Accessible Yoga for Advocates: Manage Stress, Improve Mental Health

Virginia Knowlton Marcus

Improving head and heart space with accessible yoga practices
Hello! I’m...

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Virginia completed her RYT-200 yoga instructor training in 2016 and became involved in the accessible yoga movement, advocating to make yoga practice accessible to everybody.
Being an advocate is stressful and managing stress is important.
**Signs of stress**

- Insomnia, change in sleep patterns, low energy
- Headache, stomach ache, chest pains, tense muscles
- Sense of failure, self-doubt, overwhelm
- Decreased satisfaction in daily activities
- Clenching jaw, grinding teeth
- Withdrawing from responsibilities, isolating
- Feeling tired, anxious, depressed
- Difficulty relaxing and quieting the mind

Stress affects all systems of the body, including the musculoskeletal, respiratory, cardiovascular, endocrine, gastrointestinal, nervous, and reproductive systems.
You are not alone

- Prior to the pandemic, 1 in 10 American adults reported experiencing symptoms of anxiety or depression. Over the past two years, that rate has risen to 4 in 10 adults - 40%.

- Attorney mental health concerns skyrocketed during the pandemic: 25% of female attorneys and 17% of male attorneys surveyed have considered leaving the profession due to mental health issues.

Source: https://www.americanbar.org/groups/journal/articles/2021/as-lawyer-stress-escalates-during-pandemic--lap-agencies-see-sig/
In reality... it’s all of us

Depression, anxiety, and stress are major health concerns among lawyers.

- In a survey of over 11,500 attorneys, 61% reported experiencing problems with anxiety and depression during their careers, and 16% reported experiencing social anxiety.

- Over 11% of attorneys surveyed reported experiencing suicidal thoughts during their careers.

Barriers to treatment include:
- Stigma and concerns about others finding out
- Privacy and confidentiality concerns with disclosure
- Concerns about law license
- Knowing whom to ask for help
- Cost

Co-occurrence of mental health and substance use issues

- There is a high prevalence of comorbidity between mental health disability and substance use problems.
- About 9 million people in the U.S. have co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders.
- Mental health and substance use issues have been increasing exponentially during the pandemic.
- Before the pandemic, an ABA study found that 1 in 3 attorneys were problem drinkers. 28% experienced depression, and 19% experienced anxiety.
- In a recent study of attorneys, 34.6% of females and 29.2% of males reported increased drinking during the pandemic.

Compassion Fatigue vs. Burnout

**Compassion Fatigue**
Compassion fatigue is a term that describes the physical, emotional, and psychological impact of helping others — often through experiences of stress or trauma. Compassion fatigue can have a sudden onset and is often mistaken for burnout, which is a cumulative sense of fatigue or dissatisfaction.

**Warning Signs:**
- Withdrawal and/or detachment from others
- Trouble being productive
- Becoming pessimistic, cynical, irritable, and prone to anger
- Questioning one’s own professional competence
- Having disturbing images from cases intrude into thoughts and dreams
- Apathy, avoidance
- Secretly self-medicating

Source: https://www.americanbar.org/groups/lawyer_assistance/resources/compassion_fatigue/
Compassion Fatigue vs. Burnout

**Burnout**
A condition caused by work-related stress marked by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment. Burnout builds over time due to prolonged stress.

**Strategies:**
- **Awareness.** Know the signs and self-assess to identify if you’re affected.
- **Debriefing.** Talk regularly with someone knowledgeable who can help you process the trauma.
- **Self-care.** Proactively develop a program that is right for you.
- **Balance and relationships.** Ask for help, don’t try to do everything yourself.
- **Be intentional.** Create a plan for positive change. Seek assistance. You don’t have to fix it all on your own.

Source: https://www.americanbar.org/groups/lawyer_assistance/resources/compassion-fatigue/
How compassion fatigue can affect lawyers

Lawyers, like others in the helping professions, are at risk for experiencing compassion fatigue.

Lawyers in certain practice areas, such as criminal, family and juvenile law may be especially at risk for compassion fatigue, as they are regularly exposed to human-induced trauma, and called upon to empathetically listen to personal stories, read reports and descriptions of traumatic events, view crime or accident scenes, and view graphic evidence of traumatic events.

Attorneys with high caseloads are at risk for experiencing compassion fatigue, even those with a high capacity for empathy.

