



Beat fatigue with yoga

Guest: Fiona Agombar

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Alex Howard - [00:00:15]

Welcome, everyone to this interview, where I'm very happy to be talking to a good friend. And when I say an old friend of mine, it's not a comment on either of our age, it's just the fact we've known each other for 20 years.

Fiona Agombar, firstly, welcome, Fiona. Thank you for joining me.

Fiona Agombar

I don't mind if it's about my age too, Alex, because that's fine, but it's lovely to be with you. Thank you.

Alex Howard

It's a pleasure to have you here.

So in this interview we're going to be talking about really how yoga can be a huge support to people experiencing fatigue, long-COVID, ME/chronic fatigue, really that whole collection of fatigue related conditions.

Just to give people a little bit of Fiona's background, Fiona put in her bio, and I really like this, she's a rest activist. I hadn't heard that term before. I thought it was really good. She's also a yoga teacher of several decades experience. She's the author of several books, *Beat Fatigue with Yoga*, and more recently, *Yoga Therapy for Stress, Burnout and Chronic Fatigue Syndrome*, which I was very privileged to write the foreword for.

Fiona runs online classes on Zoom a couple of times a week, which are by donations. So it's a great way for people to practice in a group and to work with Fiona in that way. Fiona also runs a successful teacher training program and she's part of the steering committee set up by Westminster University to investigate yoga as an intervention for long-COVID. And I know, Fiona, you've been doing a lot of work in the last year or two, particularly with people with long-COVID using yoga.

But I'd like to go back a few decades because, Fiona, I know your own interest in this area was from some of your own personal journey. So maybe you can say a little bit about how you discovered yoga and the support that it was for you back at that time.

Fiona Agombar - [00:02:13]

Yes. Well, I used to run a busy public relations business in the late 80s and early 90s, and then I was struck down by a mysterious viral illness, which, I think from blood tests, it was actually glandular fever. But I carried on pushing myself and working and I wasn't resting. I wasn't feeling well. I went to my GP and she just said, "Take more exercise". There was no advice given about rest. And so I kind of pushed through and I eventually became so ill that I ended up in hospital for 3 months, and I was also in a wheelchair. And I was eventually diagnosed with ME. And in the 90s it was very much a mysterious illness. We were called malingerers, we were called quite unpleasant names.

Alex Howard

We were called quite a lot of things back in those days.

Fiona Agombar

There wasn't much help out there.

And then my story was, I think it was around 1993/94, I was walking in my village, when I was well enough to go in, and I bumped into my local yoga teacher, a wonderful woman called Angela Stevens. And she said, I've come across a few people like you with this mysterious, terrible fatigue that you've had, and I'm going to set up, what she called it then, a remedial class. So she set up a remedial class in her home with about five of us, and I immediately started to feel different.

So the two things that made a huge difference to me were that I started to connect with my body, and I realized that I had been completely disconnected from my body for various reasons, including trauma. And also I started to learn to breathe properly. And then there was more of the spiritual side as well that Angela used to talk about, how we are the real self, as opposed to all the experiences and changing thoughts and emotions. I mean, that's maybe something a little bit different and a bit more esoteric, but that was of interest to me.

And then very gradually, I started to recover. And I was so enthusiastic about yoga that I wrote a book, which I got commissioned. I was lucky enough to get commissioned. So that was around 1997, I started writing *Beat Fatigue with Yoga*, and that came out in 1999, and that just spoke to so many people.

And then in 2004 I left my husband. And I think you were very much supporting me at that time, Alex. That's when I met you. And that was part of my journey of recovery because I had been in a very stressful relationship, and I think if we are looking at fatigue, we have to consider mind, body, spirit, emotions. Everything is part of the parcel. So that was a strand in my recovery, was actually getting out of an unhealthy relationship.

And then I was really well for 7 years. I did a lot of traveling. I spent a lot of time in India. I trained further as a yoga teacher. But then unfortunately, in 2011 I got a tick bite, and I developed Lyme disease, which brought up the chronic fatigue again. And now I'm very much better. But I always say that I live successfully with Lyme, so I still have to pace myself. I still have to eat a very sensible, healthy diet. And I do yoga, of course, every day. So, that's kind of where I'm at now.

