

A guide to Biblical Yoga



Written by Yvonne Myers and developed
with residents at MHA Amatheia

Illustrated by Magdalena Gabinet



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Introduction

Why Biblical Yoga?

Biblical Yoga can be adapted to help people living with dementia connect to Bible readings and encourage discussion. Biblical Yoga breaks down a Bible passage by using low intensity and low impact movements, ideal for older adults; however, this can be enjoyed by everyone. The people taking part are able to reflect on meaning and there is an opportunity to express their beliefs and views whilst also giving them the chance to reminisce. Over the years, research has shown that people have different learning styles - auditory, kinaesthetic and visual. Biblical Yoga is successful because it incorporates all three learning styles:

Auditory - Through hearing the Bible passage being read, the movements explained and being given an opportunity to answer questions and share experiences.

Kinaesthetic – The session leader and people involved are engaged in physical movement.

Visual - The movements are demonstrated for participants to see. You could set up a table with visual clues that set the scene in the environment, which could be a church itself.

Yoga is a spiritual exercise discipline and is based around slow movements that are low intensity and low impact. Yoga stretches muscles and builds core muscle strength and good posture. There is also a focus on mindfulness and looking to the spiritual self with breathing techniques incorporated throughout. The word yoga best suits this type of activity, however, if the title does not suit the target audience then a more suitable title can be chosen like 'Bible in action' or 'Bible verses with actions'. The important thing is that Biblical Yoga sessions are engaging and offer people living with dementia a chance to feel part of a community, to reminisce and express any beliefs they have in an open environment. Whilst it was originally designed to engage people living with dementia, any person in later life can enjoy Biblical Yoga, irrelevant of age or faith.



Before you begin

Things to consider before leading a session:

- Visually check the room for hazards. There should be ample space to the side of each person but not so far away that people feel disconnected from each other.
- Try to use a room that is light and where a window can be opened in warm weather. Consider closing the doors if there is likely to be substantial noise distraction.
- Before beginning, explain that the session involves doing some movements and that participants should only do movements that feel comfortable. It is good practice to remind people of this throughout the session, especially when moves involve arms or shoulders. Remind people that if they are in any pain then they should only do movements that feel comfortable. Should any of the movements cause pain and discomfort they should stop immediately.
- Make everyone aware that if they have any medical issues that make them unsure of whether they should participate then they are welcome to observe.
- You may want an easel flipchart or white board to note down points of discussion.
- If in a care home setting, a carer must be present during the session. You should always ask the senior carer if there are any changes to residents' health that you need to be aware of before the start of each session.
- It would be useful to read this booklet through before a session to get a feel for how the session will run, you can write notes and prepare reminiscence questions.

Your guide to Biblical Yoga

Choosing a scripture passage

- Choose something familiar and well-known
- Congregation/group centred approach

Any Bible verse can be used and adapted for Biblical Yoga, you could choose to follow the Liturgical Year and use Biblical Yoga within a service.

People with more advanced dementia may benefit from passages that lead up to key celebrations as these will be familiar, like Easter, Harvest and Christmas. Biblical Yoga can be multi-generational; consisting of sessions to fit in with the school term. Choosing well known biblical stories such as In the Beginning and Noah's Ark work well and can bring back memories as a child.

Choosing a suitable translation and paraphrasing where necessary will improve the delivery of the session and its impact. As dementia progresses, people living with dementia can lose the understanding of less commonly used words so choose words that will be familiar, substituting words will make engagement with the movement better understood.



Writing an introduction

- Introduction to the theme or story
- Welcoming and inclusive

Most services start with a welcome and this is an opportunity to acknowledge everyone present and make everyone feel welcome. If you haven't used Biblical Yoga before with the group then this is the time to explain the Order of Service and introduce the theme or teaching of the day. The introduction should be concise and create interest for the session ahead.

Here is an example of an introduction to a Biblical Yoga session on The Last Supper:

There is nothing like sharing a meal with family and friends. As we approach Easter the adverts on television are advertising families getting together for Easter Sunday dinner. In Jesus' time, people were preparing to eat the Passover Meal and as with all good social meal times there were some interesting conversations.

Starting your session

Warm up

Singing together helps to create a sense of belonging, so you may want to start by singing a well known hymn, clapping hands and/or use musical instruments.

