

**Yoga in Intensive Cardiac Rehab**

**By Jennifer Lenders, C-IAYT Yoga Therapist**

Although new patients to cardiac rehab commonly think of yoga as a stretching class, yoga therapy for cardiac rehab patients at Michigan Heart and Vascular Institute is many things in addition to flexibility. The benefits we have discovered in the last 18 months can best be described by patients’ comments, observations of themselves, and the impact it makes on their lives outside of class. Whether it’s someone just interested in “improving their golf swing” or muscle tension release, pain relief, stress relief, improving their outlook, confidence in understanding their body, or finding permission for self-care, the results are as unique as we are. Individuals discover through the process where they are imbalanced in body, mind, emotions or energy and how to restore a sense of peace around their health.

**Intensive Cardiac Rehab Population**

For the personality who has had a lifelong focus on taking on responsibility, getting the job done, ignoring discomforts and pushing through, the training in self-care can take an open mind and a willingness to trust that the practice will reveal the benefits. I refer to the eastern arts term of “shoshin” or beginner’s mind quite often. As the patient identifies the tools of self-healing, there is empowerment- and to those disempowered by the realities of a life or death experience this feels good!

We were not sure how some of our older male patients would respond to yoga as part of cardiac rehab, as it clearly has been popularized in health clubs in the U.S. by women. To respond to the possible misconceptions and preconceived ideas, we try to describe what will be done in class by calling it balance/flexibility& relaxation. It is emphasized in yoga class and workshops that reducing stress and improving mindset has a definite effect on physiological function and optimum cardiovascular health. It is clear they appreciate references to scientific research or current articles on the benefits of what we are doing. Most are very interested in how fight or flight syndrome works in the body and find it motivating to reduce this physical response. I’ve had many men say that they would never had tried a yoga class before, but they found it interesting, helpful, relaxing, and would seek out using some of the tools they learned after ICR ended. Most women have voiced the importance of the class in their healing and living with less stress.

Of course there are those that are not ready for the quiet self-awareness, and uncomfortable with voicing or even observing what’s going on the body. Some simply avoid body cognition as an unnecessary or low priority part of their lives. These patients may not return to the yoga class as they are not ready. There have not been many of these, and for the most part, I don’t know of many who do not return to class once they have tried it. Some executives or those who are still working may not engage right away with the class and have resistance to whether it will benefit them. We try to educate as much as possible, through articles like this one and through direct conversations while they are doing cardio exercise.

**Joint Freeing Series of Movements and Poses**

This series systematically moves through all the joints, and includes slow relaxing head movements to release neck and shoulder tensions. This is undoubtedly the tightest area for most ICR patients, including the upper back, and sometimes the jaw. Clearly their posture reflects the tensions, with forward head, rounded shoulders and back, lifted shoulders, limited thoracic spine movement and tight expressions. The movements of the head, shoulders, and thoracic spine in this series help them to recognize holding patterns and resistance to movement around the heart space. The patients become more aware of the control they have to improve circulation through simple joint movements as well. We have found that myofascial release through use of a tennis ball pressed into tight areas is very helpful. “I never felt that wonderful release in my back before!” a direct quote. The tension release improves posture which is very important in ***breathing efficiently to improve energy levels,*** reduce stress, and promote a sense of ease around their heart healing. Prior to this series of movements, many report shallow breathing, or reverse breathing where the diaphragm is restricted. After the series, I notice the chest rise and fall more easily with breathing. “I did not realize how long it would take to heal the bones from open heart surgery. I still feel the sensation there, and notice how shallow I breathe as a result,” a patient reported on what he noticed during the movements. This gave the opportunity to others to confirm that the healing was slower than they thought, thereby supporting the patient’s observation.

**Mindfulness Meditation/Healthy Mindset**

We have discovered that changing to a positive mindset requires awareness of *self-talk*. We practice this through mindfulness meditation and patients have found themselves observing when negative self-talk begins. They have also noticed that we can cultivate new thinking through humor, gratitude meditation, or breathing in/out the positive qualities we are seeking or healing affirmations. This mindset promotes healthy living, lifestyle changes and motivation, and continued heart-healthy behaviors. I notice the calm and stillness that comes over the group during mindfulness, and many report their distractions openly and we work through increasing their ability to not react but to respond.

