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Melissa Reynolds revisited 00:52

When I worked as a nurse and a paramedic in the Emergency Department, in the ICU, and ambulances, we always started with the ABCs: Airway. Breathing, Circulation. You can't live without them. If you're alive and the ABC's are in order, then for best health think Air, Water, Food, and Exercise. They come next. AWFE doesn't quite roll off the tongue. If you're able, walking is the most accessible exercise. My goal is 3500 steps a day minimum. I average 5,000 a day. Next, I have my stretching, balancing, and strengthening routine. My biggest challenge is stretching as I have tight, spasmodic muscles and my stretching routine doesn't cut it. My hips and thighs get so tight. And I sit too much at the computer. Massage twice a month and chiropractic once a month helps some. My wife goes to yoga classes a couple of times a week. I have no interest in a class. I couldn't keep up and I don't have the energy for an hour. Yet, there's an appeal. So, I reached out to my friend, Melissa Reynolds (@FibroMama) in New Zealand. Last time we spoke, she was developing an accessible yoga program for people with fibromyalgia and chronic fatigue syndrome.

Health Hats: Melissa, it's lovely to see you, hear you again. It's been six months since we had that chat about pain management and doing the work. You told me that you'd developed a yoga program?

Another tool: Yoga 02:47

Melissa Reynolds: I'm super excited about it. I've been doing yoga for a long time. I was getting so frustrated because I'd go into a yoga class on YouTube. I'd have 20 minutes between the children. And I'd choose a class that was for beginners or for when you're in pain. They were out of reach for me. I was making up my own classes. I was disappointed. I didn't have the knowledge for that.

Health Hats: What, besides time, were challenging with the packaged YouTube stuff?

Melissa Reynolds: First, the classes would be way too long. If I attempted them, I'd have post-exertion malaise forever. They rushed through poses that were not accessible for my body. Some gave you variations. Others said, "Do child's pose again." It could be and should be accessible if you commit to showing that.

Health Hats: Do you mostly do YouTube, or do you go to community yoga classes?

Melissa Reynolds: No. I tried community classes a few times. It never worked for me. A few years ago, I had a private instructor come to my home to create a sequence for me because I had just had a baby and was having some trouble with some things. I didn't go to her to help me with the fibromyalgia, but for safety. That was fun. But generally, with a chronic illness and three children, time and energy are limited. It's got to be immediately available. I've got to say, "I've got 15 minutes. Turn it on."

Health Hats: It would be nice if, in this day and age, there could be a verbal queuing and interactive app where you could slow it down, speed it up, choose your pose. But I guess we're not that advanced yet.

Melissa Reynolds: It seems to take one person realizing something's necessary, and then they work their butt off to make it happen.

Health Hats: That's what you've done?

Melissa Reynolds: Yeah, I've worked hard, and now it's happening.

Health Hats: Wait a minute. I'm back with you getting into it. How is it that you started doing yoga and realized this was good for you?

Melissa Reynolds: Wow, that's a question. Everybody knows that we're meant to be exercising. Everyone goes on about that. So, for a long time, I was forcing myself to do Pilates and it became less and less accessible. Then when I was pregnant, I couldn't do Pilates because most of the poses are on your back on the floor. So, I switched to yoga and I found that the more I practiced, the more I realized I could play with things. That's how I do things. I'll learn and then I'll alter it for myself. So, I started doing it and then I realized when I do a pose, like Forward Bend, it helps my neck. Then I started doing Forward Bend all the time. When I was pregnant, I realized that Cat and Cow pose made a huge difference for my back. Then I did that all the time. I started taking those tools and saying, "okay, I don't need a 60- or 90-minute class, which I can't do anyway. I'll take this tool and use it." I experienced those individual benefits. Then I started to realize it had built up over several years: my central nervous system with the meditation, the yoga, the breathing. I was much calmer, fewer anxiety responses, very normal now. It takes a real twister to get it going.

Keyword: Accessible 08:20

Health Hats: That's great! Tell me more about the actual program. Is it on YouTube?

Melissa Reynolds: No. I knew that if I were going to be able to make a difference for someone and help them, it would have to be a very specific order and program. They would need access to me. My keyword is *accessibility*. Accessibility means access when they have the energy and using a means they can use whether that's their phone or their computer or their tablet. It also means affordability. That intersection seems to work quite well. I use a platform called Teachable. The other part is a Facebook group, an exclusive group. That's where I come in. They asked me questions and we chat through things. Once a week I've been going live to answer questions and to talk about other things in a little bit more depth.

