

Transforming Care With Yoga Therapy

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged us to examine our thoughts about serious illness, caregiving, and to improve the delivery of care to patients. The practices of yoga therapy offer support for healthcare providers and caregivers to walk through the challenging dynamics in the continuum of care without burnout, and it offers patients the opportunity to be active participants in their healing journey. As mortal beings, our healing journeys will always end with the death of our physical body, but the practice of yoga can be adapted to help meet the changing needs of our bodies and help us change our mindset to embrace healthy living, aging, and dying. While all yoga is therapeutic in nature, yoga therapy is unique in that it is client focused and provides tools to address the specific physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of the individual.

Dee was in her late eighties when we met. She had been referred to me by a fellow healthcare professional who taught Ashtanga Yoga, a physically demanding yoga practice that uses repetitive sequences of flowing postures to generate heat in the body. An Ashtanga Yoga practice was not accessible to Dee because she had some mobility challenges and used a walker. My colleague contacted me because I was teaching gentle chair yoga for the Senior Circle at a local hospital. Dee was not able to come to Senior Circle, so we agreed to meet in her home. Dee and I practiced yoga together

once a week for nearly two years, only taking off a few weeks so she could take cruises around the world. She said her yoga practice gave her the strength and stamina to continue traveling, and made her feel less reliant on her walker; though she did continue to use it as a fall prevention measure. My time with Dee came to an end when we relocated for my husband's job.

A yoga therapist named Angel Brownlee took my place practicing yoga with Dee in her home. Not long after Angel began practicing with Dee, Dee's abilities began to change as her age and diagnosis of congestive heart failure progressed. She and Angel continued to be creative, finding ways to adapt their practices and celebrate what Dee *could* do rather than focusing on what she could no longer do. The care relationship evolved when Dee moved to an assisted living center. More care was needed, so Angel assisted Dee with her daily morning routines to get her day started with a little extra support and two days per week she practiced yoga therapy with Dee. As Dee neared the end of her life, Angel continued to use yoga therapy to support Dee and her family in the caregiving process. Angel was at Dee's bedside when she transitioned from this life at age 95.

The beautiful synchronicity of becoming the yoga therapist and death doula for Dee was inspirational to Angel. There was a lasting partnership that existed

The following are resources for using yoga and/or yoga therapy with older people and in palliative care/hospice settings:

Chair Yoga Certification
www.yogahealsus.com

Rewind Gold: Successful Aging Yoga Training
<https://ymedica.digitalchalk.com/learn/rewind-gold-successful-aging>

Foundations of Adaptive Yoga
Living 'til the End
www.mindbodiesolutions.org

Heart Guided Practices
www.templeroadjourney.com

Find a Certified Yoga Therapist
www.iayt.org



between them. Angel often felt she was receiving as much care from Dee as she was giving. What also became clear over time is that on the days that Angel took time for her *own* self-care, she had more patience and insight into how to best serve Dee. This experience played a role in the inspiration for Temple Road Journey, where Angel and co-founder Brandyn Brownlee, use yoga therapy to transform caregiving and shift the mindset of caring for others to caring “with” one another. Angel learned and refined this dynamic during her years working with Dee.

She learned first-hand that senior care can be the most rewarding role of a lifetime. However, viewing care as something we are doing *for* someone rather than *with* someone, can lead to unintended power struggles, frustration, and exhaustion. There is a new way of care emerging that empowers both the caregiver and the care receiver. This leads to a care partnership. It begins with caregivers making a non-negotiable commitment to their own self-care. To help meet this need, Temple Road Journey offers weekly Heart Guided Practices, based in yoga therapy, that give caregivers the therapeutic tools to establish their daily self-care routine.

Yoga therapy meets the patient right where they are and addresses the current challenge or health condition they are facing. This encourages the patient to play an active role in their self-care. The patient is equipped all along the way as yoga therapy naturally lends itself to shifting as the need arises. As a result, the peace and well-being that exists in the present moment is revealed. Whether giving or receiving care, it is important to feel empowered to live life to the fullest at every stage of life, and yoga therapy provides a path to better health and a better end.

Veronica Riera-Gilley, PharmD, BCGP, is a holistic pharmacist and certified yoga instructor. She is the owner of Prairie Fire Pharmacy Consulting where she helps patients maximize their health with minimal medication and embrace healthy living, aging, and dying.

Angel Brownlee is a Certified Yoga Therapist with The International Association of Yoga Therapists and an End of Life Doula. She and her husband are the founders of Temple Road Journey, an online and in-person yoga therapy resource for care partners. Angel is passionate about bringing yoga therapy to the caregiving model.

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