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YES, A 20-MINUTE PRACTICE

Are
We
Having

Fun

By Jennifer Davis-Flynn

Yet?

BRING PLAY BACK into YOUR PRACTICE
with **THREE STYLES** of YOGA
THAT CAN GET YOU OUT of YOUR HEAD
AND BRING a SMILE to YOUR FACE.

PHOTO: DANA ARNOLD



Real Talk:

If I don't do yoga every day, I fall apart. Maybe this sounds dramatic, but navigating a worldwide pandemic, economic turbulence, social injustice, year-round wildfires in my home state of Colorado, and, most recently, a war, is hard on the nervous system. My mental health depends on the 25 minutes I spend on the mat each morning doing gentle asana, plus three to five minutes of breathwork, and 10 minutes of meditation or chanting. Yet, most mornings, I still have to force myself to do all of that instead of doomscrolling through the daily tragedies on my social media.

Is this morning practice essential? Absolutely. Is it super fun? Hmm . . . not so much. It's like taking vitamins and going to bed early. It's the responsible thing to do. My yoga routine has become just another part of adulting. But does staying well really need to be so serious all the time?

(Previous Page): Practicing AcroYoga takes two.
(Facing Page): The relationship between a flyer and a lifter (also known as a base) depends on mutual trust.

Are you, like me, a little burned out on your yoga routine? Just going through the motions, practicing along with your usual YouTube video every day? Have you been flowing through the same vinyasa sequence since 2008? Maybe it's time for us to shake things up and have some fun with our practice again.

Returning to Play

Remember how much fun it can be to just be in your body and play? No? Makes sense. As adults in a society that rewards hyperproductivity, playtime is not actively encouraged. But it should be. The cognitive and mental health benefits can keep us healthy, happy, and mentally sharp.

But what is play anyway? According to a 2009 article from *The American Journal of Play* by research professor of psychology Peter Gray, it is activity that is self-chosen and self-directed, intrinsically motivated, imaginative, and done in a non-stressed state of mind. In short, play is fun for the sake of fun. Just like yoga, it's a means, not an end.

And it's good for the brain. Along with the obvious benefits of play—reducing stress, increasing happiness and general well-being—playing boosts cognitive function as well. In a 2003 study, play was shown to increase Brain-Derived Neurotropic Factor (BDNF), a substance essential for the growth of brain cells. It's also been shown to be instrumental in the development of the area of the brain responsible for executive tasks, such as planning, decision-making, problem-solving, and emotional regulation. It can be a way to fire up dormant synapses in your brain. And play can lower the risk of developing age-related conditions such as Alzheimer's and dementia.

Finally, play inspires novelty, surprise, and originality, which leads to more flexible thinking, including unusual connections between ideas that can improve problem-solving skills and stimulate creativity.

So, with all that in mind, I tried out some different forms of yoga that took me way out of my comfort zone and into the realm of play.



PHOTO: PEATHEGEE/GETTY IMAGES

1

IN IT TOGETHER AcroYoga

Probably the most playful yoga of all, AcroYoga is done in pairs or groups and resembles the daring acrobatics you might have seen at the circus as a kid. In short, it's not really something a middle-aged, plus-size woman like me would think to do.

But I show up at the Boulder Circus Center on a Wednesday evening anyway, dressed in leggings and a T-shirt, with butterflies in my stomach. They know I'm coming. I called ahead to inform the instructor that I'm a complete beginner and I don't have a lithe gymnast body. Teacher Crystal Nardico assured me that I was welcome and would be fine.

AcroYoga is relatively new. Some sources say it started in Montreal in the late '90s and came to the United States in the early 2000s. There's a specific subculture that has sprouted up around it. Acro Yogis travel around to hang out at festivals and weekly drop-in "Acro Jams" that happen across the country. My Acro partner, for example, was visiting Boulder from Southern California.

The studio at the Boulder Circus Center has mirrored walls and thick gym mats on the floor. There are a lot of men—more than I've ever seen at any yoga class. Everyone's fit; everyone's young. Everyone in this group has been doing Acro for seven years or more. And then there's me. But, despite feeling "off-brand" for Acro, I found that the group embraced me right away.

That generosity isn't uncommon in AcroYoga, according to Nardico. "Traditional yoga is more of an internal experience," she says. "But Acro is all about giving."

Acro is a team sport and completely based on mutual trust. Like cheerleading, there are "lifters" (also called "bases") and there are "flyers." As a flyer, you've got to trust the other person to not let you fall. As a base, you have to trust yourself to keep your partner aloft. In short, you are making an intense physical connection with people who, in my case, are complete strangers. It's uncomfortable at first, but, after I warm up to it, I discover it's also a lot of fun . . . if you just let go of your self-consciousness.

We start out running around the room to warm up the body, then we circle up to introduce ourselves and stretch, concentrating on our wrists and hands.

Next, we split up into pairs for warm-ups. For these folks, that includes Headstands. I make a failed attempt; my partner is able to execute a perfect pose without any assistance. Eventually, we get into groups of three: lifter, flyer, and spotter. And although I'm pretty comfortable with lifting, I feel embarrassed about being lifted. My base assures me that

Aerial Yoga allows for weightless inversions and deep, supported stretches.

he could lift "four of me," so I allow myself to be pressed up into the classic Superman pose—called a "bird" in Acro. I extend my arms and legs, balancing with my partner's feet on my hips. Then I do the same for him. We're both smiling.

