

Yoga after a mastectomy

By Corinne Doret



In February 2006 M.M. began private sessions with me to assist with further recovery from a mastectomy (removal of the breast) she'd had 6 months earlier. Her sister accompanied her and participated in all the sessions.

Our first session started on the 17th of February and concluded 4 months later in June when M.M. was ready to start group classes. The photos were taken in May when much mobility was restored to the parts which had been affected by surgery.

Our initial focus was to bring mental, physical and emotional ease with a simple practice that emphasized relaxation, visualisation and breathing. The asana and breathing practice was aimed at gently stretching the armpit chest to restore range of movement and increase circulation as well as to regain strength. Stretches to release tension in other parts of the body were also included.

All asanas used props to support the body and were performed slowly with conscious breathing. Each week we worked on progressing to more and deeper poses as well as reducing support. Our aim was for M.M. to acquire enough strength, movement in the upper trunk and arms, and gain confidence to attend group classes. This would allow her to continue to benefit from her practice in a more independent way.

Just like my sessions with Celine (Practice for a degenerative spine, March 2015), much of the practice was prepared & altered from week to week according to M.M.'s feedback within the session, and from the outcome of the previous session. So the weekly progression listed below was developed specifically for M.M. The chart sequence that follows does not represent the progression through the four months of our private sessions.

CAUTION: Please note that this is only a quick reference with basic instructions on body alignment and positioning for props. This sequence was developed for the needs of M.M. This chart is thus intended for students with a regular yoga practice and who are already familiar with the poses in this content. Please proceed with caution, have full knowledge of your condition, and seek expert guidance.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: I would like to thank M.M. and her sister J.T. for giving me the opportunity to assist them with providing yoga support, for so willingly trust and give themselves to the practice and at the same time remaining engaged. Also to thank both of them to allow me to use the photos.

17 February | week 1 & 2

Reclined on bolster: 1 blanket under head, 1 bolster under knees, arms supported with x2 blankets

- Deep Breathing with arms on side x 8 breaths
- Deep Breathing arms above head elbows bent x 8 breaths

Crossed Legged Forward Release on Bolster

Seated Crossed Legged on blanket (back to wall)

- Inhale extend arms above head, exhale arms down x 5 breaths (arms backing the wall)

Seated Crossed Legged away from wall

1. Arms bent elbow align with shoulders. Palms facing forward. Inhale arms to side, exhale arms front of face. Repeat x 5 breaths
2. Head movements
3. Extend arms up above head one at a time. Extend through fingers
4. Extend both arms up above head
5. Forward release on bolster
6. Upwards arm stretch
7. Hands behind head
8. Forward release on bolster
9. Savasana: blanket under back, head and arms

Week 3

Reclined on bolster: Breathing practice same as last week

Crossed Legged Forward Release on Bolster

In addition to some practice of last week:

1. Seated crossed legged. Interlock fingers & stretch arms above head
2. Twist in Dandasana (seated straight leg)
3. Bridge in motion. Alternate arms then both arms
4. Lying twist
5. Savasana: blanket under back, head and arms

Week 4

Repeated week one with no upper stretches

Seated Crossed Legged

1. Side stretch with arms down (variation)

Week 5

Reclined on bolster: Breathing practice same as last week

Lying twist on floor

Seated Crossed Legged

1. Reclined angle with bolster across mat
2. Forward release on bolster
3. Twist
4. Side stretch
5. Head movements

1. Sacrum on bolster (across mat), one knee up to chest. 5 breaths each side
2. Lying twist on bolster

Supported Savasana

Week 6

Reclined on bolster: Breathing practice same as last week

1. Release forward on bolster in wide angle (leg straight spread)
2. Baradvajasan (easy twist) on bolster
3. Forward release, both leg straight with bolster on legs
4. Crossed legged side stretch
5. Child on bolster
6. Upper back stretch with bolster across mat under the blades (legs straight)
7. Middle back stretch with bolster across mat under the mid back (legs in angle)
8. One knee to chest with bolster across mat under hips (leg straight)
9. Lying twist on floor

Supported Savasana

Week 7, 8 & 9

Continued with similar practice as previous weeks

Week 10

Reclined on bolster for our breathing practice

- 1 support for arms removed, we used only 1 folded blanket under each arm

Continued with similar practice as previous weeks

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Week 11

Reclined on bolster for breathing practice

1. Reclined angle pose on bolster
2. Knees bent and arms folded above head

Continued with similar practice as previous weeks

Legs up the wall

1. Supported leg to wall
2. Supported wide angle to wall
3. Lying twist on bolster

Seated

1. Dandasana
2. Crossed legged forward release on bolster
3. Half hero, hands on hips
4. Marichi I on bolster. Hands on bolster

Reclined

1. Bridge in motion (up & down)
2. Supported backbend with bolster

Child on bolster

Savasana

Week 12

1. Breathing sequence on bolster
2. Crossed legged forward release on bolster
3. Seated wide angle
4. Seated crossed legged twist
5. Dandasana
6. **Standing:** upwards stretch with arm variations
7. Triangle pose with hand on hip
8. Extended triangle (one knee bent) hand on hip
9. Wide angle standing forward pose. Hands on blocks
10. **Sitting:** dandasana
11. Crossed legged twist
12. Bridge in motion
13. Supported backbend on bolster
14. Child on bolster

