

yoga journal



This 90-Year-Old Man Started Doing Yoga During the Pandemic. Here's Why He Hasn't Stopped

90-year-old Tony Smith took up yoga to stave off boredom during pandemic lockdown. What he found was much more than a way to pass the time.

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Like so many people over the last year of mandated quarantines, studio closures, and sky-high anxiety, Tony Smith cultivated a home yoga practice in 2020. The unique piece of the Cheshire, United Kingdom resident's asana regimen? He just celebrated his 90th birthday last December, and is still somewhat of a new yoga practitioner.

Smith's daughter [Kathy White](#) can be credited for introducing yoga into her dad's life. White is a British Columbia, Canada-based teacher who has been practicing yoga for three decades. She's also the founder of The Joint Renewal System, a type of yoga she developed to address her own evolving physical, psychological, and spiritual needs.

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After turning 50, White began seeking out a more mellow, low-intensity practice that would be gentler to her knees, hips, and back, which were often sore after more vigorous classes. Over the next few years, she researched various physical modalities and philosophies and eventually launched her own system, which focuses on joint mobility. White says the practice “shifted the whole alignment” of her body, helping to alleviate the pain of old injuries and relaxing tense muscles that were contributing to chronic postural problems. When she set out to spread the benefits of her new technique, she had one particular student in mind: her dad.

Taking up yoga for mobility

Smith, a Liverpool, UK native, studied engineering at McGill University in Canada and was a successful entrepreneur who'd always been active. Throughout his life, he loved to fish, golf, sail, and for many years, cross-country ski. He was also a dog owner for much of his life, so walking the family pup — along with wife, Fran, or their three kids (of which White is the youngest), played a big part in his daily activities. But as Smith got older and his physical hobbies waned, his body began to feel stiff and unfamiliar, and he agreed to give White's regimen a try.

“I was looking for more mobility,” Smith says. “I did try yoga a few times—first in Scotland where Kathy used to live, in a class with her. I was 87 at the time. But I didn't keep up with it.”

Things changed however, when Smith underwent emergency [abdominal aortic aneurysm](#) (AAA) surgery in 2019 and experienced an infection in his spine (known as [osteomyelitis](#)). He spent several weeks in the hospital with an IV antibiotic drip. “Kathy had me doing some yoga exercises from my hospital bed just three days after my operation and in the weeks following,” he says. “It was very much part of my recovery.”

Smith's first classes, however, weren't exactly easy. “He could barely get up and down off the floor,” White says, noting that she often provided her dad with chair modifications for various asanas. “He did, however, latch onto the meditation aspect of yoga and found that to be extremely beneficial. Just slowing down to breath and pause was something he'd never done all his life.”

Adopting a home practice during the pandemic

While he continued to practice over the next year, it was the COVID-19 pandemic that truly spurred Smith to make yoga a part of his regular routine. “When the pandemic hit, I was at home in the U.K. not going anywhere.” He started attending his daughter's [online Zoom classes](#) twice a week. “Now it's been over a year of regular classes twice a week and I can walk around unaided, get up and down the stairs, and I feel much more stable on my feet. Just recently I was very proud of myself as I was able to get onto all fours for the first time in years.”

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The physical components of the practice were initially tough for Smith to grasp—particularly longer holds and strap work on his legs and ankles. Over time, however, he’s been able to steadily increase the length of his holds and says he’s felt significant relief in his arthritic joints by sticking with the practice. While his mobility has continued to improve, Smith still resonates most with the meditative qualities of the practice. “He enjoys the breathing exercises, especially *Brahmari* (humming breath) and will often hum during his practice even if I’m not instructing him to!” White says.

Yoga helps Smith stay active

In a video call with her father that White posted to Facebook last summer, Smith was straightforward about the benefits he’s experienced in the last three years of practice. “It helps me both physically and mentally,” he says. “At my age, you need to be as fit as you can to enjoy your life. I would like to be able and fit to keep doing yoga as long as I’m alive actually—that’s really a goal.”

White’s breath-based practice is intended to bring proper oxygenation to the joints, and she’s incorporated various pranayama principles from other styles into the Joint Renewal System. “Many yoga practices that are fast, hot, strenuous will have an entirely different result in the body because of how the nervous system is activated,” she says. “My dad likes the slow steady pace. There are some classes where he just doesn’t feel like doing it and would love to skip class. But with a determination that has seen him overcome many obstacles in his life, he makes himself get on the mat and follow the class. He never regrets it afterwards! He doesn’t like the discomfort and the stiffness, but he knows that if he doesn’t try to move into it, it will grow and grow, leaving him less and less able to move.”

Smith has done what he can to get his non-yogi friends to join in for regular classes, but most of them have rebuffed his offers. “They’re all very impressed with him, but tend to think it’s not for them,” White says. “Which is exactly what he used to think too. However determination, a serious brush with illness, and a commitment to his own recovery has seen him go from six weeks in hospital in 2019 to bounding around his garden, growing veggies, helping keep bees, and enjoying an active social life—pandemic restrictions notwithstanding—today.”

These days, Smith practices twice a week with his daughter for an hour via Zoom, focusing primarily on five to seven asanas. “Each pose or sequence is done very slowly and has long holds,” White says. “We may use strap work on the legs and feet. We may do some forward bends. My dad is like a few of my other students in that he needs some modifications because of how his body works, but recently he has tried being on all fours and kneeling in *Virasana* (Hero’s Pose) despite having had a knee replacement many years ago.”

Yoga for life

White believes that her father is an excellent example of yoga's expansive reach and limitless potential to heal a variety of issues—physical, mental, and beyond. “I know that Tony left it rather late in life to begin his practice, and he has still found tremendous benefit,” she says. “His quality of life has improved enormously—not many 90-year-olds say they feel fitter this year than they did last year! And that's what this practice does. Even if you are a year older, your body can feel the same or even better than it did last year. Yes, there is still soreness and stiffness. This is not some snake oil miracle cure for aching joints, it takes work and dedication, and over time really remarkable results can be achieved. That's why I'm so proud of Tony—he has stuck with it. This is yoga for life.”

As far as Smith is concerned, yoga should be an essential practice for anyone—particularly those of a certain age. “I think starting yoga later in life is necessary,” he says. “People think about getting old and using stair lifts, or mobility devices. You don't need any of that, you just need yoga!”