

YOGA&CANCER >> LAURA KUPPERMAN

October, 2003. I am a 30-something, clean living yoga teacher living in Boulder, Colorado. I'm "just married!," enjoying my honeymoon on the island of Kauai.

Fast forward 19 days. I'm sitting at my kitchen table, chatting with one of my best friends. It's a Thursday afternoon around one p.m. The phone rings.

It's my doctor calling with the results of my biopsy.

I have cancer.

The next week is spent learning about my condition, interviewing doctors, getting second opinions and communicating with family and friends.

The next year and a half includes five major surgeries and six rounds of chemotherapy. My life becomes a tightrope walk—I'm alternately elated to still be alive, and sobered by the awareness that there's no safety net below me.

How do I live the rest of my life with such an intimate relationship with death? How do I choose to expend my energy? Can I graciously accept where I am in the present moment, while simultaneously aspiring to a happy ending? And the question I ask myself most frequently: "Is there some higher purpose that this experience is about?"

During the course of my treatment I continue to teach and practice yoga. Teaching is a wonderful respite from focusing on *me* and *my health*, and practicing is often the only part of my day in which my mind can rest, and I can live in my body. I figure out which postures helped with nausea, fatigue and insomnia, and which postures



exacerbate symptoms and are to be avoided.

With the help of my yoga practice, I endure the long course of cancer treatment. I tolerate chemotherapy well, recovering from major surgeries swiftly and am more energetic than other cancer patients I know.

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- EXPERIENCED YOGI? HELPFUL BOOKS:**
- » **Healing Yoga for People Living With Cancer** by Lisa Holtby
 - » **Relax & Renew** by Judith Lasater
 - » **The Woman's Book of Yoga & Health** by Linda Sparrowe & Patricia Walden

And I soon identify that higher purpose of my cancer: I want to teach yoga to other cancer survivors. Appreciating yoga's ability to smooth the path of my own journey, I want other cancer survivors to have the same opportunity.

One year after my final chemotherapy treatment I begin training to become a certified yoga therapist, and teach my first class for cancer survivors. It's the beginning of a new trajectory. Around this same time, studies from the U. of Texas's M.D. Anderson Cancer Center (arguably the country's top cancer hospital) and Stanford University confirm what I'd experienced: yoga has many positive benefits for cancer survivors. Among them: a decrease in stress and pain, increase in energy, the ability to fall asleep faster, sleep longer, use fewer sleep medications, bolster the immune system, ease menopausal symptoms (that many women experience while undergoing chemotherapy), help manage lymphedema, increase one's range of motion after surgery and rebuild muscular strength lost during chemo. Buoyed by these findings, the National

Cancer Institute awarded M.D. Anderson a \$2.4 million grant to further study the effects of yoga on breast cancer patients.

As for me, I now offer *Yoga for Survivors* classes and am humbled to teach and learn from my students. We cheer for one other as one person completes chemotherapy and another completes her first triathlon. We discuss hair growth, and spiritual growth. We sympathize, offer suggestions and spend 90 minutes trying to coax our bodies into a place of comfort, and strength.

If you are experiencing the fatigue commonly associated with cancer treatment, check with your doctor, then give yoga a shot—sooner rather than later. Yoga actually reenergizes you, and a good instructor will make sure you participate in a manner that is safe and effective.




Laura Kupperman is a certified yoga therapist, yoga instructor and cancer survivor: laurakupperman.com



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