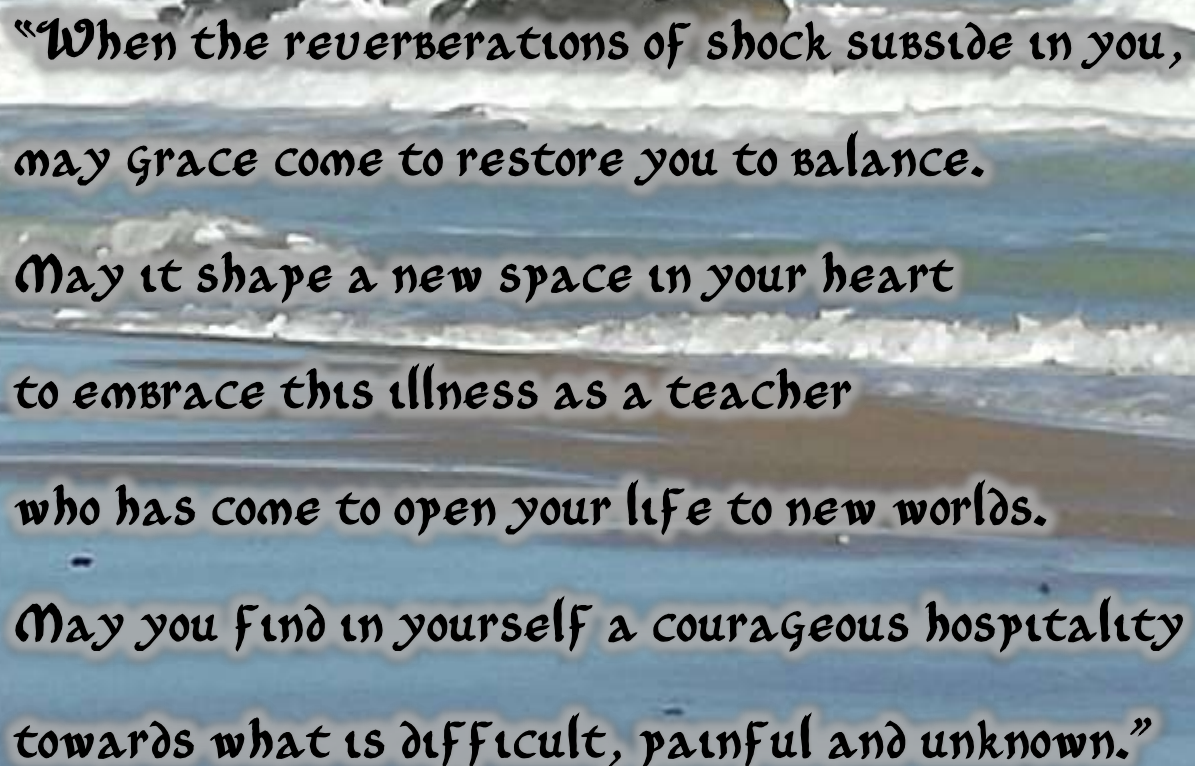




# Adapting Yoga for People Living with Cancer

A Basic Guide for Yoga Teachers

**Jude Murray**



*“When the reverberations of shock subside in you,  
may grace come to restore you to balance.  
May it shape a new space in your heart  
to embrace this illness as a teacher  
who has come to open your life to new worlds.  
May you find in yourself a courageous hospitality  
towards what is difficult, painful and unknown.”*

*John O’Donohue*

## Introduction



Thank you for downloading this guide to working with people living with cancer. This guide is aimed at yoga teachers, and teachers of other body/mind movement disciplines who wish to welcome people with cancer into their classes. I receive a great many requests and questions from teachers who are meeting students who have received a cancer diagnosis.

I share it freely 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.

## About Healing Space

I developed the original [Healing Space course](#) in 2011 after I received a request from a fellow yoga teacher to help them learn “what I do.” It became an in depth, experiential and heart led intensive training course aimed at qualified yoga teachers who wish to work with people living with cancer and other long term or life-limiting illness. After seven years we now have an [online study course](#) is offered on an ongoing basis, and a five day intensive is usually held in Brighton in spring and several professional development workshops are in the pipeline. Healing Space is a 90 hours post qualifying course recognised by the [Independent Yoga Network](#) and accredited by the [Complementary Medical Association](#).

## Yoga is not a *cure* for cancer

Many people who share yoga also subscribe to natural healing advice and may have certain ideas around what cancer is, how it can be effectively prevented or treated, and whether or not people should pursue conventional cancer treatments. The answer is complex and choosing to follow conventional treatments, or not is a completely personal decision. Some complementary and alternative treatments have been shown to be effective, some not. There is a lot of hype about things like cannabis oil and turmeric “curing” cancer, and the truth is that they don’t! They do however have myriad effective benefits. It isn’t and should never be, a case of either/or.



