A Private Yoga Case-Study: BEVERLY, age 65

**Conditions: diabetes, depression, general stiffness & weakness following a sedentary career & lifestyle**

I had known my now-client for over 17 years because we worked together until her retirement a year and a half ago following a 30-year distinguished career. My former colleague, who I will call Beverly, was a bright, hard-working employee who cared deeply for the institution for which she worked – too deeply as it not only consumed much of her work hours but, in part due to the nature of the job, occupied much of her thoughts well after hours and on weekends. This created a certain amount of long-term stress. In addition, the job involved a great deal of mental activity but little physical activity.

Following her retirement, Beverly decided to participate in one of my yoga group classes. In this "all-levels" class I aim for intermediate-level but give detailed instructions leading into and out of every pose and build from the ground up from first an easier, modified level and then offer modifications to "dial up" the challenge if participants wish and are ready for it. I was sad to see my colleague struggled tremendously with not only the easier level of postures, but even to get down to the mat and up. We spoke after class, and I reiterated the importance of not pushing beyond her ability and also went over some alternate postures for those for which even the dialed-down version might present too great a challenge and even some risk for her at this time. I even encouraged her to find a chair-yoga class, which I did not at the time offer, so that -- although I would miss her -- it would be safer and likely also more enjoyable for her. To my surprise, she continued to come to my class even though she did opt out of many poses, saying she simply enjoyed the atmosphere and sense of community.

Then she said something I will never forget and that, frankly, broke my heart. **She said, "I couldn't wait to retire to have the time to do all the things I wanted to do. Then when I did retire, I found out I couldn't move well enough to do them."**

I began working with Beverly in May 2017 at her home, meeting twice each week. We started with strictly chair yoga and kept things very gentle and slow so that I could get a sense of her abilities and her limitations at that time, and each 60 minute session included several minutes of pranayama and meditation at the start of the session and relaxation at the end. I noted overall stiffness and weakness with particular stiffness in her back, shoulders, and neck. Her right shoulder was significantly limited in its mobility. She had significant hair loss that had existed for many years.

Asana, all seated in early sessions, consisted of repeated gentle side bends (“seaweed arms”), cow & cat, twists, hand/wrist/arm movements such as compression and a gentle pull of each finger with arms extended forward (what I call “milking the cow”) and figure-8 movements with fingers interlaced. Shoulder shrugs and forward and backward swimming motions with the shoulders with fingertips on top of the shoulders were performed. Head/neck movements consisted of head tilts forward and to each side followed by forward semi-circles. Working down-body, trunk circles were included. Then leg/ankle/foot motions followed such as gently swinging the lower leg forward and back to get synovial fluid moving within the knee joint and then several foot/ankle alternate flex & point motions. This basic structure was kept fairly consistent for the first month, and the client was assigned “homework” of several of the motions to do on her own each day between our sessions. Beverly was wonderfully compliant with this although, interestingly, did many of the motions in bed before rising in the morning. Nonetheless, her overall mobility was visibly improving – most notably, her right shoulder.

After the first month, our sessions were relocated to an office I had rented, and the asana was expanded to include standing tree pose with the support of a chair. Conversations with Beverly revealed she had slipped a bit in her consistency with her independent work and that part of the reason was that she didn’t like “homework” and asked if we could call it something else! I of course agreed, and we instead began calling it “opportunities for practice”. Her new homework was, in addition to continuing the earlier movements/postures, to now practice tree – always with the support of a chair, countertop, or wall. In addition, since her flexibility was so improved, I shifted focus a bit to her lack of strength. I asked her to also add in simply standing up from a chair and sitting back down repeatedly five times in a row at least once each day to help build leg strength. Following a couple of weeks of this, I asked her if she had been practicing. To my surprise and utter joy, Beverly abruptly popped up from the chair and said, “Oh, yes! And in between each I do this!” … A tree pose with no support!!

After the second month, we began to add in seated ½ sun salutations and more standing postures. We introduced Mountain, Pencil, and Warrior poses – the latter two while holding onto a wall. One problem we encountered is that standing poses sometimes made Beverly a bit dizzy and nauseous – causing us to return to the chair for the remainder of the session. I had her ask her physician about this, but he provided no explanation or treatment for it. We continued to forge ahead simply returning to the chair whenever needed with the hope that the amount of time before that was necessary would lengthen. We then suspected certain postures triggered the symptoms more often than others, so we abandoned all of the Warrior poses with the exception of Warrior I which seemed to present no problems. We also began doing the ½ sun salutations standing in addition to in the chair. After the third month, Beverly said, “I feel so good now, I have begun cooking again.”

We then, following the advice of her chiropractor, added in a gentle baby cobra and bridge. The struggle to get down onto the mat and back up remained, but Beverly did surprisingly well with the postures themselves. We included child’s pose and table with a forward-backward rocking motion as counter-stretches to the backbends – and the latter to also help increase some arm strength. To further enhance this goal, push-ups against the wall were also added. After another two months, Beverly said, “I feel like I’m thinking more clearly.” And to me it appeared that her hair was beginning to thicken a bit.

Since then, we have continued roughly the same approach – adjusting for good days and occasional bad days. Most recently, at month seven, I mentioned to Beverly that her feet looked noticeably healthier and that to me she actually appeared taller as she is simply carrying herself differently than before.

Beverly has been doing her practice on her own with impressive regularity, but she has not been doing any other physical activities. She told me she used to walk to a coworker's house a few blocks away to see and enjoy their flower garden and, despite my encouragements, she did not feel confident in her ability to do it or to walk anywhere. But then I was able to "trick" her one day into walking with me a few blocks from my office to check out a new business that was renovating the adorable little old train stop building that is within sight.

As we began month eight, Beverly had asked that we change one of our twice a week sessions into meditation only and leave the other as is (a combination of pranayama & meditation and our gentle chair/wall-assisted asana) because she has found it helpful in dealing with her depression. But she also asked if I thought that change would make the progress from the asana suffer. I told her not if she was very good about continuing to keep moving on her own. And I added that one other way around that would be to replace the one "lost" asana session with her coming to my group chair class which happens to be at a studio quite close to where she lives. I wasn't sure she'd go for it since she has said on more than one occasion, "I don't like people." BUT... she came! And, not only did she come, but she talked and was humorous! Her husband had dropped her off, BUT after class she stopped and had a coffee at the coffee shop right next door and then... SHE WALKED HOME!! This has now occurred twice so I am very encouraged that she will continue (on days the weather permits it). And, even more exciting, she told me last week that she went to the mall to Christmas shop and said, “I figured while I was there, I might as well join the mall walkers.” Eureka!!

After nearly eight months of one-on-one chair yoga sessions twice each week, and more recently a weekly meditation session, Beverly’s flexibility has improved substantially, and her leg strength and balance have increased modestly. The better color in her feet and regrowth of some hair suggest her general circulation has improved. I believe her quality of life and overall mood have improved notably. She needs to continue to work on increasing her arm and overall upper-body strength in order to achieve the mutually-identified goal of being able to get down onto the mat and up from the mat with greater steadiness and control to enhance safety of not only her yoga but overall safety in her home and elsewhere. However, the biggest change of all that bodes well for future maintenance or even continued progress is that her mindset has shifted such that she is now adding movement on her own.