

174: Yoga For Cancer with Tari Prinster - Transcript

<https://www.francescacervero.com/podcast/yoga-for-cancer-tari-prinster>

Hello, and welcome to The Mentor Sessions. I'm your host, Francesca Cervero.

The Mentor Sessions is a meeting place for yoga teachers who want to be supported in thinking critically about their teaching. While you're here, you can expect to have your beliefs about right and wrong challenged, and you'll also have your deepest needs for nurturing and support met by myself and your fellow siblings on the path.

Hello, everyone. Welcome to the Mentor Sessions. Today, we have an episode talking all about yoga for cancer. I'm so excited. I'm so honored to have with us today a real pioneer and expert in this topic, an old friend of mine from the Om Yoga Center in New York City days of the early 2000s.

Tari Prinster is a cancer survivor, author, and the founder of Yoga for Cancer. Y4C is what it's called. A pioneer in the field since the early 2000s, she's trained more than 3,000 yoga and healthcare professionals across more than 30 countries, building the largest directory of oncology yoga professionals in the world. Her evidence-informed Y4C methodology addresses the specific physical and emotional needs of people living with and beyond cancer before, during, and after treatment. Yoga for Cancer supports ongoing research into the benefits of oncology yoga.

Tari is the author of Yoga for Cancer, a guide to managing side effects, boosting immunity, and improving recovery for cancer survivors, which is available in English, Spanish, and Japanese. And she's a contributor to yoga therapy across the cancer care continuum.

Tari, thank you so much for being here.

Thank you, Francesca. It's wonderful to reconnect.

So I want to just start by getting grounded in who you are and where you come from. So could you tell us a little bit about your most important teachers? And if you've studied in a specific lineage, we can name that as well, just to get a little sense of who you are.

Okay. Well, that's one of the other things that we share in common is that I studied with Cindy Lee at OM Yoga. We were just counting the years back. Actually, I started studying with her to become a teacher, to take my teacher training in the year 2001. And it's a really easy date for me to remember because I basically was diagnosed with cancer in the year 2000.

So it's a benchmark that gives me something to measure all of that against.

Gens is the right word. Anyway, that was in New York City. And that's where you and I also met because you studied with Cindy as well. And I was living in the city and also going back and forth

and living in Vermont. So I had a place in both places. So I was doing the East Coast travel trip. Yeah. After I was diagnosed with cancer in the year 2000, I decided I wanted to become a yoga teacher. In many ways, I felt that saved my life, not necessarily the cancer treatments, but yoga. And it was before that I was a dedicated yogi and practiced a lot, but not. And I guess the other part of the story is, and this was the thousand in the year 2000, which is close to three decades ago. And I like to start off with saying that three decades ago, the world of yoga and the world of cancer were very different worlds. In three decades, they've evolved to something else. And I would like to say that I feel like I have had a very important part of evolving the yoga world to meet the cancer world in the creation of Yoga for Cancer. There wasn't anything like yoga for cancer around when I was going through my treatments. And that's part of the story too. In any case, when I was diagnosed, what was true about the cancer world was that it would seem like being diagnosed with cancer was a death sentence. And more people, we believed at that time that more people died of cancer than survived it. biggest changes that has happened in the cancer world since I was diagnosed in the three decades. And that is that we've reversed that. More people survive cancer than die of cancer.

That's a huge, huge step forward. And it's an important one for everyone to recognize that in our world today, we have close to 20 million survivors.

And each year, we have a total number of new cancer diagnoses of around two and a half million. Of those two and a half million, 70% of them survive their cancer and go on to live a normal, healthy life and die of something else. So this is a huge change. And what it means is that more people are surviving than dying. And it means a lot for the world of yoga, because as we know, yoga, as I said, I feel very strongly that yoga saved my life.

When I was diagnosed, I didn't know what to expect. I went through chemotherapy, radiation, and lots and lots of surgeries. But what I did was go to my mat every day in some shape or form. And that helped me find the things that I needed that perhaps I was not getting in from clinical treatments and that sort of thing. So anyway, that is pretty much my history.

It's amazing what's happened in the medical field, in the yoga world, that so much has changed from your diagnosis in the year 2000. the methodology that became yoga for cancer as you said you were diagnosed and then it was a year later that you went through a teacher training so you had already been through you know this cancer diagnosis and treatment into survival when you started teaching yoga so it's my memory from being around in that time is that pretty quickly you were teaching workshops and short trainings about how to teach yoga for cancer but can you tell us more about the methodology you created that in a way evidence-based research played into that and then we'll talk a little bit later about what it looks like today but just tell us those sort of origin story of Y4C.

