Voice and yoga for individuals with Parkinson’s Disease

An innovative program combining principles of voice therapy with gentle yoga to enhance the lives of those with Parkinson’s Disease and their partners.

This program is offered by the Wendell Johnson Speech and Hearing Clinic at the University of Iowa.

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About the instructors

Ann Fennell, speech-language pathologist / vocologist
Ann is a licensed speech-language pathologist with over 20 years of experience working with individuals with communication disorders as a result of Parkinson’s Disease, stroke, traumatic brain injury, other progressive neurological disorders, and voice disorders. Ann also holds certification in the Lee Silverman Voice Treatment,® a program designed to assess and treat voice difficulties associated with Parkinson’s Disease. She has been a member of the clinical faculty in the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders at the University of Iowa since 2000.

Diana Gallegos, certified yoga teacher
Diana has been practicing yoga since 2002 and teaching since 2010. Her training includes yoga teacher certification from James Miller Yoga in 2010 as well as in-depth study with world-renowned yoga teachers. She continues her education in yoga by regularly attending conferences and workshops. She believes the practice of yoga has healing and therapeutic benefits for everyone, regardless of age or prior condition. She makes yoga both accessible and non-intimidating for everyone. Diana has also completed a Ph.D. in neuroscience and a two-year post-doctoral fellowship in the Center on Aging at the University of Iowa.
Are voice problems common in those with Parkinson’s Disease?
Yes. A 2008 report from the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association states that speech and voice disorders affect as many as 89% of individuals with Parkinson’s Disease (PD). The problems vary across individuals, but may include reduced loudness, a monotone voice, hoarseness, a breathy voice quality, or imprecise articulation. Unfortunately, only 3-4% of those with PD receive speech and voice treatment. Worse still, research shows that the communication difficulties of PD tend to lead to embarrassment, withdrawal from social situations, and inactivity.

What therapies work best for those with PD?
Traditionally, speech therapy for PD emphasized many factors simultaneously — breathing, voicing, articulation and speech rate — and resulted in poor or short-lived outcomes. However, newer techniques that focus on voicing alone show statistically significant improvements. An essential part of the therapy is a “recalibration” of the client’s sensorimotor system; in other words, the therapy sessions include a series of exercises that stimulate the muscles of the voice box (larynx) while simultaneously attending to the sensations associated with loud voicing. This loudness training brings the voice to an improved, healthy vocal loudness with no strain.

What shall I expect in voice therapy?
Voice therapy will begin with a vocal warm-up emphasizing loud voicing and calibration to loud voicing. This recalibration process of the sensorimotor system will be reinforced through increased body awareness in the yoga practice. The speech therapist and therapists-in-training will guide you through a series of activities that require loud voicing, first at the sentence level, then to a conversational level. High intensity and high repetitions will lead to new and effective voicing habits, both in quiet and competing background environments.

What is the yoga part of the class?
We will begin with breathing exercises, followed by gentle yoga poses. The yoga poses will help free tension in your body while building strength, flexibility, mobility, balance, and coordination. We will close the session with relaxation techniques. The class will leave you feeling relaxed, refreshed, and renewed.

How can I know if I would be a good candidate for this class?
No yoga experience is necessary, and modifications will be made for all levels of abilities. Individuals likely to benefit most are those in stages 1 or 2 of PD on the Hoehn and Yahr scale. Class size will be limited to ensure plenty of individualized attention.

Tell me more about the class and how my partner will be involved.
Each 90-minute weekly group session will comprise 45 minutes of yoga and 45 minutes of voice therapy. Each week, the individuals with PD will participate in yoga and voice therapy. Caregivers will also participate in the yoga sessions during all eight weeks, and then in educational sessions during the last four weeks, focusing on physical therapy, occupational therapy, nutrition and swallowing.

Join us for this innovative program! Professional voice users, such as singers and actors, have long been aware of the benefits of yoga. Its application to the underserved PD population is relatively new, but shows great promise. We will learn from you just as you learn from us. You also will be helping future speech-language pathologists! The Wendell Johnson Speech and Hearing Center is a teaching clinic. As such, you will work with talented young professionals in training, supervised every step of the way by a highly-experienced, licensed speech-language pathologist. Because this program is innovative, our graduate student clinicians gain exciting research opportunities, particularly those planning to write theses for their master’s degrees.

Will we have homework?
Yes! The final minutes of both the voice therapy and the yoga sessions will include coaching for daily home practice, including written logs for participants to complete and return to the next weekly session. We will also provide handouts to help you remember the poses and techniques. Homework will take 20-30 minutes daily.

What is the cost of the program?
The fee is $15 per session per couple to cover the cost of yoga instruction ($120 for the 8-week course). Please also bring your insurance information, as the voice therapy will be billed to your insurance. The Wendell Johnson Speech and Hearing Clinic submits claims for clients with Medicare, Medicaid, and Walmark Blue Cross / Blue Shield.

When is the class?
We will meet each Tuesday morning between 9-10:30 a.m. from September 10 - October 29, 2013. There is an assessment session August 27, and post-testing November 5.

How shall I prepare for class?
Please bring a yoga mat. If you want suggestions on what kind of mat or have any questions, please feel free to email Diana Gallegos at dianagallegos@gmail.com. Also, please bring a yoga strap (available at Target or amazon.com). Wear roomy and stretchy clothing that allows your body to move comfortably and freely. It is best if you do not eat or drink anything one hour before coming to class. Water will be provided.

How do I register?
For more information, answers to your questions, or to register, please call the Wendell Johnson Speech and Hearing Clinic at 319.335.8736.