

YOGA FOR PEOPLE EXPERIENCING CANCER

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This presentation was developed using the following “framework for understanding dis-ease”:

1. Describe the person and/or condition at the level of the Five Koshas.
2. I identify areas of separation.
3. Examine the role of stress.
4. Determine wellness factors which would alleviate separation.
5. Establish a program using techniques and methods to achieve the wellness objective.

From the Yoga Therapy viewpoint, cancer is a separation of the body, mind, and/or spirit at one or more levels of our being which eventually manifests itself in the physical body on a cellular level. Working toward integration of the Koshas is key to developing a program that works with such a wide range of physical manifestations.

Goals 1 and 2. Examination of the conditions found and separation present in each of the Koshas

I. Annamayakosha - the physical body

Conditions found in the physical systems of the body:

- Musculoskeletal system - weakened due to treatment, protective posture, and/or lack of activity
- Immune system - impaired due to treatment which results in the decrease of red and/or white blood cells
- Respiratory system - compromised as a result of decrease in red blood cells, possibly compromised due to scar tissue and/or protective posture
- Nervous system - exhaustion, confusion, forgetfulness, lability, and insomnia
- Endocrine system - hormonal imbalances, menstrual disorders including drug-induced menopause
- Digestive and elimination systems - Diarrhea and decreased absorption of nutrients

- Circulatory system – decrease in red and/or white blood cells, possibility of hemorrhage
- Reproductive system – permanent or temporary sterility, permanent damage to ovaries or testes

Separation occurring in any one of the Koshas produces an “end of the line” manifestation in the physical body.

II. **Pranamayakosha - the energy body**

Conditions present in the energy body:

- Low energy level
- Lack of breath awareness
- As a result of surgery and/or drugs:
 - i. Traumatized chakras
 - ii. Traumatized nadis
 - iii. Traumatized prana vayus
- Depression, anxiety (also affect physical energy)

Separation occurs at the level of:

- The Chakras
 - Muladhara – level of the colon – separation from the earth which results in feelings of insecurity and not being grounded
 - Swadisthana – level of the organs of reproduction – separation from the senses and one’s sexuality
 - Manipura – level of digestive system – separation from society
 - Anahata – level of the cardiopulmonary system – separation from loving relationships
 - Vishuddha – level of the throat - separation from wisdom and creative and independent thinking
 - Ajna – level of the Third Eye – separation from one’s spiritual nature
- The nadis
- The prana vayus

III. **Manamayakosha - the emotional body**

Conditions found in the emotional body:

- Fear in general, particularly fear of death, fear for the well being of one’s children, and fear of losing one’s support system
- Anger about having the disease
- Depression from inactivity and from being in emotional pain
- Anxiety about the future

- Despair and hopelessness
- Shame about appearance changes (for example, loss of hair)
- Loneliness and feeling of being alone in the world as the only one experiencing cancer
- Guilt for having put one's loved ones through so much pain

Separation is a result of the following:

- Not being whole at the level where the cancer has manifested, for example:
 - breast cancer – inability to nurture self at the heart or through relationships with others
 - stomach cancer – inability to “digest” what is going on in one's life or being upset about events in the past
 - liver cancer – anger turned inward, inability to release and/or filter out discordant thoughts and/or belief systems (for example, “I'm not good enough”)
 - Too much rajas – “doing too much”
 - Too much tamas – “too much inertia” – not taking care of the self physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually

IV. Vijnyamakosha – the witness body

Conditions found in the witness body:

- Confusion with questions like “Why me? Am I being punished?”

Separation occurs as a result of identifying too much with the ego/personality

V. Anandamayakosha – the bliss body

Conditions in the bliss body:

- Inability to be at peace with one's illness

Separation occurs as a result of not knowing the true essence of one's being.

Goal 3. The role of stress in illness and separation

The Koshas are interwoven like the threads of a piece of cloth. If one thread changes – if it lengthens, if it changes color, if it stiffens or hardens in relationship to those around it – the fabric as a whole is changed. So it is with the Koshas. The changes stress initially creates in response to the “fight or flight” reflex are physiological. These physical changes not only cause other changes in the Annamayakosha but also in the other four Koshas as well. The process is continuous – one change produces other changes, which produce more changes – as the body seeks homeostasis, its natural

state. Intervention at any level of change or separation marks the beginning of the return to wellness.