Alex Howard

Wonderful. Thank you. And I think it brings into the next piece I wanted to explore, because I think a lot of people have ideas of yoga which are not really yoga in the way that you and I might recognize

yoga. Ideas of perfect bodied people on Instagram doing poses that I don't think you and I are going to get into. But there's this sense of this yoga being about posture or Asana practice, that, that is what yoga is. And I know that to many of us, and ultimately in yoga's true to heart, it's so much more than that. So perhaps you could say a little bit about, when we talk about yoga, what are we actually talking about?

Fiona Agombar - [00:06:38]

So, if we go back to the Yoga Sutras, which I teach in the Krishnamacharya Tradition. So our tradition is very much focused around the Yoga Sutras as the sacred texts which help to give the foundation for yoga. And Asana, or the postures, are only mentioned twice in the Yoga Sutras.

So the Yoga Sutras explain yoga. And I'm kind of giving a very broad translation here, is that yoga happens when the mind becomes quiet. So we can think of yoga as being about having a peaceful mind. But my teacher, who's in Chennai, always describes yoga as also being about how energy or Prana flows around the body. And that does not necessarily mean that we need to do Asana practice to do that.

So I'm now a yoga therapist as well as a yoga teacher. And it's always said in yoga therapy that the most important tools are the most subtle ones. So we use tools such as breathing, mantra, Nyasa, which is hand placement. There's all kinds of other things we use in yoga therapy which are not based around doing complicated, difficult postures.

And I think this is really important because I get a lot of people with ME, long-COVID, who think, well, I'm too ill, I can't do yoga, because they misunderstand what it is, because unfortunately, many teachers, there's been this cultural misappropriation, really. Westerners have really made it something that's very physical and very dynamic. So I'm very keen to take yoga back to its roots because that can empower and heal people if it's taught in a certain way, I think.

Alex Howard

And I think in many ways popularization of yoga has been a wonderful thing because many more people have discovered it. But it does seem to, as we were saying before we started recording, it does seem to have changed often what, there's a lot of people teaching yoga and doing yoga that perhaps are not overly fixated on that physical element. And I know that, as you touched on, in the work that you're doing, there's a whole way of being with one's body in a sense that is part of what changes. As opposed to the mind determining what the body is going to do, it's actually shifting that relationship with one's body.

Fiona Agombar

Yes. So I would talk about that shifting the relationship to the heart. And the heart in yoga is where it's said our true self resides. And it's that feeling of the connection of instinct and, I'm trying to think of the right word here. It's our inner knowing, really. So that the mind tells us all kinds of stories and is very much affected by our conditioning and all those patterns that we've grown up with, but the heart is the true self, which is intuition, that's the right word I want, which gives the intuition.

So what I'm suddenly trying to do in the classes I teach, is to bring people back to their own knowing, their own intuition, because that then helps with the healing process, because then we're not, for example, trying to keep up or drive or push or strive or be at one with the current society. We're much more mindful about listening to what the heart is telling us.

Alex Howard - [00:10:00]

And then there's something also around... I love that phrase, "rest activist". There's something about understanding the importance of not just physical rest, but also mental and emotional rest, that often people with fatigue, of course they're resting a lot, they're having to rest because they haven't got energy to do things, but it doesn't necessarily mean it's the depth of rest that's needed, right?

Fiona Agombar

No. And that's very well observed, because to actually get proper rest can be quite difficult. But yoga has some wonderful techniques, such as breathing practices or yoga nidra, which I use quite a lot in my class. So I think that deep, deep rest is a really important element of healing.

And I think, again, there's this kind of misnomer that in yoga, that if you are fatigued, you should actually hype the body up and hyper stimulate it, which is actually the wrong way around, because what we want to be doing is to be calming down the central nervous system. So if we can get people into this state of deep, deep rest using these techniques, that's when the magic really happens. So that's something that I introduce in my classes, but also, when I call myself a rest activist, it's because we live in a society, and I mean, I think things are changing, but we live in a society where we are very much pushed to be by achieving. It's all about what I earn and what I have and what I can do in the future, rather than being here now. So this idea of stopping and resting and that I'm all right, actually as I am, even if I'm really tired, even if I'm fatigued, even if I'm sick, I'm still a worthy person.