Well I think it started as I said I went to my mat immediately no matter how I was feeling and explored all the things that were, well, I mean, as we know, what is, I guess, a call of the parallels

between yoga and cancer and drive some people crazy. But there is one and there are lots of them, not just one. What cancer does is pull you inside. It pulls you inward into really understanding and knowing what's happening in your body. So does yoga. And so that's what I did. I observed and studied. cancer and realize that even though the world sort of thinks that when we get a diagnosis of something, that it is something from the outside world that has come in to cause this malfunction of our bodies. And it's the reverse with cancer.

Cancer is something that doesn't happen from the outside. It happens on the inside. So my studying of cancer and understanding that gave me some insights as to what I should be doing with my body and observing how I was not feeling well and why and how I could possibly then turn that around to feeling better by using all the tools of yoga. And I guess starting off in my early treatments, it was... was to some degree meditation and a little tiny bit. It was doing restorative yoga. But what was really surprising to me, it wasn't that restful yoga that was making me feel better. It was when I moved. It was when I did movement combined with breathing. And that's what gave me the signal that. Something was going on here that wasn't altogether understood. So then I kind of went to the research and looked at what research had been done on recovery from some of the cancer side effects that are known to happen.

And one of them, which I was deathly afraid of, was really concerned about, is a side effect from cancer treatments, which is... I had had many lymph nodes removed and they warn you if you have lymph nodes removed, not to do this, not to do that. And I didn't understand why. And I didn't really understand what would happen in my body having lymph nodes removed. And so I looked around and realized that the lymph system was a pretty big and important system in our body that nobody really knew too much about. And what it was doing was, well, it's when a lymph node, even one is removed, that disrupts the flow of lymph in your body. And it is lymph flow that keeps our body in the yoga world. We like to say detox. And that really is what happens. It removes toxins from our body. It removes the things that we, another really interesting fact that I discovered in my studying the biology of cancer and also the biology or rather the movement of yoga was that our body every single day makes 50 to 70 billion new cells. And it also gets rid of the equal amount. So that's a whole lot of cells. 70 billion cells are washed out of our body every day. And the system that does that is the lymph system. So I started looking more closely at what it was and what made it work well and discovered that all the tools to keep the lymph system healthy were in yoga. They were all part of the mechanics of yoga. So I began looking at that very, very carefully. And it starts with the breath. The breath is one mechanism that we use all the time that helps irrigate and pull toxins out of our body. Not just the carbon dioxide that we breathe out, but it helps to move and flow the lymph. fluid in our body, how we breathe and how we breathe with our diaphragm. It's the mechanics of the diaphragm moving up and down actually irrigate the limb system.

So I started thinking and looking at all of these things and discovering that they were really real mechanical factors of yoga. And another really amazing one was learning that the lymph system flow has a specific flow pattern. It only moves in one direction. And that one direction is towards

the center of the body where the lymphatic, the largest lymphatic node exists called the thoracic duct. And lymph only flows in one direction. And what do we do when we turn ourselves upside down? A very common thing to do in yoga, right? When we turn ourselves upside down, it redirects the flow of lymph. And that is what helps the lymph system.

Yoga is now becoming a companion of the lymph system to help it detoxify the whole body. Learning all of these things and then combining them into a methodology, not necessarily a methodology that would become a replacement for other methodologies in yoga.

I mean, we have many different lineages and each lineage always seems to have their own particular little methodology. But what I... did was discover ways in which a yoga teacher can learn and understand how to apply these principles to any lineage, to what methodology they are already doing and using. And I guess if anything, there are two things that I wanted to develop in the yoga for cancer, and that is safety and also effectiveness. So that whatever lineage you're coming from, you are learning how to be safe for someone who is in your classroom or might be a private student.

Keeping them safe and not doing something that is going to cause them harm based on the kinds of, what should I say, side effects, but challenges that. cancer western cancer treatment brings to a survivor one of those is and this is probably another one besides the lymph system being really really important to keep that flow of all those billions of cells in and out of our bodies is what happens in cancer treatments is it gives a big whammy to bone development. It softens the bones. That's what chemotherapy does and radiation as well.

So there are things that we do in yoga that are a little bit, what should I say, could be potentially harmful to someone who has gone through cancer treatments and has had significant bone loss. And so part of my objective is to inform yoga teachers. of certain things. Like, for example, when we do cat and cow on our hands and knees, and so often many lineages have the person crank their neck and look up at the ceiling. And with those with very fragile, soft bones, if that is done incorrectly, it can fracture the cervical spine vertebrae and can be very harmful. Likewise, if someone is challenged with having developed lymphedema during their cancer treatments. There are certain kinds of ways, well... example, I caution that, and this is probably going to alarm a lot of yogis out there. I put a caution on doing downward facing dog.

