

How Yoga saved this Captain's career and why middle-age, sore and stiff men should try it.

Beautiful women.

... Ok, now that I have your attention, let me tell you how and why I got into yoga and spell out some of the benefits of adding yoga to your daily routine. My name is Andy Barton and I am a pilot for a major airline. I spent Independence Day, 2005 in the emergency room in agony. In a rush to leave the cramped cockpit of the 737 I had just landed, I swung my heavy navigation bag around, unsafely twisting and straining my back- a stupid but classic mistake for pilots, and our number one "on the job injury." Back home, missing a month of work while on medication and rest, I was not able to move without pain and definitely nervous that I might never fly again. To top it off, my wife Allison and I had planned our 25th wedding anniversary for over a year—a week at a hiking resort in Canada that cost a fortune, and I was determined not to miss this trip. So, armed with pain medication, off to Canada we went.

After a long painful flight to Spokane, and a four-hour car ride north to the Canadian Rockies, my back was killing me when we arrived and received our schedule. I laughed when I saw that 6 am yoga was the first activity. I whined that no way was I going to be able to do yoga- I couldn't even bend over to put on my underwear. My wife (an RN) knows me so well that she pushed the right button: "after all, we did pay for it." So off to yoga I sulked, and who walks into the class but the aforementioned BEAUTIFUL YOGA TEACHER. Oh man, now I really was going to look like a wimp, so I started on the excuses again. Bad idea. Nurse and yoga teacher ganged up on me, and the teacher instructed me on how to modify the practice- to stop if I felt a sharp pain but continue if I felt a stretching sensation. Throughout the class she checked on me and amazingly enough I not only made it through the class but felt a little better.

All stretched out, we loaded up the jeeps and headed for the glaciers. Up and down the mountain I went with a manageable amount of discomfort. No drugs required. That night, I had a massage, and at the end of that day I felt 50% better than I had in the morning before yoga. After four days of yoga and massages, I was feeling so good that I planned to go back to work when we got home. I was "cured"!

My wife, as she often does, knew better. Back at home, she suggested that we continue yoga. I predictably started in on the "I'm good now, I don't need yoga" routine, and in typical nurse fashion she ignored me and bought yoga mats and a DVD. Here is the problem with a Yoga DVD: If you don't already know how to do yoga, then a DVD is not a great place to start because the dude on the screen can't see you and tell

A 'Pilot' Program: How Yoga Saved this Captain's Career

By Andy Barton, CYC Yoga Teacher and Commercial Airline Pilot



you that you're doing it wrong and that you may either hurt yourself or not get the intended benefit. After two days, I had enough of that. Undeterred, my lovely wife found the Camarillo Yoga Center and spoke to Audrey, the owner. She suggested an entry-level yoga class for beginners. My excuses fell on deaf ears, and I found myself in a room full of people on mats- to my surprise, many of them were guys. The class wasn't full of pretzel poses, and Audrey helped us both feel comfortable and gave me clear instructions on what I should do to help my back, the big one being to stretch my ridiculously tight hamstrings. Sounded like a good idea, but to my dismay Allison signed us both up for six months of classes right in front of my eyes. Did I mention that she knows me so well that once we paid for the classes she knew I was d...n well going to get my money's worth? After three months I realized the pain in my back was completely gone. After six months, I did not have any pain anywhere in my body. Ok, so maybe there is something to this yoga stuff.

Now, both Allison and I have been practicing yoga for over eight years, and teaching yoga at Camarillo Yoga Center for six. We are in our mid-50's and amazed at how we compare with same-age friends in terms of stamina, lack of aches and pains, and other signs of aging. I do yoga on the airplane between flights, and have even shown my flight crews how to stretch. I'm into woodworking, and can spend longer hours on my projects, because I stretch while I work.

Allison and I feel better that at any other time in our lives. My body feels balanced, strong and flexible and my wife has never looked better. Yoga is an activity that couples can do together because you learn to do what your body is calling for. Your spouse and everyone else in the class are all in different places and that's ok. Success in yoga is defined by showing up to class on your mat and dealing with where you are today.

It took me 45 plus years to get my hamstrings so tight and short that I was getting back pain. It took patience and commitment to free my body of pain. Yoga is not about being super flexible, but about breathing and moving your body to maximize good health and longevity. A consistent yoga practice is not a stand-alone exercise regime but designed to enhance all the other activities in your life, so that you can hike, bike, work in your backyard, or whatever is important to you, pain free, for as long as you can.

Dudes, get over it. Your wife is right. Take it from me, you need to stretch. Go to yoga.