

Adapting a yoga practice for people living with cancer

Guidelines for Yoga Teachers

Jude Murray

Introduction

I produced this fact sheet in response to many requests for support and advice around sharing yoga with people living with a cancer diagnosis. I share it freely, but in the understanding that it does not replace in depth training for those who wish to work therapeutically with people with cancer, or any other health condition.

We have to be very clear that Yoga is not a cure for cancer. However, it does help balance body, mind and spirit to help people feel and function better. Yoga helps to calm the mind so that people cope better with their diagnosis and treatment. It can also help to alleviate symptoms and side effects such as tiredness, pain, nausea, sleep problems and depression. Post-treatment, yoga can be a gentle way to help people stay physically active, to maintain a healthy and active lifestyle, to help keep calm and centred. Yoga is also a beautiful way to help people who have experienced cancer treatment, to reconnect with their bodies in a gently loving way, and to find a way to celebrate life.

I do not offer specific practices here, only advice for what you will need to consider in order to adapt your existing practice for someone living with cancer.

The usual techniques of yoga apply, and include breathing and breath awareness, relaxation, visualisation, meditation and asana (postures) all of which are adapted to the specific needs, ability and energy levels of each individual. The beauty of Yoga is that it can be adapted and made gentle enough for anyone, of any age and at any stage of cancer treatment.

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Contraindications?

I don't believe that there are any overall contraindications to yoga. I come back to the belief that if you can breathe, you can do yoga. I firmly believe in an integrated practice. This is not for every teacher, this just happens to be the way my teaching has evolved and I am confident enough as a senior teacher and in my experience of working with long term health conditions and disabilities, to modify the practice for whoever shows up. You may not feel comfortable with this, and of course that's OK. You may feel that teaching a specialist class or one to one is more appropriate. As I mentioned before, I agree that one to one teaching is the best possible way to share yoga to people living with cancer (indeed it is the ideal way to teach yoga to anyone) if it is affordable and accessible for the person.

In my experience of mentoring new yoga teachers, there is a lot of fear around potentially injuring people during yoga. This is partly the fault of a modern health and safety conscious style of yoga teacher training. I think it risks causing worry and this is not entirely conducive to a heart led practice. Of course, we have to be aware of the safety of our clients, which is why we find out as much as possible about them as we can using the health questionnaire. But being fearful will create a boundary to your genuine presence and attentiveness to the individual, and this is what allows you to genuinely keep your students and clients safe.

General Health questionnaire

It is considered good practice to offer a health questionnaire to all of your students/clients. This ensures that you know about anything that needs to be modified in that person's practice. And a person living with cancer may also have other health conditions that you need to know about, so it's important not just to ask questions about their cancer. You may already use a basic health questionnaire for your clients, however, here are a list of conditions you might want to ask about

- Heart or circulatory conditions
- High or low blood pressure
- Diabetes
- Glaucoma or detached retina (or risk of)
- Epilepsy
- Asthma or respiratory problems
- Allergies
- Back or neck problems, sciatica
- Joint or bone problems e.g. arthritis, osteoporosis, brittle bones
- Severe mental health problems
- Pregnancy

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- Medications (this may alert you to anything they've not told you about) You don't need the names of all the drugs (it may surprise you how many medications some people take!) You just need to know what they're for.
- Cognitive, developmental or sensory impairment
- And a space for anything else that might be relevant

Then you want to ask questions about their cancer

- What is your diagnosis?
- Details – especially if it's a cancer you are unfamiliar with. Where is the cancer? If they had something like breast or lung cancer, which side is affected? Don't be afraid to ask as many questions as you need to to understand how this affects them.
- When were you diagnosed?
- What treatments did you have/are you having?
- Are you on any medication?
- Did you have surgery? When?
- Are your surgical wounds healed?
- What side effects are you experiencing?
 - May include things like: Nausea, Diarrhoea, Fatigue, Anaemia/low blood counts, Dizziness etc.
- Are you in any pain? Does anything make it worse? Or better?
- Are there any physical positions or movements you find difficult: Standing? Sitting? Lying down? Get up and down from the floor?...

And things to ask every time you see them:

- How are you feeling today?
- How is your blood pressure today?
- How did you feel after our last session?

