

# Yoga Teacher Training for Students with Parkinson's Disease



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## Background

### Yoga and Parkinson's disease

In the United States, there are an estimated 480,000 people over the age of 65 who are living with Parkinson's disease (PD) and approximately 130,000 new diagnoses annually.<sup>1</sup> Those in this newly diagnosed generation appear to be more open to ways of managing their health and fitness through yoga and other complementary alternatives than ever before.<sup>2</sup> Studies show that people with PD benefit from exercise to improve strength, flexibility, balance, overall fitness and quality of life.<sup>3,4</sup> Yoga, which includes deliberate movements, meditation and focused breathing, may be a viable means of providing such exercise and relaxation. Studies specific to yoga and neurological conditions, particularly PD, are limited.<sup>5,6</sup> However, the authors identified a need based on experience working with people with PD and the increased interest and availability of yoga in the United States. Yoga teachers who gain an understanding of PD could better conduct safe and effective classes for those students in their classes with PD.

### Teacher training specific to Parkinson's disease

Registered Yoga Teachers (RYT) earn certification. However, specialized training including information about safely and effectively leading classes for people with PD is not generally included in teacher training.

### Aim/Objective

- Create a collaborative model in which healthcare professionals with expertise in PD provide educational training to yoga teachers about symptoms and needs of people with PD.

### An Interdisciplinary Program

- A nurse, a physical therapist and a yoga instructor developed and led the programs
- These professionals experienced in PD presented didactic and practically applied principles for teaching yoga to this population
- The day-long workshop included:
  - Introduction to PD diagnosis, symptoms, management
  - Presentation on targeted safety and benefit areas
  - Application of principles to yoga practice
- Participants received a packet with informational pamphlets, the course curriculum, resource lists, and a certificate of completion
- A minimal fee to each participant for the day-long workshop covered rental space and refreshment costs. A local PD organization provided additional support.

## Core Curriculum

### Introduction to PD Led by PD Nurse Specialist

- Epidemiology and etiology
- Diagnosis
- Symptoms: motor and non-motor
- Medical management and role of medical team

### Safety and Benefit Overview Led by Geriatric PT with expertise in PD

- Evidence supporting exercise for people with PD
- Areas to target for stretching, strengthening and balance
- Strategies for managing stiffness, freezing, tremor, bradykinesia and minimizing fall risk

### Application to Yoga Instruction Led by RYT with expertise in teaching students with movement disorders

- Key relationships to yoga practice
- Demonstration of modifications/ accommodations
- Cueing and sequencing solutions
- Small-group and whole group opportunities to share best practices



Photo by Edgar Andrew

*"I would love to attend a yoga class again if I could find an instructor who understands my disease."*

– C.W., Michigan, diagnosed 1999

*"I gained tremendous insight into the ways in which exercise – and particularly gentle movements such as in yoga – can help improve the quality of life for people with Parkinson's disease."*

– C.A., Massachusetts, yoga teacher



Photo by Jim Valerotas

## Conclusion

- Two workshops have been conducted; forty yoga teachers have been trained
- Four yoga teachers who participated in the training have implemented yoga classes for people with PD.

## Future Outlook

This collaborative model could increase access to effective exercise through yoga by building community-based yoga programs tailored to people with PD. Areas of concentration include expanding the program and conducting future research directions on studies of effectiveness and safety of the program. It is important to note that additional studies are needed to determine the effectiveness and safety of yoga for people with PD.

## Expanding the Program

- Schedule additional yoga teacher trainings.
  - Conduct follow-up sessions with trained participants to share best practices.
  - Coordinate workshops in which teachers are trained to conduct the teacher training in their regions of the country.
- ## Conducting Studies
- Test the effect of yoga on strength, flexibility, balance, posture, gait and overall well-being of people with PD.
  - Observe if yoga teachers successfully apply concepts such as modifications and safety measures from the training course when teaching students with PD.
  - Determine the optimal level of teacher training needed.

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