

Fully fit

plus-size exercise options

cater to comfort

By AMY NEWPORT
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It's hard not to be self-conscious when exercising, especially in a room full of lithe, young bodies, but it's even harder for women who fall into the plus-size range.

It isn't just about comfort, though, it's also about physical capabilities.

One teacher, Patricia "Meera" Kerr, who is plus-size herself, has reached out to the plus-size community and developed yoga routines that can be performed easily by someone who hasn't exercised in years and may be significantly overweight.

"Yoga," she says, "Isn't just for 19-year-old gumby girls in cute leotards. It is for those who are older and have round bodies as well."

Kerr, who prefers to be called Meera — a name given to her by a former teacher and swami — credits yoga with saving her life. She discovered yoga and its philosophy as "a pot-smoking hippie" while singing with an all-girl rock 'n' roll band. The band was practicing music and yoga in Danbury, Conn., when it had an opportunity to meet Indian holy man Swami Satchidananda, their instructor's guru. With his long, flowing hair and beard, the hippie band was drawn to him. Meera asked him to bless her band, and he in turn asked her to give something uplifting for the people.

Meera, who now lives in St. Joseph, Mich., was born in the Midwest and raised in the Episcopal Church. She became deeply involved in the practice and philosophy of yoga, participating in lengthy, sometimes silent, retreats. She became a vegetarian and started meditating and practicing yoga daily.

Despite the strict regimen, she struggled with her weight and, as she got older, it became even more difficult to keep the pounds off. Though frustrated, she continued with daily meditation and exercise along with a philosophy of applying love, rather than shame, to her body.

As her practice continued, she began to see a need for an adaptation to serve those who wanted to do yoga, but couldn't do what thinner people were doing.

Working with instructors who taught "extra-gentle" yoga classes, Meera began modifying poses that would still give the benefits of traditional yoga without requiring extreme postures.

Along with another teacher, she developed adaptations of poses like the "bridge" pose, in which students, while on their back, push up into an upper back bend. In her adaptation, the student stands a few feet away from a wall while leaning back to touch the crown of her head to the wall. This, Meera says, causes the shoulders to drop and the weight to shift, enabling the student to place her hands behind the back for a stretch she might otherwise not get. As students continue, they become stronger and more flexible, and move on to more advanced poses.

After a few years of teaching the adaptive poses, she decided to reach out to a wider audience, and developed a yoga video incorporating the adaptations, with herself as the model. She hoped students would appreciate seeing someone demonstrating poses whose body more closely resembled theirs. She has two successful videos under her belt, with plans under way to develop a more advanced one. Recently, she signed a publishing contract for a book demonstrating yoga poses, again with herself as the model.

“It will be the first book of its kind,” Meera says, “With yoga poses being demonstrated by — horrors — a fat person!”

Meera isn't the only one who has discovered that being overweight doesn't rule out exercise.

Rocelyn Delina, a former psychiatric nurse who lives in Wisconsin, understands this all too well. At 5 feet, 4 inches and 250 pounds, she admits when she started exercising she couldn't reach her knees, let alone her toes. Delina, who began practicing yoga just a few months ago and is learning to be an instructor, has faced her own demons — low self-esteem and the constant criticism aimed at heavy women. While she wanted to start a new chapter in her life, she quickly learned it wasn't going to be easy. She recalled the first time she got on the floor to perform some poses.

“I fell over,” she laughs. “But I sat back up and tried again.”

After a month of practicing yoga, Delina says she was able to get up off the floor without the use of a chair. She also learned how to manipulate her body to get into certain poses.

Now at retirement age, Delina is hoping to combine her medical knowledge with principles of yoga into a personal rehabilitation business. As she continues, Delina notices progress each week and hopes she can extend her own version of restorative yoga to those struggling to hang on to their physical abilities.

Closer to home, North Kansas City Hospital offers a yoga class aimed specifically at plus-size women.

Instructor Airam Mason teaches the twice-weekly class in an aerobics studio. A petite woman, Airam seems an unlikely candidate for teaching the class. It was she, though, who first presented the idea of teaching yoga to plus-size women to the hospital's Community Education Department three years ago. At that time, Mason had only been practicing yoga about six months and had just made a dramatic career switch.

While working at a job doing graphic design and printing, Mason ran into an old friend who was teaching yoga. He encouraged her to come to a class.

“I was so sore afterwards I could hardly walk. The next day, I couldn't lift my arms,” Mason says.

Though sore, she was hooked. Mason quit her job to become a certified yoga instructor. Throughout her learning process, Mason says she particularly wanted to work with plus-size people. She knew yoga, as practiced in most traditional yoga studios, was not accessible to many full-figured women, and thought she could offer an alternative.

After teaching classes for nearly three years, Mason has taught herself how to adapt the poses for her full-figured students, saying often only minor adjustments are needed. She has found most of her students haven't lost much weight, but have made great strides in improving strength, flexibility and stamina. She acknowledges many of her pupils may not be able to do full backbends and headstands within this lifetime. But, she says, yoga is about much more than being able to twist yourself into pretzels.

“Yoga is the cultivation of peace,” Mason says. “Many teachers teach yoga just as exercise, but the philosophy can help you drop into a richer experience of life.”

Mary Gordon, a yoga and pilates teacher from Tucson, Ariz., has practiced and also taught yoga in the past. As a nurse and former personal trainer in a women's fitness club, she had seen the devastating effects that being significantly overweight had on the health of her patients. She saw Pilates as a way to quickly build core strength in students who were 30 to 40 pounds overweight and those who weighed more than 400 pounds.

“The results were amazing,” Gordon says. “After six months, breasts had shrunk and raised, bellies were tighter and double chins had reduced or gone away completely.”

Despite dramatic improvements, many of the women in her classes retained what Gordon terms a “round body.” However, they were still quite fit and firm. As a personal trainer, she has seen mistakes made when working with overweight clients.

“One of the first things trainers do is put them on a treadmill,” Gordon says. “It is mind-numbingly

boring, and makes it difficult to stay motivated.”

Gordon says TV shows such as the “Biggest Loser,” where overweight individuals are put through a competitive, rigorous, bootcamp-like environment, are brutal in their treatment of participants. She says the TV show doesn’t get at the underlying reason many are overweight. According to Gordon, many people are overweight because of undigested trauma or types of abuse. While Pilates can’t remove trauma, Gordon says it can help get your mind away from the past and create a new focus. “Pilates,” she says, “is a system of 10 basic moves that can be performed on a mat. As students progress, the moves become more elaborate.”

Nearly anyone can practice Pilates if they can get up and down off the floor with or without a chair and don’t have osteoporosis, Gordon says. Students more than 70 years old have participated in her classes.

“It’s never too late to start exercising,” she says.

Being significantly overweight poses mental and physical challenges when it comes to exercise. Finding what works and staying motivated is even harder. Abilities can vary, even day to day, but finding something that works can be exciting and rewarding. Doing a headstand may not be in the cards for most, but it doesn’t mean there aren’t other things that can be done to increase strength, stamina and flexibility — and maybe shed a few pounds in the process.

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