

“Yoga-ing Through Epilepsy – A Candid Journey”

By: Bryant Chu

I remember this moment vividly, even though my memory from past years hadn't been the most clear after I was first diagnosed with epilepsy at age 10, as I awoke in a hospital bed with my mother by my side, holding my hand. The look on her face is forever imprinted on me: one of concern and uncertainty, but still full of love and kindness. This was my first experience with epilepsy. This was my first seizure I ever had - my body so sore that I couldn't move; I'm sure I had urinated on myself as my clothes were soiled; embarrassment filled my face and then I passed out.

I awoke again with doctors checking my vital signs, and preparing me for tests. When you're this young, you don't understand what's going on, and all of these acronyms they used MRI, EKG, CTScan sounded so horrible like I was some sort of experiment they were analyzing. Seizures aren't always associated with epilepsy, so they needed to confirm the root cause. Years later I understood this... Tests were completed, and it was determined that I had an epileptic seizure. There wasn't a lot that they could do at this time other than make a referral to a pediatric neurologist and send us home.

Later that week, we met with a new doctor. I'm not terribly fond of doctors (even to this day), so this visit was already stricken with anxiety from both me and my parents. The conversation led to questions, which led to concerns, and eventually to medication. For those of you who are new to epilepsy, know that medication is a tricky substance to balance in your life. Your doctor will want to start you on a high dosage to prevent any future seizures; however, there will be side effects that will affect your life in more ways than you may want to admit.

The effects my medication had on me were pretty disruptive. Already not having my hormones in balance (i.e. I'm going through puberty) in addition to the introduction to meds galore, I found myself manic-depressive, but probably more on the depressive side. There's a social stigma tied to epilepsy, which I found out really quickly. Doctors, family members, and friends were all telling me things I *couldn't* do, or that I was unlikely to do in my lifetime. All of these culminating to an idea of how horrible having epilepsy was, is, or could be... Don't let that discourage your spirit, though. Now that I'm older, and I have more tools at my disposal, I'm able to address my epilepsy in many unique ways.

I found yoga during my college years after athletic injuries finally caught up with me. I used yoga as a physical, therapeutic practice early on, but later found out there were many other benefits that had gone untapped. Who knew that mindfulness and awareness could change my body in so many ways? After years of study I was finally able to implement a mindfulness practice both on and off the mat. This allowed me the opportunity to start exploring alternative ways to manage my epilepsy, which included daily asana (physical) practice, meditation, and dietary changes.

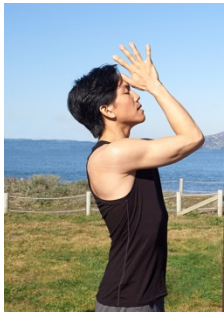
Getting into the routine of dedicating time to yoga was difficult at first. With so many distractions in our lives, we have plenty of excuses at our disposal. But the catalyst for much of this stemmed from a talk with my neurologist. Medication has been a bane in my life, and anything I could do to reduce it was a priority for me. I wanted to feel again, and as much as possible! As soon as I was able to collaborate with my neurologist to do a dosage experiment, I had all the personal ammunition I needed to convince myself that a daily practice was on the docket. This experiment started out as a slow reduction in medication with regular visits. Blood work was done and I also found that my stress levels were trending downward – all of which made my doctor happy and contributed to him allowing me to continue this experiment.

After a couple years, I had gone an extended period without having a seizure, and decided to self-medicate. I took myself off my medication fully, and I was fine for quite some time; however, I relapsed. I had a seizure after having not had a seizure for two and a half years. My neurologist wasn't surprised, but also was gracious enough to empathize with my situation. We decided that we would put me on one of the lowest dosages of medication and see how my body reacted as long as I continued to have a mindfulness practice (i.e. yoga). To this day, I am still on that lowest dosage, which really isn't much of a burden for me. My reaction to the meds is minimal. I feel like I have amazing relationships; work is fulfilling; and I've manifested a wonderful community around me. I've also been seizure free for over two and a half years again.

Yoga has given me the tools to live life. Yoga has given me the opportunity to accept and work within my own boundaries. Who knows where I would be today if I were still dulled by my medication and controlled by my samskaras (habitual grooves). I only hope that my story inspires others with epilepsy that there are options available to live life more fully. Why else do you think so many other people practice yoga who don't have epilepsy?



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Bryant is a San Francisco based yoga teacher who works passionately within the community. His goal is to help you find the light within yourself, so that you can shine brighter than you have before. Continuous growth, compassionate introspection, and unbiased awareness is what we seek to enable in each of us. Through practice, understanding, and experience do we achieve our best.