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Family Caregiving Made Lighter

Through Yoga and my Yoga Sangha

by Kim Fraser

This personal essay is a follow-up to my previously published article in the Spring 2021 *Yoga Bridge* “Yoga as a Self-care and Resilience-building Strategy for Family Caregivers.” In that article I shared who family caregivers are and ways yoga can support them through their family caregiving journey. In this personal essay I will share my experience with family caregiving and how yoga and my yoga *sangha*—my Yoga community—helped me support my husband through his prostate cancer diagnosis and treatment.

To recap, family caregivers are unpaid caregivers who provide care and support a loved one or friend. They may live with the one they care for, or not, and their caregiving journey may be acute, short-term, or go on for several years. Nearly one in three Canadians are family caregivers—that’s eight million of us.

My story began on September 18, 2019 when my husband was diagnosed with prostate cancer—the kind that 80% of men might have, but an aggressive type that only a small subset of men experience. September just happens to be prostate health month and each September approximately 1900 families will be forever changed with the words, “You have prostate cancer.” Ours certainly was. It threw us both into a whirlwind of unknowing and fear.

Like many family caregivers, I took on my caregiving role reluctantly. Of course, I wanted to do it. To be there for my husband, to be the strong one beside him—it was his body, his health, but he was also central to my life and our sons’ life. It affected every one of us, albeit differently. Although I kept repeating to myself that I didn’t want to be here, that I did not need the personal

experience of being a family caregiver, now that I was, I also knew I would do my best. I had just completed a book on family caregiving (Fraser, 2022, in press) and felt I was being put to the test, held to account as I was called to verify just how true was what I wrote. Would those things hold for me? I thought so but I would soon find out.

I wrote the book based on what others knew and shared with me, what I studied, and things I observed, not only with my mother—my father’s family caregiver, but also with the thousands of families I worked with over my career as a home care nurse and researcher. But now, I was the litmus test. Every concept I wrote about pinged my brain. The feelings—anger, fear, confusion, the waiting—for appointments, for the doctor, for lab results, for surgery bookings, for people to get back to you. Keeping my anxiety at bay through the search for information, accessing the best possible care, communicating effectively with health care professionals to get the information we needed, and dealing with the myriad of different sectors and care providers took a lot of my energy. Often, I wanted to scream. I had the chance to test every concept I wrote about. I had to face our “new normal,” following the initial recovery and follow up, along with the fears that arise every six months when it’s time for PSA testing again. I was thankful for my yoga practice over and over through this “new normal” as I came to accept that this “new normal” is only one aspect of our lives and knowing that, we can overcome anything that comes our way.

My family caregiving role was fast and furious. I didn’t have to “look after” my husband like someone does when they have a debilitating disease like MS—like my Dad had which

necessitated my Mom to be his full-time caregiver. My experience was different. I was always there for my husband, taking on the role of researcher, organizer, communicator, supporter, and of course directly caring for him during his hospitalization to remove his prostate and through his post-op recovery, but it wasn’t the relentless day-to-day caregiving that many caregivers like my mother experienced.

My role as supporter meant that I had to be strong. I was the one who tempered our fears, reviewed the literature, interpreted the treatment options as well as the doctor’s words, and kept my husband focused on a positive recovery. We were scared more so than any other time in our lives. He drew on his circle of friends for additional support—at the airport where he flies. I drew on mine to support me—my yoga community. Of course, we had our extended family out of province and our mutual friends, but we also needed to draw on our own circles. We had different needs.

The power of my *sangha*—my yoga community—kept me grounded. It was my place to check in with the outside world and do something I loved almost every day. The first thing I did was to tell people. In one of my regular classes, my yoga teacher always asked who needed prayers or positive thoughts so I was used to that. When she asked me if I wanted to draw on some of our yogic strength in the room with thoughts and prayers I immediately said yes. Normally, I am shy about such things and am quite private with family life, but I knew we needed all the love and support we could surround ourselves with. I told my husband about what I was doing to draw on support of my community as I encouraged him to keep talking to his friends and be open as he shared what he was going through with his friends—especially the ones he knew who already had prostate cancer and various procedures.

The support of others through tougher times can ease the burden. They can’t offer support if they don’t know. As I reflect on what I wrote in my book about self-care and in my previous article, there are many ways that yoga specifically helped me.