Goal 4. Wellness factors which alleviate separation

The road to wellness can be like a newly paved interstate – smooth, straight, and built for speed - or that road can be like the road to Ranch La Sherpa – dusty, curvy, and full of potholes. Regardless of which road one's journey takes, it will progress on different several lanes, each one representing a different aspect of being. Not only does the physical body become ill, but the energy and emotional bodies also suffer trauma. Belief systems are tested, and one begins to define him/herself by his relationship with cancer. Perhaps most importantly, that place in one's being – that place where peace is found – that place which provides one safety and comfort – is tested in the worst way. It is for these reasons that a comprehensive program addressing all aspects of being should be created.

Goal 5. 10-week program for people experiencing cancer

In addition to the physical yoga poses or asanas that this class will include, all students are expected to develop a positive mental attitude, make dietary improvements, and cultivate the essence of their spirituality. The tools used to help in this task are breathing techniques, guided imagery and meditation, and positive affirmations. It is the responsibility of each student to take ownership of his/her own journey back to wellness.

Week 1 - Introduction

- Welcome and introduction of teacher
- Introduction of and sharing among students
- Class outline with interweaving of student statements
- Gentle chair movement, breath awareness, and affirmation that will be repeated often through the entire 10 weeks

Week 2 - Body awareness

- Body mapping on chair or floor as appropriate with guidance through the Koshas
- Transferring of experience to paper and sharing of same
- Gentle chair movement and affirmation

Week 3 - Breath awareness

- Chair movement and breathing
- Floor movement and breathing
- Relaxation with guided imagery about the breath
- Affirmation

Week 4 - Mudras

- Background to eliminate fear of mudras
- Healing mudras for immune system introduced with breath
- Gentle chair postures for everyone, chair or floor postures, standing postures
- Savasana and affirmation

Week 5 - Heart opening

- Combine breathing with an "opening the heart charka" script for body awareness
- Chair or floor postures, standing postures
- Savasana and affirmation

Week 6 - Chakra focus

- Breathing up the spine through all the chakras
- Postures with references to all the chakras
- Relaxation with references to all the chakras
- Affirmation with reference to all the chakras

Week 7 - Emotional body

- Breathing through the whole body, noting areas of emotional blockage
- Movement into postures while keeping that awareness
- Noting how various emotions reside in various parts of the body
- Relaxation and affirmation

Week 8 - Circulatory system

- Breathing with attention to the warm flow of blood from the heart to the extremities
- Postures that open the body (using more standing postures than before) into star shape with emphasis on feeling the circulatory system
- Relaxation using images of flow, flow, flow, open and affirmation

Week 9 - Musculoskeletal system

Described in detail on following page.

Week 10 - "Top it off"

- Healing through the Koshas, stressing that there is no final goal and that each moment is perfect
- Breath, postures, relaxation, affirmation

Class 9 - Musculoskeletal system

- Centering
- Sitting in Sukhasana or other comfortable position
- Adhi mudra which soothes and calms the entire nervous system and facilitates 3-part breathing especially in the abdomen and the back body
- Gentle spinal opening
- Lying supine over crossed bolsters
- Sidelying over crossed bolsters
- Upavista Konasana, upper body supported on the seat of a chair - last minute or two spent exploring cat/dog

The following postures will all be done with a chair at the end of the mat to be used as needed:

- Gentle standing stretches with breath and body awareness
- Tadasana
- Urdhva Hastasana
- Ardha Chandrasana I with rhythmic movement
- Virabhadrasana II, moving rhythmically in and out of posture
- Virabhadrasana I, moving rhythmically in and out of posture
- Seated forward bend in chair with hands clasping opposite elbows to release the back
- Relaxation in Viparita Karani or other relaxation posture as needed
- Seated (on floor or in chair) meditation with hands in Anjali Mudra
- Affirmation
- Closing - hands are in Padma Mudra, eyes are closed, and chin is lowered to look into the heart

I honor that place within you in which the whole universe dwells.

I honor that place within you which is of love, of peace, of light, and of truth.

When you are in that place in you, and I am in that place in me, we are one.

Namaste.