The Healing Space philosophy is to embrace and work alongside conventional medicine and to keep up to date with the latest research and developments in order to understand what we are doing in a way that effectively benefits people.

## So how *does* yoga help people with cancer?

Yoga can help balance body, mind and spirit from an embodied perspective, to help people feel and function better during and after their treatment for cancer. It can also support people who have, for whatever reason, chosen not to follow conventional treatments.



Yoga helps to calm the mind so that people cope better with their diagnosis and treatment



Yoga alleviates the effects of stress in the body.



Yoga can help to alleviate symptoms and side effects such as : Tiredness; Pain; Nausea; sleep problems; Depression; Anxiety.



Yoga can be a gentle way to help people stay physically active (Exercise has been shown to be one of the most significant indicators of long-term cancer survival)



Yoga can help people 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.

## Adapting Yoga



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 techniques and breath awareness**

**Relaxation**

**Meditation**

**Mindfulness**

**Visualisation**

**Asana (postures)**

**Yoga Nidra**

(Probably the most powerful technique you will use!)

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. Not all practices are suitable, and it is important to bring some discernment into the adaptation of practices. A list of considerations is given below.

## Contraindications?

I don't believe that there are any overall contraindications to yoga. I come back to Krishnamacharya's 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 is 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
- ♥ 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 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 should also 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.

## Considerations

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 considerations that you will already be aware of during yoga practice. E.g. applications for high blood pressure and so on.

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.<br>Nausea, diarrhoea<br>Fatigue                                      |
| Radiotherapy                                 | Nausea<br>Fatigue<br>Skin reactions/burns<br>Internal discomfort and pain   |
| Surgery                                      | Scarring<br>Tightness<br>Pain and swelling<br>Loss of range of motion<br>Loss of muscle tone or muscle mass<br>Wound<br>Infection<br>Trauma<br>Loss of body part? |
| Tumour                                       | Tumour impacting on other organs/tissues or joints<br>Nerve impact – pain, loss of sensation, paralysis   |
| Stoma  | Ileostomy/colostomy<br>Tracheotomy<br>Peg in stomach  |
| Breathlessness, coughing, choking sensations | Lack of lung capacity<br>Low blood oxygen<br>Anxiety<br>Tracheotomy<br>Neck or throat treatment   |
| Cancer in bones                              | Bones may be brittle, fragile   |

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

More details of treatments, conditions and side effects can be found in the excellent publications from **macmillan.org.uk**

## Ethics and Referral

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 or another practitioner who might be able to advise them more effectively. I completely understand the urge to want to help people, that's why you do this job right? But from an ethical and legal perspective, your duty of care is to refer people in situations where you are not qualified to advise.

### First port of call

- ♥ GP
- ♥ Consultant
- ♥ Nurse practitioner
- ♥ Physiotherapist

In the case of medical advice (or anything that encroaches on medical advice) ALWAYS refer them back to their medical team.

### Alternative and complementary therapies

Unless you are additionally qualified, don't offer advice about other therapies. I advise that keep a list on your phone of the contact details of therapists and practitioners that you would personally recommend

- ♥ Acupuncturist
- ♥ Chiropractor
- ♥ Osteopath
- ♥ Massage therapist
- ♥ Nutritionist
- ♥ Naturopath
- ♥ Psychotherapist/counsellor

File them under job titles because you may not always remember names.

You cannot be all things to all people!  
You may not be aware, but it is actually illegal to make medical claims about yoga. And absolutely, unless you are otherwise qualified, don't give advice (other than general advice) about nutrition, supplements or alternative therapies. This could put you in a tricky ethical or legal situation.

## Signposting

You can also signpost to support organisations such as Macmillan, Cancer Research, condition specific support organisations, and local cancer support agencies.

- ♥ [macmillan.org.uk](http://macmillan.org.uk)
- ♥ [cancerresearchuk.org](http://cancerresearchuk.org)
- ♥ [maggiescentres.org](http://maggiescentres.org)

## Working from the Heart



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*.

## 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, give 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 short courses, an intensive training course and an online training which you can learn more about at

[www.myhealingspace.org.uk](http://www.myhealingspace.org.uk)

## *Blessings - Jude*

Jude Murray – Course Director, Healing Space

Jude is a senior yoga teacher and complementary therapist who has worked extensively in acute, palliative, integrative and community cancer care settings. Her experience has brought her into contact with people who are either recovering or receiving active treatment for many types of cancer and are receiving a range of treatments including chemotherapy, radiotherapy, stem cell transplants, hormone and targeted therapies as well as various scans, tests and invasive procedures. Jude has an in-depth understanding of the impact of these treatments and their side effects, and has completed studies in cancer biology and clinical oncology. She continues to research and learn.



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