These are not the messages of our current society. Again, this is something that I'm trying to teach. Actually, we are okay as we are, and we don't have to keep continuously striving or stride in order to fit in.

Alex Howard

And I think, certainly my experience with yoga over the years has been that it's one of the most helpful ways to really realign my mind and my emotions and my physical body, and also to be in touch with actually how I feel. If I myself think about what you were saying about leaving your husband, and there's something around to make a decision like that and to be able to act on that, my memory of that time, it was partly you'd got so much more deeply in touch with yourself that that was a truth that you had to honor and you had to listen to. But yoga was a very powerful part of the journey to that place.

Fiona Agombar

Well, that's absolutely right. It was very much a heart message, but it's also a difficult one. Because often when we get these heart insights it takes an awful lot of courage to act on them because the mind or the ego is usually telling us the opposite. But actually, unless we pay attention to these messages of the heart, we are going to create a lot more suffering for ourselves.

But you're absolutely right. It was doing yoga and meditation and resting and breathing, using these kinds of tools and getting more in touch with my body, when this truth came to me. And also at the same time, I'd been on an awful lot of medication. I'd been on heavy antidepressants in the late 90s. So it was only yoga that helped me to begin to dial down my medication. And then when I stopped the medication again, my heart was able to speak much more clearly because it wasn't being fuddled by the antidepressants. So this listening to the heart, I think we'd have a much more beautiful world if we could all listen to the heart rather than just messages of the mind.

Alex Howard - [00:14:05]

Yes. And even when our minds disagree with others, if we can do it from a heart holding place, of course it's a different type of dialogue and contact.

You mentioned pranayama a little bit earlier in terms of the breathing element of yoga, perhaps you could speak a little bit to how that can be helpful with fatigue.

Fiona Agombar

Yes. Well, prana very roughly translates as energy or universal life force. And as I said before, yoga is about the flow of prana. One of the main ways that we help prana to flow is through pranayama, which means the conscious direction of prana.

And when I trained before COVID, I would use certain techniques such as Nadi Shodhana or alternate nostril breath or different breathing techniques, because you can create different states of being by how you breathe. So, for example, if you lengthen the exhalation, you can calm down the central nervous system. If you put more focus on the pause after the inhalation, you can actually rev things up. So there are all kinds of ways you can play about with the breath.

However, when COVID happened and when I started teaching on Zoom, I realized very quickly that most people were extremely stressed and fearful and overwhelmed and burnt out. And I actually had to kind of drop all the techniques that I had previously learned and go right back to basics. So many of the people I work with are in sympathetic nervous system overload, which I know you know what that means. They're in fight and flight, they're running the stress response. They are hyperventilating. So I'm going back to basics, actually getting people to breathe through the nose and to breathe more slowly and to breathe from the diaphragm. So instead of this chest breathing, maybe through the mouth that we quite often see when people are stressed, I'm just getting them to calm everything down because that's what so many people need.

And also there's this misnomer in yoga, and many yoga teachers think that we need to be breathing more deeply. But actually what we're aiming to do is to increase the uptake of oxygen to the cells, to the mitochondria, or in yoga we talk about increasing prana. So to do that, we need to be breathing, I would say, slow and low. So it's still from the diaphragm, but it's not over breathing. We're not breathing too deeply. It's this idea of slow and low to help increase prana.

And then when we're talking about pranayama, the other aspect in yoga, there's a word called granthis, which makes me rather snicker, but it means restrictions. So the other thing in yoga is we're seeking, through pranayama practice or breathing practice, to reduce or release or soften the restrictions that might be there, which might be preventing us healing.

And this can be on a physical level. So for example, we might have a tight jaw, tight eyes, tight shoulders, tight hips, or there might be emotional blocks. Or it can be on the pranic level, the energetic body, which is where actually if we work on pranayama, it helps all levels of being. But as I say, I'm bringing it right back to something very simple at the moment.

