

Season 4, #3: Petra Coveney: Yoga for women's health

Joyce

Welcome Petra.

Petra Coveney (00:04.445)

Thank you, Joyce. Thank you for inviting me on to your podcast.

Joyce (00:08.032)

I know we're going to have a lovely, brilliant and very educational podcast today. But let me start, Petra, by asking you to tell us what first drew you to yoga and how you became interested in yoga for women's health specifically.

Petra Coveney (00:23.261)

Okay, so I first practiced yoga as a teenager and I've got to be honest with you, Joyce. It was a way to bunk off doing netball. I have never been good. I have never been good at doing team sports just because I forget the rules. I'm just not a competitive person. So to get out of netball, the wonderful school in London that I attended.

offered 10 weeks of yoga with a beautiful, wonderful Indian woman who came into the school. And I think it was funded by something that was called the GLC back in those days. Anyway, I had been feeling stressed. I was in my adolescence who isn't stressed. There must have been exam stress as well. And we did these yoga poses. It was traditional Hatha yoga, not this vinyasa flow or anything else. And I was transformed.

I found that in some of these poses on the big wooden floor, in this big hall with this teacher, I suddenly felt relaxed, calm. Everything just felt good again. And I knew then that, wow, I've just experienced something extraordinary. Fast forward, you know, back in those days, you didn't have lots of yoga classes available.

But fast forward until I was a gym bunny for a while when I worked at the BBC, you know, dealing with my work stress, loved my fitness. But then when I became pregnant, I started going back to yoga, but in a more relaxed way to help with sleep, to help calm my nervous system, and mainly to prepare for giving birth using breath work, deep squats.

strengthening my leg muscles because I was planning to have a water birth, a natural birth. And then after the babies were born, I wanted to support myself reconnecting my abdominal muscles, yeah, erector abdominis, after the birth, my pelvic floor. And then as the children got a little bit older, I used it as a way to escape the family, to find a little moment.

Petra Coveney (02:46.556)

A little moment of stillness and quietness for myself, you know, away from the demands of two children who were lovely and wonderful. And then as I went through my perimenopause, before people knew what that actually was, I went into my

perimenopause earlier than all of the people who were in my friendship circle and didn't really know what was going on, but just felt...

bonkers, not sleeping, hot flushes, night sweats, exhaustion, fatigue, inflammation in my joints, changes in digestion. my word, I seem to have it all at different stages. so yoga helped me therapeutically through all of that choice. And now I'm 10 years post menopause and I now use my yoga

for strength, stability, balance, preparing for my next decade ahead of me.

Joyce (03:54.806)

hopefully many more decades ahead of us.

That's amazing that you were taught yoga at school. And it's made me remember when I first did yoga. So my mother, I can just remember my mother always doing yoga. So she was actually brought up in India. So maybe that's where that came from. But I never, I can remember now, I never saw anyone actually doing yoga or teaching classes. And I was the gym buddy and I used to go to lots of aerobic classes. And I don't remember any yoga classes.

Petra Coveney (03:59.676)

you

Joyce (04:27.438)

But you've just reminded me, the time I really took on yoga was pregnancy yoga. I used to drive 40 minutes into Cambridge. It was the only place that did it nearest. And now there's one in my town. I absolutely loved that connection with, and I'm not a yoga person until then, that connection with other women who were going through the life stage I was going through with our intergestion and our piles.

and everything else we had when we were pregnant. And then we did, then I did baby yoga, baby massage when the children were born. yeah, that, having that yoga at specific life stages for sure, which we're going to delve into in a minute is really important. But you also brought up already some of the different types of yoga. So tell us what actually is yoga and can you tell us about some of, some, I know there's many different types, but some of the main types that we might see certainly in the UK.

Petra Coveney (05:25.178)

I'm going to try to condense what is yoga because that's a huge debate but in its original state it was a spiritual practice, practiced by yogis or sadhus who were spiritual people and the purpose of some of the poses and the cleansing can be put in pause.

Joyce (05:45.666)

Yeah. Keep going on, it's just out.

Petra Coveney (05:56.732)

you

Joyce (06:01.048)

Don't worry. Don't worry. can edit. It's really easy to edit out a chunk. So we're at six minutes. I'll go back and edit. Yeah, so I've got my question. You just start, what is yoga? And I'll...