Oh, my God. Is it yoga if you don't do downward facing dog?

Yes, you can do yoga without doing a downward facing dog. Now, why?

Because that pose interferes with the natural. move the natural pathway that lymph wants to, it needs to move in. So we do other things or we do downward facing dog in modified ways, using lots of props and things that do not disrupt that natural flow of lymph.

Right. I know that we all became yoga teachers because we love the practice so much. We want to share it and we want to help people. But so many of us spend so much time dealing with tech

now in a way that yoga teachers of the past just didn't have to deal with. And this is why I love our partner OfferingTree. They help you reclaim so much time and energy by bringing your entire business into one calm, organized home. Many of you know a teacher I have loved and worked with for so long. Her name is Samantha Harrison. She's got an incredibly successful brick and mortar yoga studio in North Carolina called Yoga Strong. And you can hear how Offering Tree has helped her here. I would say it's definitely helping me to grow the classes and it's also helping me to focus more on the business because I'm not having to look at a gazillion different tools it is really nice to have everything all in one place so I'm not having to like log into this and log into this and make sure this is communicating with this software so I feel like it's saving me time and I do love the automatic reminders that I can send to people and customizing some of those reminder messages that helps to keep students getting back in or getting them here if they signed up. And I would in the past when I had Acuity, I actually did that like manually, like I was texting my students. The automations are really nice and that saves me a lot of time. Let the automations handle the busy work so that you can stay focused on your students. Claim your exclusive teacher discount at offeringtree.com forward slash mentor and start your journey toward more ease today.

And you don't necessarily advocate for a gentle only practice, I'm understanding. Like you sound like an advocate for an active practice where appropriate, you know, movement. But there might be some parts of an active practice that you would leave out in a yoga for cancer class. Oh, there are some parts that I would modify, not necessarily leave out. But let me make a little bit of clarity there.

Yes, it is an active practice. There are many who come. Let me just use this example. Over the years, I've had yoga teachers come to me and say, what are the 10 restorative poses I should do for somebody who's recovering from cancer? And I go, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. We move. And there's very little reason.

Well, there's not a lot of significant research. on specific poses in yoga. But what there is is a lot of research that shows that movement is the antidote to fatigue. Everybody comes with the assumption that you're going through cancer treatment, you're going to suffer from fatigue. It's a very different kind of fatigue. And what really... -done research has been done is that those who are suffering from cancer treatment-related fatigue, we do a comparison. Those who are given an active practice and those who are said, rest is best, go home and rest. And it's powerful research that shows those who have cancer -related fatigue became active and moved, of course, moving with the breath too, but were very active, did better. Their fatigue was resolved by movement, not by rest. So when I was first diagnosed, this kind of research was not available.

Since then, in the almost 30 years, we have seen research that said, oh. And in fact, well-meaning yoga teachers want to provide what they think is best for those in their class who are recovering from cancer treatments or going through them. And in their mind, what is best is rest.

be not giving, I don't want to say doing harm, but it certainly is not giving someone the full advantage of the powerful ways that yoga can be like medicine to the body.

And the things that I just described, both in terms of bone loss and in terms of lymph flow, the mechanics of yoga are really like medicine. And I've had women in my class who come and have had lymph nodes removed and are getting lymphedema in their arms. And within a very short period of time, putting controlled managed weight on their arms, their lymphedema was reversed. And we also developed techniques that I share with anybody in any lineage of how to do self-lymphatic massage. And this is a wonderful technique that students can learn and survivors can use themselves. And it's a little like turning upside down, but for example, you can turn your arm upside down and that reverses the flow of lymph in the arm. You can lie down on the floor and put your legs up the wall. can reduce the amount of inflammation in the legs. So it's a form of lymphatic massage. And it's yoga, right?

Of course. So I say there are two important things. One, the foundation of making things safe. So what we don't want to do is to crank our neck up and look up at the ceiling when we do a cat and cow. That shouldn't be done even if you're not going through cancer treatments. That can crank the neck and compromise the vertebrae. But we also want people to use yoga in a way that is as effective as possible.

