

Hatha Yoga for People with Eating Disorders

By Gretchen Rose Newmark, MA, RD, LD

Hatha yoga has become popular, available in many places such as gyms and work settings, as well as more traditional yoga centers. You might find it useful as you recover from an eating disorder. If you want to try yoga, or are doing it now, here is how to find quality instruction and the types of yoga that are more helpful with eating disorder recovery.

Hatha yoga is one of the eight branches of yoga, and refers to any yoga that focuses on the physical body, as opposed to other forms that emphasize meditation, studying yoga scriptures, devotion to a teacher, breathing exercises, etc. There are many kinds of hatha yoga, often named for or by the individual who developed it. Although yoga has been taught for at least 3000 years as a preparation for meditation, many of the types available today are relatively recent, and vary primarily by the types of postures that are taught, and the qualities that are attended to. All forms of hatha yoga focus on physical development, but some are better than others for developing mindfulness and relaxation.

The Benefits of Hatha Yoga

There is a lot of scientific research showing many physical and emotional benefits of yoga. It has been shown to diminish anxiety and depression. Yoga develops strength, stamina, balance, proprioception and flexibility. Depending on the form of yoga and the skill of the instructor, yoga can also help us be more aware of our body sensations, thoughts and feelings. Yoga can train us to be better at dealing with disturbing emotions. Skillful yoga training and practice can help us learn to witness our bodies and minds as they are in any moment and better accept them. Yoga training can also help us feel better about our bodies because a good teacher will bring our attention away from mere appearance to other qualities of our bodies, such as balance, strength, and flexibility. Yoga can also help us better resist impulse. It is also gentle way to begin to exercise again for someone who has become compulsive or resistant to physical activity.

Preliminary studies have shown that participants in non-aerobic forms of yoga lose weight successfully, and that women who do yoga are less likely to gain weight in menopause. No one knows why, but it may have to do with being more mindful of our hunger signals and how the food we eat makes us feel, as well as training us to be able to relax. Yoga probably improves neurotransmitter balance. There is a common misconception that it is the calories burned in exercise that promote weight loss or maintenance. This is not true.

Choosing a Hatha Yoga Instructor

The popularity of hatha yoga means that there are many new teachers, some who don't have much education. It is legal for anyone to teach hatha yoga, with or without training. Some teachers are certified, having studied and apprenticed for several years and passed written and practical exams. Some teachers, while not being certified, have practiced for many years with well-trained teachers. At gyms, some fitness trainers teach yoga. Some of them have only what is provided by Yoga Fit, one weekend of training, plus one more weekend for "advanced" training. However, some gyms have well-trained yoga teachers or a mix of both.

Poorly trained instructors are more likely to cause injury, and do not know how to recognize or modify a pose if someone needs help. The kind of mindfulness training that helps heal eating disorders requires a well-trained, articulate teacher who can point out subtle body sensations, emotions, and thoughts

so that we can become better at noticing for ourselves. We also benefit from someone who can teach proper breathing and remind us to do it!

Being discerning in selecting a yoga teacher is important. As with any care provider, the first thing we need is a teacher we like who is kind and respectful. It is a good idea to ask who trained the teacher, whether they are certified, in which styles of yoga, how long they have practiced, and how long their teacher training lasted. A defensive response is not a good sign. Ideally, the instructor should walk among the students, gently helping with poses, and suggesting props when needed. Some teachers do their own practice in the front of the room while describing it to students. Most people need more instruction than this provides.

General Guidelines for Types of Yoga

Because there are new hatha yoga forms all the time, this list is not exhaustive, but will give some idea of some of the more available forms of hatha yoga to help you find the best experience. Teachers vary in their aptitude and skill, so there will be exceptions to these general guidelines:

Iyengar yoga emphasizes breath and body alignment. This is a good basis for any other yoga training. It teaches body awareness and prevents injury. A certified Iyengar teacher will know how to show each person how to do a pose properly, using props like blocks and straps when necessary to make it possible to enjoy the posture and get the full benefit without injury.

Anusara yoga is a newer form that comes from the Iyengar tradition. It emphasizes similar body awareness as well as the movement of chi or prana, the subtle energies in the body. It has similar certification procedures and benefits as Iyengar yoga.

Kripalu yoga focuses on emotional experience as well as physical. Instructors tend to be less precise in their verbal cues and less likely to use props. However, this is a gentle form that can enhance mindfulness and relaxation, and help us tolerate difficult emotions.

Sivananda yoga is good for younger people who are less vulnerable to injury. The teacher typically does not move around the class to help students in their poses. The routine includes poses that are difficult for most people over 35 who have not done yoga before. It stresses mindfulness and helps to create a very relaxed state.

The following types are more physically rigorous. They provide a good workout and can be fun, but wouldn't be helpful if you are restricting calories, or need to develop mindfulness and relaxation skills:

Astanga yoga usually has well trained instructors who stress good alignment and breathing.

Power yoga comes from the Astanga school and also moves quickly. Quality would vary depending on the instructor.

Yoga Fit is the training that fitness instructors can take to be “certified” as yoga instructors. It views yoga as a fitness program. There will likely be very little precise instruction in mindfulness or other subtleties of the poses.

Bikram or “hot room yoga” is a fast-paced form that focuses more on the physical shape of the poses with less attention to breath or mindfulness. It can be fun for people who are already well trained and in good shape, but could be risky for anyone vulnerable to athletic injury, especially back injury.

Hatha yoga is an ancient form, powerful help for people with eating disorders. With skillful instruction, it can provide excellent relaxation and mindfulness training. It can help us develop the ability to be aware of our minds and bodies with greater self-acceptance and compassion.

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