

Get “Pinked” with Yoga

By Maureen Fallis, Surround Circle Yoga

“Cancer changes everything.” Cancer survivors commonly reflect on how their lives have been transformed ~ often, they say, it’s been for the better. Before diagnosis, the stress of daily living, the frenetic pace of a demanding job, or the race towards what might seem like a better future just over the horizon, can be the cause of much unhappiness and heartache. At the time of a cancer diagnosis, many people find themselves taking stock of their lives. Questions come up, “Am I spending my time and energy wisely? “Am I doing what I am supposed to be doing here on this earth?” “Have I taken advantage of my strengths and interests to do meaningful work?” Being diagnosed with cancer or not, asking these types of questions can be beneficial for all. Sometimes it takes a life-threatening diagnosis to slow down enough to do this important work.

Healing requires slowing down, an unravelling of tension, an unwinding of the senses, a calming of the mind from its incessant worrying and thinking ahead of dreadful possibilities. A challenging task at the best of times becomes still tougher when informed of having a tumour growing inside you. While acute stress has the effect of stimulating the cells that protect our system; chronic stress, the kind of daily worry and constant pressure, akin to what a cancer patient might typically experience, markedly depresses the function of the natural “killer cells” that protect, thus leaving us even more vulnerable to the disease.

Yoga, now considered beyond the fringe of alternative medicine, is a wonderful tool for releasing stress, calming the central nervous system and stilling a busy mind. Whether newly diagnosed, in treatment, recovering or a cancer survivor, a gentle and restorative style of yoga is ideal for healing. Stretching and movement with intention and attention is paramount. However, it is important not to overdo the yoga practice. The cardinal rule, “do less” comes from Sudha Carolyn Sundeen, my beloved Kripalu yoga teacher and three-time breast cancer survivor. She taught me to, “Remember that healing is a body-mind-spirit process. It may or may not include a “cure” but when movement feels impossible or progress seems stalled, it’s best to visualize what it felt like when the actual pose or movement was possible.”

Susi Hately Aldous, founder of Functional Synergy, along with researchers from the University of Calgary, studied the effects of yoga on cancer survivors. The study was designed to compare how women who were treated for breast cancer felt compared to a control group during and after participating in a once-a-week seventy-five minute yoga class for seven weeks. The class consisted of gentle breathing in the pose Viparita Karani (Legs-Up-the-Wall), which was followed by fifty minutes of gentle asana (postures) modified to meet their needs, and finally they ended with fifteen minutes of shavasana (deep relaxation). The results were sound: the yoga group showed improvements in their physical fitness and their heart rate, both when resting and after exercise. They found the yoga group compared to the control group had significantly less tension, anxiety, depression, confusion, anger, fatigue, and emotional irritability. The one surprising negative finding was the students reported more pain, which researchers speculated might be related to increased body awareness as a result of their practice. The research on this continues...

Managing one’s cancer can be a difficult, demanding task. Even with the consistent support from family and friends, each day can be a struggle to assess one’s failing energy, to change or sometimes just endure the uncomfortable, often painful side-effects of treatment, to struggle against depression at the thought of further weakness and death. One cannot overestimate the value, to someone in that condition, of a moment of ease, joy, and well-being.

To help relieve the stress of living with cancer, to help you breathe a sigh of relief while rebuilding your resources of energy, and to provide a safe and sacred place to clear away the mental debris through yoga and meditation, Surround Circle Yoga is pleased to announce the launch of

'Pink Partnership' with Breast Cancer Action Ottawa. From October 2009 to October 2010, Surround Circle Yoga will be offering anyone who has been diagnosed, is being treated, recovering &/or is a survivor of breast cancer a 45-minute private yoga session for a fee of \$10.00 (value of \$45.00). The proceeds from this initiative will be donated to Breast Cancer Action Ottawa.

To find out more about classes, workshops and or to register for the Pink Partnership Program, please call 613-730-6649. Surround Circle Yoga is located in Southminster United Church, 15 Aylmer Avenue (Bank Street & the Canal in Old Ottawa South). The entrance is on Galt Street on the 2nd floor. www.surroundcircleyoga.com