

Yoga as a Multidimensional Approach to Traumatic Limb Loss

By Marsha Therese Danzig

Imagine this: one day, you wake up with a sore throat. By the end of the day, you are so ill you are taken to the hospital, diagnosed with a severe case of strep throat. While the diagnosis is a relief, doctors are perplexed that after administering massive doses of antibiotics and fluids, you are not getting better. By the end of the week, your limbs have become necrotic and your organs are shutting down. You are diagnosed with sepsis. To save your life, doctors must amputate your legs as well as multiple fingers on your hands. In two weeks, you have gone from being a dearly loved elementary school teacher to a quadrilateral amputee who has lost hope in a future.

Whether the limb loss is a result of something as sudden as sepsis or as chronic as diabetes, losing a limb is a traumatic ordeal, one that requires tremendous reserves of courage, faith, and determination to overcome. No matter how you look at it, amputation of a limb is a violent act directed toward the body. The Merriam Webster Medical Dictionary defines “amputate” as “to cut (a part, such as a limb) from the body.” Talk about finality! Not only does an amputee have a limb cut off, but more often than not, self-esteem, life force, freedom of movement, career, marriage, confidence, body image, and life purpose are cut off as well. Even mental clarity can be lost due to ongoing and severe pain.

Losing a limb requires a rebuilding from the ground up, from basic life skills such as learning how to get up and down from a chair, to developing a new sense of self. Both recent and long-time amputees can have moments of struggle with either one of these, based on any number of factors from poorly fitting prosthetics to changes in health. The daily mental, emotional, and physical gymnastics amputees must perform to get through the myriad movements in a day—when they had once flowed one into the other with automatic ease—can take a toll on the mind and body. Compounded with other conditions, such as heart disease, PTSD, scar tissue, phantom pain, and depression, recovery is a many-layered process—a process that yoga can help.

How can yoga therapists offer the most effective yoga practices to best serve our amputee clients who have lived through and overcome so much?

Teach to Strength

I believe it starts with our own mindset. Most amputees want to feel whole and normal again. That means we, as yoga therapists, need to meet our clients as humans rather than patients needing to be fixed. It is our nature to want to help, but amputees who come to us for yoga want, for the most part, to be independent. We are trained with the eyes of clinicians to seek places of imbalance, weakness, limited range of movement, stress, and pain, but for this population we need instead to teach to each amputee’s strengths and triumphs. Listen from your deepest wisdom for ways to support and nurture your clients’ wellbeing.

For example, many amputees will have incredible body awareness and sensitivity to their environment, because they need these skills to avoid falling. Even if they might not know how to take a

deep breath, or stretch a muscle, they are using mindfulness techniques all day long. It is a lot of body-mind work, for example, to figure out whether the ground beneath you will meet you, and likewise whether you will be able to maintain your stability while reaching to the ground. New amputees will move slowly and deliberately, activating all their senses to get where they need to go. Trust your amputee clients to know their bodies and then build that knowledge into conscious awareness; many can offer you a lot of specific feedback on their capabilities and goals. Trusting your clients’ inner wisdom will also help them develop more confidence and control, which then builds a more positive outlook on life.

Amputees think creatively, and often. This means that both sides of the brain are quite active.^{1,2} It is one thing to take a walk in the forest. It is another thing to take a walk in the forest while navigating hills, tree stumps, roots, acorns, and slippery leaves with no way to feel sensation in the feet. Added to that, amputees may be dealing with multilayered emotions, such as grief, anger, frustration, and despair, which can cloud clear thinking.

It is equally daunting to move easily through space as an arm amputee when you are accustomed to having a hand to open a door, to reach out and hold onto something, or to cushion the impact of a fall. Amputees need to be more aware of their environment wherever they are. *Collaborate* with these clients to arrive at yoga plans that work best for them.

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This daily adaptation to space, sensations, interactions with others, and time is a central part of life for amputees. Unless amputees are in the throes of major depression, they will be moving their bodies. This invites new neurons to develop as the brain adapts to the massive changes limb loss brings. Be aware of that adaptive process when working with amputee clients. Their yoga poses require planning and many options, such as walls and props (which may include you!).

There are many moments in the life of amputees when surrender is necessary. If an amputee walks too much on a new prosthetic, for example, he or she may develop a blister, which means having to endure great pain while walking or opting to avoid the prosthesis until healed and instead using a wheelchair or crutches to get around. This creates a whole new set of challenges. Many arm amputees choose to avoid prostheses, especially if the prosthesis feels cumbersome or interruptive to their lives. Moving from standing to sitting, or sitting to the floor and vice versa, can require significant time during a yoga practice. Your guidance through pranayama can help an amputee make those transitions more easily.

Amputees, in addition, find patience they never knew they possessed. While prosthetics have advanced quite a bit in the last ten years, recovery from amputation takes time, no matter how much

determination your clients possess. Encourage that strength in amputee clients by reminding them of all the concrete ways they are practicing present-moment awareness and self-compassion.

