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Yoga as a Self-Care and Resilience-

Building Strategy for Family Caregivers

by Kim Fraser

Yoga is an accessible self-care strategy for family caregivers. It not only provides direct benefits like physical and mental health and overall improvements to quality of life more generally.

Nearly one in three of us are a family caregiver, creating an army of eight million family caregivers across Canada. If we were to replace the care they provide it would cost governments more than 66 billion dollars annually. One million family caregivers live in Alberta and many of them are experiencing multiple stressors on a daily basis.

In this article, I will describe caregivers and their challenges, how yoga can be used as a self-care and resilience building strategy. Although many readers of *Yoga Bridge* already have a yoga practice, not all do. I will outline the conceptualizations of yoga I use and then talk about how each concept relates to the aspects of our nature or well-being. I will address why it is an accessible and sustainable tool, and if one has the desire to embrace it, how family caregivers might commit to a practice that works for them including where to get started for those new to yoga.

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. Family caregivers vary in all sorts of ways including age, gender, or employment status. The care and support they provide may be things like getting their loved one to appointments and helping with groceries or yard work, but often it also includes personal care or health and medical treatments such as partial or

total assistance with bathing, dressing, toileting, or even wound care and assistance with range of motion.

Stressors and challenges family caregivers face come from both external and internal sources. External sources include things like how much care they provide, what kind of care they provide, and what other supports they have in their life. Internal stressors and challenges are things like how well a person copes with daily life, personal resilience, and coping skills. Stressors and challenges can affect any or all of the four aspects of our being: physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional/social. Yoga is one modality that can provide multiple strategies to promote well-being and health. It can support self-care and build resilience in family caregivers.

Yoga can be used as a self-care and resilience-building strategy that works beyond a yoga class or “off the mat”. A regular yoga practice is self-perpetuating in that it is a gift that keeps on giving, if you practice it in a way that works for you. Each of its three main concepts—breath, body, and mind—can be developed and used alone or in concert with each other.

A breath practice, pranayama, can be as simple as breathing consciously in and out or it can be comprised of a specific set of breathing exercises and routines that vary from simple to complex. In yoga we use the breath for a few reasons. A breath practice alone can help the body relax by regulating the parasympathetic nervous system which signals our body to calm. A simple inhalation repeating the word “long” in your head and exhaling to the word “calm” is a practice that will promote the relaxation response through the parasympathetic nervous



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system. A session or series might focus on one aspect of the physical body or move sequentially through the whole body.

Body work is movement, the asanas. It is moving through poses in a sequence over a period of time. Breath supports our movement and over time becomes a rhythmic practice in combination with movement, inhaling and exhaling with either contracting or relaxing muscles as we move in and out of poses. Through pranayama we move energy throughout a physical practice. The asanas bring movement that move blood, oxygen, nutrients throughout system and are also useful in clearing out toxins. Over time, we notice improvements to flexibility, strength and stamina, all of which are beneficial to caregivers. These benefits come from both asanas and pranayama, or movement and breathing. There may be safety implications or contra indications according to your own body and health status and as with all new activities it is advisable to get the go-ahead from a medical professional, your physician or health care practitioner. Qualified yoga teachers operate with safety in mind and often provide options and modifications so everybody can participate regardless of level of health or fitness.

Yogic practices for the mind include techniques like focusing, mindfulness, concentration, and meditation. Yoga classes are diverse with respect to how they approach mindfulness (as well as movement and breath work); different styles

of yoga focus on different aspects of yoga. The practice of yoga takes us inward. By focusing on the breath and body we learn mindfulness and concentration. Many yoga teachers offer guided meditations before, during or after the physical portion of the class and we begin to train our mind to focus, slow down, relax and concentrate. One thing for sure is that yoga can offer benefits to everybody—*every body*, at any age or stage of life.

