the perfect pose. The true explanation of yoga is when the mind gets clear. It's about calming the swirlings of the mind."

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