



HEALING THE WHOLE PERSON

A holistic approach to sharing
yoga safely and
compassionately with people
affected by cancer



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Morven Hamilton is an accredited senior yoga and mindfulness teacher and the founder and lead teacher of Yoga by Nature, YAP accredited TrainerPro yoga training school.

Morven has been teaching yoga since 2008, specialising in therapeutic applications of yoga. She developed the Healing the Whole Person approach to Yoga for Cancer while working as yoga teacher and course facilitator at Penny Brohn cancer care, the UK's leading complimentary cancer care centre.

in 2019, Morven was diagnosed with breast cancer and received treatment in 2020.

She currently teaches yoga in group and one to one settings to people affected by cancer, and teaches 21 hour CPD and 40 hour teacher training courses in Yoga for Cancer.

Morven is trained in Yoga for Menopause and yoga for bone conditions.

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MORVEN HAMILTON

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YOGA FOR CANCER - A WHOLE PERSON APPROACH

Healing is a process, which results not in a definitive outcome, but in an ever-deepening understanding of who we are right now

Healing the Whole Person is a holistic approach to sharing yoga safely and compassionately with people affected by cancer



This e-book is an introduction to the Healing the Whole Person approach to yoga for cancer. You will learn the foundational principles of the approach, general guidelines for working with people on the cancer journey and some useful practices you can start sharing right away.

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WORKING WITH PEOPLE AFFECTED BY CANCER

Just as no two people experience a yoga posture in the same way, no two people experience cancer in the same way. The most important thing to bear in mind when you are working with people who have had a diagnosis of a life-threatening or life-limiting illness, is that they are, first and foremost, people.

People are complex and unpredictable, they are constantly changing and growing, no matter what life stage they are at. People are all very much like you.

LET ME TELL YOU ABOUT THE 3 BIGGEST MISTAKES I MADE WHEN BEGINNING MY WORK WITH PEOPLE AFFECTED BY CANCER...

1) I made an assumption that people living with cancer were not fine. So, I never asked them how they were as I thought it would be insensitive to ask. Rude!

2) When a woman came into my class without her wig for the first time, I made no mention of it as I thought she would be embarrassed or ashamed. I realised my mistake when the rest of the group members came in and showered her with compliments and encouragement, telling her how great she looked. Again, I was rude! Afterwards, I was ashamed of my own ignorance.

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3) Once, when working at a cancer care centre I was unable to get hold of the clients' names and health information from the centre staff before the class started. I started the class regardless and, although there was nothing about the class that made it different from any other class I taught at the centre, my manager got a complaint about me afterwards from one of the class members. Because I had not informed myself about them prior to the class, she did not feel safe, seen and listened to. Now, I always make sure I know people's names and I always sit down with each and every attendee to hear about what's going on with them before they start yoga with me.

TO HOLD SPACE FOR PEOPLE
ON THE CANCER JOURNEY YOU
NEED TO BE OPEN. MAKE NO
ASSUMPTIONS AND. ABOVE ALL,
ESTABLISH TRUST.

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CANCER DOES NOT DISCRIMINATE

Cancer can arise in any body and it can arise anywhere in the body.

While there are certain genetic, physiological and environmental conditions which may serve as an exacerbating or catalytic element, cancer does not obey rules or conform to expectations.

We all know of someone who has lived well all their life and received a cancer diagnosis, just as we all know of someone who has smoked their whole life and lived to 93. With cancer, we cannot predict and it does not serve us to judge.

*Just keep going, no feeling is final -
Rainer Maria-Rilke*

For most people, cancer presents an identity shift which can really rock the foundations of life and of the surrounding community. Be open, listen to what each person has to say and be acutely honest about your own judgments.

When it comes to another person's emotional health, pain levels or their potential for progress you can make no assumptions. But you can listen. Every person has a story to tell, every body has a story to tell. As a yoga teacher or health professional working with people affected by cancer, you are in the unique position of being the guardian of these stories. Watch them and be with them respectfully as they unfold. Tend to them with care and love. This work requires resilience and depth, it also requires compassion and softness. Being with people at their most vulnerable is a unique position which will take you right to the edges of your strength and into your deepest fears. Like it or not, this work will make you grow, and growth is never comfortable. Use this e-book as a guide to tentatively dip your toe into the field of Yoga for Cancer, but never consider your work to be done.

