

Yoga for Clients Who Are Overweight or Obese



Throughout the years of managing hundreds of staff from all various backgrounds, I have come to realize that we teach and preach based on our individual experience. Experiences from which we learn include education, certification, work, mentorship and cultural backgrounds. Thus, opinions and philosophies may not always be in alignment.

The topic of how to implement yoga for overweight and obese people has fascinated me for years. In the early stages of my career, it was common for yoga instructors (who come from a yoga background) to recommend gentle yoga classes to overweight and obese people so they could “get used to the pose.” This notion was confirmed during a recent conversation with a studio owner, who was handing out free class passes at a local festival.

She asked me what type of students I instruct. I explained that the bulk of my classes are led in a corporate environment and that the majority of my clientele are overweight and obese students. She looked at me and said, “Oh, so you teach gentle yoga.”

I replied, “Well, actually the opposite. I come from an Ashtanga background, so I get them upright and moving, and I lead with various progressions and regressions.”

This reply startled the studio owner, who looked at me as if I were nuts. A few days later I read a LinkedIn post about an instructor requesting recommendations on what poses to instruct to a group comprised of individuals with diabetes. Given the fact that many people with diabetes also are overweight, I was astounded to see the amount of replies that suggested gentle yoga to ease into the postures.

As explained in the [Effective Strategies for Overweight and Obese Clients](#)

workshop, increasing flexibility should not be the primary concern when implementing an exercise regimen for this type of client. These individuals need to focus on reducing body weight by increasing caloric expenditure and making positive lifestyle changes prior to making flexibility a primary goal.

Yoga is highly effective when it comes to enhancing weight-loss efforts, reducing stress and increasing inner awareness. Although the notion of attending a gentle yoga seems to “get used to the yoga poses” seems reasonable, the word gentle may not appeal nor be appropriate for every individual. The word gentle exudes a calming, restorative practice and atmosphere, where the reality is that these individuals need a basic, introductory or foundational yoga practice. In a basic practice, the students learn the majority of the primary poses, most of which are standing asanas.

Throughout the years, the yoga industry has been effective at promoting gentle yoga for this population. By contrast, fascial and bodyweight training are the hot trends in fitness right now, with a greater emphasis on training clients upright rather than seated in machines.

So what’s the correct approach? It’s generally a balance between the fitness and yoga concepts where a **modern-day approach** to yoga is highly effective with progressions and regressions.

Thus, overweight and obese students can be upright and spend the bulk of the class in vertical positions. Obese students can still flow through movements with intelligent regressions. Many upright positions are challenging for the limbs; for example, holding the arms at shoulder height in a warrior position. An upright practice does not necessarily mean a heart-pumping, sweaty yoga practice, but it can still be an opportunity to gain the basics and increase range of motion.

But what if my students’ main goal is flexibility? Many overweight individuals are inflexible due to a sedentary lifestyle, and lack range of motion due to adipose tissue. Students performing asanas will still receive flexibility benefits, however, as most are placing their bodies into positions that they have never before experienced. Many yoga postures position the limbs and torso into the three planes, which allows for flexibility gains without having to hold or fold into uncomfortable stretches.

Why keep the student’s primarily in upright asanas?

- It avoids embarrassment. Seated postures such as butterfly or seated forward folds are challenging for larger-sized participants.
- Standing asanas build confidence. Watching a highly flexible instructor who can reach his or her head to the toes may remind overweight participants of the limitations caused by their excess bodyweight, which does not increase self-efficacy.
- Obese lifestyles are primarily sedentary; therefore, asanas get the body moving differently, while increasing circulation and focusing on taking deep breaths.
- Standing allows the instructor to focus on pertinent areas such as posture and balance. These vital areas translate benefits in life and to the weight room floor.

Should instructors use props? Instructors should use their expertise and professional

judgment to know whether or not they want to include props. While props may or may not be available in a health club, yoga studios are generally equipped with props. Props are also dependent on the instructor's yoga training background. Students with an Ashtanga yoga background are generally trained to implement poses without props, whereas Iyengar instructors "prop up" every asana.

If working with morbidly obese individuals, or sedentary, obese seniors, it is appropriate to implement either a chair-specific yoga class or incorporate a chair as a prop.

When is gentle yoga appropriate? Gentle yoga is appropriate for anyone seeking a calm class and atmosphere. Also, gentle and restorative yoga or yoga nidra is highly effective for helping individuals reduce stress, worry and anxiety.

Overweight and obese individuals should not deliberately avoid gentle yoga, especially if their main goal is to calm the mind and relax the body. However, if the main goal is flexibility, then an upright practice will be far more effective. By



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