Health Hats: That's a nice combination. Let me make sure I understand. There's an audio-visual component of the basics of the pose, and then there's a Facebook group and a live chat.

Melissa Reynolds: I don't know if you know much about yoga, but when you create a class, you choose poses for a reason. In the first module, I presented several poses individually, showing the life cycle of the pose so that people can experience the pose where their body is. So, they get into those poses. Then in the second and third weeks, we put those poses into classes for specific purposes. It naturally progresses. It's not trying to learn a thousand things at once. It's hard work, learning new things.

Health Hats: When you say the life cycle: I've taken yoga for MS. Sometimes, you start standing or sitting in a chair and then you progress to what seems more complex. Is that what you're saying? The life cycle is what you can do and then as you get more limber and your balance improves.

Melissa Reynolds: Precisely. Most poses have, I hate to use the terms, beginner to advanced version.

Health Hats: I'm glad you hate to use those terms.

Melissa Reynolds: It's variation.

Health Hats: Life cycle is good.

Melissa Reynolds: You benefit from the pose; however it looks for you. I want to show the entire representation of it because you might be in one place today, but next week you might be in a different place. It's not linear. I go back and forth. If I try first thing in the morning, my poses do not look the same as if it's later in the day. I'm very stiff in the morning. So, we go through it and we say, here's how it can look, but let's give ourselves permission to play with it in our body. Here are the things to think of to keep it safe. But these poses have such variation. It's not necessarily about being advanced or anything. It's about using it for what you need. For example, you can do Forward Bend sitting in your chair or standing in front of your chair and using the chair. Or you can just fold down from standing or you could use a wall to help you balance. It's just learning to get into the pose and let it serve you, which seems like a very trite thing to say.

Health Hats: No, not at all. I think about the routines that I have and how I've progressed in my abilities. Some of the routine I have to maintain so that I don't progress, or I progress more slowly. Some are for my safety, and then some are for strength. Most of the impact of MS for me is on my lower extremities. I like that my upper extremities are getting stronger. It's nice to have something getting stronger. So, this program can be for people of any age, of any abilities, whatever level of pain they happen to be in now?

Melissa Reynolds: I've made it as accessible as possible, bearing in mind that the ideal way to make it personalized is to work with me directly. I can't give personal advice with the prerecorded videos. The idea is that you can use it wherever you're at. With chronic pain and fatigue, there's such a variation. Some people are always at high levels of pain. Some people vary. There are various stages within fibromyalgia and chronic pain and chronic fatigue. Plus, you have other things going on. Some people also have arthritis where their chronic pain comes from. Or there are other complexities. You can't say, "this is how you do yoga for chronic pain." Key is letting people see that they have choices, so there's never a push. They don't need to be aiming for anything. They need to listen to their body and do what jells with their body. What feels nice? For too long, we've been told you have to push yourself. You've got to get to this point. This is your goal. I'm sick of external goals I want to work on my own goals.

Health Hats: In basic learning or in habits, where I've come more recently, is what can I do every day or every other day that's within my capabilities, that isn't a stretch? I'm getting used to doing it every day. And it's fun to do. Having little successes regularly works for me.

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Recruiting students 16:49

I have a whole different question for you. Who refers to you? Is it by word of mouth, or are there professionals who refer to you? How do you get students?

Melissa Reynolds: It's tricky having an international audience. Connecting with professionals is a bit difficult. Mostly, it's word of mouth through people who have been following my journey. As I was doing my teacher training, all of my audience came along with me. I was sharing how it was going. I launched a course for the first time two weeks ago.

Health Hats: Oh, really? Is it that new?

Melissa Reynolds: My first students have come from people who've been following my journey and word of mouth. There are enough promises out there and marketing and advertising. So, I'd rather a friend say, "Hey, this thing has helped me, give it a go" than try and target people with ads, with promises of things.

Health Hats: It's a pace that's manageable. I know you're going to send me links and information for the show notes. I'm intrigued. My wife does yoga, and she goes a couple of blocks from us - community yoga. I'm intimidated and there's no way I would go. About ten years ago, when we first moved here, a friend of mine came to the house and coached me on some yoga. I never followed up with it. Not that I feel like I need something else because I feel like I have a good routine. But it felt good and I like the way you're talking about it. It makes sense.

