



# introduction: healing “pain in the neck” — and shoulders, upper back, jaw, & head, too

If your neck is chronically tense and tight, and if the muscles in your upper back and shoulders often feel as hard as a rock, you're not alone. In our high-stress, hurried, 24/7 world—filled with work deadlines, financial pressures, “terror alerts,” and

sleeplessness—many of us feel the weight of the world on our shoulders. Add to this emotional tension the postural stress of spending most of our days sitting, typically doing activities that round our bodies forward—such as computer work, driving, and reading—and all too often, the result is a serious pain in the neck.

And the problem doesn't stop here. Many people don't realize that chronic neck pain is associated with a constellation of related disorders, including headache; jaw discomfort; and upper back, shoulder, and arm soreness. That tingling in your fingers, ache in your arms, and vice-like sensation of pressure encircling your skull may all be related to neck pain. In addition, the slumped posture that can lead to neck pain may compress internal organs, contributing to respiratory, circulatory, and digestive problems as well.

Yet modern medicine offers most people struggling with neck pain and its associated disorders little other than painkilling medications that address the *symptoms*, but not the *cause*, of their problems. In fact, a popular treatment, the cervical collar, is unlikely to help in relieving neck pain, according to a report published in *Spine* journal (Hurwitz et al. 2008). Other common remedies that are also unlikely to help include ultrasound, electrical muscle stimulation, and most injection therapies (*ibid.*).

Experts are now recognizing that, for most people suffering from neck pain and its associated disorders, the most helpful strategy is self-care. Yoga is a powerful form of self-care on several levels:

**Physical:** Yoga poses help stretch tight muscles and strengthen weak ones, cultivating flexibility, stability, and ease of movement. Yoga also teaches proper alignment, which helps you learn how to sit and stand with good posture, easing strain on your neck and shoulders.

**Psychological:** Yoga is a potent stress reliever that teaches you how to relax and connect to an inner sense of peace. In addition, the process of self-discovery that begins on the yoga mat helps you understand yourself better, shedding light on your habitual stress patterns and emotional reactions—which typically translates into learning healthier ways of relating to the world in everyday life.

**Energetic:** Yoga breathing helps enhance vital energy and recharges your entire system. Yoga postures can help release physical and emotional energy blockages, facilitating a healthy flow of *prana* (vital energy) throughout every cell. The yogic approach of balancing effort with relaxation can help you learn how to avoid expending energy in unnecessary ways so that you stop spinning your wheels and use only what you need.

This book is designed to empower you with safe, effective self-care strategies gleaned from the ancient practice of yoga and adapted to help heal our modern epidemic of neck and shoulder pain. It's based on my work with countless yoga students and yoga therapy clients, as well as my own struggles with neck pain. As a journalist who worked under deadline pressure at the *Washington Post* for ten years (from 1977 to 1987), I often experienced neck pain, which, at its worst, resulted in frequent headaches. This problem led me to yoga, whose therapeutic powers were so profound that I furthered my study of this holistic discipline to both heal myself and help teach others how to access yoga's extraordinary health benefits. Over time, I have virtually eliminated my own neck pain, and feel grateful to be able to share the myriad gifts of yoga with you.