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From the Baltimore Sun

Partner yoga stretches bodies, relationships

By Jonathan Pitts
Sun reporter

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Barbara Allen was just recovering from a long and serious illness -- fibromyalgia had incapacitated her for a full eight years -- when she decided to take up yoga as a way of "finding myself again."

Allen, a former executive in the computer industry, appreciated it when her husband, Tom, an engineer, volunteered to try the practice, too. But, like many men, he wondered whether yoga wasn't basically "girly stuff." He felt more comfortable with a newer incarnation of the discipline -- partner yoga -- in which a couple tries out yoga postures and stretches as an intertwined twosome.

After they worked through some unexpected communication problems, their poses became "solid as a rock," Allen's renewed sense of strength convinced her that equilibrium is best found in partnership, and she was a convert to a form of yoga that has been growing in popularity in Baltimore and around the country.

"I love partner yoga," says Allen, 60, now a yoga instructor and executive coach in Ellicott City. "I can't get enough of teaching it."

In this new twist on an ancient practice that evokes self-discipline, participants pair up and work through a succession of positions in physical contact with each other. Instructors might ask participating pairs to sit back-to-back, breathe deeply and get a sense of each other's presence, or later to extend, intertwine and rotate their arms. Postures grow increasingly complex as pairs bend, stand or extend limbs together, or transfer body weight from one partner to the other. The goal: to find and make mutual accommodation for differences, and to experience the transfer of trust.

"Take a traditional 'warrior' posture," says Ann Hyland, a yoga instructor based in Charles Village, referring to the basic yoga pose in which the practitioner extends one arm forward and the other back, his or her feet brought into a straight line. "You're balanced within your weight. Now add another person. ... Your feet, shoulders, hands or knees might be touching. You're in connection with each other, finding a balance between you."

In the physical sense, two people striking such poses can allow each to stretch farther than he or she otherwise could, almost as if partners were mutual props in a Pilates routine. It can also work on deeper levels, establishing a physical "conversation" between the two in which each learns the other's strengths and limitations.

"You're not just finding your own comfort zone," says Hyland, who studied partner yoga in California before returning to her native Maryland. "You're establishing a shared one. It can be a powerful way of getting to know each other."

Depending on the class or workshop, participants can be people who show up alone and are then paired with others, or twosomes who are already friends, significant others or spouses. Singles might be assigned one partner throughout a workshop or find themselves rotated through several as instructors vary the combinations of size, height or temperament. Pairs who are friends or committed romantic partners, instructors say, can find themselves learning more about each other than they expected. Being physically disconnected might reflect something deeper, and so might bridging it. When Allen and her husband first started partner yoga, for instance, she saw herself as more agile and found herself unwittingly competing with him.

"Once I got over basically being a brat," she says, and worked with Tom rather than against him, their yoga started to reflect the strength they share as a couple. "Our 'tree' positions were unshakable," she says. "Just as we are together in other areas of our lives."

Partner yoga "is all about intuition and helps couples and individuals connect with each other," says Christy Thorndill, a self-employed yoga instructor whose business, Charm City Zen, is based in Baltimore. "It is about giving and receiving on an emotional and soulful level."

At times, news accounts have painted partner yoga as the latest choice on an expanding meet-and-greet menu for singles. There's some truth to that, especially in places such as New York and Los Angeles, where the practice has been in vogue longer and people are "less hesitant" socially than they tend to be in Baltimore, in Hyland's words. But in the main, instructors are vigilant to keep partner yoga nonsexual in nature.

"I make that clear up front. It's important that my students and clients feel safe at all times," says Allen, who teaches classes at The Well yoga studio in Ellicott City. "After all, I'm 60, not a 22-year-old hot-yoga teacher. Everyone has a right to feel at home."

When a class is "mixed" -- made up of established couples and singles who have just met -- Allen tailors her exercises toward the newcomers, sticking to less-intimate postures, and she asks participants permission before introducing new stances. Hyland, who uses the term "Buddy Partner Yoga" to stress the form's user-friendliness, gives separate instructions to couples and newcomers during the same session.

"There's definitely a lot of tailoring," she says. "Everyone can be comfortable."

Partner yoga in Baltimore is still mainly taught by appointment, either in periodic workshops or in private sessions. Not all yoga instructors teach the form -- Allen says a minority even seem to fear it -- but those who do teach it tend to weave partner-yoga work into their regular classes.

Most instructors also offer sessions in corporate settings, as Hyland did yesterday at McCormick and Co., the Hunt Valley spice manufacturing company. Some customers have used sessions at bachelor or bachelorette parties.

At the start of a typical session, Allen says participants might have to overcome shyness, especially if they're new to the form, but once she pairs them off and puts them through their paces, the

room resounds with laughter. Her company, Forward Flowing Consultancy, which teaches yoga and does "executive coaching," is based in Ellicott City.

"By the end, the energy is sky-high," says Allen, whose husband is now a regular in her classes. "There's a tremendous sense of release. There's a lot of loneliness in the world, and underneath it all, people can't wait to give it up."

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