Petra Coveney (06:01.382)

Sorry.

Petra Coveney (06:08.092)

to start.

Petra Coveney (06:17.063)

So going back to the most traditional origins of yoga, it was just a spiritual practice. And the yoga poses or seated positions and cleansing techniques that the sadhus, the spiritual people used, were really just to prepare your body for meditation. And meditation being the gateway to a spiritual enlightenment. So that is the traditional origin.

But as time progressed and we moved into the 1800s and then into the early 20th century, the practice became very influenced by Western techniques such as Pilates and gym instruction and calisthenics. Calisthenics, I can't remember how you pronounce it. And then strangely, you're going to love this, Joyce.

it was the British who brought yoga back into India and it was a way of keeping people fit. Then the Americans heard about it and then they exported it to the United States. So when we talk about modern yoga, you have a version of that modern yoga in the UK, in Britain, which was more founded, more based on the kind Hatha, Iyengar versions of yoga.

from the British Empire, I'm afraid to say. And then you have the American versions, which were all about power and strength, vinyasa and acrobatics. And then that's obviously been imported again to us, to the UK, but also has now returned to India. So you have this wonderful kind of flow of the practice to and fro. And I think that if we think about why yoga

has withstood the test of time. It's not just a fad like some of these different exercise classes or techniques. I think what it has, the roots of it is a spiritual practice helping you to connect to yourself, to calm your nervous system, to give mental focus for mental well-being as well as physical well-being. I think that's why it has endured over the centuries.

Joyce (08:39.542)

Yes, so it's definitely for me a mix between the mental health benefits and the physical health benefits. I know there's all the spiritual side as well. We can delve into a little bit about that. But this is the first podcast, Petra, that we're doing about mental health and ways we can help and support our mental health. I'm feeling so strongly about this. The

more I work, especially with women, we are leading these hugely busy and stressful lives.

and our brains are just overloaded and I'm seeing people just not relax and not reset their brains and then they're wondering why they're anxious and they're angry and they're not sleeping and they've got no mood and they're stressed and their perimenopausal symptoms are all terrible. So let's first go into the mental health benefits of yoga. How does that help us?

Petra Coveney (09:32.784)

Well, everything is connected, Joyce. And so just as the ancient sadhus knew, if you're feeling anxious or overwhelmed, your nervous system is heightened, sensory awareness. It's up, it's into the cortisol, the fight and flight. And because of our modern lives, and we're juggling so much, and we're connected to these and other digital devices, so we don't really switch off.

So this is affecting, as you know, the whole of our life and our lifestyle, our sleep, our digestion, our energy, everything. So going back to that traditional approach, you can very quickly, literally within one minute, use your breath, which was trained through what we call pranayama, the ancient yogis used pranayama to calm your nervous system by slowing down your breath.

The wonderful thing is modern science has now proven if you have a long, slow exhalation, it helps to bring you down from that cortisol height, calming your nervous system. So, it's absolute basic level yoga with its breath work, its mindfulness can help you to come down from that place of stress or heightened anxiety.

bringing you back into a place of balance. Now, in yoga, what I should just mention for anyone who's interested in yoga, yoga is a limb. It's a strand of Ayurveda. Ayurveda is the traditional Indian healthcare system, and it includes nutrition and herbal remedies, movement, meditation, et cetera. So yoga, as I said, is the physical movement.

of your body in stretches or poses to help you reduce where you are. So if you've got a heightened state in your nervous system, then it can help bring you back into balance. We call that satva. And if you've got a very low or depressed or heavy energy in you, you can do different techniques that bring you up to balance.

Petra Coveney (11:56.198)

but it's always about finding that balance, that equilibrium, because as modern medicine and science know, that if we can have all of the systems in our body, mental health, nervous system, endocrine system, respiratory system, if they are in balance, we are more likely to avoid dis-ease. So,

Another way of saying yoga is helpful is it helps bring your body back to ease, to help avoid dis-ease, whether that dis-ease is mental health or physical health. Is that an okay answer? I hope it's not too long.

Joyce (12:41.206)

No, that's beautiful. Disease. I've never broken the word disease up like that. That's genius, Pec. I love it. I love it.