Main exercise

The Bible reading with actions

Once the passage has been read using the actions at each of the points described below, you can explain that you will read it again and people can repeat the exercises with you if they wish.

Demonstrate to participants how to do each movement. This can be done by the reader or by another person demonstrating the actions. In a larger church you may want two people to model the activities as the passage is read. Show them how they can do an easier version of the movement and try to correct posture.

Throughout the session, walk around and engage with participants on a one-to-one level, showing them how to do the movements. Each session has a title followed by text which has been adapted from The New English Bible. There are suggestions for how many movements to do, however, you may want to adapt this to the group depending on how engaged they are in the session.

Hymns

- Choose well known hymns
- Move around the room to increase engagement

Singing a hymn at the start of a service or Biblical Yoga session is a great way of bringing people together. Much research has been done into the benefits of singing for mental health and listening to music together has been found to help people feel connected to each other and feel part of a community.

Move around the room while singing and if possible sit with someone who would benefit from eye contact. Singing to someone living with dementia can encourage engagement and participation.

Reminiscence & reflection

- Reminiscence questions
- Spiritual reflection questions
- Listening to shared experiences and faith

Take one line of scripture at a time and write some spiritual reflections and reminiscence questions for each. Reminiscence questions are those that explore past experiences and events.

Keep the questions short and concise, such as:

- Have you been on a boat?
- Have you picked fruit from a tree?
- Have you held a baby in your arms?
- What sound does the wind make?
- Where do you like to pray?

It will be more effective to limit the use of questions that test short term (recent) memory as this may be difficult for some people to respond to i.e. rather than saying 'are you enjoying this?' ask in the moment questions around feelings i.e. 'are you enjoying this? Or how do you feel?

Engage with people by walking around the room and asking people reminiscence questions that are connected to that line of scripture. Make eye contact and sit alongside them. It may also be necessary to repeat a question a few times and be patient about getting a response. Listening to people's experiences shows that you value what they have to say and they will be more open and trusting about sharing more personal thoughts about God and their faith. It may not always be possible to understand their response, but if you are able to pick up on one or two words that they have said, you will be able to repeat those words back. Reflecting back what someone has said shows that you are listening and will create an atmosphere where they feel comfortable.



Choosing movements

- Try to incorporate a range of movements
- Aim for 10-15 movements per session
- Repeated movements

All of the movements are designed to be done in a seated position.

Try to incorporate some lower body movements, i.e. feet and legs and some upper body movements, i.e. arms, hands and neck. Tailor the slow and easy movements to suit the scripture passage. By incorporating a range of movements, Biblical Yoga benefits body, mind and spirit and gives people an opportunity to take part in an 'exercise' that is extremely inclusive of all abilities.

There are examples of movements along with biblical references later in the booklet.



Prayers

- Select a few, short familiar prayers
- Include personal intentions
- Try Taizé (repetitive singing of simple harmonized tunes, often in various languages, interspersed with readings, prayers, and periods of silence), meditation or music.

Prayer is an important part of the Christian life, throughout life we can feel drawn to prayer and in other times of our life prayer can be difficult.

Be guided by the Spirit in prayer and let those opportunities be moments to share prayer together.

Help bring people together and connect them to God through Taizé, meditation or music. There may be opportunities when silent meditation can be a fruitful experience. Familiar prayers act as a foundation for people; the Lord's Prayer is a great way to engage everyone of all ages, familiar with the prayer.

The words, rhythm and tone of a familiar prayer like the Lord's Prayer, help people living with dementia to engage in dialogue with God. You may want to incorporate Biblical Yoga into the Lord's Prayer to enhance its meaningfulness.

Example - keeping active

Being active can reduce the risk of falls and can aid our sleep.

Hymn

Be still my soul

I Corinthians 6:19

Our bodies are a temple. (What does this mean? How should we treat our bodies? How can we take care of our bodies?) Other people should treat our body with respect and dignity and we have responsibility to speak up for ourselves.



Hold arms out to the side and hold for 5 seconds.

Be aware of the space that your body is in. Can you feel the chair surrounding you, can you feel the clothes on your skin? Take notice of your breathing.

