

Yoga for people living with cancer

Jude Murray

As yoga practitioners, we know that yoga makes us feel better, which is why (even on days when we don't feel like it) we get drawn back to our practice because we know and understand how much better yoga makes us feel on all levels - mind, body and spirit. We may also have had experiences of yoga helping us through illness and injury or times of crisis and stress. It is this personal knowledge of the benefits of yoga, particularly in helping to deal with stress and crisis, which has led me to pursue a path of using yoga to help people going through their own crisis, in particular people living with cancer.

I began working with people living with cancer four years ago and discovered first hand how yoga and complementary therapies give support to people living with the disease. I now teach yoga, relaxation and breathing techniques on two days a week at Friends of the Beatson, a purpose built centre within the Beatson West of Scotland Cancer Centre in Glasgow. Friends of the Beatson provides a retreat away from the clinical environment where patients can come and have complementary therapies, sit and relax, read a book, listen to music, use the internet, or have a warm drink in a pleasant and therapeutic environment. It is a very special place and I feel privileged to be able to offer yoga as one of the range of therapies and activities on offer to the hundreds of patients who visit the centre each month. I also welcome people living with cancer into my own yoga classes.

At the centre, I mostly see people on an individual basis and work with a range of techniques that we would all recognise as yoga. Whether it is in the luxury of a one-to-one situation or in a class, it's important to reassure people living with cancer that yoga is not about tying oneself in knots – although we all know that some people like to do that! Stressing that there are no magic wands or any off the peg solutions is also an important part of creating a sense of ownership of the journey. Some yoga practitioners, like me, will find themselves working in the healthcare setting, alongside conventional medical treatments to assist people in coping with their diagnosis and treatment. At the same time we may also be giving support to those who, for whatever reason, choose not to follow the conventional treatments, so it important to state that yoga is not a cure for cancer - we don't treat the disease. Yoga works to help improve well being.

Cancer does not necessarily mean that people are going to die and in many cases people live long, healthy and productive lives following a cancer diagnosis. Despite this, receiving a diagnosis of cancer and dealing with the treatments can cause fear, anxiety, panic, anger, a feeling of loss of control, sleeplessness or depression. Add this to the unsettling nature of being in hospital plus the side effects of treatments and medications such as chemotherapy, radiotherapy, stem cell transplants, antibiotics or steroids and people can be going through a very difficult time.

Teaching yoga to people living with cancer can be challenging both in terms of adapting the practices to suit the varying personal needs and abilities and coping with the emotional aspects of working with people with a life threatening illness. Flexibility is key - e.g. adapting yoga for someone hooked up to an IV drip or sitting in a wheelchair- as is being open to becoming familiar with and using a range of practices that come under the yoga banner - breath awareness, pranayama, asana, visualisation, meditation, relaxation, yoga nidra - and to a certain degree dispensing with the idea of a lesson plan! Sometimes the only thing I will give a person to do in a session is breath awareness. When a person is in a state of fear, they may hold their breath or the breath may become shallow, short or ragged. Through breath awareness the person finds a deeper connection with what is happening in their body and discovers a way to let their breath become deeper, longer and more controlled. The focus of this activity also allows worrying or distracting thoughts to be put to one side. Encouraging people to focus more deeply on the breath as a one-pointed focus moves it towards simple meditation. Using this practice of breath awareness with people who have never done it before, often with very profound and immediate results has proved to me time and time again the simple power of the breath to calm the body and the mind and to balance the emotions.

Experienced yogis will inevitably turn to their practice when faced with a cancer diagnosis and I find that I can readily guide them to use their yoga in a way most suited to their particular needs. However, very often a person living with cancer will have had no experience of yoga, or anything even remotely holistic, so, keeping language neutral and ideas simple, it helps to spend quite a lot of time on first meeting, talking about how they feel physically, mentally and emotionally and asking about symptoms and side-effects and drug treatments so that contraindications can be taken into account. Exploring what relaxation means to them, how it feels, where in the body it is felt and how they would like to feel will lead to exploring techniques together that will be more likely to work for that individual.

Ideally the yoga extends beyond the lesson to be of use to the person when they most need it, to help them feel calmer, more balanced and more able to cope with what is happening to them in their cancer journey. One of my yoga students, Lorna, was diagnosed with cervical cancer at the beginning of 2009. Writing to me about her experience she wrote that *“Life will always give us new challenges and receiving a cancer diagnosis was certainly a challenge for me. I can remember in the days following diagnosis how grateful I was to have a practice to turn to, in order to give me processing time, where I could completely focus on me and where I was at...As I look back at my journey from diagnosis through treatment, recovery and on in to wellness I feel that my yoga practice has been fundamental in allowing me to meet the requirements of each stage in an authentic and constructive way...Yoga has brought me in to an integrated relationship with my body, heart and mind. During the demanding parts of chemotherapy and radiation treatments I was able to stay centred and grounded in myself. I think that this is because yoga has really encouraged me to listen to myself in deeper, reflective and non-judgemental way.”*

It is this aspect of self-empowerment through yoga that is most inspiring. Despite everything that is happening to them and all the things they feel they can't control - the cancer, the drugs, the hospital routine- people living with cancer can learn to control the breath and quieten their thoughts. They can restore peace to the body and the mind, learning to control how they respond to the experience of cancer and finding ways to manage the physical and emotional symptoms of both the disease and its treatment. Yoga offers space to be in the moment, to connect with the breath, to make peace with the body and to make contact with and trust that still point at the centre of the being that is beyond any experience of disease: the unchanging Self.

Jude Murray (Mahashakti) is a Yoga teacher (YRT 500 hrs) and complementary therapist living and working in Argyll on the West Coast of Scotland. She teaches regular Hatha, Yin and Pregnancy Yoga classes and workshops and is the creator of Celtic Yoga Journey. She works two days a week at Friends of the Beatson, based at the Beatson West of Scotland Cancer Centre in Glasgow teaching yoga and relaxation to people living with cancer.