

[A yogi with MS](#)



My strength and balance—both physical and psychological—are stronger, thanks to this practice.

by Janet Golownia

When I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis at the age of 23, I felt betrayed by my body, as my entire left side slowly stopped working and I experienced painful spasms. I had a lot of fear about the future, too. Now, even though I still have numbness and weakness, I'm not so distressed about having this disease. I wouldn't choose to have MS, but through all of it I have learned so much about my body and my spirit.

When I was diagnosed more than 30 years ago, in 1985, I began a journey to learn how I could work with my body to create better health, rather than focusing on my disease. I read all that I could about nutrition and began drinking green vegetable smoothies—or what my family lovingly called “Mom’s green sludge”— for breakfast. I began exercising daily, alternating between biking, running and walking. I intuitively knew to visualize my body as healthy and whole while I exercised and also as I drifted off to sleep—what people now call the “mind-body connection.”

Next, a co-worker asked if I wanted to take a yoga class at the community recreation center. To my body, yoga felt like an old familiar friend. I became stronger and more flexible, and I also noticed an ongoing feeling of calm that I had never experienced before. I began to read books on yoga and, as I read, I knew that this was another part of my journey.



Janet Golownia (left, kneeling) teaches yoga and has found that the practice has opened up her life in unexpected ways. Photo courtesy of Janet Golownia

In 2012, my husband had a heart attack. The stress in my life was now compounded, and I knew that if I wanted to avoid the same fate as my husband, I would have to take a look at my life. I had been pushing myself and working in a career that no longer aligned with my values of prioritizing work-life balance and time with my family. This lifestyle was affecting my health, and I knew it was time to leave.

Yoga became my lifeline. It helped me tap into my inner strength and begin creating the next version of my life. I felt that everything I had gone through was for a reason and knew that I had to share my journey. I became driven with a desire to help others with MS believe in themselves, in the power of their thoughts and the wisdom of their body. This desire grew into a stepping stone to my new profession as a yoga teacher and yoga therapist. Yoga has changed my life in countless and unexpected ways. My body is stronger today than when I was in my 20s. I feel muscles in my body that I never thought I would be able to feel again.

Yoga is about more than holding poses. Yoga is about slowing down the breath and deepening it until you find that still place inside, where all you sense is your breath and your body. It is about recognizing that nothing else matters except just being in that moment. It is from my yoga practice of being in the moment that I am able now to listen to my body and notice when and where I am holding tension and stress. I then take the time to breathe deeply, relax and ground myself back in the present moment—by looking around with gratitude for all that I have in my life. The most important thing yoga has taught me is to not worry about the future because it's not here yet, and that what I fear is just in my head.

Yoga has reconnected me to my spirit, and it now guides me in my life choices. Before saying yes to anything, I take time to connect to my heart and tune in to how I feel. I choose to do

those things that bring me joy and feed my spirit, rather than doing the things that I feel I “should” do.

This shift in my thinking has changed my whole life. I am no longer defined by my circumstances, because I can choose to change how I think and how I feel about them. The funny thing is that once I do that, my circumstances change as well. I may have MS, but I don't have to think about it as a limitation or disability, and I can feel joy and gratitude for all that I can do and all that I have in my life.

Janet Golownia is a yoga instructor, yoga therapist and health coach. She was diagnosed with MS in 1985.

Visit [Yoga for MS](#) to read more on yoga and MS.

To find a yoga class in your area, call an MS Navigator at 1-800-344-4867.