I'm also using quite a lot of what's called coherent breathing, or in yoga we'd call that Samana. So that would be equal inhale and equal exhale. So it's just trying to get people back to healthy breathing because I think everybody is hyperventilating at the moment, because everybody is so anxious because of the pandemic. And as you know, Alex, because I know you're an expert on this, if you've had chronic anxiety, because you've been sent messages of fear, as we all have with the pandemic,

it's very difficult to get out of that because that then becomes a habit, because the hypothalamus, the amygdala, becomes super sensitized. I think it's called limbic kindling. So I see so much of this. So what I am aiming for in my yoga practices is just to dial all this down, to calm everything down.

Alex Howard - [00:18:35]

I think also, one of the ways that I think about it is, you can't think your way to a feeling of calmness or safety. It's like the more activated we get, the more our mind goes, the more we try to think our way, but we just go further down the rabbit holes of those anxiety patterns. And there's something about coming back to the breath, or indeed using the breath as a practice, which really does have an impact on shifting the state that our system is in, right?

Fiona Agombar

Yes, absolutely. It would be wonderful if we could just say calm down, and do it. But you're right. That's the mental thing. "Calm down dear". Obviously, I'm a yoga teacher so I've got bias, but I think yoga tools are so brilliant at helping us with a stress response and consequently with fatigue, because when we can calm down stress, we can begin to get our energy levels back again, by resting, by breathing.

And speaking personally, I've had a lot of change in the last 2 years. I've moved several times. I'm now living in Spain. I've been through a bereavement. So I still do my breathing practice three times a day. And I do a deep yoga nidra every day if I can, because that really supports me. So I do know that these yoga tools do work and are very valuable.

Alex Howard

You mentioned yoga nidra a couple of times, just for people that haven't heard that name, what is that and say a bit about some of the benefits of yoga nidra.

Fiona Agombar

So the word 'nidra' is used in the Yoga Sutras, meaning sleep, sometimes describes a psychic sleep. It can also be translated as a way of going to Samadhi or more towards enlightenment, but that's not what we're using it for. So I'm using it for the purpose of very deep relaxation.

So it's a method where the person doing the practice lies down, if possible. I mean, it can be done from sitting. And then the attention is very slowly rotated around the body. So you become almost into a kind of trance-like state. And then there are certain images that can be given just to help to deeply relax the whole being. But it also leads us to a state of witness. So we kind of become the witness in consciousness. I usually don't take the yoga nidras very deeply with my classes because you have to be careful with them in case somebody has mentioned something that triggers trauma. So I always use quite bland practices. But if you are going deep, you might, for example, experiment with pairs of opposites, like feeling cold and feeling warm, feeling heavy then feeling light.

And the idea is that you're witnessing this and in this witness state you're seeing how experiences come and go, that things change, but there's something that always remains the same. We would call it the Atman or different translations, or in the tantra it'd be called the self, the true self is always in the state of watching or something even beyond that. But experiences come and go, so we don't need to attach too much to them. But having said that, the main purpose of the way I teach it is just to help people to relax very deeply.

Alex Howard - [00:22:06]

Yeah, great. So we talked a bit about pranayama or the breathing practice, we talked about yoga nidra, let's talk a little bit around postures and how people approach those. Because I think, again, one of the challenges can be that people have an idea of what they think they should be able to do, and it's often the case that people try to recover from fatigue with the same psychology that played a path to them getting fatigue in the first place. If someone's got a strong achiever pattern, for example, the tendency is to see yoga as another thing they have to push themselves and achieve at. So how should someone, particularly if fatigue is a key part of what they're working with, before we talk about any kinds of sequences or postures, how should they approach that in the first place?

Fiona Agombar

So when I teach I am aware that people are very often in that achiever pattern because it's so common. I have it myself. So I'm there. But throughout the class I'm reminding people that you're not competing, that you've got to listen to the body, that you're not striving. This isn't about trying. And that if you can't do something, again it's about listening to your heart rather than your mind. So the mind says, yes, you should be doing this. You could do this last week or somebody else can do this, but the heart is saying, no actually, I'm a bit tired today. I'll just rest out. So I'm very much about encouraging people to listen to their body, to honor their fatigue, to not fight it, to accept it. We move so gently in the class anyway, but to only move as and when it feels right for them.