Petra Coveney (12:52.22)

It's not me, I'm just quoting other great yogis and yoga teachers and the philosophy behind it. But it's true though, isn't it? When your body is in balance, all of the different systems, then your body is functioning at its optimum ability, using the least energy, the least effort to maintain good health. But dis-ease comes from those too high.

too low in your energy, your nervous system, which then affects your mental health, your physical health. So the mental health and physical health are really manifestations of being out of balance, out of equilibrium.

Joyce (13:37.612)

I also see a lot of people that go to my exercise classes. So we do a lot of jumping around and we do lots of weights. So we're always being told we've got to do the weights and we've got to do the cardio and all these things. And what I keep saying to everyone is you also need to do the stretching and the relaxing. And I'm seeing so much now about weights and cardio that I think we've forgotten. We've forgotten to remind people that going to yoga or to something like

especially yoga. Going to yoga is not just a relax, it's really important as we've discussed for our mind, but let's also now discuss the physical benefits of what yoga is doing to our body.

Petra Coveney (14:20.208)

Well, yeah, can I mention something about that? Because you and I, both love to feel strong. And you know, back in the day, I also went to the gym, so did you. And now I'm in 10 years post menopause. I'm actually a qualified gym instructor and fitness instructor now, which is, find hilarious at the age of almost 60. And I do have hand weights and I do teach hand weights in many of my classes for post menopause.

strength and cardiovascular health. But what you can find is that people who are doing a lot of that physical strengthening work, whether it's cardiovascular, muscle strength, et cetera, that this is actually increasing cortisol necessarily to get the adrenaline, the flow of blood through your body. But I can tell you as a qualified instructor now,

you also need to stretch the muscles after that exercise and bring that cortisol and adrenaline down. Otherwise you're just going to stay tense, tight, lactic acid, et cetera, et cetera. So yes, yoga has a role in exercise regimes as being stretching and relaxing after strenuous exercise. But I think

If we were just to call yoga stretching, we would miss the whole point. And whether you're doing a gym workout or a physical yoga workout or running, whatever it might be that you're doing or swimming, really that is moving your body to release that nervous tension you might have in order to bring you to stillness.

And in that stillness, that ability to sit, to breathe, to focus mentally, mindfully, that is what is going to be transformative for you in your life as a life skill. And it's in those moments, I don't know whether you've experienced this in yoga, Joyce, but in those moments of stillness, there are moments of clarity.

Petra Coveney (16:43.855)

things become clear or what it is you need to give yourself, you go, yes, now I know. Or something that you've been stressed and anxious about, indecisive, I don't know what to do. Just naturally without any effort, the answer has just come to me. So this is the early stage of that deep spiritual connection. And if you don't like the word spiritual,

Maybe just use the phrase tuning in to yourself or listening in to your own inner voice. Another way to describe that inner voice is all around us we have the noise and distractions of the world around us. Our senses are constantly drawing in information from the outside world and it can become so overwhelming

that we can't hear our own voice, our own intuition. So when you can let that external noise stop, pause, then you can hear, you can tune in. Anyway, I hope that makes sense to some of your listeners.

Joyce (18:01.9)

It makes total sense to me. And people don't believe me because I am super hyper, I'm running around all the time and they say, what you relax and you enjoy the meditation part. And I'm like, yeah, I enjoy the slowness, the stillness. I enjoy stretching my body and relaxing my mind. So I'm doing more and more yoga and yoga type classes now than I've ever done. And I.

absolutely feel as you used the word earlier it's balancing me and I'm trying to convince my buddies who are just doing all the crazy things that they really really need to do this they so so need to do this so Petra let's sorry carry on

Petra Coveney (18:44.473)

They certainly need to it as well because if we exercise and just keep pushing and forcing, especially as women, then we are likely to do ourselves an injury because we're not tuning in and listening in to what we need. And Joyce, I know that you have your specialism in the stages of women's health and it cannot be ignored that we have menstrual cycles.

I'm no longer in my menstrual cycle, but those of us who still are, the hormone fluctuations and changes are going to affect not just your energy levels, your sleep, your mood, you know, whether you're bloated or having a bleed, but it's also going to affect the ability of your muscles to stretch, expand, inflammation or lack of inflammation. And so being able to tune in,

listening into what you need in your menstrual cycle can then help you to adapt to whatever exercise you do, whether it's yoga or lifting weights or running. Because we

do, think that's going to be the biggest change that we're going to see in women and exercise is that they start changing their exercise to match the stage of their cycle. Well, I certainly hope so.

