

Faria Athar Khan on navigating illnesses and ageing with yoga

What often goes unaddressed in Bangladeshi women's health is how much they lose themselves in the process of making others happy. Managing the household, raising children, juggling a social life and a career all at once can severely rattle our hormones. Which in turn impacts our weight, nutrition, productivity, as well as physical and mental health. Eventually, this manifests in the body as chronic lifelong illnesses.

Fortunately, yoga instructor Faria Athar Khan is helping women of all ages change this narrative. The Founder of YogMind has been practising for 10 years and teaching yoga for six years. Before teaching Hatha yoga full-time, Faria was a school teacher at Sunbeams School for 15 years.



According to her, 'Ha' in Sanskrit stands for the sun, and the 'tha' translates to moon. These two planets deeply impact the state and wellness of our bodies. Her commitment to yoga led her to do a three-month teacher's training course from Swami Vivekananda Yoga Anusandhana Samsthana in Bangalore, India. Currently, she's completing her Master's in Yoga Therapy from the institute.

"I learned that physical and mental wellness, or the 'Asan', is one of the primary components of this practice, followed by 'Pranayam', the breathing exercises and 'Dhyana', which is meditation. These three pillars of yoga are recognised worldwide," she says.

Faria's study focuses on the management of stress and hypertension amongst women aged 20+ to 60+ through Pranayam. Drawing from her own lived experiences and others', she notices a decline in women's physical activities in their 30s.

Stress: the root of it all

Faria explains, "women don't have the time to look after themselves. This stress, coupled with anxiety, keeps piling up, especially when children get older. By their 40s, women are fixated on their children's future, academics and their life choices, while also shouldering domestic and



financial responsibilities," she highlights.

The bridge between our mind and body is breathing — we are often unaware of our own breathing as a result of always being in a rush. This surfaces as unpleasant sensations in the body in the form of pain. Not stretching or resting from work can lead to back pain and eventually attack our internal organs.

Hijacked by Hormones

As children grow up and become busy with their own lives, these women are left to figure out an identity beyond motherhood. "During this time, feelings of devaluation also crop up. Amidst this identity crisis comes menopause. While some experience it in their 40s, others develop it in their 50s. Hormonal imbalance can truly destabilise our lives. Thyroid problems are quite common in women, and their effects can often go unnoticed. The body starts depleting nutrients, energy and muscle strength. Thus, resulting in unanticipated weight gain, irrespective of whether we eat or not," she says.

Faria informs that yoga helps stabilise the secretion glands. In addition, women can include walking, strengthening exercises to gain endurance, patience and emotional resilience.

Weight a Minute...

Like most women, Faria is also fixated on weight loss as a fitness goal. But three months into practice, she still wasn't losing weight. "I realised it is necessary to be patient as the impact of yoga is not immediately visible. Yoga encourages flexibility in our bodies, which can enable us to power through more difficult asanas — ultimately promoting weight loss," she explains.

Simultaneously, it is essential to track our meals. No matter how much we exert ourselves physically, it is necessary to have balanced meals to keep our weight in check. It's not just about controlling our food intake, but also about meeting our nutritional needs at the right time.

Faria observes that there are a lot of people who are stressed and eating less. Yet, they still are not losing any weight in certain parts of their bodies. She emphasises that intermediate-level asanas do not promote weight loss since they are easy to do for people of all ages. However, doing them regularly increases our strength and endurance to attempt advanced-level asanas, which are no less than the stretches and exercises taught at the gym or recommended by physiotherapists.

Braving what's beyond control

Diabetes impacts other organs such as the kidneys, heart, and eyes. Faria explains that some people inherit diabetes after turning 50 if they have two diabetic parents. She adds that type 2 diabetes is also very common in people. Although some women develop it as gestational diabetes during pregnancy, there's always a chance of it returning after 40. However, with yoga, those who are already at risk of developing diabetes can learn to

manage symptoms even if they have it for a

lifetime.

Faria Athar Khan stresses that early consciousness means early prevention, even management, against all odds. If people start practising yoga in their 20s, then people who don't have the condition can minimise future risks. In case they develop it later, they can still learn to manage it.

"There are some asanas which help keep diabetes at bay, for example, twisting the body, side or backwards bending. These increase our insulin secretion, keep the pancreas healthy, and thus delay the diabetes diagnosis. A lot of my students have shared that their diabetes has improved and does not spin out of control. And those who are elderly and have been practising with me for five years have not developed diabetes yet," she says.

Choosing to live at all ages

Yoga helped Faria embrace stillness in the face of stress, anxiety and overthinking. Today, she's able to run half marathons, despite being a mother of three and a full-time yoga teacher. Faria vouches that Hatha yoga is a safe practice for people of all ages. It also helps with physically strengthening the body, promoting flexibility, and boosting confidence.

"I have students aged 60+ coming to my yoga studio. Initially, they would use a stick when taking the stairs. Now they no longer need a crutch. Seeing this change in them gives me a certain sense of peace," she shares.

Additionally, this practice has given them a community beyond yoga. Faria and her students get to connect over movies, lunch, and retreats. She leaves the profound reminder that, "Forties and fifties are a time when women need something else beyond family and children. Yoga provides a sense of belonging and a chance to return to oneself."

By Rubab Nayeem

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