Yoga and NLP

By Eve Menezes Cunningham

I've been practising yoga since 2001 when I discovered that it was effective pain relief for me (along with crystals) where hospital-prescribed painkillers weren't, at that time, making a dent.

I started out doing Cat–Cow and other poses in my tiny London studio flat, on the piece of floor next to my futon that was too small for a full yoga mat.

When I started braving actual classes, I experienced longer-lasting pain relief but also began to get in touch with other issues that were coming up for healing in me. Before I even heard of NLP, yoga was my first experience of getting myself into a resourceful state.

I volunteered for a helpline for the chronic pain condition I have and met so many wonderful people, many of whom had experienced terrifying side effects from medication which still didn't stop the pain. Learning that there was no cure for endometriosis and I'd have to keep having surgery every few years meant that I was highly motivated to figure something else out.

When I discovered poses like Cat-Cow, Bow and Wheel (when I was well enough), I was excited to share them with my fellow volunteers. Many of them were in too much pain to even try but yoga helped me begin to claw my life back.

NLP helped me to use my yoga intentions in an even more empowered way. By the time I did the yoga therapy for mental health training, I'd qualified as a counsellor and in other therapies, too.

Using yoga for anxiety, stress, sleep and trauma was revolutionary for me. Even though I had a decade's experience of using yoga for pain relief and to manage my symptoms every day, the idea of yoga as a way to regulate the nervous system, rewire (with practice) the brain and lift our mood or calm our whole selves was life changing.

I love helping clients and yoga students embody states they want to experience more frequently using yoga poses. It's an easy way to anchor these states. Some are calming, others empowering and mood boosting. The better we get to know ourselves and our bodies, the more we can use even a few short minutes to help ourselves feel however we want to feel.

I remember learning about the importance of genuine downtime during my NLP training. Yoga and meditation offer many ways in which we can experience this deeper rest. One of my favourites is yoga nidra – yogic sleep.

I've written about Sankalpas – the positive intention or resolve we connect with at the start and finish of each yoga nidra practice – for *Rapport* in the past. Focusing on an intention that comes from the heart and using all of the senses to imagine it coming to fruition, getting the unconscious mind on board as the body and mind relax so deeply, can be really helpful in terms of congruence with our goals and a relaxed way of working towards them.

Even setting intentions at the beginning of a yoga practice or class fits with the idea of setting a well-formed outcome in NLP. ∎

Yoga was my first experience of getting myself into a resourceful state

Are you curious about experimenting with yoga?

There are so many different styles. Hatha refers to *any* physical practice but is used to market fairly traditional styles and classes. Ashtanga is a more flowing, dynamic form. Yin has a lot of stillness.

What do you want from your practice? What's drawing you to yoga? What might you set as a well-formed outcome around your yoga experiment? Knowing your hopes for your practice will help you choose a style that helps you with this.

Sensory acuity is helpful, too. Your choices will depend on the styles and instructors who are local enough to you. There are some wonderful online options (for example, Yoga with Adrienne) but there's no substitute for working with a yoga therapist or attending a class that's small enough to get the support you might need with props, alignment and more.

I encourage my students to experiment with as many styles and instructors as possible. As well as looking at what fits your schedule, do as much of what feels good as possible.

Sometimes, we might be drawn to a dynamic, strong practice and it can be beneficial for us to do this kind of style. Other times, what we resist (be that a stronger practice or a more restorative style) might be exactly what we need. Future pacing as well as thinking about what feels good in the moment will help you tailor a yoga practice that supports you in the moment as well as moving forwards.

And, of course, yoga is a wonderful aid for developing physical as well as mental and emotional flexibility. What insights are you suddenly open to as you focus on a previously unnoticed spot on the ceiling as you hold Triangle pose? Seeing a familiar room from different perspectives has benefits that go beyond physical strength and flexibility.

We can also learn to be more flexible around what's sustainable for us. Some days, a full practice is a wonderful thing. Other days, even one or two poses can be enough.

'Sensory awareness is central to both yoga and NLP,' says Paola Catizone. She has been teaching yoga for more than 35 years and practicing NLP for nearly 30 years. 'To be embodied is to be in touch with the senses. We map the psychic geography of the body through movement, sensing and image work.' Paola uses NLP in her yoga teaching in a range of ways including her 'use of language, to pacing, mirroring, repetition, sensory-specific cues, and the careful crafting of affirmations/suggestions.

'Physical movement and rest can support and amplify suggestions. It's easier, for example, to relax muscles that have previously contracted and stretched and the mind can be trained to follow the body into relaxation.

'Positive suggestions become very effective during deep relaxation and asanas (postures), mudras (hand gestures), chakras (subtle anatomy) and other physical energetic practices can become "anchors" for positive suggestions.

'Warrior poses, for instance, can be used to suggest courage, direction and stability, and an expanded range of movement can be used to suggest openness to new ways of thinking and being.

'Sensory association to healthy states is cultivated. Difficult experiences can be managed through witnessing mental and emotional states without becoming engaged with them, as taught in traditional meditation.

'This, however, is a cumulative practice which takes time to cultivate. NLP-based visualisations can also aid clients to learn new ways of relating to overwhelming emotions.

'Just as yoga aims to free the practitioner from unconsciously built and often unhelpful habits and beliefs, NLP can bring light and renewal to the depths of the waters of the mind. Together they are a powerful tool for change.'

Eve Menezes Cunningham is a yoga therapist and NLP master practitioner. She integrates yoga, NLP and her other therapies in her practice and her book, *365 Ways to Feel Better: Self-care Ideas for Embodied Wellbeing*. You can access several free yoga videos at **www.selfcarecoaching.net/book/yoga-videos** and you can use the menu to explore different moods and benefits before experimenting with them yourself.