

# BENDING THE RULES:

## *Yoga for all ages*



If you've considered starting a yoga regimen but feel intimidated by the thought of having to twist yourself into a number of pretzel-inspired positions, have no fear -yoga studios throughout Rhode Island are offering classes that are tailored to a broad range of ages, fitness levels and many health restrictions.

Chair yoga, for example, is ideal for people with more serious mobility issues and has been gaining popularity in yoga studios, senior centers and retirement communities. As the name implies, this gentle style of yoga includes exercises that can be performed when sitting in a chair, or simply using a chair for balance and support.

"What it does is increase balance, flexibility, mobility and the breathing exercises we do improve their stamina, nervous system and circulation," said Cynthia Carlozzi, an instructor who teaches chair yoga classes at Yoga Universe in Slatersville.

Carlozzi explained that practicing chair yoga offers gradual but significant increases in mobility and flexibility. Whereas some of her students were previously unable to bend down and put their own shoes and socks on, yoga has made these everyday tasks manageable for them.

She also noted that chair yoga is a great option for those confined to wheelchairs, as it improves upper body strength and overall physical fitness.

Caryl Sickul, a yoga instructor and movement therapist based in Tiverton, also instructs a chair yoga class that focuses on meditation and releasing tension rather than strenuous exercise. She incorporates exercises geared toward improving balance, something that becomes more important—and often more easily challenged—as we age.

For those who are simply looking for a more relaxed yoga experience, many introduction classes, as well as those described as "basic" or "gentle" may be suitable. According to Sickul, yoga instructors can easily adapt most of their routines to suit their students' capabilities, thus allowing for a workout that can accommodate a variety of needs and limitations.

that is stressed in all forms of yoga but is especially important in students with health problems or other physical limitations.

"We always encourage students to listen to their bodies. We always say if a position doesn't feel right, come out of it," Hagan added.



"Yoga really is for everybody," she explained. "The idea is not to be competitive with yourself or with others. It's about going beyond what's totally comfortable for you and that's when the growth happens."

Some studios take the guesswork out of picking a class by offering age-specific sessions, such as All That Matters, a yoga and holistic wellness center in Wakefield that offers a twice-weekly yoga class designed for people 50 and older.

"It's literally 50 plus. I have people in their 50s and I have people in their 70s and 80s. I actually have one student who's 94," said Amy Hagan, an All That Matters instructor.

While the workout still entails stretching and posing, it moves at a slower pace and places less emphasis on "transitioning"—or, as Hagan explained, less moving from standing positions to floor positions, which can be especially difficult for people with certain joint and muscular problems.

The class begins with breathing exercises, aimed at teaching students to focus and become more in-touch with their own movement—something

But students can expect plenty of help and guidance from their instructors. According to Hagan, yoga teachers typically consult with new students to determine their level of experience and discuss any health issues they have.

"It's always better to just let the studio know—here's where I'm at and here's what I need," she said.

This is fundamental in preventing injury, allowing the instructor to adjust exercises to suit individual students. For example, if some students have back issues and are attempting to do a leaning pose, Hagan will instruct them to bend from the knees rather than the lower back in order to avoid straining muscles.

Students also use a variety of props to help safely execute some of the tougher poses—those who can't bend all the way down to touch the floor balance against thick blocks instead, effectively bringing the floor a little closer to themselves.

And the benefits of yoga are as multifaceted as the methods of practicing it. Not only does it help improve circulation, flexibility and strength, but it can also mitigate the symptoms of arthritis,

thyroid problems, osteoporosis and many other conditions. The meditative aspect of yoga, as well as the act of practicing together with a group, can help improve emotional well-being and even alleviate depression.

"I've never maintained any kind of exercise program and this is the first time I could take care of my body and really stick with it," explained Nancy Penn, a student in Hagan's class who has been practicing yoga for more than a year. Penn, 65, credited yoga with improving her balance and flexibility, as well as her spiritual and emotional state. Not only can almost anyone practice yoga, but it carries an essential message that everyone can benefit from—take some time out of your hectic day to stretch, think peaceful thoughts and breathe deeply.

"Yoga's not competitive at all," she added. "If you can't touch your toes it's ok. You're always encouraged to make it your own." ■