We keep ramping up the poses, and I'm working up a sweat. This is really starting to be a serious strength-building workout. Eventually, it's time for an inversion. We are going to try Star Pose, where the lifter lies down with their feet up in Waterfall Pose, and the flyer moves into a version of a wide-legged Headstand, balancing on the lifter's feet. I try to decline, but the group enthusiastically encourages me to try, so I oblige hesitantly. Getting into the position is scary and awkward—in Acro, your butt is gonna be in someone else's face on the regular—but I let go and allow the lifter and the spotter to shift me into position. It takes a village, but I get there. And, to me, it feels like an enormous physical feat of strength and bravery.

After 90 minutes of lifting and flying, I leave feeling invigorated. Acro is an intimate and physically challenging experience. I enjoyed it, but I'll probably leave it to the young folks.

2

FLYING HIGH Aerial Yoga

Aerial Yoga features a fabric swing called a silk, which serves as a supportive prop for all poses. I signed up for a class at Yoga Hive in downtown Louisville, Colorado, a studio that specializes in this style of yoga.

Floating on Air: The Benefits of Aerial Meditation

If your meditation practice also needs a change, try wrapping yourself in silk. Aerial meditation classes, such as the ones offered by Current Meditation, cocoon you in the silk hammocks so

you can immediately begin to relax, feeling safe and protected. Because the fabric contours to your body and holds you suspended over the ground, you avoid aggravating pressure points

or experiencing the other discomforts of lying on the floor. Plus, the gentle swaying of the hammock is incredibly calming, allowing you to sink into a deeper meditative state.

PHOTO: JORDI SALAS/GETTYIMAGES





Britteny Floyd-Mayo, a.k.a. Trap Yoga Bae, leads high-energy, dance-inspired yoga classes.

Aerial Yoga was born in the early 1990s. Broadway choreographer Christopher Harrison is credited with creating the practice in his Antigravity Performance Company, which combined aerial acrobatics with dance, Pilates, and yoga. Today, there are several different styles and lineages. Yoga Hive teaches the Unnata Method, which was developed by dancer and movement artist Michelle Dortignac in 2006 and is rooted in Hatha Yoga.

Our teacher, Alisha Klezmer, hangs a silk for me off of a steel support on the ceiling, and I place my mat on the floor below it. Actually, silk is a misnomer. Our yoga swings (sometimes referred to as hammocks) are made from nylon, and apparently they can hold more than 400 pounds.

We start off on our mats in Sukhasana (Easy Pose), taking some deep breaths to gently bring us into the practice. Then, we move into Tabletop with our elbows in the swing

above. The feeling of the stretch is deep and luxurious. Doing this pose using the silks feels very different from a traditional Tabletop. My thoracic spine squeals with delight. For the rest of the class we move through a vinyasa flow using the swing, which deepens each pose and allows me to stretch muscles and fascia in a deep way that feels therapeutic. I also notice that using the hammock for all the traditional poses keeps me grounded in the present moment. It's hard to zone out when you're doing Three-Legged Dog with one foot in a swing.

"I like to describe Aerial as yoga with a really cool prop," says Yoga Hive owner Blaine Wilkes.

I would also describe it as fun, especially

when we get into a position called Back Hang where we're hanging upside down with the silks wrapped around our hips and our legs splayed in a V-shape. The weightless inversion decompresses my spine and invigorates my whole body.

We end in a heavenly antigravity Savasana (Corpse Pose), suspended in a hammock, gently swaying side to side. "The two reasons people come to our studio is to do back hang [inversion] and Savasana in the fabric," Wilkes says.

I can see why. When we finish the class, it literally feels like I have been on a relaxing beach vacation. Aerial Yoga is truly blissful. I can't wait to do it again.

PHOTO: NAILAH HOWZE

3

SHAKE IT OUT Trap Yoga

Trap Yoga, as the name suggests, is yoga accompanied by a trap music soundtrack—a subgenre of hip-hop that originated in the South. The bass is heavy, and the lyrics can get raunchy. It's definitely party music, and Trap Yoga is meant to be high-energy and fun.

Brandon Copeland of Khepera Wellness in Washington, DC, began offering Trap Yoga in 2015 as a way to attract more Black people to yoga. "I would describe it as a faster-paced Ashtanga Yoga, with sequencing based loosely on Rocket Yoga [a fast-paced cardio yoga]," he says.

Copeland, who discovered yoga when he was a student at Howard University, regularly brings his brand of Trap Yoga to local DC schools to introduce kids to a healthy way to manage anxiety and stress.

Trap Yoga is defined more by the music than by a particular teaching style. Yoga teachers across the country bring their own flavor to the practice. For example, self-described Trap Yoga Bae, Britteny Floyd-Mayo, incorporates twerking and other dance moves into her signature yoga style. She also has a DJ who spins live during her classes. A star in her own right, Floyd-Mayo regularly teaches packed classes across the country.

I didn't find a trap yoga class in my Colorado town. (No surprise there. Live Trap Yoga classes can be found in many larger cities, though.) But I found a class on YouTube with Abiola Akanni of Trap Vinyasa.

I'm usually not a huge fan of vinyasa, but Akanni's class was actually fun thanks to bonus twerking and boxing moves. She suggests that you play any high-energy hip-hop music you want as you flow through the sequence, so I put on a favorite '90s mix of A Tribe Called Quest, Jungle Brothers, and De La Soul. We twerked our way from Downward-Facing Dog Pose to Plank Pose and back again, which made the whole flow less painful and far less boring. I love to dance, so I can see myself doing this kind of yoga again—preferably in a group class.

All three of these styles got me to play. I've promised myself to do that more—in yoga and in life. 🍀

Jennifer Davis-Flynn is a Kundalini Yoga teacher and regular contributor to *Yoga Journal*. Find out more at jenniferdavisflynn.com.