And it's interesting because when I started the Zoom classes at the beginning of the pandemic, I was teaching more asana and I was even doing some standing postures. But then very quickly, because I set up a Facebook group and I was getting feedback from the students that actually said, "Could you please not do standing postures? And could you maybe do less movement more?". And then I realized that, yes, because there are other teachers teaching more movement if people need it. But this idea of breathing and relaxation and very gentle movement is really needed.

But I mean, above all, to answer your question, what I'm trying to help people with is to have a sense of their own agency. What I'm always saying at the beginning of the class is that what I am saying is not an instruction, it's a suggestion. And that what you feel is much more important than what I'm saying. And that indeed you take this off the mat because you are learning to listen to your body and your instinct rather than to all the messages that we are getting externally. So it's about reclaiming agency. And as we both know, if you've had severe trauma or fatigue, that's one of the first things that goes, is you lose the sense of who you are and you lose that agency.

Alex Howard

Yeah, it's funny, I'm just remembering that when I first started doing yoga 25 years ago I think now, and I had, as you know, ME/chronic fatigue at the time. And I used to go to these classes where, we're talking about 1997/1998 here or something, and I was the only guy in the class and I was the only person below 50 in the class. The thing that was really hard was I couldn't do what everyone else could do. And as a 18 year old kid with these, in my eyes, 'old women', which of course someone in their 40s now will see that very differently, but at that point to be the one having to lie in savasana and rest while they were doing sequences, was on one hand very challenging, because it was the opposite of what my achiever pattern wanted to do.

But it was also very valuable because it taught me a wider lesson about listening to my body and what I need being more important than what everyone else is necessarily doing. And it isn't always

easy, but in a sense it's almost the harder we find that, the more value there's going to be in learning that lesson. Certainly that was my experience.

Fiona Agombar - [00:26:25]

Yes. And I think, particularly if you've got ME or long-COVID, we have this very important lesson of learning to pace. And everybody who has had ME, long-COVID, or like myself, Lyme, will admit that pacing is maybe one of the hardest things. But this is what I'm trying to share in the yoga sessions, that we might do a little bit of very gentle activity, then we rest and we recalibrate, and then we might do a bit more, and then we rest. So this is all about learning, as you say, to not compete, not strive, not push, but just listening to the body and learn to pace. And I think yoga is so valuable if it's taught in a particular way, it really can put that message across. And it's brilliant that you got that back in the 90s too.

Alex Howard

It was. I had to relearn the lesson a few times over the years. But for me one of the other real benefits of yoga, and I think, again, it's a helpful, sometimes mind shift, is that I can spend a day in meetings at my desk or a meeting room or whatever, and not really move my body all day. And at the end of the day I can be tired and think what I want to do is go and soak in a bath or flop on the sofa or whatever, but actually I need to move my body to be able to rest my body. It's like there's so much tension and trapped energy in the system that actually be that going for a walk or going to the gym or going for a swim or doing yoga, in what we're talking about here, that movement can actually allow that deeper rest and it can actually allow our system to flow much more easily. And I think sometimes that can be a surprise for people.

Fiona Agombar

I think, of course, that's true, which is why we put the relaxation at the end of the class because that's when people have moved, but equally if people have got severe ME or long-COVID, we have to be very cautious about how we use this word 'move'.

Because actually interestingly I run a Facebook group and there's a big controversy at the moment because *The Guardian* have just published an article on long-COVID and movement, and some of the group were quite angry saying, no, they're promoting exercise and this is completely not going to help long-COVID. Some of the groups feel quite strongly. So I think when we talk about moving, yes, we do need to move, but it also depends where we are in our recovery. Which is why actually in yoga, in yoga therapy, we teach one to one because it's actually easier to give an individual practice for somebody depending where they're at.

But this is where it comes back to listening to the body again. Because in your recovery it might be that you need complete rest and you can't move a lot. On the other hand, you might be somewhere where you are recovering and you can do gentle walking or you can begin to join a class that's more dynamic with yoga. So it's always just listening in and knowing where you're at.