As a self-care/resilience building strategy for family caregivers, regardless of the strength or type of practice, yoga is an accessible practice to all. Its benefits can affect any or all four aspects of our being—physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional/social. Not only is movement nourishing to our bodies, but it can help family caregivers be safe when they carry out chores they might not otherwise be responsible for in their household from physical care of a loved one, to shovelling snow or cutting the grass, and even running around doing errands and getting things done in a hurry because there seems to be little time.

The mental health benefits that come from slowing down, giving your mind time to focus on your own body ... yourself and your time on your mat. It might change the way you view the world, and help build resilience. Spiritual benefits also come from taking time out of your day to focus on yourself and reflect on your thoughts—everything from reflecting on your state of mind, where you fit in the world, to being guided through *sarvasam*—the short but nutritious rest at the end of a class or practice session complete with invitations to be where you are, to feel gratitude for all the things you have in your life and all the things that you don't. Emotional and social benefits grow from being both on your mat and by being in community with others, whether on line or in person. Emotional release can occur just by being in a practice. It is not uncommon for tears to arise, particularly if one is going through a challenging time. Everybody is different but everybody benefits. What that looks like for each of us varies depending on our needs, our practice, what we are seeking, and what we allow to come in.

The benefits of yoga for family caregivers are both immediate and long-term. For example, some are more obvious with a regular yoga practice such as increased strength, flexibility, and range of motion in joints. However, the less obvious and perhaps more important changes might be observed in the body and mind over the longer term as you learn to take your practice off your mat and into your daily life. Those subtle benefits that yoga offers come from the time you give yourself on your mat to slow down, to think, and to rest. Over time you might find the subtle changes improve your outlook and the way you view your own situation, offering you better ways to cope with negative situations. It doesn't mean that some of the challenges, losses, grief, and sadness go away or are negated in any way for what they are, but it might help you be more gentle and forgiving with yourself and all that you do as a caregiver.

My advice to family caregivers is to begin, start with baby steps, and do it regularly whether it is a bit of time every day, four times a week or twice a week. Commit to some small thing regularly until it becomes a habit you practice. It becomes a practice the same way you learn and build skills for anything new from learning how to cook a new dish, how to bathe someone in bed, or any number of other things.

Many types of fitness or body-work therapies are often expensive. It is not necessarily true that yoga is also expensive. It doesn't have to be. It doesn't even have to cost anything beyond access to the internet or the purchase of a book for self-study if that is your choice. If you choose a studio*, which I recommend for a variety of reasons, many offer a one week free access pass to try different classes. As well, there are various plans when you can choose what works for you from a punch pass, a set session, or a monthly unlimited pass. The point is there are a variety of ways to choose yoga.

If you choose a studio or a regular session, like a four or eight week series, yoga offers a community—a sense of belonging. Feeling a sense of community can help family caregivers feel less alone in an often isolating experience. It can

remind you that you are a mere cog in the wheel of a very big universe. This occurs whether you choose anonymity and prefer to focus on your practice or mat, or whether you create connections and choose to share aspects of yourself with others. Other options are to try yoga at home using the many tools available such as videos, books, or YouTube® channels that many yogis share publicly and freely. In Alberta, the Yoga Association of Alberta website provides a listing of YAA certified yoga teachers, the type and level of yoga they teach, where they are located in the province, and often their place of business (yoga.ca). Many yoga teachers offer one-on-one sessions online or in your home. One thing for sure is that there are many options and most yoga teachers love introducing beginners to yoga and provide a warm and welcoming environment.

Kim Fraser, a nursing professor, has practiced yoga for 12 years, studied family caregiving for over 20 years, and has authored over 80 scholarly articles. Her website is kimberlyfraserauthor.com and she can be reached at kim@kimberlyfraserauthor.com

**Bridge Note: Studio or in-person classes have been in most cases postponed during the pandemic restrictions. Many are providing online, zoom-style programs. Check with the provider of your choice for when in-person classes will resume.*