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THE HEALING THE WHOLE PERSON APPROACH



A whole-person approach includes body, mind, spirit and relationships. We are so much more than our physical manifestation. In order to truly heal, we must address not only the body but also aspects of our inner and outer worlds. A person is intimately intertwined with her environment, her community, her culture and with collective consciousness.

Hatha yoga is a “bottom-up” approach, meaning that we start with the physical and gradually move to the more subtle. In this e-book, we will focus primarily on the body, as the cancer journey begins with a diagnosis of a physical condition and there is so much healing we can do with the body alone. Starting with the body makes yoga accessible to everyone – we can all see and feel our bodies, we all breathe

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THE HEALING THE WHOLE PERSON APPROACH

SPIRIT

Connect to one's
own truth in the
moment

BODY

Experience
physical
presence of life
and vitality

HEALING

MIND

Observe with
curiosity and
without judgment

RELATIONSHIPS

Consciously
befriending leads
to kindness and
compassion



THE BODY

In a Yoga for Cancer class, much of our work on the body is to assist our students to balance their nervous system. We do not live in a collection of disparate parts – body, mind, spirit – we live in a fluid, organic, rich strata of consciousness where a fluctuation in one stratum has its ripple of effect through the entire system.

A diagnosis of a life-threatening illness can have such a disruptive effect on our mental health because we are suddenly confronted with existential uncertainty, that the body enters a state of stress whereby the sympathetic nervous system is strongly activated, resulting in symptoms of stress e.g. raised heart rate, restricted breathing, slow digestion and sometimes fatigue.

For some people, the anxiety and fear triggered by diagnosis is the biggest struggle of their cancer journey.

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Grounding exercises, calming breath work, vagal toning and guided relaxation can all help to restore homeostasis, enabling a healthier functioning of the body's natural cancer defences.

The movements that we make in Hatha yoga help to move lymphatic fluid around the body, aiding our natural detoxification process. Lymph carries cancer cells, virus cells and dead cells towards the lymph ducts so that they can be safely passed into the bloodstream and flushed out via the liver and kidneys. Asana (postures) assist the circulation of oxygen and vital nutrients to every cell in the body. When we move in all directions, we nurture the digestive system – another way of promoting detoxification, aiding the expulsion of toxins and excess hormones from the body.

THE BREATH

Awareness of the breath brings so many benefits, it is not possible to explore them in full in this short e-book. Breath work can enhance energy levels, reduce mental agitation, restore the nervous system to balance and bring about a sense of connection and peace. This is so important for anyone who has been through trauma.

Do proceed with care when you are initiating a breath work practice, as focusing on the breath can make people feel anxious at first. If your student feels anxious when focusing on her breath, begin with a body scan on the breath ([audio link below](#)). If you are doing asana with her, incorporate some easy breathing patterns that marry well with the movements. Avoid deliberate or measured breathing practices until your student feels relaxed about moving with and focusing on the breath.

Functional breathing has many significant benefits which can contribute to cancer recovery. The movement of the lungs and diaphragm draw lymph fluid towards the thoracic duct, facilitating the transportation of toxins on their way out of the body. The action of the diaphragm massages the abdominal organs – liver, spleen, kidneys, intestines, improving detoxification and digestion. Abdominal breathing encourages a healthy gas exchange, with Co₂ being efficiently expelled from the body with the full exhale.

If you can breathe, you can do yoga. Sometimes people come to my classes and lie down on the floor or on a sofa in savasana for the duration of the session. It has been enough just to get themselves there. They have reported feeling great benefit from being there in the presence of the group and just taking part in the breathing guidance and the relaxation, or even just being there at all.

One to one students sometimes just want to talk to a non-judgmental listening ear, and perhaps do a supported restorative pose and a guided relaxation.



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BEFRIENDING

Perhaps most importantly, yoga practice teaches us to tentatively befriend our bodies. It is very common after a diagnosis to feel betrayed or let down by the body. Surgery may have left the body looking and feeling very different. Women who have had breasts, womb or ovaries removed can be left feeling defeminised and no longer sure of their sexual identity. Similarly, men who have had their prostate or a testicle removed can feel emasculated and dissociated. People who have been “good” all their lives – eaten well, exercised regularly and done all the “right” things may feel frustrated, bewildered or angry that cancer has arisen unfairly in such a seemingly healthy environment.

