

Teaching a Student with Multiple Sclerosis in a Basic Yoga Class Setting

Multiple sclerosis (MS) is a chronic and often disabling disease that affects the central nervous system. Included in its broad variety of symptoms are fatigue, numbness, loss of balance, muscle weakness, spasticity, and visual problems, and even these can vary from day to day or from morning to night. In 1990, the National MS Society (NMSS) hired me to teach classes for them—even back then they recognized the potential benefits of yoga for their clients—and I have continued teaching both individual and groups of yoga students with varying levels of MS ever since. Studies are now being conducted by places such as the Oregon Health Sciences University (OHSU) in association with the National Institutes of Health (NIH), confirming that yoga can improve MS patients' quality of life.¹

It is difficult to make blanket recommendations as to what does and does not benefit people with MS because of the wide range of symptoms associated with the condition. From my experience, those whose MS symptoms allow them to participate in a regular yoga class should be encouraged to attend, as long as their level of disability does not demand too much time from the teacher.

Generally, most yoga classes address the most important areas for MS students to work on: poses that improve balance, increase flexibility and range-of-motion, reduce fatigue-inducing tension in muscles, and increase strength. Of course, breathing and relaxation techniques are important also. It is critical, though, that the level of the student is honestly evaluated so that he or she attends a class that is appropriate. I have had students who believe they can participate, but because of their lack of balance or other symptoms, needed constant attention and so it was unsafe for them when I couldn't provide it. For these students I usually recommend more personalized classes or a seniors' class or gentle yoga class that can provide more individual attention at a slower pace. For MS students who are at a higher level with fewer observable symptoms, keeping up with a basic yoga class can be possible, but the student should always discuss with the instructor his or her daily condition because of its variability.

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Janet, a student with MS, has been coming twice a week for about two years to the yoga class that I teach through the County Parks Department of San Luis Obispo, CA. Her neurologist recommended that she do yoga, so she came to a workshop of mine and we decided she could try my basic class. The class has carpeted floors, couches along the perimeter, and ten-to-fifteen students per class with an average age of 50. Their levels of capability differ, so I offer variations for many poses. Arthritis, joint pain, and back "issues" are common complaints. It is not easy for many of these students to focus on who they are now; instead they often fantasize about what they used to be able to do and then try to work at that level, which is often not appropriate. Therefore, many of these students, even without MS, have internal struggles as a result of simply aging that can influence the ability to relax into a pose or affect concentration and balance. Janet's struggles might be more overt, but since I already provide many variations to a class that is also facing challenges, I thought she would be comfortable attending.

Janet is a trim 59-year-old woman who walks with a cane. Some days her legs are more difficult to move than others so her spot is next to the couch, which she uses for support when needed. She was very



Twisted Lunge Variation (*parivrtta anjaneyasana*) with Couch: Janet keeps her left hip and knee along the edge of the couch to stabilize her lower body, while her hands on the seat help her keep her spine aligned.

athletic as a child and is still very active. In 1993 and 2004, Janet had accidents that caused a punctured lung, cracked ribs, and, later, a torn meniscus. At first, when she also began having symptoms such as fatigue, tingling in the rib cage area, loss of balance, and soreness, she thought they were related to her accidents. But she was diagnosed with MS in 2009. The NMSS states on their website that so far there is no link to the onset of MS and trauma. However, they do say that some traumas may have been caused by undiagnosed MS symptoms, such as the ones Janet was experiencing.

Besides the yoga classes, Janet swims three-quarters of a mile two to three times per week, does leg exercises in the pool, and usually does some gardening on the weekends. Many people with MS are able to maintain an active lifestyle such as this, especially when their symptoms are mild or not present, although this may not be typical. I asked Janet some specific questions about her symptoms to better understand what she copes with daily. (It should be noted that not all who have MS have so many symptoms. Many live for months or even years almost symptom-free.)

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Janet: “The MS affects my left side so my left hand is weaker and uncoordinated. I also have left foot drop. I have soreness all over; every day that varies from slight to extreme but is usually in the middle. It can exhaust me so I am fatigued most of the time. This also varies in intensity and can stop me from doing things and going places. Maybe once a month I’ll have a lot of energy and it is wonderful. I have spasticity daily. My hips and legs are usually stiff and hard to move and my feet and legs tighten up on their own. Makes me want to sit or lie down. I get leg cramps periodically at night. Because of my loss of balance, I always have to think about every step I take. I’m rarely without my cane. I also have severe tingling or electrical impulses—all the time, about one a minute. I call them my “zappers.” They go to my groin area and vary in intensity. They are mainly bothersome but can sometimes be on the painful side, making it hard to fall asleep. I have bladder issues constantly. When I have to go—I have to go. I always make sure I use the bathroom before I go anywhere. Heat intolerance is always a big problem. Hot weather stops me. It’s so hard to move. Most of the time I’m in the middle with these symptoms and I just push through them. On my really bad days I just take it easy. I’ve learned to prioritize and simplify.”

Classes vary daily, but I like to begin with a warm-up that teaches about the six directions of movement in the spine/neck and make sure each is moved. Then we do overall range-of-motion for the shoulders and wrists. This sequence is designed to stimulate the flow of the lymphatic system, which helps to regulate the immune system. I follow these with sun exercises, often with many variations, including a seated version. Typically, I include a mix of standing poses, balance poses, and strengthening poses (done with seated variations for those who need/want them.) The class ends with students in a reclining position doing hip openers, twists, and relaxation poses.