But anyway, sorry. Go ahead, Joyce.

Joyce (20:10.604)

No, no, that is so true. And as you know, you've helped us very much with our menopause education and support program we're developing. And my wonderful colleague, Shima Tarek, thought of the name InTune, which was, as soon as she said it, that yes, women need to be in tune with our body. We really do.

Petra Coveney (20:31.819)

Exactly. It's exactly. It was such a great phrase. She did really well to come up with that name because that is exactly what we need to be doing, being in tune with ourselves because what you need and what I need at this stage of life are going to be different. I have a lot of energy and I do a lot of more strength training alongside my yoga and that I feel great with that. But when I was,

When I was pregnant and even postpartum, you should not be doing a lot of deep stretching yoga because of the hormones in your body making your ligaments and tissues stretch more. So you're, you know, you need to be doing more of the contraction, know, bringing, pulling everything in. When I was going through my perimenopause, I had to stop my strong Ashtanga yoga practice.

because I had so much joint inflammation, joint and muscle inflammation. And what I needed to do then was more deep stretching, breath work and relaxation because my nervous system was out of kilter. My hormones were up and down every day in perimenopause. And so I was just causing injury after injury. So this is why in menopause yoga, for example,

I have different types and styles of practice for different stages. But also, Joyce, you and I, we're very active people. I know many people who are less physically, energetically active, and they need something a little different. Yep, so it's all about attuning your physical movement for what each individual needs.

Joyce (22:25.55)

Absolutely and I this is the biggest thing I say to women Please listen to your body and it's a very wise body and it's going to tell you what what it needs last week I really needed protein and I really needed oranges. I don't know why I was craving oranges just craving something You know feed your body. Let's go more into into women's health. So as we've as you've already said

women's health, changes, it's got all these wonderful, we've got our menstrual cycle, we've got our pregnancy, we've got our menopause, this beautiful life course of women's health, but it is all these different stages and it really does vary. And you've done a lot of work around that, from menstruation to menopause and beyond. So let's

tell us a bit more about your main work, which has been menopause yoga and how that started and what it involves.

Petra Coveney (23:20.999)

So it all started back in my mid-40s. I'm now about to turn 60 next month. So in my mid-40s, as I said, I went into a slightly earlier perimenopause and none of my friends around me were in it. My older sister wasn't in menopause. My mother had sadly passed away early.

and I felt very lost and alone and I didn't know what was happening because back in those days we didn't have information about perimenopause. In fact when I went to my doctor they hadn't even been trained in menopause. All they could do was do a blood test and say are you in menopause or not and back in those days they did not want to give you HRT because of health scares, health concerns.

around cancer and other illnesses. And so it was very much left on your own. And I remember saying to the doctor, look, you I'm not asking for HRT. I just want someone to talk to. Are there any women's support groups? Is there anyone I can ask about nutrition or herbal remedies or exercise? What can I do to help myself? And the doctor said, I'm sorry, there isn't anything.

And that this was back in the days really when Facebook was kind of more in its infancy and we didn't have all of the social media that we have today. So I literally had to go out there and sort of buy books from other countries, try and get them translated from Brazilian or Italian. And I found it very interesting that there were books that were published up until about the 80s, maybe 1990.

But after that big research came out around menopause and cancer, breast cancer, from that point, there seemed to be this, almost like the dark ages descended. Nothing was published, nothing was out there. So I was having to kind of scabble around in the past in the dark. And then I started thinking, okay, I'm doing this for myself, trying to find nutrition, herbal remedies, movement, yoga, et cetera, to help myself.

Petra Coveney (25:39.832)

What about other women? And I actually felt a bit, when I say a bit angry, Joyce, think about menopause rage, and then 10 times that. I was furious. was outraged. Yeah, I had my menopause rage and I felt outraged that there was not enough for women about this stage of life. And as a former BBC journalist and producer, I knew how to do research.

Joyce (25:50.722)

Ha ha!

Petra Coveney (26:09.684)

and I wanted to inform people. So that's why I created the Menopause Yoga and Wellbeing Programme, which included everything, but mainly focused in on yoga practices. And then I adapted the traditional yoga practices because when you actually

look back into the history of yoga, it was designed for men, not women. In fact, women originally, we were banned, we weren't allowed.

Joyce (26:33.336)

Mm.

