

Workplace Wellness



Unlocking Freedom: Iyengar Yoga for the Dental Hygienist

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I am dangling upside down from my wall ropes after a day of clinical practice, tuning into the subtle popping of my body as it opens by the passive pull of gravity. I visualize the release of connective and muscle tissue fibres that have been held all day in support of my oral hygiene work. Interestingly, the opening reminds me of the releasing feeling one has when a ledge of calculus cracks off during instrumentation. I think all dental hygienists can relate to that moment of “ahhhh” or “yes!” when the tension breaks and the foundation of the tooth structure is felt. Feeling the support of the ropes holding and caring for me in the most unusual way, I am reminded of how oral caregivers support clients, each one unique in their own way, and how we find ways to create space and openings in our interactions to bring wellness and health into the conversation.

As dental hygienists, we know that working well includes good ergonomics, lighting, seating, client positioning, and sharp instruments, right? But should the idea of wellness stop when we leave the office? How can we nurture within ourselves a sense of well-being that we so eagerly wish to share with our clients?

We play many roles in our lives: primary health care providers, parents, students, spouses, partners, to name a few. Our duty to ourselves is important because it allows us to support these other roles. Unfortunately, our own self-care is often the last thing on our wellness radar. After caring for others all day, can we, as health care coaches, have the proverbial “all”: a vital giving practice as well as the gift of energetic, mental, and physical lightness?

I know the challenges of clinical practice well from both a psychological and physical point of view. These obstacles can be exacerbated by our life experiences or any injuries we have incurred along the way. At the age of 19, I was involved in a car accident that left me with a broken pelvis and dislocated hip. Years of searching for some sort of pain relief and healing led me to my mentor and teacher of Iyengar yoga. I had tried other forms of yoga, but it was this style that really opened my eyes to the amazing restorative, strengthening, and healing capacity of the body, mind, and spirit.



IYENGAR YOGA YOU SAY?

This style of yoga is a form of hatha (opposition of forces) yoga that emphasizes precise alignment, deep awareness, and attention to detail within the mind, using breath and postures (asana). It is named after Bellur Krishnamachar Sundararaja (BKS) Iyengar (1918–2014) and reflects his personal insights from meticulous study and experimentation on himself throughout his long life.

The beauty of Iyengar yoga is that it can benefit everyone regardless of age or ability thanks to adaptations made using props. BKS invented props to help people gain the full benefits of each pose; these props have spread to almost all other forms of yoga. It is because of the prop support that most Iyengar classes are multilevel, with a diverse range of student ages and abilities within them. It is truly yoga for all.



▲ Figure 1. Place blocks under the hands and upper arms if they do not reach the ground. Keep the head neutral.

UNLOCKING FREEDOM

Some of the poses that are very useful after a day at the office involve opening the abdomen and chest. Like it or not, we tend to bend over our clients all day trying to accommodate their needs. A bolster or blanket folded lengthwise with a little head support unwinds any constriction within about 5 minutes! Simply lying down with arms open wide works like magic to relieve tension, improve abdominal circulation, and clear the mind of the day. Move the shoulder blades towards the buttock to feel the chest open and freedom come to the neck.

And this is only the beginning!!

Use the posture opening shown in Figure 1 to guide you into the next set of poses for our hard-working neck and shoulders—again, simple and easy to lie down on the mat and move the legs up the wall with arms above the head holding the elbows or wrists (Figure 2). Place a blanket under the head to keep the neck neutral if needed (Figure 3). The shoulder blades automatically support the front body and it is easy to notice the breath move unhindered. This pose can be done anywhere.

During the summer months, I lie on my deck after work, sun beaming down, with legs crossed on a horizontal bolster, arms out wide, reaching and stretching my hands and forearms. In winter, try relaxing your body on a sheep skin or nice rug. These openings you give to yourself will extend long after the pose is over. Observe the softness of the throat, and what happens to the breath and mind as you rest within the posture.



▲ Figure 2. Legs up the wall without support



▲ Figure 3. Legs up the wall with support for stiff shoulders and ribs

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Unlocking Freedom...cont'd

Use the imprint of the position of the shoulder blades and back from the last inverted position to inform the next pose. Downward facing dog, a well-known yoga pose where the body (hands and feet touching floor) forms a triangle, is better done at the wall for dental hygienists because it removes the weight of the body from the hard-working arms. Because it is a standing pose, many



▲ *Figure 4. Downward-facing dog at the wall*

beginner yogis mistakenly place too much weight on the unsupported and weak wrists in an attempt to do the full pose. Time and time again, I invite people with wrist issues to place their hands on the wall and walk backward, giving a wonderful length to the torso (Figure 4). The side benefit is an understanding of how the legs and back need to work to support the shoulders and ribcage.

Simple hand poses can be a game changer in improving the longevity of your dental hygiene career. We are well aware of the hazards of overflexing during instrumentation and the carpal tunnel problems that can result. Additionally, during handstand-type poses, loading the wrists with too much downward energy can lead to wrist stress problems if the shoulders do not know how to work and open properly. It is the yogi's first obligation to observe non-violence if any body part is tired, and this includes the wrists. Therefore, weightless wrist openings work wonders. Cupping the hands and extending the wrists forward (Figure 5) assists in creating space for fluid movement within the carpal, metacarpal, and phalange bones of the hand. Let's face it—dental hygiene practice



▲ *Figure 5. Keep the shoulders back and down as you reach the heel of the hands forward.*

is repetitive and most of us inadvertently flex the wrist and fingers as we navigate the oral terrain. Providing relief in the opposite direction is very balancing, both to the body and nervous system.

We dental hygienists need space to expand and spread our alveolar and thoracic “wings” after a day of caring for others. Spending at least 2 minutes with each pose is just what this dental hygienist yogini would prescribe to begin a lifelong health and wellness yoga practice, so that we may continue to be of service to our extended family community.

Sounds too simple, doesn't it? In the wise words of my mentor, “Don't underestimate the simple restorative poses. They are often the most powerful!”

Hanging upside down, feeling the release of each bone yawning open, I couldn't agree more.

A final word of encouragement: it is always wise when beginning a home practice to have a qualified teacher to guide you. Iyengar teachers are specialists in their field and can be of great assistance for anyone wishing to learn more about how to adapt their practice for specific needs.

You can follow Yoga with Andrea for blog posts, ideas, and class information on Facebook: www.facebook.com/andreadawndesign/ and the Vancouver Iyengar Association where she discusses props (The Gift of Props), change (Navigating Change), and The Yoga Sutras in blog posts, and presents a video tutorial: iyengaryogavancouver.com/category/articles-and-interviews/

Stay tuned for a YouTube channel!