

Resilience

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Resilience & the Human Spirit

As I speak with fellow yoga therapists, listen to perspectives and opinions, or read the growing body of literature and research on approaches to yoga therapy, there is an element all too often missing: A recognition of the resilience of the human spirit, something which is not --simply by default-- crushed by trauma, injury, or chronic illness. Not recognizing the inherent strength, spirit and willpower in each of us is a negation of a fundamental aspect of being human, and being alive. In the midst of grief, strife, and utter deprivation, humans tend to be at their strongest and most determined. If our outlook as therapists is obfuscated by a dark, negative outlook, saturated with the conviction that each client is in some way broken, bruised, and too sensitive for a frank, open conversation and the long journey ahead, we literally deprive them of the opportunity to grasp our hand and pull themselves forward. Mahatma Gandhi spoke eloquently to this aspect of the human soul when he said, "Strength does not come from physical capacity. It comes from an indomitable will." Strength and resilience reside in gentleness, perseverance and endurance. We should use these attributes as our tools, and recognize them in our clients.

As a yoga therapist, care giver, healthcare provider, we may be with our client through good times, very difficult and complicated times, and yes, death. One must be able to find joy in the sadness of watching someone with early-onset Parkinson's change from a well-spoken, outgoing person to a shuffling, mute, and distant person. Or seeing someone with MS who is active, raising a family and engaged in their profession eventually apply for disability, stop working, and divorce due to the strain on their marriage. Or guiding someone with ALS to breathe through the last few weeks of their life. Joy? Impossible, surely. And yet, the years spent helping them remain upright and walking on their own; the astonished doctor who could not believe that yes, indeed, their patient can still get on the floor and back up without a chair or prop; the breathing exercises to cope with the relentless compression of an 'MS hug' or to give a voice to the faint whisper of Parkinson's are a form of bittersweet joy -- a lesson gained from the recognition of, and appreciation for, resilience of the spirit.

Duality of Expectation

Opposites must often co-exist in order to achieve *equilibrium, a state in which opposing forces or influences are balanced*. In caring for others, two fundamental principles mirror each other: Non-expectation on our part as a practitioner, and yes, expectation. There should be no expectation of reward or fulfillment on our part as practitioners... if it comes, that is a gift and a blessing. Yet, we must expect much of ourselves, and our clients, if either is to benefit from the client/practitioner relationship.

Pain, illness, and disability are not always defined by a visible injury or identifiable cause: In order to heal fully, the mind as well as the body must heal, with an eventual consensus between the two. If a below-the-knee amputee can still feel their foot, then we work with that connection rather than ignoring what may physically no longer exist. By the same token, recovering from cancer may, for some, be a much harder journey than undergoing treatment or the disease process itself. The body and mind are depleted and there is a sense of separation --a distancing-- from the physical body. Yoga Therapy gives the individual a means to help themselves, putting less emphasis on 'doing' and more on 'how', resulting not only in body awareness and the mind-body connection, but self-awareness.

Within this term [self-awareness] resides the potential for growth, inner strength, and resilience of spirit and mind, yet also the ubiquitous misperception of ‘Self’ as ‘me, myself, and I’. The latter is self-absorption, whereas looking beyond oneself to something which is greater than our ego or our per diem actions and reactions results in self-examination at a level deeper. At that level we, as well as clients, may find a source of profound and immutable strength and resilience, while also staring down grief, pain, and anger. The Balance of Nature theory, which proposes that nature or a system is in a state of equilibrium, or homeostasis, is sometimes discredited in favor of chaos theory due to the outlook that nothing is in perfect balance in nature. What is overlooked is that *equilibrium is a balance between opposing forces*, not a stagnant state. And, so-called *chaos* has been shown to be a form of perfectly controlled order. Turning back to self-awareness and self-examination, one can understand that in striving to find the physical energy, mental energy, and spiritual willpower to overcome an illness or injury, or pursue a meaningful life while managing a chronic disease or after a traumatic experience, one must find order both in the chaos we may feel within us and the natural balance which exists deep within us.

Grounding: Support and Supported

How are we to guide clients to health and healing through their own resilience when we ourselves may be seeking resilience? This brings us to a term yoga practitioners know better than most, yet may not fully appreciate --grounding-- often described verbally as grounding into the floor. Newton’s third law states that *for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction*, therefore one must assume that the floor is supporting us with an equal and reciprocal force. Neither our standing force, or the supporting force of the ground, overrides the other, therefore there is reciprocity and equilibrium. The relationship between client and practitioner is much the same, requiring yoga therapists to ground themselves in order to support their clients, while asking clients to gradually learn to ground themselves in order to help themselves. A client is supported in their efforts by the yoga therapist, yet never overwhelmed by that support or made to feel that they are tethered to that support.

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