

## Patricia Sanzone:

# A Position of Strength

How one breast cancer survivor used her love of yoga to help others



Sanzone with one of her longtime students, breast cancer survivor Kendall Carter.

**S**even years ago, at the age of 42, Patricia Sanzone was diagnosed with breast cancer. A certified yoga therapist in New York, she underwent a rigorous course of treatment that included two breast surgeries, chemotherapy, and radiation.

The treatments made her very ill; after each bout of chemo, she had to be hospitalized because her white blood cell count plummeted. Sanzone, whose partner is yoga therapist Andrew Sugerman, experienced those difficult months as a time of deep personal reflection. Sanzone

recalls, “My ordeal led me to begin a personal healing journey.”

As fate would have it, her challenge would become, for many others, a ray of light.

### Creating a safe space

While undergoing treatment, Sanzone decided to do all she could to improve the lives of others affected by cancer. “I made a commitment that, through yoga, I would try to create a safe space where people could feel calmer, more emotionally stable, and at peace,” she says. “Healing happens when there is a profound con-

nection between two people, and when the student feels that the teacher deeply cares.”

She didn't have to wait long to act on her commitment. One of her students told her about a young woman battling ovarian cancer. Sanzone gave

the young woman free, private yoga sessions—then cast a wider net.

Soon, her students and her personal healthcare providers began referring people, and now Sanzone's private practice consists mainly of people who are either in treatment for cancer or are in remission.

Her students learn simple, gentle movements coordinated with breathing. When she's working with breast cancer patients whose surgery involves removal of the lymph nodes, Sanzone teaches movements that can help improve range of motion in the arm.

But this yoga teacher's work is more than just physical. In her sessions, she often incorporates words like *peace*, *love*, *calm*, and *trust*. And chanting, says Sanzone, can be especially powerful. "After chanting, my patients often feel more open and willing to share their life stories."

As a result, her sessions are often filled with tears—and also laughter and hope. And Sanzone is "present" and moved by all of it. "My job is not to cure," she says, "but to witness and listen."

In addition to running her private practice, Sanzone has also held special group classes

and donated the proceeds to various cancer-related groups, including City of Hope, CancerCare, and the Make-A-Wish Foundation. She has also given free yoga classes to children with cancer and their siblings at Ronald McDonald House, and has just received a grant to teach yoga to the parents of these children.

### Offering inspiration

To people who know her casually, she may simply be a yoga teacher whose clients include many cancer survivors. But to her clients, Sanzone represents much more. "Many of my students see me as a person who has survived," she says. "They see that I have vitality and that I'm healthy and thriving. They find inspiration in that!"

"When a patient in treatment works with a teacher like Patricia Sanzone, who's been through the same thing, there's an immediate connection," confirms Ooi-Thye Chong, RN. She has referred several clients to Sanzone. "Appropriately taught, yoga is a very healing therapy," adds Chong, who is also the manager of the Complementary Therapies Program at St. Vincent's Comprehensive Cancer Center in Manhattan. "A sympathetic and empathetic teacher," she adds, "can

help patients access their own healing power."

At what point should a cancer patient consider yoga? "First, you need to consider your health status," says Chong. For safety's sake, anyone who's been diagnosed with cancer should first speak to his or her oncologist before starting any exercise program, including yoga. She also recommends gentle yoga, and thinks it's preferable to work with a certified yoga teacher in a one-on-one setting because group classes are generally not customized to specific health needs.

Today, Sanzone believes that her illness was a blessing in disguise. "That was truly the first time I'd ever felt vulnerable," she notes. Although she does not have children, Sanzone has always considered herself a caregiver. "What I had to learn," she says, "is how to allow myself to receive care from my family and friends." It's important, she stresses, for anyone facing life-threatening health challenges to feel okay about expressing their need for care and nurturing. Sanzone also views her illness as a beacon because of where it has led her. "My work," she concludes, "is incredibly rewarding." 🧘

—Coeli Carr

## Getting to Om

If you're considering yoga, it's important to find a good teacher. There are many yoga teachers, but not all are certified. Being certified means the instructor has studied for a certain number of hours under the supervision of a reputable organization.

Although there are no specific credentials for working with cancer survivors, a credentialed teacher often has the knowledge and willingness to address such special needs.

If you decide to try yoga, be a bit cautious. It may be difficult to keep up the pace in a group class, especially if you're tired from chemotherapy and radiation. For that reason, you may want to consider some individual

sessions, suggests Ooi-Thye Chong, RN, manager of the Complementary Therapies Program at St. Vincent's Comprehensive Cancer Center in Manhattan.

So check with your oncologist first, and if you get the green light, be realistic about how much your body can do at the beginning. Also be sure to discuss your current health status with your yoga teacher before getting down on your mat.

Good websites for locating yoga instructors or classes in your community include [www.yogaalliance.org](http://www.yogaalliance.org), [www.yoga.com](http://www.yoga.com), [www.yogafinder.com](http://www.yogafinder.com), and [www.iayt.org](http://www.iayt.org).

Patricia Sanzone's website can be found at [www.artofbreathing.com](http://www.artofbreathing.com).