Joyce (26:38.157)

Wow.

Petra Coveney (26:38.658)

And then a wonderful teacher called BKS Iyengar, he asked his daughter, Gita Iyengar, to develop some practices for women. And that was wonderful that she did that in the 1980s. But many of the practices that she had in her book are just not accessible to the modern woman. You know, some really bizarre upside down poses, hanging off ropes and

chairs and things like that. you know, doing a shoulder stand for half an hour, like that is not going to happen for us. So I then started adapting and modifying some of these older techniques. Then I tried and tested other techniques, got lots of feedback from women over several years. And that is what created menopause yoga. So it's based in

Western medicine. So I bring in hormone, understanding of your hormones, medical doctors. So we've got that insight. I've got nutritionists, et cetera. But then it's the especially adapted yoga poses, adapted breath work for menopause, adapted meditations. And now this is really key Joyce, do you remember you mentioned being pregnant and

postpartum and you really, you said you really enjoyed being in the circle, the other women, that sense of community. So that's, that sense of community is essential in menopause yoga as well. It is designed to be practiced together because I do feel very strongly that at key transitional times of a women's life span that women

come together naturally and they need to. Whether it's teenagers hanging out on street corners or in their bedrooms or pregnant women coming doing yoga or having cups of tea or postpartum baby massage, perimenopause, postmenopause. I think we are drawn together to have that sense of connection to support each other. Do you agree?

Joyce (29:02.952)

totally, totally agree. And this is really where all my work's heading. And that group, when we were pregnant, we actually stayed friends for many years, but then they've all gone to all corners of the Earth now. But we do still catch up every now and then. Being with women at the same life stage, I think, is so powerful and so rewarding. And I'm just in discussions now with my shamanic drumming mentor.

Sophie Messenger, who I've also had on my podcast, about setting up a ceremony for postmenopause, which would totally go with my book as well. So we're thinking of exactly that. We need some yoga practices in there. We need meditation. We need

dancing. We need singing. I'm going to a Closing the Bones ceremony with Sophie next week, which is a postpartum ceremony. And I'm thinking about

how we can design this. So Petra, we need to talk about how we can have this post-menopause tribe of women come together and support each other. I think it's absolutely essential.

Petra Coveney (30:03.514)

Yeah.

Petra Coveney (30:15.459)

I think your post menopause circle would be wild. mean, wild women, absolutely. That would be fantastic. But it is actually, if you sort of look at the science and the neuroscience around women's circles, there is actually something there. So oxytocin, apparently men and women can release oxytocin at different stages, whether it's through having sex, breastfeeding, or whatever it might be.

but women particularly are able to release oxytocin when they are in the company of other women. And what I find fascinating about this Joyce, and I hope your listeners agree, is that when we're going through perimenopause and menopause, the decline in estrogen also affects your oxytocin levels. And oxytocin isn't just about sex and breastfeeding.

it's about feeling grounded and that grounding comes from connection. And according to the social anthropologists, it is believed that we have developed this ability to release oxytocin in the company of other women because it was a reward system for enabling us to huddle together. So if we were women together,

looking after babies, that made us vulnerable. Therefore, having a big circle of people around us meant the children were more likely to survive. So it's a hormonal reward, but it helps us to feel grounded and calm. And what I have experienced through training and teaching women in perimenopause and menopause, I've done this for over 15 years, exclusively.

And what I see over and over again is this social withdrawal. Women drawing in on themselves, losing their self-confidence, withdrawing, feeling I've got nothing to say, nothing to share or contribute to. I can't go to a party or a dinner party or I've got nothing to give. Or maybe feeling shy about the changes physically in their body. And I'd actually say talking about mental health joys.

Petra Coveney (32:39.116)

I also see women who express symptoms that could be viewed as early stages of paranoia, believing even that their friends, their family, their work colleagues are against them. And it is such a lonely place to be. These women don't want to be in that state. And so by having these women's circles, these coming together,

I train women to run these circles, to host them in a way that is non-judgmental, is supportive and feels as safe as possible so that women can be there and talk and share without judgment. And I have literally had women coming to me afterwards saying, that is the first positive experience I've had of being in a women's social setting.

So this, it's powerful Joyce, it really is. And it's as powerful as the yoga, as, you know, other treatments that you might be taking during your menopause.