One woman even mentioned that she never thought she could reduce her stressful thinking and feel any better until she took the yoga class. She noticed outside of class that she had a fear of dealing with strong demanding personalities, and she was taking on physical stress every time she entered communications with these people. This awareness gave her the information she needed to make relationship changes, increase her voice, or increase her self-care. Another patient observed his need to move or fidget while building concentration on the breath and body. Clearly some are being in the present moment for the first time, and express relief and new words to describe a relationship with the body.

**Guided Visualization of the Cardiovascular System**

“I discovered through the guided visualization of the cardiovascular system, that I am not afraid of my heart event, but rather see it as a guide to look at my life a little deeper, and to listen. The fear is less.”

“My doctors told me that my heart was saved from further damage as it created a bypass itself around a blockage I had. I enjoy the yoga class because I have a new appreciation for listening to my body’s sensations and it *relaxes me* to trust how it works.”

I discussed that listening to and discussing the body sensations allowed a person to observe and validate their own experience and reporting about themselves what other healthcare professionals may not see. I found this opened up some who were not usually talkative about what they experienced in body sensation or mental/emotional stress. One gentleman said the visualization of the heart made him feel like he was a part of his recovery process, his body was his own, and not an outsider to what others had to say about him. Another mentioned that after the visualization of cardiovascular system, when he experienced some pain around the sternum, he did not get stressed or panic. He tuned in with a little deeper observation, was calm with the sensations and realized that the bone was probably aching in the healing process and there was ***no need to worry.*** It was obvious ***he felt relieved*** about his discovery, thereby lowering his stress level or sympathetic tone. Others have reported similar observations when faced with an elevated blood pressure or chest discomfort they remained calm and allowed themselves time to relax.

**Classroom Environment**

An extremely anxious patient expressed that the relaxation tools and environment of the class helped him come to cardiac rehab, as he was hesitant to come due to social anxiety.

Many times the class starts with faces and bodies exhibiting discomfort, pain, fatigue, polite curiosity, and postures can be rigid or protective. A patient who may never have been open to lifestyle changes before or who like many of us have made changes that didn’t last, ***know that it’s now or never***- which adds an element of stress to the process of change. Although some can be at ease, it is clear that many have more health issues than just heart recovery that are affecting their health and life balance. Most know that changing their lifestyles will help, but are fearful that they will not be able to do it or maintain it***. I have found that this class encourages them that self-care, self-compassion, and gaining a relationship with their bodies a well-needed and deserved change to their lives.*** I have heard some carefully reassure themselves with the phrase “**permission to take care of themselves”** - which is so unfound in Type-A personalities where disallowing vulnerability and shrugging off of their own needs comes naturally. *Somewhere along the way they need to hear that it’s ok and necessary to take time for one’s self and even have quiet solitude.*

**Guided Visualization**

As chronic pain is an issue for many of the patients, we work with how to manage the anxiety of discomfort. The stress of chronic pain is clearly a problem and contributes to their health problems through higher stress levels and demands on their energy. One woman had not found any relief for neuropathy of the legs, and was clearly frustrated and depressed. We discussed ways of movement in her life in which she had found joy and through guided visualization of her peaceful place, she kept coming back to water, and how free she felt swimming or boating as a child. She decided to pursue getting into the water again, allowing soothing sensations of water into her life and her legs, which made her optimistic. Of course as an ICR patient, ***we want the patients moving as much as possible.*** She was much less likely to continue movement if the pain and frustration continued.

**Deep Abdominal Breathing**

I’ve heard from many that they have brought deep abdominal breathing into their lives in various ways and found relief. Some indicate it soothes them to sleep better, while another individual stated that “I feel less pain in my hip when I breathed deeper,”or “ when I injured my hand the first thing I thought to do was to breathe deeply-and it helped tremendously.”

Many have mentioned the convenience and ease of adding deep abdominal breathing throughout the day, in traffic or to fall asleep at night.

