

# REAL MEN DO YOGA

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE PRACTICE OF YOGA REVEALS A HUGE RANGE OF HEALTH BENEFITS WAITING TO ENRICH THE LIVES OF MEN WHO ARE BOLD ENOUGH TO EMBRACE IT.

BY KATE HENNESSY

Observe all the men huffing and puffing in gyms today and it's clear many are just as concerned about body image as women are believed to be. But could the activities lots of men enjoy, such as weight-training and high-impact sports, have a perfect counterbalance in yoga? Yoga experts say yes. They also list reduced stress, deeper emotional insight, better life balance and fewer ego-related conflicts and worries as major benefits for men, as well as greatly increased flexibility and strength. Sounds like the making of a dream man, right?

Men, however, are much less likely to do

yoga than women: around 90 per cent of Australian yoga participants are women, according to an RMIT University survey of 4000 yoga practitioners in 2006. Ironic, considering it was originally practised in India exclusively by men.

So what stops men fronting up for a class? A *Yoga Journal* poll asked men why they were reluctant and the biggest response was "fear of embarrassment in class". This is part of the reason why physiotherapist and Yoga Synergy founder and instructor Simon Borg-Olivier talks about "mobility" instead of "flexibility". The very word "flexibility" can have men running for the hills.

## WORKING TO MEN'S STRENGTH

"The best way to embarrass an inflexible man is to make him do a hamstring stretch when he can't even sit up with his legs straight," Borg-Olivier says. "So if you remove the concept that yoga is all about flexibility, men are more inclined to come. If a man is strong but not flexible, his strength is still a great attribute for yoga. Yoga was traditionally practised by men, so many poses actually make more sense for a man's body where upper-body strength is a big plus."

The second reason men were reluctant was "I don't think I'll get a good enough workout". Yet there are many different styles of yoga on offer these days, so it's probably a case of shopping around. Men who do practise yoga definitely prefer strong and dynamic styles. In 2006, an RMIT University survey found nearly one in five students in the very physical-style yoga classes were men. The survey rated Borg-Olivier's dynamic Yoga Synergy style as the most popular in Australia, followed by Bikram yoga (performed in a heated room).

Borg-Olivier developed Yoga Synergy with the modern Western body in mind. The "traditional body" works in the fields, sits crossed-legged, squats on the toilet and carries heavy things on its head. This makes poses like headstands, lotus and back bends easy. Yoga Synergy, on the other hand, addresses the problems of our Western bodies caused by activities such as driving, sitting and computer work, including overstretched lower backs, stiff hip flexors, weak necks and weak knees.

Men are wary of yoga classes taught with women's more flexible bodies in mind, says Borg-Olivier. "Men will say things like, 'I can't go to yoga — I can't even touch my toes!' where women might be more open to learning. And many classes are tailored to women's abilities. For example, men have strong wrists and are good at poses on their hands but classes taught by women favour standing poses. Men aren't as good at stretching the hamstrings and hips and forcing them to do this with a belt won't make them any better; it will just make them feel useless!"

Ego is a factor, too. Men are generally happier in a male-taught class with a higher proportion of male students, says Borg-Olivier. "It's hard for a male ego to be told what to do by a woman, then see other women in the class do it much better," says Borg-Olivier. "That's our problem and it takes quite an advanced man to get over it!"

## SEEING THE LIGHT

Six years ago, Mick Barnes was one of "those men". "I had always been fanatical about training and looking good. My favourite exercises were running, boxing and circuit training. Then I got injured sparring with a

friend and I started to develop migraines. After a while, I gave up seeking relief through the use of medicine."

A girlfriend recommended that Mick try yoga. "At first I didn't get it at all. It was very challenging and I was constantly in discomfort. I took classes up the back because I was too proud, stubborn and egotistical to do a beginners' course."

It's perhaps no surprise, then, that with excess ego comes injury. The RMIT survey found that men were twice as likely to suffer minor injuries from yoga.

As Mick continued with his practice, he began to notice his body was muscular, strong and lean but very weak and out of balance. He was restricted to basic movements and his breath was short and shallow. Then he started to notice how restless and busy his mind was. "I couldn't stay focused at all!"

Mick persisted and tried a class at Samadhi Yoga in Newtown, Sydney. "That's when the penny dropped. That day the instructor talked about focus, accountability, compassion, devotion and all this other amazing stuff. It really made me stop and think about my life. I know now she was talking about yoga in its entirety, not just the physical aspect."

Now 51, Mick is a devoted yoga practitioner and a director and teacher at

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the very same Samadhi Yoga school. In contrast to Yoga Synergy, fewer than one in 10 Samadhi students are men. That could be because Samadhi teaches "old-school yoga", says Mick, with chanting, scripture, devotion, meditation and asanas. There are no mirrors and no heating and disassociation with the ego and outward appearance is encouraged.

"It's a tall order to sell this kind of yoga these days but the liberation that comes from it is without parallel. But it doesn't come easy and right there is where people balk. They want short-term input for maximum gain, like a better outward appearance. Other schools such as Bikram and the like have lots more men but the yoga is more focused on the physical body.

