

Yoga by Numbers works to bring poses to the people (Update)

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In this March 7, 2014 photo, Elizabeth Morrow poses on her specially designed Yoga by Numbers mat in Bow, N.H. The mat gives true yoga beginners a step-by-step roadmap to learn poses at their own pace. (AP Photo/Jim Cole)

Combine Twister, paint-by-numbers and the ancient Hindu practice of breath control, meditation and poses, and you get Yoga by Numbers.

The approach—complete with a numbered mat—was designed by a

Boston woman whose own health scare inspired her to put yoga in reach for people with physical limitations, tight schedules or other roadblocks to traditional practice.

The oversized yoga mat is dotted with big, numbered circles that look like the target in a rifle scope. The accompanying DVD gives true yoga beginners—those who wouldn't know an up-dog from a Chihuahua—a step-by-step roadmap to learn the poses at their own pace.

Elizabeth Morrow was an athlete, a skier and soccer player who, two years ago, found herself hospitalized with a right lung full of blood clots, the lower lobe completely collapsed. When she was strong enough to start exercising again, she found even the easiest of yoga classes too taxing. She didn't have the stamina for an hour, couldn't hold the poses the way the instructor wanted.

So, the 32-year-old started thinking of ways to make it easier, more convenient and even more fundamental than the myriad DVDs already on the market.

"I was thinking about a paint-by-number kit where you don't need to be Picasso or van Gogh, you just follow what they tell you and you'll come out with something," she said. "I just wanted something that felt really accessible and doable for people. The image of the mat just popped into my head: 'Wow, I can do yoga by numbers as well.'"

The DVD tells users exactly which circle to put their hands and feet in and allows for advancement to more challenging poses.

Yoga by Numbers has been compared to Twister, the popular game with giant colored circles, spinning wheel and crazy, cross-limbed poses. But Morrow's cool with that, even when it comes from critics.



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"I think it's awesome when they have that reaction because to me, that means they get it and they know how to use it," said Morrow, a certified yoga instructor.

Morrow has sold to people who live far from a yoga studio, those with tight schedules who need to squeeze in practice whenever they can, and people with health conditions. The National Institutes of Health's

National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine reports that recent studies of people with chronic low-back pain suggest yoga can help reduce pain and improve function. Other research shows regular practice might reduce heart rate, blood pressure and stress and may help relieve anxiety and depression.

"People who are older are using it because the DVD really focuses you on not contorting yourself into Cirque du Soleil-style acrobatics," Morrow said. She demonstrated the mat recently at her parent's house in Bow, N.H., about an hour north of Boston.

The latest "Yoga in America" study, released by Yoga Journal, reported 20.4 million Americans practiced yoga in 2012, compared to 15.8 million in 2008. They spent \$10.3 billion on classes and products, up from \$5.7 billion the earlier survey.

Janet Lark teaches yoga in Ogden, Iowa, and had a bad experience with a poorly cut, astringent-smelling mat, so she started doing some research. She came upon Morrow's mat and was struck by how simple it was for novices.

"It truly was a 'Duh! Why didn't anyone think of that sooner?' moment," she said. "It is fantastic to notice how quickly the clients start to focus on making sure they are properly aligned."

Morrow, who worked in the nonprofit sector for several years, also hears from purists who pooh-pooh the mats as a gimmick.

"My response is that this is not a mandate," she said. "I think that if you're already practicing yoga and it works for you, that's great and I'm really excited for you. I'm interested in hearing from people for whom the system doesn't work."



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A spokeswoman for the nonprofit Yoga Alliance, which represents teachers, schools and studios, said the ideal situation is to learn from a master teacher in private classes, but time and cost can be barriers.

"Any tool that helps people practice yoga is a good thing," said Katie Desmond. "And so we applaud Elizabeth's ingenuity in spreading the power of yoga by helping to make the process of learning yoga as a beginner more accessible."

Morrow patented the idea and sells the mats, made in the U.S. from sustainable rubber, for \$119.95 including DVD and carry strap. She started selling on The Grommet, a website that launches undiscovered products, then had a successful, online crowd-sourced campaign to raise more start-up funds.

She also registered the business as a benefit corporation in Massachusetts, which means she can write into the bylaws that the company's social mission takes precedence over the bottom line for shareholders.

Up next: She wants to focus on reaching kids, especially those at risk, and hopes to partner with social services providers. If she makes money along the way, all the better.

"I think politicians sort of create this false dichotomy where you either have to be pro-business or pro-social program and that you can't do both," she said. "A lot of corporations want to put out the message that it's just not profitable and that is just not true."

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