

OM Nom Nom: Integrating Yoga with your Lunch Break

Patricia M. Dragon, Katy Webb, Rebecca Tatterson

East Carolina University, Joyner Library

The Benefits of Yoga and Mindfulness

Yoga is a practice that was developed in India starting about 5000 years ago. Its popularity has increased in the United States in recent decades, with many specialized studios, gyms, community centers, and other organizations offering yoga classes. At East Carolina University's Joyner Library, a small group of staff who had experience with yoga from these other venues decided to form a lunchtime yoga group in the library. We get together at noon most Tuesdays and Thursdays, go into a free classroom, and do yoga for about 30 minutes. We do not have a leader, but rather follow yoga videos on screens in the classroom. The members of our group have changed over a period of years, and we have gone through busy phases during which we have not met regularly, but the group persists because we derive benefits from it.

While the physical component of yoga is probably the most familiar to Westerners, yoga actually integrates physical, mental, and spiritual components, and conveys health benefits in all these areas[1]. In the workplace we focus on the first two areas, physical and mental. On the physical side, yoga emphasizes stretching, core strength, and above all, breathing. Stretching can counteract the effects of sitting down most of the day at a computer, including tight hamstrings, repetitive muscle stress, and neck pain. Developing core strength can help against back pain, and mindful breathing can fight poor circulation and digestive problems. Contrary to the impressions some have of yoga, the goal is not to compete to see who can most convincingly bend oneself into a pretzel. There are many styles and adaptations, including

gentle yoga designed for seniors, and desk yoga designed to be done sitting while in work clothes. It is a good workplace activity because it truly is possible for anyone to do it.

Yoga also has mental health benefits. It is typically practiced in a quiet, dark room, which is a pleasant break from the library noise and activity (yes, there is a lot of noise in the library), as well as the glare of computer screens. The practice of moving with your breath and focusing your attention on its rhythms is an antidote to the multitasking we all do on a daily basis. While it is no substitute for medical care, yoga really can counteract stress and make you feel better. We have even found it to be good for organizational health by promoting team dynamics and increasing communication opportunities across departments. Rarely a yoga session goes by without several of us collaborating on work problems as we turn on the lights and roll up mats.

History of Joyner Yogis

The yoga group at Joyner Library developed because interested members wanted to establish a regular yoga practice on or near campus. In 2013, a library employee took a yoga teacher training and started offering the first yoga sessions in the library to meet a quota of hours for her certification. Tables and chairs were cleared from a large meeting room and the sessions lasted for one hour. Although the employee left the library soon after, the core group for the yoga time was formed out of these sessions.

The Joyner Yogis hoped to find a way to continue their practice despite the loss of the librarian/yoga instructor, and in 2014 and 2015, the Campus Recreation and Wellness Center (CRW) offered free lunchtime yoga sessions on Tuesdays. These were aimed at an audience of students and were taught by one of the counselors at the Counseling Center. She allowed university staff to attend the hour-long sessions to reduce workplace stress. Drawbacks were that this was just one time per week and the sessions' availability waxed and waned with the semesters. The room was not available on weeks where the yoga instructor was not present

and there was a convoluted sign up process. A paid option for yoga one evening after work per week was soon available through the CRW. The instructor was very engaging, but soon left to start her own yoga studio in mid-2015. Like the lunch yoga sessions, this option was only available one day per week and was not available during semester breaks and over the summer.

The Joyner Yogis group started in earnest in mid-2015 and grew out of a larger library initiative to promote teamwork and inter-departmental cooperation. This larger initiative set a number of other lunchtime activities into motion, such as a book club, knitting club, puzzle group, and a walking group. Upon their inception, the Yogis decided to meet on Tuesdays and Thursdays at lunchtime, due to the fact that there was an aerobics class available at the CRW on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at lunchtime. This would allow those interested to have a workout every day of the week over the noon hour. Since there are no longer any employees able to serve as a yoga teacher, videos and iPad applications have been used during these sessions. Besides a semester-long hiatus in fall 2017 that coincided with a participant's maternity leave, the Joyner Yogis have been meeting in a library classroom for over three years.

What is Needed?