In a yoga practice, the practitioner shows up for herself with kindness over and over again. She learns what her body can do, she understands in an embodied way how she is connected and sustained by the elements of earth, water, air and fire – not separate from but part of the great living organism of the Earth.

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SPIRIT

Understanding oneself as part of something greater is the first step towards spiritual growth. Whether or not you talk about spirit explicitly as a yoga teacher, what you share with your students in a yoga class may lead them to an experience of their spiritual selves. Some people prefer to refer to greater consciousness, Nature, the divine or God. Whatever the terminology, a mindful yoga practice will bring about wholeness and connection, to a greater or lesser degree.

Wholeness and connection, however, may not be the first experience. It is common in a yoga class for emotions to come, and with them, tears of sadness, rage, exhaustion, relief, joy or pain. Turning towards oneself and minimising distractions, as well as releasing tension from the body will bring you into the presence of your feelings - feelings that demand to be felt and must be felt in order to move through them. Tears in your yoga class are no bad thing but they can bring with them a degree of discomfort, emotional or social.

It is important that you give your students space to feel whatever they are feeling. It is not up to us to tell them how they should feel now or how they may feel in the future, it's for them to be where they are right now with acceptance.



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PRACTICES TO SHARE

Make sure your student has had the go-ahead from their doctor before beginning a yoga practice. The following practices can be suitable for anyone affected by cancer. On the Teach Yoga for Cancer course, I teach modifications and therapeutic applications of several poses. I will not go into them here as there are contraindications of which it is important to be aware, and which are best learned in a teacher-student setting and not read about in a book.

FUNCTIONAL BREATHING PRACTICE

Due to emotional distress, pain or obstructions caused by treatment or the cancer itself, it is not always possible for people to take a full breath. However, everyone can and does breathe. Functional abdominal breathing can be practised by everyone. Just make sure your student is not doing anything that causes or aggravates pain.

The functional breath stimulates the vagus nerve and sends a signal to the nervous system that it is safe and ok to relax. Have your student resting in the most comfortable position and make sure that his or her chin is slightly tucked into the chest so that the system knows it's time to relax. A jutting chin will trigger the reticular activating system and send the body and mind into "seeking" mode. Make sure that your student knows that all of the following is optional, and that they can opt out at any time.

[Abdominal Breathing Audio](#)

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THE BODY SCAN MEDITATION

The body scan is the golden nugget of mindfulness practice. It is a way of teaching the body the difference between “what’s happening” and “the story about what’s happening”. By feeling into sensation while being aware of thought, we train ourselves to tap into the felt sense of the presence and of what is true right now. Much of our suffering occurs because we get stuck in our stories about what is happening to us. Jon Kabat-Zinn calls this “selfing”.

Body Scan Audio

Body Scan on the Breath Audio



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YOGA NIDRA

Most people can practice Yoga Nidra. Make sure that your student feels comfortable with resting and being guided into an introspective practice. If your student is agitated, restless and anxious, it might be better to do some physical practice first. Yoga Nidra can be an extremely healing practice, which guides the practitioner into their inner world safely, helping them to feel peacefully embodied, calm and able to put insistent thoughts into perspective.

Yoga Nidra "Safe, Happy and Loved" Audio



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TRAIN TO TEACH YOGA FOR CANCER

Morven teaches 21 hour CPD courses and 40 hour Teacher Training courses in the Healing the Whole Person Approach to Yoga for Cancer.

You also can do a short introductory teach Yoga for Cancer course with Morven which is 100% self-paced and online. click [HERE](#) to enrol.

If you would like to share yoga safely and compassionately with people affected by cancer, contact info@yogabynature.org to discuss your next steps.

Alternatively, view a masterclass on Yoga for Cancer and sign up for the next course directly on the website [HERE](#).



I wish you courage, joy and learning on your journey with teaching yoga for cancer.

"Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final."

- Rainer Maria-Rilke

With heart,

Morven