Stressors and challenges come from different places—external and internal. My external stress came from the diagnosis itself—understanding it, aiming ourselves with the best possible information and treatment options. Cancer

was new to me on a personal level, hearing “an aggressive type” was traumatic. The stress of not knowing how soon he would get the surgery, once we knew that was our only option was the most difficult part of the process. We were on a waiting list. Internally, we were well equipped. We both had healthy coping skills and are both highly resilient people. Knowing that perpetuated the belief that we would get through it. However, deep down I knew I also had to rely on others for support, just through sharing and talking, to get through it. I was called on to practice what I preach. Although that was a stretch for me it was worth the risk. I did not feel so alone. If we chose to be more insular and not share like we did, coping with the whole thing would have been harder.

Yoga and my yoga *sangha* were invaluable to me. My personal yoga practices—breathwork, asanas, and meditation—were all helpful. Moving through the asanas helped me focus on what I was doing in class. It was therapeutic for me to have my mind on my practice. While focusing on the postures and keeping my mind busy was beneficial, my whole body benefited from the movement. Physically maintaining and working on my strength, flexibility, and stamina was health promoting in and of itself. Because we had various appointments, sitting in waiting rooms, and were spending more time sitting with each other in the evenings, the asana part of yoga at least supported my physical body more than ever before. During the two full hospital days for surgery, I was sitting a lot. This was followed by more sitting while my husband was recovering at home. I was grateful for my healthy body.

I had noticed some years earlier that my breathing had more depth and breadth to it because of yoga. I often took deep breaths and sighed audibly because I loved how I could regain control over my nervous system. I regularly drew on that practice. Through the time of diagnosis, fear activated my body’s stress response—my heart was racing, my breathing became shallow, and my gut was acting up. During that time I was able to intentionally use breath work to calm my nervous system. I knew that if I could gain control over my body, then I could work to calm my mind as well. The power over our body, and the ways

the body can control our minds should not be underestimated.

Meditation also calmed me. It supported my stress management in general by allowing me to focus my thoughts, stay grounded in the present, and reaffirm my resiliency and self-awareness. In the case of guided meditations, they provided a restful and nourishing mental break from “what-if” thinking about of prostate, cancers, treatments, options and schedules.

The mental and emotional benefits of my yoga practice were as supportive as the physical part of my practice. Simply taking time on my mat gave me space for reflecting on both the cancer itself, as well as the impacts of the cancer on our lives. It helped me maintain a healthy—and reasonable—perspective and remind myself that this was only one part of our lives. Although it was an all-consuming part at the moment, I could see beyond it regardless of the outcome. I started to believe we could cope with anything and believed that all would be well again. I drew on the power of positive thinking—already a big part of my natural outlook, but something easy to forget in the face of such adversity.

Knowing I was practicing in a room with like-minded people who knew what I was going through was reassuring. Being in my own community, drawing on the strength from the collective energy of the room was comforting. Each day my teachers would ask about my husband as would many of those in my classes who I had come to know. A few women had gone through this with their husbands and they took time to share personal situations and experiences. The treatments, recovery, ages of men with prostate cancer vary, but hearing others’ stories was helpful.

I felt emotional support both by being in the studio with others and simply by being on my mat. Maintaining my practice through such a stressful time not only offered immediate benefits, but also long-term benefits. Because I continued my practice, even if I modified the frequency or intensity, I didn’t have to begin again with my routine. I didn’t have to build back up after an absence, because I never gave it up. While it is often challenging to maintain a usual routine through a change or a stressful period, I knew letting go of my yoga practice was not the right thing for me. The subtle but consistent benefits of moving

through familiar asanas, breathwork, meditations, and savasana were not lost on me. The permission I gave myself to just be present and not push myself through my practice was also applied off the mat and supported me in being more forgiving of myself at home.

Yoga reminds us that we are part of something much bigger. I carried that with me, or did it carry me?

Footnote 1: Sangha loosely translates to community and traditionally referred to a community of ordained monks or nuns. Thich Nhat Hanh, Vietnamese Buddhist monk and peace activist, called it a “beloved community.” A sangha is about the people in the group or community who are engaged with each other in service, offering joy, and sharing inspiration. It is the collective contribution of the whole group that build sangha. It doesn’t just happen when people gather—it is a special connectedness. Common words that come up when we discuss sangha are fellowship, brotherhood, spirit of support and togetherness, inspiration, learning, universal upliftment, of service to others, a willingness to join hands, energy, inclusivity, and of course community. Yoga is usually a solitary pursuit, but we don’t have to make the journey alone.

REFERENCE CITED:

Fraser, K. (in press). 2022. *The Accidental Caregiver: Challenges and Triumphs of Intimate Family Caregiving*. Sutherland House Publishers.

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