Janet: “I usually manage to do the full sun salutations, although I sometimes need to use one hand to help lift my sluggish left leg forward—but I keep up with the class. The most difficult poses for me are the standing poses, especially when they involve twists. Since I no longer have the balance I used to have, I fear falling over and making a fool of myself. It is helpful when Shoosh accommodates me and finds what is most comfortable for me.”



Downward-Facing Dog (*adho mukha svanasana*) with Chair: Janet’s home routine includes this simple variation that helps her lengthen her spine, open under her arms, and stretch the backs of her legs.

Because this is a public class in a Veteran’s Hall, we do not have access to “official” yoga props. I know that many schools of yoga require props, but it has been my experience that many of my MS students don’t like working with them. Often, they are just one more thing to deal with, and many students have a big enough struggle just getting their own body to cooperate. So, I use the couches, the wall, and a chair to help Janet to balance and offer creative variations that don’t involve standard yoga props.

Janet: “Yoga definitely helps my flexibility and has helped me to strengthen my core, which has provided a definite improvement in my mobility. Shoosh does abdominal strengtheners with us, on our backs. I put my legs up on the couch so I don’t have to worry about them leaning sideways. I feel less fatigued after doing yoga. Although the yoga does not eliminate my symptoms, it has helped improve my balance. The sun salutations are a good example of an overall body routine that really helps me. I can’t specify one exercise or pose that has had discernable effects, but I believe it is the overall use of my body with yoga that produces the benefits. I face a slow erosion of strength, flexibility, balance, and energy and the yoga poses seem to help slow the process. Most importantly, yoga creates an overall feeling of well-being—which is so important for anyone with a debilitating condition like MS.”

I often use the wall with many other MS students (as couches are not usually available). Triangle pose (*trikonasana*), warrior II pose (*virabhadrasana II*), and extended side-angle pose (*utthita parsvakonasana*) can challenge balance and so are made easier by leaning the shoulders as much as possible against the wall. I have found that trying to use a seated variation for these poses is often not appropriate, because lack of leg strength for balance can cause inappropriate angles on the knees. If pillows or bolsters are available, they can be used to stabilize the poses, but without them the risk of injury is too great for the knees. I like to include these poses, using the wall, however, because they are so valuable in opening the hips, strengthening the thighs, and working on balance.

After attending this class for a few months, Janet developed a regular home practice on her own.

Janet: “I have added some poses to my home routine. Every morning, as soon as I get out of bed, I do a modified downward-dog pose. I use the wall or chair to lean on for balance. This helps lengthen my spine, stretch my hamstrings and calves, and build some arm strength. While getting dressed, I do side stretches and twists to help relieve tightness. Shoosh teaches an easy standing or sitting routine that just involves either twisting freely or bending sideways, forward and back for moving the spine in all six directions. I lean my legs along the bed or do these seated. If I am very sore and stiff, I do four sun salutations to move the major joints, get some inversion, stretch the spine and legs, and open my hips. At night, I do the child’s pose in my bed to relieve tightness in my back before going to sleep. The stiffness is temporarily relieved, but it does keep returning so I need to be vigilant with my stretching.”

Janet’s drive may not be typical, and other MS students might have different symptoms and so need more help and encouragement. For example, some students with MS can become fatigued more easily when they get warm. I suggest to them that they bring a tumbler of ice chips to suck on to help keep their core temperature down. Other MS students might have vision problems that can cause blurry or double vision. Keep these students near a wall or chair.

Janet says she enjoys attending this “regular” class, rather than practicing specifically with others who have MS, because its stan-



Warrior Pose II (*virabhadrasana II*) at Wall with Shoosh: While turning to the right, Janet leans her shoulders, the outer edges of her little fingers and buttocks against the wall, and Shoosh reminds her to focus on opening in the left hip.

dards encourage her to push herself to a higher level of achievement. But those with more symptomatic MS should inquire about MS-specific classes offered by places such as the NMSS. However, the truth is that, so far, there are not that many of these classes, and yet doctors with good intentions are now suggesting yoga for their MS patients—so we as yoga teachers need to be informed about how to work with this population. The NMSS is working to help train yoga teachers so that the higher functioning MS students can participate safely in regular classes. Find out if there is a training in your area, or call the NMSS and help set one up! ²

Janet came to my class with a terrific body consciousness and athletic background that might not be the case with many MS students. For those with MS looking for an appropriate yoga class, make sure your teacher knows about MS, has had several years of experience working with adaptations, and is comfortable working with you and your symptoms. Many well-intentioned young teachers may not have enough experience; you need to be wise in finding the right class and the right teacher

Janet's advice to yoga teachers is "We don't need to be singled out and we don't need to be given undue special treatment. But, consideration of our limitations helps immensely." To those with MS who might be considering attending a yoga class, she says to "put aside whatever fears might be preventing you from starting and just join in!" **YTI**

References

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2. National Multiple Sclerosis Society. www.nationalmssociety.org.



A teacher of yoga for over 38 years, Shoosh Lettick Crotzer specializes in working with students who have MS, arthritis, cancer, and other limiting conditions. In 1994, she produced the video Yoga for MS., still widely used today. She wrote and produced the video Yoga for Arthritis in partnership with the Arthritis Foundation in 1997. Her book, Yoga for Fibromyalgia: Move, Breathe & Relax to Improve Your Quality of Life was published by Rodmell Press in 2008.

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