The Holy Spirit resides in our bodies (What is Holy Spirit? What makes us different to animals? The Holy Spirit is a gift from God).



**Raise arms above head
and wave them side to
side.**

God wants us to look after our bodies. Regular exercise helps us to sleep better, feel less stressed, reduces aches and boosts our immune system and gives us a better appetite.

Prayers

Lord, help us to focus on what we can do and not on what we can't do.

Give us encouragement each day to take part in activities that promote our wellbeing.

Help us to accept that you love us for who we are and what we can offer today.

Biblical Yoga movements and verses

Over the next few pages are some examples of Biblical Yoga movements for upper body, lower body, coordination and breathing techniques. Some extracts from the Bible aim to show how a movement is connected to a line of scripture.

Examples of upper body movements

Place arms to the side and raise up and down as if you had wings.



- Matthew 4:6 'He will command his angels.'
- Luke 1:27 'The angel went to a virgin.'
- Psalm 55:6 'If only I had wings like a dove.'

Hold arms outstretched in front and hold.

Or

Hold arms outstretched and do breast stroke actions as if swimming.



- Proverbs 2:6 'The Lord gives wisdom.'
- Matthew 16:24 'Whoever wants to be my disciple', i.e. follow me.
- Genesis 1:20 'Let the water teem with living creatures.'



Raise arms up as high as is comfortable. Those with shoulder problems can raise their arms up from the elbows. Hold and relax.

- Luke 2:14 'Glory to God in the highest heaven.'
- 1 Cor 13:11 'When I became a man.'
- Mark 14:42 'Rise! Let us go!'



Place arms together and sway from left to right to loosen the shoulders.

- Luke 2:7 'She gave birth to her firstborn, a son.'
- Exodus 2:3 'She placed the child in it.'
- 1 Kings 3:26 'Give her the living baby!'

Lower body movements



Lift one leg, hold and relax. Repeat with the other leg.

Or

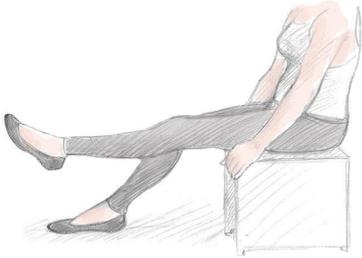
March on the spot for ten or twenty depending on ability of the group.

- Luke 2:15 'Let's go to Bethlehem.'
- 1 Timothy 4:8 'For physical training is of some value.'
- Exodus 14:29 'The Israelites went through the sea.'



Place hands on knees and slowly move hands down the legs towards the feet as far as comfortable.

- Matthew 2:11 'They bowed down and worshipped him.'
- Genesis 3:19 'Dust you are and to dust you will return.'
- Exodus 14:16 'Go through the sea on dry ground.'



Raise one leg at a time and hold for five seconds, relax and repeat with the other leg.

Or

Raise leg and move ankle and repeat with other leg and foot.

- Acts 3:7 'The man's feet and ankles became strong.'
- Colossians 3:23 'Working for the Lord.'
- Philippians 1:7 'Whether I am in chains.'



Sit with legs slightly apart and bring knees in together and repeat.

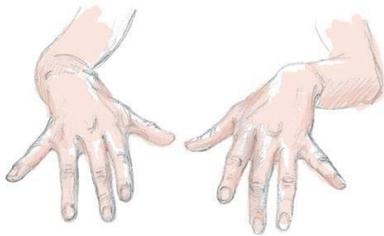
- Daniel 5:6 'His legs became weak and his knees were knocking.'
- Ruth 4:11 'Together built up the family of Israel.'
- Hebrews 12:12 'Strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees!'

Co-ordination and breathing

Hold hands out in front and shake wrists.

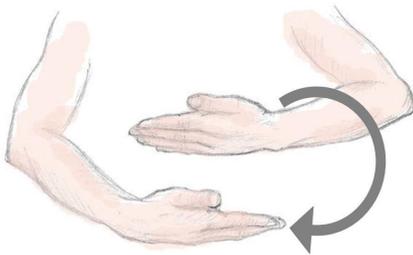
Or

Hold hands in front and move fingers.