Source: https://www.americanbar.org/groups/lawyer_assistance/resources/compassion_fatigue/
Lawyer Assistance Programs (LAPs) can help support lawyers, judges, law students, and other legal professionals who experience compassion fatigue and other mental health or addiction conditions.

Source: https://www.americanbar.org/groups/lawyer_assistance/resources
Mindfulness helps individuals learn to identify perseverative worry thought patterns that reinforce anxiety habit loops; to notice thoughts and emotions as mental and physical events and sensations, and “just be” with them, rather than repeating the cycle.

Mindfulness can:

- lower stress and anxiety
- prevent and alleviate depression
- improve cognition and focus
- decrease burnout
- build resilience
- enhance sleep
- boost memory
- improve general health
- reduce problem drinking
- facilitate recovery
Mindfulness can be used to effectively break the “habit loop”

Source: Roy A, Druker S, Hoge E, Brewer J
Physician Anxiety and Burnout: Symptom Correlates and a Prospective Pilot Study of App-Delivered Mindfulness Training
JMIR Mhealth Uhealth 2020;8(4):e15608
URL: https://mhealth.jmir.org/2020/4/e15608
DOI: 10.2196/15608
Benefits of mindfulness-based interventions

Reducing psychological distress
Notably anxiety and depression
Improve well-being and quality of life not only for those with mental health disabilities, but also in the general population.

Self-help interventions work
Studies show that self-help interventions including components of mindfulness have a beneficial impact on mindfulness acceptance skills.

Greatest effect of self-help is on stress
Online tools are easily accessible, discreet, and inexpensive, ranging from phone apps to meditation aid websites and everything in between.

Some people turn to alcohol and drugs because they’ve experienced some kind of trauma. Yoga practice can help us find a place of safety and peace, by grounding us in the present moment, distinct from things that have happened or might happen. Breath work serves as a doorway into the present moment.

Yoga is known to help people manage their mental health disabilities that often co-occur with substance abuse and addiction - especially people who experience post-traumatic stress disorder, who are at a higher risk of using drugs.

Yoga practice has been demonstrated to aid in overcoming addictive behaviors, and in prevention against substance overuse.
Research indicates that yoga helps people recover from substance use disorders and mental health disabilities

➢ Yoga and mindfulness help treat or preempt addictive behaviors, including associated patterns of thinking, emotional processing, physiology, and behavior.

➢ Yoga and other mindfulness techniques are increasingly being used in substance use treatment programs and throughout recovery to help prevent relapse, reduce withdrawal symptoms and drug cravings, and provide a healthy outlet to cope with potential triggers and daily life stressors.

➢ By being more physically aware of cravings when they occur, a person may be better able to cope with and manage these feelings.
Many studies have shown that yoga and other mindfulness practices can:

- Promote recovery for people with PTSD and other mental health disabilities
- Decrease anxiety and depression
- Relieve pain and stress
- Improve sleep and decrease fatigue
- Help people cope with anger
- Build resilience
- Improve ability to focus
- Increase strength and self-awareness
- Improve health and wellness
What some people think advanced yoga is

What advanced yoga really is
Access to Yoga is a Civil Rights Issue

Virginia Knowlton Marcus

People with all types of disabilities can benefit as much as anyone from the practice of yoga. Disabled yoga practitioners recognize the tremendous power that yoga has to transform and improve our existence and relationships. It enables us to heal ourselves and the planet. We learn and we teach.

Yoga realizes a broader spectrum of beneficial effects when their yoga practice extends beyond the postures, or Asanas — the third limb of yoga. Advancement in yoga is predicated on the foundational first and second limbs of yoga, the Yamas & Niyamas (restraints and observances). These principles are our guide to leading an ethical life and are essential to achieving meaningful benefits from the other six limbs of yoga.

Yoga teachers are called to assist others in achieving yoga’s transformative benefits. This assistance must include everyone, regardless of ability. Offering yoga to select students based on perceived mental or physical ability, while excluding others who have disabilities and may benefit most appreciably from yoga, violates such Yamas as Ahimsa (requiring proper relationship with others), Satya (truthfulness) and examines the collective consciousness. In the case of Unjustified exclusion of yogis with disabilities violates the law and generates negativity. Yoga asks us to honor each person and treat everyone with justice, respect and equality.

A powerful yoga practice does not require specific physical movements. It does require us to be aware of our true relationship with others. As a disabled civil rights advocate, I am often locked into fight. Yoga improves my mental health and spiritual health in a way that I have not been able to imagine, and profoundly affects my ability to connect with the peaceful energy that we so often forget.