But equally, it's not pushing the idea of movement too much because I have just seen with some of the long-COVID clinics within the NHS, that they have interpreted that in the wrong way and they are still pushing exercise. Which is of course what you and I saw, Alex, 20 years ago in the Me community, and it did a lot of harm. And there was this thinking that if you're tired you must exercise and it's like we've forgotten the word convalescence. And it's like if you're tired, as soon as you feel you have any energy, take a couple of paracetamol and get back to work. And actually in the old days... I remember

I had glandular fever in about 1972. My doctor put me on 6 weeks bed rest and I really resisted that at the time but looking back I think that was really sensible because that was the attitude then and we've lost that.

Alex Howard - [00:30:36]

One of the ways, without going down a whole different tangent here, one of the ways that I often talk about it is stages of recovery. And at earlier stages we need that pure physical rest. And at later stages, as our body is able to, we can move more.

And also I think it's great that you put a spotlight on the word movement because for one person movement could be an hour and a half ashtanga yoga class and for somebody else it might be simply lying in child's pose for a couple of minutes and then lying in shavasana for 10 minutes. It doesn't necessarily have to be lots of energy expenditure. It can also just be allowing the system to have a little bit more space.

Fiona Agombar

Yes. If I am doing movement I might do things like very gentle cat stretches, which is just helping to open up the spine to work on the posture. Certainly in my classes I'm keeping it very gentle. And then if people are recovering they can go on to another yoga teacher or on to do more yoga. But I'm just seeing at the moment my kind of gentle yoga is what's needed. Because my classes are for people with fatigue. That's how I describe them. But I've also got people coming to me who've got profound stress and overwhelm and burnout, and they just want to rest, too.

Alex Howard

One of the things that's also, you said to me before we start recording, I thought it was really interesting, was that because of working with Zoom there are people that you're working with one on one or people that are coming to your twice weekly open classes, that would never have had one on one or group yoga before. They might have watched a video online, or they might have, back in the day, bought a DVD. And that must be quite exciting as a teacher that, in a sense, that there's an audience that are so needy of help and support, can actually access it in a way that was not possible before.

Fiona Agombar

In that respect I think Zoom is amazing. And I'm so grateful to Zoom because it has made classes accessible for people who, just as you say, couldn't get to class before. So I've got people who come to me who are bedbound, so they work on their bed. And I've also got people in New York and California and New Zealand. So it's given this accessibility. But certainly a lot of people come to me who couldn't make a class. They couldn't get to a class or they wouldn't be well enough to join in. Because I used to, as you know, teach a lot of people with ME on retreat. But there's a whole swathe of people with long-COVID and ME who wouldn't even be well enough to get to a retreat. So this accessibility thing is just fantastic. I'm just thrilled that that is the case.

Alex Howard

So, Fiona, for people that want to find out more about you and your work and particularly that perhaps want to join these classes, what's the best way for them to find out more and to do that?

Fiona Agombar - [00:33:37]

So I've got a Facebook group which is quite active, and it's called [Restful Yoga for Fatigue with Fiona](#). And I've got a website which is my name, so that's fionaagombar.co.uk. I'm on [Instagram](#). I'm just setting up a [YouTube](#) channel where I'm beginning to upload some recordings of my classes, which, of course, are free, so people can go and try those. And then there's also the book which you mentioned, *Yoga Therapy for Stress, Burnout and Chronic Fatigue Syndrome*.

Alex Howard

Fantastic. Fiona, it's always a pleasure. Also, I should say as part of this conference that there's a daily yoga session, some of which were filmed a while ago, and we're going to try and film some new bits in the future that reflect a little bit more on some of how you're doing things now. But these sessions are a great way for people to get a little bit more of a taste of what we're talking about as well.

But Fiona, it's always a pleasure and thank you so much for sharing your experience and knowledge today.

Fiona Agombar

Can I just say it's really lovely to see you, Alex, as my dear friend. And what you're doing with work, this conference and all the other work, is brilliant. So thank you for doing the work that you're doing.

Alex Howard

Bless you. Thank you, Fiona. I really appreciate your time.

Fiona Agombar

Thank you.