Exercise is no longer considered. It's something that is not included in cancer treatments. In fact, it is strongly urged. 30 years ago, but now it is urged by oncologists that people move. They don't go home and just sit on the couch and rest. Yes, if you're tired, that's absolutely, you must do that. But that is not the key to really managing a full recovery. Moving is, moving the body and learning. And yoga does one of the most effective things in terms of teaching us how to use our breath in order to move the lymph in our body, as I already said. Now, one of the other things that has changed in the medical community, in the medical world in 30 years, is the introduction of something called integrative medicine or complementary therapies. That did not exist 30 years ago. And what those are techniques like acupuncture, nutrition, oncology exercise, and yoga.

Oncologists are encouraging people to find these techniques, to find these therapies. And what they are, they are things that treat the whole person, not just what the medical profession does in treating a specific disease like cancer. The medical profession does not treat every aspect of a person's wholeness. They need to call on the services of other professionals to help them do that, to help them really keep a person's whole mind, body, and spirit intact when they are hovering from cancer treatments and also when they are recovered.

So it's one of the, you know, the medical system is extraordinary at helping people survive cancer. And after treatments are over, Job of living a long, healthy life becomes the job of the survivor.

It also becomes the job of yoga because it's yoga that can help survivors to understand how to keep mind and body healthy and balanced. So it goes beyond medical interventions to help keeping someone healthy and strong throughout. the rest of their natural, healthy, happy lives.

So a question, Tari, that I have about oncology yoga is that there are so many different kinds of cancer that affect different parts of the body in different ways. And I wonder if the way that you teach yoga for cancer encompasses all different kinds of cancer, or if it's geared more towards some more common kinds of cancer rather than others. Would different kinds of cancers need a different kind of movement practice? Tell me more about that, if you don't mind.

Oh, great question. Well, as I said, I started off talking about the limb system. The things that we do in yoga that are medicine for keeping the limb system strong are universal to every cancer. Every cancer starts with a... bad cell in the body that begins to multiply every cancer, whether it's a tumor or blood cancer, every cancer starts within our own bodies and multiplies.

And if it is a bad cell, if it's a cell that, you know, the immune system can recognize it and say, okay, this is a bad cell. Let's flush it out. Get rid of it. And that's what the immune system does. That's what its function is all about. So it's universal to every cancer that we want to have a strong immune system that can recognize bad cells. And just about every cancer treatment does things to our bones because every chemotherapy is designed to... affect the production of new cells. And that, no matter what cancer it is, or that happens in our bone marrow. And so what we want is the production of new cells is understood carefully and that it's not interrupted in a way that will cause more cancer cells to be created, Cancer is. If it is a blood cancer, if it's prostate cancer, if it's breast cancer, it is all built on a cell in a person's body that goes bad.

So all of the things that we do in this methodology are applicable to whatever cancer the person has. Now, mind you, there are going to be differences. Certainly the surgeries that are involved with, say, breast cancer or stomach cancer are two different kinds of surgeries.

And so what you would do for someone with breast cancer or someone who has had, say, stomach cancer and had part of their stomach removed, there are going to be restrictions and challenges to those two different individuals. And yes, the yoga teacher needs to take those things in mind. as related to the actual cause of the cancer, that is universal. Very interesting. You're really inspiring the way you talk about it.

You can hear how much passion, knowledge, experience is behind this methodology. For teachers listening who might be feeling called to this work, can you tell us more about your Y4C training? What does it look like? How do you teach it? What do teachers walk away knowing how to do?

All right. What do you walk away with? Well, I would say that the first thing that you're trained to do is to look under the T-shirt without lifting it up. So in speaking to someone who has been treated for cancer, you're going to know what to ask. You're going to know how to listen to what they tell you. How to get them to say more about when they are reluctant to say what's going on so that you can understand what's really going on under that T-shirt. That is, and then be able to modify a class, construct a class, construct, if it is a therapy session, construct a therapy that will work for them and address their issues.

You will have knowledge. A lot of knowledge about cancer biology, as I've just, you know, spouted out a whole bunch. You'll understand how cancer works and how the treatments work. You'll understand why people lose their hair, okay? And it's nothing to do with cancer. It's all about the treatment. But in also understanding how the treatments work, how that causes, as I said before, you know. bone disruption. It can have cardiovascular effects. So you will have a lot of cancer biology. And then you'll learn what the side effects of all of these treatments are.

Oh boy, that's a whole section in itself. Cancer side effects, cancer treatment side effects, and how to modify and how to avoid risks. As I said, cat and cow can be very, very, and downward-facing dogs, not altogether risk-free for someone who has been treated for cancer. So the other thing that a person in doing the training will walk away with is understanding the mechanics of yoga. I've already warned that maybe cat and cow and downward-facing dog might have risk factors in them. But I want to just point out the difference between those common poses in a lineage and say a full eagle pose, a full eagle pose.