I believe that our survival depends on the recognition that we are interconnected. What happens to one happens to us all. We cannot move forward by leaving others behind.

People with disabilities are our teachers. They challenge us to demonstrate our commitment to yogic principles, to honor every person, to seek beyond what we already think we know, and to willingly explore ways to ensure that all who wish to practice yoga have access.

A powerful yoga practice does not require specific physical movements. It does require us to be aware of our true relationship with others. Accessible Yoga calls on yoga teachers and practitioners to see that our real differences are perceived and to create welcoming spaces that bring more yogis into the fold and respect their human rights.

Virginia Knowlton Marcus is the Director of Legal Advocacy at Disability Rights California, where she previously served as the Director of Public Policy. Prior to her recent return to California, Ms. Knowlton Marcus was the Executive Director of Disability Rights Maryland. These two nonprofit legal advocacy organizations are committed to advance the civil rights of people with all types of disabilities, of all ages, throughout the United States and internationally.

She has been an advocate for people with disabilities for nearly 30 years. Ms. Knowlton Marcus has been advocating for people with disabilities, on a broad array of critical issues at state, federal and international levels. She is the former Executive Director of the Joseph F. Kennedy, Jr. Foundation in Washington, DC, where she worked on disability-related federal policy, grant making, and international development projects.

She has experience in a variety of capacities, including advocating for people with disabilities and developing advocacy and community leadership in a variety of capacities. She also has expertise in developing resources and strategies for people with disabilities and people with disabilities to identify and address discrimination and other barriers to accessibility.

Virginia Knowlton Marcus was born in New York City and grew up in California. She has a BA in International Relations from the University of California, Davis. She has a valuable Disabilities and is an NYC 200 yoga instructor who taught popular yoga classes in Baltimore. She is excited to be back in California, focus on the accessible yoga movement, and seeking new ways to combine her love for yoga and passion for disability rights.
What Yoga Is & Isn’t

*If you can think and breathe, you can (should) do yoga!*

- Yoga means “union“
- Yoga is much more than fancy poses on a mat
- Yoga isn’t a competitive sport for athletes
- Yoga is a way of being in the world & within yourself
- Every pose can be individualized
- Yoga can ease stress and aid recovery from trauma
- Yoga IS for every body
Restorative Yoga

“Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.”
- Audre Lorde

Yoga can not only replenish you when you are feeling burnt out, it could offer you the time and space to get in touch with what is causing the burnout.

1. Supported Child’s Pose - 3 min
2. Supported Butterfly - 2 min
3.Supported Wide-Legged Forward Fold 2 min
4. Supported Spinal Twists 2 min per side
5. Supported Fish - 3 min
6. Legs Up the Wall - 3-5 min
The 8 Limbs of Yoga - asanas (postures) are the third limb, and essentially preparation for meditation

→ Yama – principles (5)
→ Niyamas – observances (5)
→ Asanas – postures
→ Pranayama – breath work
→ Pratyahara – sensory withdrawal
→ Dharana – concentration
→ Dhyana – meditation
→ Samadhi – state of bliss

The first Yama is Ahimsa (non-violence). It is the foundational principle and broadly defined.
Yoga Journal’s Controversial “Leadership Issue” and “The Future of Yoga” Issue
“The time has come for us to take yoga back. Yoga isn't owned by corporations or clothing companies. It is a beautiful gift to the world that we can all unwrap and enjoy. Yoga provides tools that offer us moments of peace and can lead to lives of dedication and fulfillment.”

- Jivana Heyman, founder of the Accessible Yoga Association and author of “Accessible Yoga,” and “Yoga Revolution.”
We think of yoga as working with the body when in fact, the essence of yoga is working with the mind. **Anyone who is able to breathe and think can do yoga.**

Yoga can help us recover from trauma by:

- Quieting the mind
- Calming the central nervous system
- Steadying thoughts and emotions
- Expanding awareness
- Reconnecting with our true nature
- Allowing time and space for empowerment and self-acceptance

Any aspect of practice can be individualized and adapted to achieve these outcomes.

We can turn our yoga mat into a zone of safety and non-judgement, and take the experience off the mat into our lives, where it is always there for us.
Truth is One: Paths are Many

“The light is within. It is already there. Take your time to see it.” - Sri Swami Satchidananda
“Meditation is not evasion; it is a serene encounter with reality.”

- Thích Nhất Hạnh
grounding & centering
Questions?

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