Amputee clients can be both fearless and terrified at the same time. You may have clients who try and even master activities they didn't do before amputation, such as mountain climbing or marathon running. Amputation gives some people the impetus to live life large. However, the present-moment experience of learning from a yoga professional may make the limb loss all too real again, especially in a class setting with other amputees. It takes a long time to relearn life after limb loss, so any modifications that you offer through yoga, from the ways to stand to how to move, can feel threatening or exasperating, a reminder that they could once again lose control. In addition, many amputees have an innate fear of falling, especially if they have had multiple amputations. In my experience helping amputees develop a strong sense of core through abdominal exercises, such as breath of fire, a variation of *navuli kriya* (abdominal cleansing exercise) with simple belly pumping, or *uddiyana bandha* (upper abdominal lock), can reduce this fear.

Key Supports

Illness and trauma triggers can bring on phantom pain. An amputee could finally feel free of his phantom pain, only to have it awaken again after practicing yoga. Phantom pain is very real, likely occurring when motor and somatosensory areas of the brain reorganize to receive input from neighboring regions rather than from a limb that is no longer there.³ The process of awakening the body and mind through yoga *is* a cleansing process, so it stands to reason that any leftover stagnation, or phantom pain, that has not yet been resolved, can pop up. In my experience, *ujjayi* (victorious, or ocean, breath) as well as movement flows such as *surya namaskar* (sun salutations) redirect clients toward freedom from pain. If a client mentions pain, it may be useful to shift the conversation toward empowerment. Ongoing pain produces an attachment in the mind to future and potential pain, which also causes more pain. But if amputee clients do not mention pain, they may not have any. Some amputees never experience phantom pain.

We should not assume that all amputees are in pain or want to heal their pain; they may be accustomed to it and have developed coping mechanisms.

Most amputees who come for yoga therapy will not be veterans unless you are specifically working with that population; the majority of amputee clients will have lost limbs for other reasons. Working with veteran amputees is very specific and not within the scope of this article, although the basic concepts are similar.



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If you become too sensitive and concerned about offending or triggering an amputee with the wrong word, this will make your session stilted and tense. If your client is in a depressive state or barely surviving because of ongoing PTSD or chronic pain, use the word “leg” and “arm” or, better yet, ask each person how you should refer to the missing or prosthetic leg or arm. Unless a client has congenital limb difference (born without limbs), the *concept* of the leg or arm is still there. If the client wears a prosthesis, it *is* the leg or arm, and matter-of-fact discussion can help develop a healthier relationship with the prosthesis as a part of the whole body. Many amputees put their prostheses on first thing in the morning and do not take them off until bedtime. Using the proper anatomical terms helps amputees heal the feeling of separation. Many amputees joke about their limbs or lack thereof. It is burdensome to someone recovering from amputation to have yet another professional tiptoe around what is clearly their reality.

Teach amputee clients to move from center to periphery. All movement, from rooting the feet to extending the arms, starts at the navel. Guide amputees through deep abdominal toning, lengthening from the center of the navel to the edges of the hip (if they have one) and down into the ground or from the navel to the edges of the shoulder (if available). The idea is to teach expansion and contraction of the entire body as well as developing a core capacity for easier movement in yoga and beyond.

Use props such as a chair, wall, strap, block, bolster, blankets, and/or pillows to help your clients build confidence in their poses. Not all amputees will need props. Indeed, some will refuse them, seeking to be as independent as possible. Keep the props around and offer clients the opportunity to choose for themselves. If you actively

integrate props into group yoga practice, your clients will most likely believe that yoga includes props. Some amputees will want to lean on you; this is fine for the short term, but it is far better in the long run to support your clients to become independent of you so they can practice yoga in any setting.

During each session with amputee clients, be sure your approach balances the weaker, underused body parts with the overused body parts. Underused body parts, such as the residual limb itself, need to be strengthened. Overused body parts, such as the remaining limb, need to be stretched and relieved of duty for a while.

Avoid inviting amputee clients to envision the missing limb. This could well be unproductive, as phantom pain, for example, is thought to result partly from incongruent messages of motor intention, sensation, and visual input.³ As clients advance in their practice, seeking deeper truths in yoga, they may develop an interest in connecting to their missing limbs, to understand the energy body. In any case, we can facilitate a homecoming to each client's essential self, opening previously unimagined doors to new possibilities through the healing power of yoga.

Finally, have fun. Your amputee clients, especially when new to the experience, are surrounded by serious obstacles every day, including the professionals, strangers, and family members with whom they interact. Enjoy serving your clients and supporting their wholeness. Sharing yoga with amputees is a privilege, a rare opportunity to witness the deep reserves of the strength of the human will to survive and thrive. **YTT**

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