

TODAY'S QUOTE

"Yoga is a Sanskrit word that means 'Heal your back without health insurance.'"

Norman K.

VARIETY

Matt Sanford struggled with injuries and pain until he turned to yoga. Now he helps people energize their lives and workplaces by teaching them to connect the mind and body.

Mind, body and heart



Photographs by Joey McLeister/Star
Matt Sanford teaches a morning yoga class at a Minnetonka studio that is part of his nonprofit Mind Body Solutions organization.

By Donna Halvorsen
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Tickle Matt Sanford's toes and he won't feel a thing. Ask him to stand and he cannot. Ask him to demonstrate upavista konasana, and he makes this yoga pose look easy, gliding gracefully out of his wheelchair and onto the floor. Legs wide, hands by his thighs, toes pointing up, upper inner thighs pushed in and down, stretching out through his heels, he lifts his chest and collarbone.

It's a difficult pose, but Sanford has an agile body that belies his condition. He's a paraplegic — and also a gifted yoga teacher who has founded Mind Body Solutions, a nonprofit Minnetonka yoga studio dedicated to showing others the benefits of awakening the connection between mind and body.

His journey began 25 years ago when his family's car hit ice and went off a bridge. He was 13, an athletic boy from Duluth who awoke from a three-day coma to learn that his father and sister were dead and that he would never walk again.

Paralyzed from the chest down, he was urged to accept his condition and move on. Doctors at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester told him that any sensations he felt in his legs were "phantom" feelings, not real ones. Forget your body below your chest — it's lost to you, they said.

HEALTH continues on E2



Paul Sanford, 4, keeps his dad company in their home yoga studio. Matt, who was paralyzed 25 years ago, founded Mind Body Solutions to teach others what he has learned in his practice of Iyengar yoga.



Photographs by Joey McLeister/Star Tribune

Matt Sanford led a group of managers at Time Warner Cable through yoga exercises that can be done while sitting at a desk.

HEALTH from E2

Pulled from the safe world of academia

His mom told him he should focus on his mind, and he did, eventually graduating from the University of Minnesota Phi Beta Kappa, summa cum laude, with a bachelor's degree in philosophy. He also received a master's degree in philosophy but stopped short of getting a doctorate. He couldn't see himself in an ivory tower. Something was pulling him away from the safe world of academia.

Mind-body connection

It was his body. He wanted it back. He intuitively felt there was



Sanford found that yoga helped him to improve his balance and "feel" his lower body again, years after being paralyzed. Doctors had told him that any sensation would be "phantom" feeling.

something more to the mind-body relationship, and he set out to find it. He wanted to live in his body — his whole body.

At the Mayo, he learned to disconnect from his body to avoid pain as doctors and nurses worked to mend it. His back, neck and wrists were broken. A lung had collapsed. His internal organs were damaged. His digestive system had shut down. He spent two months in intensive care before returning home for rehabilitation.

Sanford spent the first 12 years after the accident following his doctors' advice, treating his body as something he had to tote around for the rest of his life. It had become an object, he said.

While looking for remedies, Sanford found Iyengar yoga, which stresses stretching and proper body alignment in a variety of poses or postures.

Modern medicine has begun to affirm the importance of a mind-body relationship, and alternative approaches such as yoga have gained credibility. Yoga is seen as a way for people to relax, limber up, even relieve pain.

Sanford doesn't see yoga as the only path to a mind-body connection, but it worked for him, awakening his paralyzed body to sensations that he couldn't have imagined possible. They were not the same sensations that he feels in the upper third of his body, but they are sensations nonetheless. He describes the feeling as that of a "hum" or a "buzz," a surge of energy that travels through his paralyzed body. Feeling the presence of his lower body not only gives him the connection he was seeking but also helps his balance, he says.

Yoga is an ancient discipline that has a mystical, 1960s-type aura about it, but Sanford wants to make it more accessible. He tries to make it practical when he conducts a program called "Bringing Your Body to Work" for employees at Twin Cities-based corporations.

What can yoga do for employees? In a study conducted at Carlson Companies, employees said they had better

energy levels, sleep quality, stress management, overall health and job outlooks after Sanford's 10-week, yoga-based program, said Loila Mickelson, Mind Body's business programs director.

Members of the work force are ignoring the mind-body relationship, Sanford contends. "It's not that different from me disassociating in the hospital to avoid pain. The truth is that this level of sensation is available to all of us. My experience is only more extreme."

Connecting to one's body, he said, can be as simple as feeling the sun on one's face

He had the Time Warner managers do yoga poses when he sensed they were bored. Halfway through his talk, he had managers on their feet, some without shoes, with their legs spread wide and their arms outstretched. As they listened to his instructions, he noticed that some had stopped breathing. "One thing a yoga pose teaches is how to have mental things go on and not grip your life force," Sanford said. "You actually keep breathing."

Mind Body Solutions also conducts children's programs and teaches health care professionals locally and around the

with yoga poses.

Talk to students such as 43-year-old Chuck Ankeny of Deephaven, and it's clear that he's a revered teacher. "You know how you have teachers once in a lifetime who really make a difference?" Ankeny said. "He's one of those."

Kati Lovaas, 47, of Wayzata, who has three children and travels as part of her job, has been coming to the studio since it opened. "This is my one respite," she said. "I really love this class."

Sanford doesn't see himself as inspirational, or as someone who has overcome a disability. "My insight about these things comes from a lot of traumatic pain," he said. "When my mind left my body, it was my body that kept moving toward life. This is an insight I want to share."

With a wife and a 4-year-old son, Sanford said he has a good life, and he wants to help others have fuller lives. It's harder, he said, for people to engage in destructive behavior and easier for them to look beyond themselves if they have a greater awareness of their bodies.

"When you get more connected to your body, you get more connected to the things around you," he said. "I have never seen anyone truly become more aware of his or her body without also becoming more compassionate. If there was ever a time when the world needed a little more compassion, it is now."

"This subtle connection between mind and body is one that we all share," he writes in a memoir that he has just completed and is not published yet. "I believe this connection has profound implications not just for the shape and quality of our consciousness, but for the aging process, for our approach to disability and rehabilitation, and even for our survival on the planet. ... A deeper, more conscious connection between mind and body holds the promise of extending both the longevity and quality of life."

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Jennifer Sanford, right, is Matt's wife and director of Mind Body Solutions. The couple have a 4-year-old son, Paul.

during a lunch break, listening to birds while taking a walk or savoring the coolness of a glass of water.

The "breaks" that employees take are not really breaks, he tells managers. They're part of working, in effect a "rebooting" of the mind with the help of the body. "Your body is part of your thinking process," he said.

That was part of the message Sanford gave to managers of Time Warner Cable's customer service facility in Minneapolis. He is trying to convince them to hire Mind Body Solutions to teach yoga-based skills to employees.

country. Sanford also blends yoga into programs at Courage Center in Golden Valley.

Inspired in the studio

After years of studying yoga, Sanford now teaches able-bodied students at his two-year-old yoga studio, the base for Mind Body Solutions.

With a mop of brown curls, a short beard flecked with gray, cheeks flushed from the exertion of yoga, intense eyes and a mouth that's always on the edge of a smile, he looks the picture of health and younger than his 38 years. Weaving around 11 students in his wheelchair, he provides help