Savasana

Week 13

Added practice:

- Supported revolved triangle
- Supported Shoulderstand
- Bridge (with chest lift)

Week 14 & 15

We removed the arm support for the reclined pose (breathing practice)

- Neck kept in neutral

Added practice:

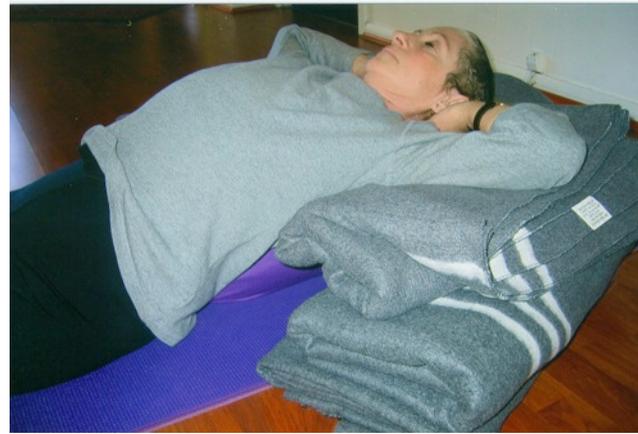
- Cobra & Downdog with blocks

Week 16 (4 months from 1st session)

This was our last private session. M.M. started group classes at Beginners level.

Added practice:

- Standing forward bend at wall



Deep Breathing Practice (8 breaths)

Reclined on bolster, 1 folded blanket under the head, 2 folded blankets for each arm. (At the beginning we also had a bolster under the knees). Palms down to lessen pectoral stretch.

- To promote a relaxed state
- To initiate gentle stretching of upper trunk
- To increase energy level

Deep Breathing Practice (8 breaths)

Reclined on bolster, 1 blanket under the head, additional blankets for each arm. (At the beginning we bent the knees to lessen side trunk stretch)

- To continue gentle stretching of upper trunk in a relaxed state

Crossed Legs Forward Bend

Head to right 4 breaths
Head to left 4 breaths

- To release shoulders and armpit chest



Back, neck, hips & leg stretches

1. Gentle stretch to back, chest, shoulders and neck: 3 breaths each side
2. Forward release for back and shoulders. Gentle stretch to hips and legs:
3. Forward release for back and shoulders. Gentle stretch to hips and legs

Head to right 3 breaths, repeat left.



Shoulders & Chest Stretch (4 breaths)

Move to your level of comfort, never over stretch, pain should never be experienced.

Slow conscious breathing helps increase inward focus, being present to how your body is responding to the stretches, and it continues to promote a relaxed state.

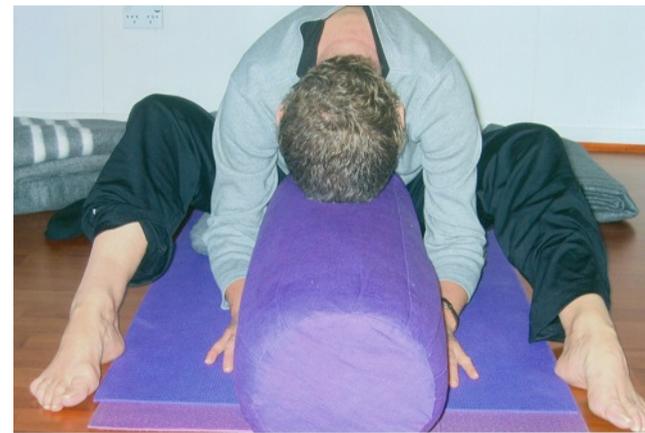


Shoulders & Chest Stretch (4 breaths)

Arms/hands Variation



Shoulders & Chest Side Stretch (4 breaths on each side)



Forward release (4 to 6 breaths)

- Shoulder release
- Back, leg & hip stretch



Shoulders & Chest Stretch (8 breaths or more)

The head is lightly tilted back. The head position should be adjusted so that:

1. The neck must feel supported and long
2. The shoulders must be away from the ears
3. There is no tension in the upper thoracic/neck region
4. Palms down to lessen pectoral stretch



Middle Back Stretch (8 breaths or more)

- The shoulders/arms/head are supported with a bolster to lessen the armpit chest stretch
- The hands are placed under the head



Pelvis & Thigh Stretch (8 breaths or more)

The bolster is placed under the hips. Adjust so that there is comfort.

- Legs are straight
- Extend through the heels



Thigh Stretch (4 breaths each side)

- Extend straight leg through the heel



Back Leg & Lower Back Stretch

You can stay as long as it is comfortable. Minimum 1 minute.
The bolster is placed under the lower back.

- The pelvis should be up enough so that the weight comes towards the knees.
- The pose should be effortless, the body limp.
- Palms are turned up



Back Leg, Lower Back & Hips Stretch (4 breaths on each side)

From above (1) bring your legs to the side coming to a twist

- The bottom hips should be on the bolster
- The pose should be effortless, the body limp.
- The opposite arm/hand is placed to comfort (arm straight or bent, palms up or down)



Supported Child Pose

Gentle release forward. You can stay as long as it is comfortable.

Adjust so no tension is experienced in the body.