Joyce (33:52.578)

I wholeheartedly agree. And you've been doing this for such a long time, so for 15 years. And I know you were one of the wonderful women I interviewed for my book. And I've written in my book your story about when you first started, people were saying, don't call it menopause yoga. No one's got, and you did have a real problem with doctors listening to you and even friends telling you, no, because 15 years ago, Petra, you were ahead of the game. No one was, menopause, people have said to me, menopause wasn't invented.

15 years ago. But you kept at it and you have been one of the trailblazers with getting the community of women together. So it's astounding.

Petra Coveney (34:34.202)

Well, I just knew that it actually took several years because I had so many people, whether it was yoga studios saying, well, we'd like you to come and do this, but can you just call it women's yoga or can you just call it balance yoga? I'm like, no, because you've got to do what it says on the tin. And if we don't break down that barrier, that taboo of the M word, then

We're not, we've got nowhere to start. You know, this has to be the starting place. But I had yoga studios, not only refusing to use the word menopause, because they said, people won't come in and book the class or the course because they'll be too embarrassed. That is still true in some places, but it wasn't just the yoga studios resisting. It was also the doctors.

So back in those days, health practitioners were very mistrustful of yoga people and yoga studios were mistrustful of the medical profession. So the other thing that I did, remember I'm a next BBC producer, I said, no, we need to learn from both sides. We've got to educate ourselves.

So I brought together the modern medicine and the ancient wellbeing yoga techniques together. And I brought menopause doctors into a yoga studio. Gasp, horror. And I brought yoga people into medical settings and healthcare settings. Gasp, horror. And one of the things that I smile inside like a lovely sunshine of warmth.

I can tell you that as a member of the British Menopause Society, if you look at their information they have on their website, which includes fact sheets which are given to health professionals and members of the public, it will list yoga as one of the forms of exercise that it is helpful for women to practice.

Petra Coveney (36:55.917)

for their general health, their physical health, digestive health, mental health. Now that for me, you know, I don't need anyone to say, Petra, you pioneered this. I just want to say, thank goodness, thank goodness, because we need it all. Yeah, don't we? We need it all, Joyce.

Joyce (37:17.646)

Well, I'm going to say it, Petra, you did start all this. You did really need to. So I can tell you about 10 years ago, I did several events where I wanted to teach women about the menopause, exactly what I'm doing now. I'm still sort of banging my head about it. But I didn't have the nerve to call it menopause because I know 10 years ago, it was a forbidden word.

It was like vulva is now, it was taboo. So I called my events, well being over 40. And then I kept joking to everyone. I call it well being over 40, get them in the room, lock the door and then talk to them all evening about menopause. So you were very much braver than me 15 years ago by using that word and trademarking it menopause yoga. And you have, you've trained so many practitioners. It's gone around the world and it's just so important.

Petra Coveney (37:44.098)

Yeah, taboo.

Joyce (38:12.898)

And I've heard you talk before about some of the themes that women bring to your menopause yoga. So you've already talked about some women shrinking in, we've got women who are isolating, women who are lonely. And I've heard you mention this before. What sort of, actually we were in parliament one day and you said that so many of the women are asking you really basic questions. What other other themes that come up repeatedly among the women in your classes or workshops?

Petra Coveney (38:43.524)

Well, I mean, obviously you're going to have people coming. They'll come through the door for the word menopause. They know I'm going to rewind that slightly again, Joyce. They may not be able to get an appointment with their doctor. Their doctor may not be menopause specialist trained. They may be struggling with their mental health, as in anxiety or depression or mood swings, whatever it might be, or overwhelmed.

but they don't feel that they want to go to a psychologist, psychotherapist. So they know they want help with what they think could be menopause. They know they're struggling physically, but also with their mental health. And when they see the word yoga, it gives them an in. So they can get into a yoga studio or yoga space and come for the yoga, talk about the menopause. I might,

and say, okay, this workshop or this class is about cooling hot flushes and calming your mind. Because they're both interrelated. The mind, yeah, the hypothalamus, the

temperature gauge in your body, hot flushes. It's all connected. And reducing stress is the starting point for all of it. But whilst they're then in the room and we get the discussion going, so much more comes out.

And that could be, you know, sexual relationships, intimacy with their partner. It could be, as I said, that sort of paranoia or disconnection from people at work. It could be an overwhelming sense of rage that they feel about the world around them and injustice to women. It can start with...