And I just love this. I teach it when I go off on retreats and teach yoga to survivors who have never done yoga. And I tell them, you're going to go home and tell all your yoga friends that you did eagle pose, a full blown eagle pose. And they're going to. Their eyes are going to get wide and they're going to say, oh my God, that's a really hard pose. And you did it and you're going to say, yes. All of the mechanics of eagle pose are so beneficial to someone who's dealing with cancer. It's the best of yoga mechanics in without one pose.

And I won't take the time to explain all of that now. take the training and I'll explain it to you. But it's really interesting that to me, how much of yoga is the real mechanics of it are not fully appreciated by, you know, a lot of yoga teachers, you know, the whole idea of, well, I'll have to give some credit to Mr. Iyengar. He came up with and defined it as the squeeze and soak methodology. And he was right. He was right. But what he didn't get and what a lot of yoga teachers, and that's what we explain in Yoga for Cancer, is what you're doing in that squeeze and soak methodology technique of Iyengar yoga is that you are forcing, using the mechanics of yoga to irrigate, The lymphatic system, plain and simple. So anyway, that's one of the things.

But I guess the other thing is that you come away from the training is with a real meaningful professional opportunity to create a credible bridge between the clinical world,

the medical world, what we know as mind, body, spirit world of yoga so it's a bridge between those two worlds where a yoga teacher is able to motivate and inspire a survivor how to manage and deal with the things that they might be suffering from right away but also how to and this is a really important point that I want to make is that often those who are non-survivors don't understand the most powerful fear a cancer survivor carries with them the rest of their life. And that is the fear of a recurrence. So what yoga can do is be the bridge.

You've successfully finished treatments now. We need to keep your mind and body together, balanced and do the right things for the rest of your life. And also keep your immune system strong and fighting, fighting the potential for a recurrence, finding those rogue cells in your body and flushing them out. And that's what the immune system does. So I guess, you know. That to me is, I'm going to use one of my favorite, favorite slogans here to kind of say, to sum up what a yoga for cancer training, what your takeaway is.

To understand that yoga is as scientific as it is spiritual. There's so much there, you know, and I'm thinking about how first. yoga teachers listening, we have already worked with a cancer patient or cancer survivor, whether or not we know it, because cancer touches so many people. And I really am so glad that you're doing this work to give yoga teachers the support and the training they need to meet those students in the most helpful way possible.

I know you have two opportunities for teachers to study with you, a five-hour introductory course, and then a full 75 hour certification. And you've been so generous as to offer our listeners 20% off either one of those until August of this summer, 2026. So that link and code will be in the show notes, but just wanted to say thank you, Tari, and your whole community for offering that discount to our listeners. I know we have a lot of teachers. who are interested in growing and evolving as teachers, deepening their teaching.

You know, I feel like many yoga teachers, we love to study, we love to learn. And I think if you're a teacher listening, thinking about a training that you might be interested in taking, I really can't recommend this enough. Like I said, cancer touches so many people. You've already taught cancer survivors, even if you don't know it. So I think it would be wonderful to fill in gaps in knowledge so that we can be the best teachers for those students that we can be.

Absolutely. And I guess the other thing that we should all know, as I said, you know, there are every year more survivors, more people are diagnosed and are treated for cancer and 70% of them will survive, which means that the world is going to increase the number of survivors. They're not going to shrink. Cancer is here. It's not going to go away. And so, you know, best we know how. how we can use what we all love, yoga, to help us deal with it better. Thank you, Francesca.

Yeah, thank you so much, Tari. We'll put this in the show notes, but will you go ahead and say your website and any social media handles so that people can look it up themselves if they're not looking at the show notes?

That's really easy. Okay, it is yoga. All know that word. The number four. and the word cancer.com, all put together. Yoga, numeral four, cancer.com.

Perfect. Thank you so much, Tari. And again, the links with the discount will be in the show notes. So I encourage folks to check it out. Thank you so much, Tari.

Thank you, Francesca. So good to talk with you again.

Thank you so much for listening. I'd love to get to know you and have you join our community here and continue the conversation that we started in this episode today. You can find me at the website 15sequences.com. That's the number 1515sequences.com.

And when you drop your email address in there, you'll get an email from me that includes 15 sequences, 15 video sequences that you can use as inspiration in your teaching to help your students prepare their bodies for downward facing dog. You'll also get access to lots of other great free resources and you'll get an invitation. and a discount to join the Mentor Session Sangha, which is the online but off social media community home for this podcast. I'm so grateful to have you here. And remember, anytime you need me, this podcast is a place you can come for support and strategy.