Melissa Reynolds: All sorts of things are out there for all sorts of other illnesses. There's yoga for MS. But chronic pain and chronic fatigue aren't sexy. Nobody has programs for them. It's a little bit of a dream of mine to make it accessible and make it nice and share the tools. But also, to break it down. Yoga doesn't mean doing weird poses and looking like perfection on Instagram. Yoga is taking those tools and improving my life. Some tools have directly improved my life, not only because the tools feel good, but because I know the second I'm starting to feel bad, I've got things to do. I know I can do X, Y, and Z right now to feel a bit better. We need that.

Health Hats: We do need that. I'm running through my own list. It's great having more things in your toolbox.

Trying stuff that didn't work before 20:10

This question doesn't necessarily have to do with the yoga, but I've meant to ask you and I never emailed or texted you to ask. When we talked last time. One of the things that I thought was intriguing was that you had been journaling for years about what works for you. Yeah. And you had just started when we talk, so this was in July. You had just started, you're saying, well, I feel better. Things feel quieter in my system. And now I'm going back to some of the things that didn't work to see if they were working. And my question was, well, what have you discovered? What's that been like? I thought that was outstanding.

Melissa Reynolds: Really great. So, I got off amitriptyline, which I had been on for many, many years. The withdrawals are very bad. and then I started five HTP.

Health Hats: I don't know what that is. I've heard the first, but not the second. So, tell us a little bit about those meds.

Melissa Reynolds: Amitriptyline is a tricyclic antidepressant that, particularly here in New Zealand, when you get diagnosed, the doctor will throw you on it, and that's about all you'll get. It's meant to help sedate you a little bit so that you can get to sleep. It doesn't have very good side effects. It can help some people, but the effects generally wear off. Weaning off is not very fun.

Health Hats: You're hooked on it. Getting off is so miserable.

Melissa Reynolds: But I got off it. Because that is to do with serotonin because it's an antidepressant that you take in a lower dosage. I couldn't try 5-HTP, which is a supplement that, now you're digging into my brain here a little bit, but it creates serotonin in your brain somehow. Okay. I think that's a natural supplement, which has meant to help you sleep. It has been helping me. So, I'd much rather be taking medicine that you have to wean off. So that's been fun. Also, sleep is very fun.

Health Hats: Oh, no kidding.

Sleep routine 22:45

Melissa Reynolds: I've got a great sleep routine going. It's the five HTP, magnesium malate, low dose naltrexone, which we probably talked about before. Then I do my gentle bedtime yoga routine. The yoga routine I teach in the course is the routine I do myself. Then I do my body scan meditation, which again, I teach in the course, and then I pretty much go to sleep quickly and I'm sleeping for a few hour blocks now. I very rarely spend ages is awake in the night anymore. Sometimes I have trouble going back to sleep that mostly I do my body scan meditation and I have gone again. And that makes such a difference.

Health Hats: That's great. Good for you.

Melissa Reynolds: So those are the big things I have tried again.

Health Hats: Well, you inspire me.

Melissa Reynolds: Thank you.

Health Hats: So, what else? Anything you want to ask me?

Melissa Reynolds: Ask you? Are you keen to give it a go? Do you want to have a go at checking out my yoga?

Health Hats: I'm thinking about it.

Melissa Reynolds: I'll put you in that for, and I'd love to see you do it.

Health Hats: What the hell? Okay.

Melissa Reynolds: You know your body, so I know that you'll do what you need to do. And you'll avoid what you can't do. But do you know, I would so love your feedback because I want to improve the course because accessibility is my keyword, making sure it's accessible. Your feedback would be invaluable.

Health Hats: Alright. It's a deal. You'll send me the information, I'll put it in the show notes, and I'll take advantage of it myself.

Melissa Reynolds: Awesome. That'd be great.

Health Hats: It's great to see you. Great to talk to you.

Melissa Reynolds: You as well. Thank you for having me again.

Reflections 25:03

Melissa Reynolds, warrior, entrepreneur, connector, author, creative. Keyword: accessibility. Meet us where we are. Trust yourself. Honor your body in whatever circumstances you find yourself. Take small steps forward. Adjust as needed. Connect to others taking small steps. Share what works for you. No wonder she inspires me.