Let's say for instance I'm running a class on soothing menopause rage and irritability. They may come in, you know, you might think it's oh it's kind of a little chat and then it all starts coming out and it's interesting isn't it? in Ayurveda and yoga philosophy we talk about something called Maya. Maya is like this

Petra Coveney (41:09.582)

veil or illusion that we have that kind of glosses over everything, kind of covering your eyes so that you can walk around the world, operate in the world, function in the world and live as harmoniously as possible. But when the veil is lifted, you see reality for what it really is. And

women going through the menopause, it's like the estrogen veil is lifted. The veil of compliance and agreeability and trying to be the peacekeepers, all of that lifts and you look around you and you think, why am I the one always loading or unloading the dishwasher? Why am I the one, why are women the ones who have to juggle?

so much. Like why is it the men who only are the ones who get to focus on one thing? Why, why, why, why, why? And this sense of rage and injustice comes up to the surface. Now, honestly, after 15 or more years of teaching this, I can tell you I have seen it all. And it has been an extraordinary privilege, Joyce, to be witness to hold space.

for all these women's experiences and emotions. Not just in the UK. I train and teach people all over the world. In fact, on my next course, I have my first person who's joining from South Korea. But I've also trained people, yeah, I've trained people in Japan. I've had my course translated into Japanese. And one of the most beautiful things, I'll stop waffling on here. Sorry, I get so enthusiastic.

Joyce (42:45.486)

Wow.

Petra Coveney (43:00.057)

One of the most beautiful experiences and privileges I've had is to see from my own experience that women all over the world, whatever culture you are living in, whatever country, whatever language, whatever color or pigmentation of your skin, we all go through a menopause. And we may have...

relationship with some of the symptoms in different places, but we all have this common experience. And that's been quite extraordinary. It's a very collective

experience. And when I've got people on screen from all over the world, different languages, and they are all nodding their heads and agreeing, it's like we are women of the world unite. It's amazing.

Joyce (43:54.321)

It's it I know what we're attuned to this. I feel so the same I feel we've really come into our power and interesting the words you just use there because 15 years 10 15 years ago and I've really been working in this space. I set up a group called global women connected That that's that's a name of my company I have a company that I give education through and I used to have a website We were we had a website for years and years, but now it's just a tiny little area of my my main website

But yeah, my company is called Global Women Connected. I think the power of women around the world, and as you said, different cultures, and we're experiencing that sisterhood and that unity is incredibly powerful. And with the yoga, I think you're really bringing that together. I think it's amazing.

Petra Coveney (44:44.377)

So yoga, one of the definitions from English of the word yoga is to unite, uniting the brain and the body, the mind and the physical. One of the translation is yoking. And sangha, sangha is the Sanskrit word for community. So yoga, yoking, uniting, sangha, community.

This is such an important part of yoga and this is one of the reasons why yoga is such a beautiful practice to help women going through whatever life change it is. Joyce, can I just share something? Now this is not my wisdom, this has come from actually a man who trained me in yoga therapy and philosophy.

Actually I'm going to name check him because I think we should always give credit to the people who share ideas. His name is Colin Dinsmore and he teaches yoga meditation as well. He said...

Men are more linear and men don't understand women because women are the embodiment of change. And I was like, what? mean? And he said, well, women experience the cyclical change in their hormones every month, like the phases of the moon. Women change in not just in puberty.

Joyce (46:14.819)

Yes.

Petra Coveney (46:30.776)

but potentially in pregnancy, again in postpartum, again in perimenopause, again in postmenopause. Whereas, yes, men experience puberty, but then it's pretty flat, you know, on a long line until they get to a very gradual decline in their hormones and older age. And so you said what that does is that your body, your hormones, your nervous system, everything is geared up.

for change and that affects your mental capacity to change. And therefore, change for women is a physical and mental reality. And therefore, women are in the perfect position as leaders to help other people change, society to change, the world.

to change because we are so in tune with nature and the world around us and this physical manifestation within us of change. Isn't that beautiful, Joyce?

Joyce (47:43.086)

We love him. We do. love him. But it's, I've said the same. Men are very stable. I mean, our hormones are so powerful. They really make us or break us. They affect us physically and mentally. And men's hormones are level. Yes, they slightly go down as they're aging. