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What is Range of Motion?

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The common perception associates yoga with stretching. But what is flexibility, or range of motion (ROM)? If someone is limited in range of motion, is it bad? Are there people who will never achieve certain poses? Can your range of motion change over time?

photo by Megan Resch

As we settle into our daily lives, we are most comfortable with the ranges of motion we experience every day. If much of the day is spent sitting, it is hard to imagine beginning a yoga program. The answers are complex, but the short of it is that range of motion, or 'flexibility' as its commonly called, has a lot to do with two things: the structure of the joint and the ability of the contractile tissues to move the joint.

Myth: I am not flexible enough to do yoga.

Segen's Medical Dictionary (https://www.amazon.com/dp/B00413QFTC) says that "***Range of motion*** *is the range of movement through which a person can voluntarily change a joints components without assistance from another body part, person, or device*." In this sense, *active* range of motion is the motion you can achieve without assistance. Your p*assive* range is the moving of a joint through this range of motion without any help from yourself, another person, another joint, or some external object like a strap, wall or block. There are also numerous other influences, both inherent and situational, that can affect your range of motion for any given joint.

Students can work on muscle control, which will improve the range of motion in a joint, but there are some things absolutely will not change.

The Unavoidable:

The type of joint. Some joints just aren't meant to move a lot. Structure dictates function. There is also the internal resistance within a joint to consider. Ligamentous pull, or the lack of it, and the dense internal network of fascia (the material that attaches muscle to bone) can limit range of motion. Some people are just naturally "bendy"- these elements of their anatomy are inherently longer on some people than they are on others, just like some people are taller than others. They are the ones in the front row in yoga. ☺️

Your anatomy. Bony structures which limit movement, like the size, shape, and available contact surface of a bone, can limit range of motion. Bone can also change over time. An avid runner of 35 years may never sit in lotus on the floor, and doing so might cause more harm than good. The lever lengths of your bones also matter. If you have a short torso and long legs, you may never touch your toes! Not everyone is made to be a Rockette.

Your Age. As we get older, we lose bone and muscle. Strategic exercise slows this process down. Starting a consistent program that progressively works to strengthen the muscles that surround and protect your joints greatly helps you

approach age with grace and strength. We all lose muscle and bone over time. No one can escape it. You can't control is how old you are, but you can control how you address the natural process of aging.

Assistance is a good thing.

photo by Megan Resch

There are a lot of ways to assist yourself in yoga poses. Blocks are exceptionally useful, in that they 'bring the floor to you'. Focus on strengthening the muscles utilized in any given pose. This is more important than how far 'into' the pose you can move yourself on any given day. As you grow stronger, your range of motion will naturally increase as structure allows.

Your body is continually working to respond to the forces applied to it. Not everyone can reach the floor in many common standing asanas. For some, even placing the block on the floor is too much stress. In these cases, placing the block on the leg or hip is enough to begin the process of strengthening the muscles involved in the pose.

Sitting in a chair only requires 90 degrees of flexion at the knee and hip. Sitting on the floor is a huge challenge for some people. Why? Because the knee joint is extended to 180 degrees.

photo by Megan Resch

We often see students compensate in this pose by moving into spinal flexion with a posterior pelvic tilt. This position, demonstrated by the gentleman in the image to the right, can be stressful for the lumbar spine. When the hip flexors are too weak to counter the tension that hip extensors are creating it causes discomfort in the pose, causing a rounded posture in this postion.

The yoga strap is not always the best tool if one is using it to overcome the counter force that hip extensors like hamstrings are creating. Students are better off using the strap to increase tension on the scapular retractor and trunk extensor musculature. This can assist the hip extensors in creating an anterior pelvic tilt to protect the lower back. This is demonstrated by the female in the image at the above right. Students can also sit on a blanket to increase the angle of their hip so that the hip flexors do not have to contract quite as much.

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