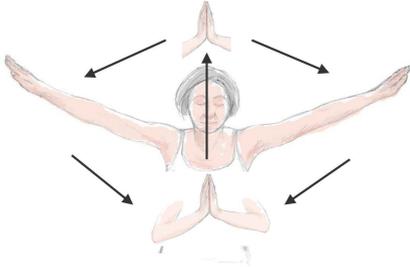


- Matthew 1:20 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid.'
- Mark 6:36 'Send the people away.'
- Psalm 80:13 'Insects from the fields feed on it.'

Place one arm over the other and rotate around each other, clockwise and then anti-clockwise.



- John 19:40 'Two of them wrapped it, with the spices.'
- Matthew 2:11 'Gold, frankincense and myrrh.'
- Luke 2:7 'She wrapped him in cloths.'



Start in prayer position – breathe in and raise arms above head and breathe out as you lower arms to the side. Repeat.

Luke 2:7 ‘She gave birth to her firstborn, a son.’

Acts 2:11 ‘The wonders of God.’

1 Co 13:13 ‘Faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.’



Take a deep breath and sing ‘la la la’ for as long as possible.

Or

Take a deep breath counting to four and blow out for four.

- Luke 1:64 ‘His mouth was opened and his tongue set free.’
- Joshua 6:16 ‘Shout! For the Lord has given you the city!’
- Psalm 13:6 ‘I will sing the Lord’s praise,’

Ending the session

- Be short and concise
- Include memories and experiences

To finish the session, include references to contributions people have made in the session. It is important that everyone feels valued and welcome in the sessions. Touch on personal memories and experiences that link to the Bible verses and movements used in the session.

Cool down - a time of reflection, meditation and/or prayer.

- Use counting for breathing techniques and imagery from the Bible reading as part of the meditation.
- Refreshments may be offered before further discussion.
- You could also use a whiteboard to write down some of the key thoughts and reflections from the session.

Depth of discussion will be different for each session. After discussion, it's a great time to get feedback on the session. Some things to focus on for future sessions are: How easy were the movements? Did people enjoy it? Was there anything that they remembered?

Testimonials

“I had the wonderful privilege of attending a Biblical Yoga act of worship at Amatheia MHA in Workington in the Cumbria District where I serve as District Chair. The act of worship was prepared and led by the chaplain Yvonne Myers. I was transfixed by what happened. The room was full of people who were at various stages of dementia and Yvonne introduced a familiar biblical story which took 50 minutes to complete in which all those people present engaged in what for me was an unexpected way. People who I had not seen speak or interact were all of a sudden immersed in the story, mentally, physically and spiritually. They came to life and God was very present in that room. I have continued ever since to tell the story.” **Rev Richard J Teal (Chair of the Cumbria Methodist District)**

“I was diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer’s disease in 2012, so whilst I still can I take an active interest in activities that improve the lives of people similarly affected. What a wonderful idea. A simple concept. Many people living with dementia are at an age when as children they went to Sunday school. I have very happy memories of Sunday school and this took me back to those days. Not only does it rediscover memories of the biblical stories we learned as children, but the movements help engage both our brains and our bodies and trigger those spiritual feelings that bring contentment and peace. Something simple that creates many moments of joy.” **Hilary Doxford (Ambassador and Research Network volunteer for Alzheimer’s Society)**

Afterword

Rev Chris Swift, Director of Chaplaincy & Spirituality at MHA

At MHA we strive to provide the best possible care for those using our services. When it comes to worship there is a constant need to match our provision to the needs of those attending. Through Biblical Yoga everyone is invited to participate, to the extent that they wish to, so that familiar stories are experienced afresh and worship is enlivened through thought, movement and expression. The development of Biblical Yoga offers everyone the chance to be strengthened in body, mind and spirit. Its principles are not confined to the Christian faith and can be used wherever people share a story in common. It is especially helpful, in the context of dementia, to build on the stories which are familiar and enduring.

The development of Biblical Yoga brings a range of benefits to those who experience it. I have seen the approach in action and can testify to its transformative effects. People are drawn deeper into the stories and embody the reminiscence which so often accompanies familiar texts. Members of staff, relatives and visitors can use Biblical Yoga together and discover a method of biblical reflection which allows everyone the opportunity to participate together.

There's only one way to make your mind up about Biblical Yoga – give it a try!



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