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## **Yoga for MS sufferers**

HEIDI TOTH - Daily Herald

Syl Carson is a yogi. That's what her license plate says, anyway.

The tall, slender yoga therapist started doing yoga 15 years ago, but it wasn't until she was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis that she discovered even more benefits to the activity.

"That's when I took it on real seriously as a therapy," she said.

Then, three years ago she found her true calling: yoga therapy for people with multiple sclerosis. As the alternative treatment becomes more mainstream -- the National Institutes of Health recently found that yoga combats the fatigue people with MS experience, and the National MS Society encourages the activity as a way to stay healthy and active -- she sees more and more people.

And as a sufferer of an auto-immune disorder herself, she feels the benefits. In her arthritis, her immune system attacks her joints. In MS, the immune system attacks the central nervous system, damaging the myelin around nerve fibers and building up scar tissue, thus disrupting communication between the brain and the nervous system, according to the MS Society. Either way, the lengthening and moistening of the joints, muscles and nerves brought on by a good yoga session is beneficial.

"It brings you back into your own body," she said, adding many people, when they find out they have MS or a similar condition, go into a state of hyperstartle and constant inhalation. They go up, up and up, working their bodies into a constantly excited state.

"Some people just don't come down from that," she said. "Yoga gives you a chance to go 'ahh.' "

The benefits aren't quantifiable as of yet; no studies have found a consistent correlation between yoga and improvement with MS.

But Sally Davis, who was diagnosed with MS six years ago, is a believer. When the Orem resident was diagnosed at age 51 with the disease, she was experiencing severe fatigue, a loss of strength, trouble with balance, mental confusion and physical pain. Unsure of what to do, since there is no cure, she

turned to what she knew.

"I remembered that years ago when I did yoga, that I felt healthier at that time," she said.

So she continued. She went to Carson's classes sporadically for a year or so and noticed improvements in both her mental and physical conditions. Three years ago, she committed to going to a weekly class and a monthly one-on-one Thai Yoga Therapy session. She doesn't have any new lesions and no deterioration.

"Since then I've improved so much people I know are always telling me how much better I look," Davis said.

She still struggles with other issues, like stress -- "I still haven't mastered that" -- but the therapy sessions and yoga classes provide ways for the stress to seep out. Overall, she just feels better and more balanced, she said.

That's exactly the intended effect of yoga for anybody, Carson said. The movements are designed to strengthen and lengthen muscles, nerves and joints, releasing moisture and minerals into the muscles to create greater flexibility and a healthier body.

It can even trump old age for a time by keeping body parts feeling and working younger; even keeping muscles and bones moving keeps them younger.

"We think of the bones as hard, but really they are quite soft," she said, adding the movements in yoga lubricate the parts being used, bones included. People actually can lengthen their bodies, although that may not translate into being a little taller next time at the doctor's office.

She applies the same principles in the Thai Yoga Therapy, in which she actually moves her client's body through a series of yoga movements and performs massage techniques and acupressure. Carson described it as a combination of yoga, dance and wrestling.

"I'm using leverage to move their bodies," she said.

Overall, though, yoga is about balance. It improves the strength and flexibility of the doer and gives him or her a chance to psychologically exhale and release emotions and to leave the studio feeling good.

"There's a general sense of well-being," Carson said. "It's called the yoga glow."

But the benefits are greater than that, as are the reasons for doing it. Davis is committed to her triumph over MS for another reason -- her children. Her ex-husband, who also has MS, has been in a care center for the last 10 years.

Since some genetics are involved with MS, and both of her children's parents have the disease, her children are at a greater risk of developing the condition. She wants to make sure they know it's not a death sentence.

"I'm determined to show them the opposite side of the coin," Davis said.

For more information on Carson's practice, go to [www.whitemountainyoga.com](http://www.whitemountainyoga.com).