You will need to allow time at the beginning of your first session with the person to allow you time to do the health questionnaire. If they are coming along to a general class, then you can perhaps email it to them in advance and ask them to fill it out and bring it with them. You could also do it over the phone.

You will also need to ask them for their doctor's OK to practice yoga if they are still going through treatment or affected by their condition. This does not have to be in writing. The person can ask their doctor, and sign your form to confirm that they have done so.

The following table outlines certain considerations for adapting the yoga practice that you may encounter when you work with people living with cancer. This list applies in addition to the contraindications that you will already be aware of during yoga practice. E.g. applications for high blood pressure and so on.

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This is not an exhaustive list. Remember that everyone is different, everyone's cancer is different and everyone's treatment is different.

Condition or treatment	Considerations
Chemotherapy	Low immunity- You cannot work with this person if you have an active infection- of any kind. Nausea, diarrhoea Fatigue
Radiotherapy	Nausea Fatigue Skin reactions/burns Internal discomfort and pain
Surgery	Scarring Tightness Pain and swelling Loss of range of motion Loss of muscle tone or muscle mass Wound Infection Trauma Loss of body part?
Tumour	Tumour impacting on other organs/tissues or joints Nerve impact – pain, loss of sensation, paralysis
Stoma	Ileostomy/colostomy Tracheotomy Peg in stomach
Breathlessness, coughing, choking sensations	Lack of lung capacity Low blood oxygen

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	<p>Anxiety</p> <p>Tracheotomy</p> <p>Neck or throat treatment</p>
<p>Cancer in bones</p> <p>Bone metastases</p> <p>Osteoporosis</p>	<p>Bones may be brittle, fragile</p> <p>Tumour may be compressing nerves</p> <p>Pain and stiffness</p> <p>Loss of ROM</p>
<p>Central (Hickman) line, PICC line or cannula</p>	<p>Area is sensitive and may be prone to infection</p> <p>A cannula = needle in situ</p>
<p>Infection, virus, cold etc.</p>	<p>Risk to other patients</p> <p>Taxing to body</p>
<p>Co-morbidity</p>	<p>Don't forget they may have other things wrong with them too!</p>
<p>Neuropathy</p>	<p>Possible side effect of chemo</p> <p>Loss of sensation, numbness or tingling in extremities especially hands and feet</p>
<p>Pain relief</p>	<p>Effect of opiate drugs e.g. sleepiness or Confusion</p> <p>Awareness of pain</p>
<p>Oedema</p> <p>Lymphoedema</p>	<p>Complication of lymph node removal</p> <p>Fluid retention</p> <p>Do not rule out risk of DVT with swelling that has an unknown cause</p>
<p>DVT, thrombosis,</p>	<p>Possible complication of chemo</p> <p>Undiagnosed pain in limbs which does not go away, swelling, heat. IF CONCERNED SEEK MEDICAL ADVICE</p>
<p>Blood pressure</p>	<p>Can fluctuate significantly with treatments.</p>

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Do not be fearful

My fundamental belief is that if you are truly present to whatever the person brings, and you guide them gently into awareness of their own body's boundaries and capabilities, then you can safely facilitate a practice for *anyone*. This is also informed by the depth of your own practice. I have taught yoga to people lying in hospital beds, attached to Intravenous drips, in wheelchairs, and with spinal cord compression. You may not envisage that these people would come along to a general yoga class, but you can certainly adapt a practice that would suit them in a one to one situation, or in a specially adapted class. Do not be fearful. Listen. Be present. Don't be afraid to try things, gently. Accept what limitations present themselves, and offer yoga in the spirit of unconditional acceptance of *what is*.

However, beware your ego. If you are in any doubt, whatsoever, that you are equipped to help this person, then refer them to a more experienced colleague.

Practice flexibility

In your work with people living with cancer, you may be surprised by what they are unable to do. Seemingly simple things, that you might otherwise consider "easy" like getting up and down from the floor. You may also be surprised by what they *can* do, given the physical problems that they have. The answer is that you cannot always anticipate what you will be working with, and in that respect, lesson planning doesn't always work. Flexibility is key, and having a range of adaptations up your sleeve is essential.

Training

If you want to do specialist work with people living with cancer, or indeed any other health condition, then my recommendation is to do in depth additional training in Yoga for Cancer, or Yoga Therapy. I offer online and residential training which you can learn more about at www.myhealingspace.org.uk

Blessings - Jude 