



By Eleanor Rixey

With October designated as Breast Cancer Awareness Month, I wanted to take this opportunity to talk with Melissa Anderson Morgan about the incredibly important Oncology Yoga program that she teaches at the Y. Also referred to as yoga4cancer - or y4c - it is an "evidence-informed Oncology Yoga method tailored to address the specific physical and emotional needs left by the cancer and cancer treatments," according to yoga4cancer.com.

I was curious about how this class differs from a typical yoga class. Melissa explained that there are many elements to consider when planning a class. The poses or postures are often modified due to the side effects of cancer and cancer treatments. She considers where each individual is on their journey. The use of props is integral to this individual approach. The pace is much slower, taking into account the effects of chemo and radiation on energy levels.

Melissa usually begins the class with an opening meditation. I'll let her explain her process for assisting participants in entering a more meditative state of mind.

"I generally ask the participants to find a comfortable, attentive position. The y4c methodology calls this Dynamic Stillness. Dynamic Stillness is usually seated, perhaps on a bolster, but may be lying down depending upon the person. I invite everyone to soften or close their eyes and draw attention to the breath, but without changing it. Just observe. Then, I generally use one of two approaches for meditation. One option is to walk through a body scan, bringing awareness to specific points in the body (from crown of head to tips of toes) and inviting them to relax in each area as we go. Most recently, I have been reserving this approach for the end of class once they are in a restorative pose.

Often, I have a theme/focus for class, and so I will attach a visualization to that. For example, in my classes this week, mine was "honoring the simple things in life" and I asked each person to call to mind something simple in their life that brings them joy. It might be a warm mug of coffee on their porch or watching a hummingbird flit about. I share an example in my own life, like how I enjoy watching my two hens interact, listening to their little clucks when they "talk" to me and to one another, etc. I guide participants through the senses within that visualization. What colors and shapes do they see in their "simple thing". What sounds do they hear? What do they feel? Warmth? Wind? From there, I usually transition out to a specific pranayama (breath pattern) and/or a simple arm vinyasa (moving arms with breath pattern)."

The Oncology Yoga program is backed by science. Melissa shared the numerous physiological benefits: "The body's immune system is made up of several interconnected subsystems including the cardiovascular system, the respiratory system, the lymphatic system, digestive system, nervous system, endocrine system and the musculoskeletal system. Yoga can play a role in keeping these systems healthy. For example, moving between the physical poses (asanas) promotes the flow of blood and lymph, supporting cardiovascular and lymphatic health. This physical part of the practice also aids in building stronger bones and muscles. Diaphragmatic breathing plays an important role not only in respiration, but also in activating the body's relaxation response and lowering levels of cortisol, the hormone associated with high levels of stress."

Modifications are the key

Adapting exercise to meet the individual is essential to ensuring success in an exercise program. Melissa excels in her ability to translate traditional yoga poses into variations that accommodate the myriad conditions cancer patients endure. She takes great care and consideration when planning her class, and shows exceptional commitment to the wellbeing of the participants.



Modified sphinx: This is a gentle back bend that can help "open" the abdomen to ease digestive challenges. The mild compression of the lumbar spine also encourages circulation.



Modified cat/cow: The use of a bolster elevates the seat providing more space for the hips and knees to open. Flowing between spinal extension and flexion improves spinal mobility and helps build the mind-body connection.



Modified standing lunge: A precursor to Warrior poses, this supported lunge helps build strength and bone density. It is an energizing pose.



Modified chair: The use of blocks supports the upper body and assists in building strength in the core and legs.

Modified tree: Allows for a safe way to challenge balance and build strength both of which are often diminished due to cancer. This pose also eases the symptoms of neuropathy as it stretches the hands while strengthening the feet.



Modified pyramid: This pose is great for challenging core and leg strength while building flexibility. It is also energizing and builds warmth.



Supported fish: Using a bolster and block allows for full surrender to ease anxiety and fatigue.