In one of the healthy mindset workshops there was quite a bit of interest surrounding the history of the deep breathing practices. Many were interested that these techniques have been around for thousands of years. A retired Lutheran pastor, also a patient, stayed to talk about the importance of considering the body as part of a spiritual practice. He was interested in the connection to the body at a deeper level in prayer, and obviously felt this was important part of his healing process. Recognizing the intellectual interest of these patients, I try to bring them some information so they understand the place of these practices in cultural history.

**Body Scan for Tension**

The body scan for tensions or discomforts in the muscles is a way to bring the patient into recognition of what they are feeling and experiencing in sensations. So many of us ignore pain and like to keep the mind busy to stay out of the body. The body scan is very relaxing, and eases them into the body awareness systematically, through every part of the body, and patients may tune in and listen in ways they never have before experienced. One woman who came into the class with a headache commented ***that after the body scan the headache was gone and some neck tension eased.*** Another felt that the abdominal pain he felt had lessened. I hear quite frequently that when head, neck and shoulder tensions are mitigated, and ***there is a reduction in mental stress.***

**Deep Relaxation through Yoga Nidra**

Surrendering control, fear of death and aging, fear of isolation, lack of support and helplessness are major stressors for many of these patients. The deep relaxation practice may give time of relief from these fears by systematically reducing physical, mental and emotional tensions and find a peaceful place inside. For many of the patients, lying on the floor is not an option they are comfortable with and they remain in the chair. Again, there is a strong interest when given an explanation of how yoga nidra works, and given time to first choose their position of comfort. After the session, I ask for feedback and draw attention to what may be going on in the body systems while the mind is drawing deeper into relaxation. The result can be ***more optimism, hopefulness, and peace*** around their current health circumstances. It is clear that they enjoy this as some will immediately find a comfortable position on the floor as soon as I mention it as the focus of the day, and it’s the only time they will occasionally applaud at the end!

**Healthy Mindset Workshops**

The weekly practice of yoga is supported also by healthy-mindset workshops. Every three weeks there is a workshop to educate on stress and health living, including mindfulness in relationships as this is a major area of stress. This workshop is designed to recognize how communication takes place with others, and when depression or emotional strain may be present. Bringing awareness to self-talk is essential and is making a shift in thinking by recognizing a thought pattern and instilling a healing affirmation can be helpful. Many are contemplative regarding the reasons they want to live, and find an affirmation that guides them to this place of balance in mind/emotions. They have come up with statements like, “there’s still more to do here in this life,” and “I want to see my grandkids,” or “I want to see more of the world,” and “what I do today is building block for tomorrow.” They also use mantras with mudra such as “I am calm and safe,” and “I attune to the subtle sensations in my body” or “my heart is open to give and to receive.” One of the best discussions we’ve in a workshop, where many offered their voice, was about the perception of stressors and how to change our perceptions. We hope the patients will continue to practice and with some facilitation and reflection they will dive deeper to reveal the unconscious and subconscious belief system behind their stress.

**Overall Heart Health Impact**

The goal of cardiac rehab is to maintain heart health through education, practice, and encouragement of healthy lifestyle changes. Making long term lifestyle changes require a focus and perseverance that can be impeded by stress, low energy, and lack of motivation for change. There is increasing scientific and circumstantial evidence on both the benefits of reducing stress and the mind-body tools to counteract its effects. Adherence to a healthier lifestyle will only be maintained to the extent there is a belief system of self-care and a mindset to do so. Sometimes I ask them what the first thing they want to do when they feel overwhelmed, hopeless, or stressed. The response is always, “EAT!” or “Drink (alcohol).” Obviously, stress impedes a sense of motivation and energy to take on self-care. We are continuing to explore ways to invite them into examination of their core beliefs and conditioning. It is exciting to see the impact directly on the ICR patients.

Clearly lower stress levels are important for cardiac patients in prevention, maintenance, and improvement of their health on many levels depending on the individual’s needs. Yoga can meet these needs for the open minded patient willing to search for new self-care tools as they manage a health challenging event- and for life.