"Men are drawn to yoga of the physical kind that, in reality, is just another workout. Anything more is confronting to them, especially going inward. But we need to understand there are eight 'limbs' of yoga and just one of them is asana (posture). The other seven are equally important but get minimal attention. The practice of yoga has been slowly deconstructed in the West with

## Beneficial asanas for men

Different asanas (postures) work specifically with the subtle anatomy:

- Standing postures help with our connection to the earth.
- Forward bending helps us practise humility and resolve emotional baggage.
- *Matsyasana* (fish pose), *ustrasana* (camel pose) and *halasana* (plough pose) can all improve speaking, hearing and listening skills.
- Backbending opens the chest and emotional heart.
- Inversions turn our world upside down, giving a different perspective and invoking calm in the face of change.
- Child's pose connects us with our intuitive selves.
- Twisting postures help digestive processes and detoxing.

\*Provided by Mick Barnes

the emphasis mainly on the physical."

While Borg-Olivier teaches a more physical style of yoga, in principle he agrees with Barnes. "For men, yoga isn't about becoming strong and flexible or relaxing. It's about learning to do stressful things in a controlled environment while learning to relax. In that way it becomes a model for life. If you master it you can do anything, no

matter how stressful. And as a by-product you become tremendously flexible, strong and fit. But if you make that the sole aim you miss the point of the exercise."

Borg-Olivier says it's crucial that men practise good and sensible yoga. If they do, he says, men will get the same benefits as women: flexibility, fitness, energy, internal peace and nourishment, contentment and reduced need for sleep and food. In addition, however, there are several benefits specific to men.

## BENEFITS FOR MEN Increased mobility

Men tend to be stiffer than women and strength-building activities contribute to this stiffness. There is a lot of tension in men's muscles, and muscle bulk itself can impede blood flow.

Yoga will gradually increase men's mobility, which improves circulation, helps detoxify the blood and promotes internal body massage. This makes internal organs healthier and increases blood flow around the body without putting stress on the heart. The benefits of yoga and "yoga lifestyle" →



## BEYOND THE PHYSICAL the eight “limbs” or steps of yoga

- YAMA: Universal morality
- NIYAMA: Personal observances
- ASANAS: Body postures
- PRANAYAMA: Breathing exercises and control of prana (vital life)
- PRATYAHARA: Control of the senses
- DHARANA: Concentration and cultivation of inner perceptual awareness
- DHYANA: Devotion, meditation on the divine
- SAMADHI: Union with the divine

## In yoga, you master how to hold stressful poses in a relaxed manner, a technique men can also apply to weights. As men become more comfortable lifting their own bodies, they become more comfortable lifting weights.

interventions” on cardiovascular health have been confirmed by several studies — another upside for men, who are more likely to suffer heart attacks.

“The heart is not necessarily there to make blood flow,” says Borg-Olivier. “Body movement does that — the heart can actually stay quite relaxed and slow-beating while the blood is moved by body movements.”

Men are often stiffer in the hips because of their hip and pelvis shape. When hips are stiff at the front, the lower back becomes overstretched, leading to knee and lower back problems. Yoga poses such as a standing lunge or a cross-legged forward bend can help relieve hip stiffness and associated problems.

### Balance of “one-sided” sports

A lot of sporting exercises favoured by men are “one-sided”. Think cricket, racquet games, snowboarding, skating, surfing and football. This leads to asymmetry in the body, which can manifest in spinal twisting,

scoliosis, neck pain and back pain. “I see this all the time in my classes,” says Borg-Olivier. “I steer my kids towards symmetrical sports and activities.”

Good yoga practice tones the entire body symmetrically and helps to offset physical irregularities from the sports men enjoy. Tight muscles are loosened and the body returns to its natural alignment.

### Connection with emotions

It’s a generalisation but men tend to be less in touch with their emotions and less able to verbalise and work through emotions than women. This can lead to men being overcome by anger, frustration or jealousy at unexpected times and can put a burden on interpersonal relationships.

Yoga can bring a new emotional experience to men, suggests Barnes, without the need for long, drawn-out dialogue or counselling. “Through the yoga experience itself, men begin to get in touch with their emotions and transcend their egos. It’s quiet

but it’s profound. As a result, an enormous confidence and security arise knowing they are part of something that is much larger than themselves.”

### Improvement with weights

Combining weight training with yoga can produce better results. Yoga encourages a balance of strength and flexibility that will keep men supple while also strong. In yoga, you master how to hold stressful poses in a relaxed manner, a technique men can also apply to weights. As men become more comfortable lifting their own bodies, they become more comfortable lifting weights.

“It’s a beautiful complement because it brings men totally into it; they are focused and present when doing these activities. They learn to switch on the whole body,” says Barnes.

Borg-Olivier points out that if it’s strength men are seeking, they can achieve that without bulky muscles. “If you want bulky muscles you can get them but you can be stronger without them. I probably go to the gym once a year. I don’t do any specific abdominal exercise except my daily yoga practice and I can set the abdominal weights in the gym to the highest setting with no problems at all. And I’m relaxed when I do it — so no grunting!” ☺

**Kate Hennessy writes about travel, the environment, music and arts, all of which can be found on the road.**