After determining an approximate size of your group, locating a comfortable location that is large enough to accommodate the group is essential. Joyner Library has several large meeting rooms available for use, so one of the participants will usually determine an available room to reserve for the session. Room availability can vary during the times of year when instruction is busiest. Occasionally a room is not available, and on those occasions the group is unable to meet.

In the absence of an instructor, we have found that many online yoga videos are a worthy substitute. If using a yoga video for instruction, the practice space will need either a

screen to project the video session or an internet connection to accommodate broadcast from an iPad or laptop. Joyner Yogis have a few favorites that are included in this essay.

Aside from the essentials, a space to practice and an instructor or the equivalent in the form of a video or DVD, there are a few supplemental items that can be helpful. A yoga mat provides a comfortable, safe surface to practice and is highly recommended. Occasionally props are utilized in instruction videos and sessions; however, oftentimes our group manages without and can still perform the poses. A change of clothes is recommended as it can help with comfort. Many yoga poses require extensive movement and stretching and even laying or sitting on the floor, so comfortable clothing allows this kind of movement.

Group Rules and Guidelines

The group is open to anyone who would like to join in. We invite participation, usually by word of mouth. Many new employees have joined in after telling one of the Yogis that they like to practice yoga outside of work. We are not professional yoga instructors, and none of us serve as the instructor, which means we cannot check for proper form or even give each other guidance during the sessions. (In fact, the room is dark, so we often do not even look at each other at all) For that reason, the Joyner Yogis require that new recruits to our group have some prior yoga experience. For those who have no prior yoga experience but who want to join in, we recommend starting with a yoga basics session through a local yoga studio.

The Joyner Yogis have an email list of people who have been involved in the group recently, as well as a calendar item that shows up on individual Outlook calendars. Group participation is very flexible and people can join in when they are able. Each Tuesday and Thursday, an email is sent to the group to see if practice that day will be possible. This is based on room availability and the presence of the people in the group, which we check the day-of.

Some guidelines that we follow in our group are that our yoga practice is not about performance or even form. It is a personal practice for each person in the room. If we are doing a video where there is something that an individual cannot do, we do not expect them to do it or push themselves to get there. Our practice space is a no judgment zone.

Yoga Websites and Apps

Anyone who has practiced yoga knows that new products are coming out by the day. The main locations that you will find yoga videos are on websites, iTunes applications, YouTube channels, or through readily available subscription services like Amazon Prime. At the time of publication, some of our favorite websites and applications are listed below.

- **Do Yoga with Me, standalone website:** <https://www.doyogawithme.com/>

This site offers free and paid options for high-quality yoga videos. The instructors are from British Columbia, Canada. Joyner Yogis recommend the videos by David Procyshyn, one of the founders. A positive feature on this site is that it is easily searchable by instructor, style of yoga, level of difficulty, and amount of time you have to practice.

- **Yoga with Adriene, YouTube Channel:**

<https://www.youtube.com/user/yogawithadriene>

Adriene is a cartoon voice actress with an engaging demeanor and sense of humor. The videos are high quality and there are a lot of them to choose from. Her adorable dog, Benji, makes regular appearances.

- **Yoga Studio app, iTunes application:** <http://www.yogastudioapp.com/>

This application was a favorite at the beginning of our group's existence. We especially liked the calming music loops and backgrounds. It is recommended for iPad or iPhone users, but there is a nominal cost associated with it.

The group continuously discusses and evaluates video resources.

There are many benefits derived from incorporating regular exercise into one's daily routine. Several members of Joyner Yogis briefly explain how our practice enhances their workday. A new member to the group said, "As a new employee in a new town, I was delighted to learn about the informal lunchtime yoga that happens here in the library. The sessions are just the right length to restore balance to my mind and body while still allowing me to grab a quick bite to eat. Best of all, I now have a fabulous group of new work-friends!" Others mentioned the benefits of staying limber, releasing tension, and seeing coworkers that we do not normally see during the day. The important thing is to have fun and provide a relaxing environment that allows camaraderie and a social opportunity for employees.

References

[1] Morrison, V. (2013, June). Yoga Benefits the Body and Mind. *Occupational Health*, 65(6), 27-29.