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Real Men Do Yoga

“How can I take this yoga serious, when all it ever gives me is a pain in my posteriors?” sang Elvis Presley as he fumbled through a yoga class in the 1967 movie *Easy Come, Easy Go*. Today, men and yoga still aren’t getting along, as evidenced by the 2016 Yoga in America study conducted by *Yoga Journal* and Yoga Alliance, which found that only 28 percent of yoga practitioners are men. The male teachers at Molly’s Yoga Corner, however, are out to change that.

Carl Hoffman, Jonathan Hoose and Jesse Pemberton teach and practice yoga. Each of them decided to teach after discovering the incredible benefits it brought into their own lives. For Hoffman, practicing yoga improved his health and gave him a more peaceful mental outlook. When Hoose started practicing yoga in college, he found he had more energy and could focus better in class. Pemberton experienced the ability to let go of old thought patterns and live in the present moment. Each of these men found that yoga is not only physically challenging, but it brings balance, health and relaxation into every aspect of life, including work and relationships.

“Yoga hits on the physical, the mental, and the spiritual,” explains Pemberton, “Those three aspects of health are all connected. If you don’t have all three of those in harmony, then you won’t be in balance.” This balance was the goal of the ancient Indians who developed yoga. According to the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali, written around 400 CE, the physical aspect of holding postures was just one of the eight limbs of yoga. Together with other limbs like meditation and breath work, the *Sutras* enable the individual to reach a higher state of consciousness. Because modern American yoga was built on this tradition, practicing it supports one’s spiritual and mental well-being, as well as being physically challenging.

“The guy who tries yoga for the first time,” says Hoffman, “may well be surprised at what he finds.” A typical yoga class at Molly’s involves holding postures, paying attention to the body and moving with the breath. While this may not surprise most men, the level of strength and flexibility yoga takes probably will. Hoose, Hoffman and Pemberton all agree that most men’s bodies are fairly tight, especially in the shoulders, hips and hamstrings, which can make certain postures a challenge. Opening up these and other areas of the body, they

explain, has the obvious benefit of increased flexibility but can also promote an emotional release. Opening the heart center, for example, can cause increased feelings of compassion, and opening up the shoulders and throat area can result in an enhanced ability to speak one's truth.

According to these men, the challenge of opening the body through yoga is worth the difficulty. Pemberton explains, "If your body hasn't gone to a place or done a certain pose, your body's going to talk to you, and it's going to manifest as shaking, or vibrating. If you're feeling vibrations in your muscles, that's a good thing. That means you're growing. See if you can stay in pose for 10 seconds, 15 seconds, 25 seconds. If you want to grow past this point, you have to go through discomfort." In order to ease students past the discomfort, these teachers recommend modifying the pose, sometimes using props like blocks or bolsters. They keep a close eye on each student, making sure that the needs of each are being met in a safe and beneficial way.

For some men, the idea of not being able to perform a pose as well as another student may be a challenge in itself. But these teachers encourage their students to focus only on what is happening on their own mat, no matter how many people are around them. "The more you do it, there's less ego involved, and you're just there with the pose," says Hoffman. While holding a posture, yoga students must be fully present in their own bodies in order to determine how far they can or should go.

This inward concentration leads to acceptance of what one's body is capable of, and this acceptance, in turn, leads to increased confidence in one's abilities. "Bring this feeling with you wherever you go," says Pemberton. The idea of being true to oneself is one of many yoga lessons that can be beneficial both on and off the mat.

Some men find the physical practice of yoga to be more challenging than other forms of exercise since each pose engages the entire body, including the mind and the breath. Unlike weight training, in which only one muscle group at a time is generally the focus, every yoga pose—simple to complex—is a full-body challenge. In addition, practicing yoga can complement the other forms of exercise. A runner that practices yoga may experience more flexibility in his hips and hamstrings and an enhanced ability to concentrate on his stride.

But many men turn to yoga only after other forms of exercise have caused them injury. As Hoose reports, "I've seen an increase in the number of male students who have had some sort of injury from other kinds of exercise, like back surgery or knee replacement, and come to yoga as a part of their recuperation." What these teachers would like men to know is that while yoga can be restorative to a body in distress, it shouldn't be a last resort.

The teachers at Molly's Yoga Corner would like to issue Rochester men a challenge: To give yoga a chance. They recommend finding a good studio and spending time exploring the possibilities and challenges of yoga. One-on-one sessions or a beginner's workshop are other ways to get started. "If guys need a challenge," says Pemberton, "I challenge you not to think.

Come hold a pose, move with your breath, and try not to hold onto a thought. Just focus on how your body is engaging.”

In *Easy Come, Easy Go*, Elvis Presley’s character couldn’t handle a yoga class. In today’s world, Hoffman, Hoose and Pemberton are proof that real men do yoga.