

Yoga4cancer

Empowering Cancer Patients Through Yoga

There are many benefits that regular yoga practice can offer: improved flexibility, increased muscle strength, prevention of cartilage and joint breakdown, and increased bone health, among others. Yoga for cancer patients, however, offers a host of additional benefits, many of which empower patients to take back control of their lives.

Yoga4cancer (y4c) is a class offered to cancer patients and survivors through the Westminster Recreation & Outreach Center (WROC) and taught by Shawna Locke, a Yoga4cancer certified instructor.

“Yoga4cancer is an evidence-based methodology of constructing a yoga practice specifically for cancer patients and survivors, taking into account the physical, mental, and emotional tolls that surgeries and treatments take on the body and mind,” explained Shawna. Shawna has been a y4c instructor since 2018 after a series of intensive online and face-to-face trainings with Tari Prinster, the founder of y4c and a breast cancer survivor. Shawna was the second person in Pittsburgh to become certified, but since then, more have followed.

“Cancer and its treatments wreak havoc on the body and mind,” said Shawna. “The y4c methodology is conscious of that, and incorporates breathing exercises and movements to stimulate the immune system, rebuild bone density, improve strength and flexibility, and reduce anxiety.”

In addition to the physical benefits, the y4c classes offer a host of other benefits, including building a sense of community. “I’ve heard many of my class attendees discussing doctors, treatments, and side effects before and after class. In one of the first y4c classes that I taught, a woman brought a shoebox full of wigs to share with others who were currently going through chemotherapy,” recalled Shawna. “Witnessing the support and love they show for one another has been one of the most rewarding experiences I’ve had as a yoga teacher.”

Besides being able to witness such special moments, Shawna said the reason she decided to become a y4c certified instructor strikes a more personal chord. “My husband and I both lost our mothers to cancer about 20 years ago, when they were in their mid-40s. To honor them, we host a benefit every fall, the Locke American Cancer Society Benefit, which is now in its 18th year. I’d always wanted to do something more personal, working directly with cancer patients and survivors, and in 2012, I began a regular yoga practice to help work through depression and anxiety. A few years later, I toyed with the idea of becoming a yoga teacher to help those with cancer, but kept putting it off because I was sure I would be the oldest and most out-of-shape person in the training class. I was too self-conscious and fearful to take the leap.”

“In 2016, my best friend’s husband passed away from colon cancer. He was 45. On the day he died, I vowed that I would get



Shawna Locke, Yoga4cancer certified instructor

over my fears and apply to a teacher training program. I finished the requirements for my 200-hour certification on the one-year anniversary of his death.”

Shawna now regularly teaches in the fitness room at the WROC from 5:45 to 6:45 p.m. on Mondays and has recently added a Yin yoga class at 7:00 p.m. on the same day. The one-hour class begins in a seated position to allow everyone to settle in and focus on their breath. After some warm-up movements, she then transitions to hands and knees, and then mindfully continues to standing, all the while continuing to link movement with breath.

“The last segment of the class is more restorative, a time to wind down and relax,” noted Shawna. “It’s definitely not the same class every time. For those who attend regularly, they build on what they’ve learned previously, which provides variability and more of a challenge. Throughout class, I give options and alternatives to the poses so that everyone can find what works best for their bodies.”

– Heather Holtschlag

Reprinted with permission, USC Today Magazine, Winter 2019.

Yoga4cancer

January 13 – March 2

Mondays, 5:45 – 6:45 p.m.

WROC Fitness Room (above the gym)

Cost: \$5; registration required.

For more information about the y4c classes and all of our Winter 2020 fitness classes, visit the website at wroc.westminster-church.org or contact WROC director Kathy Long at 412-835-6630x200.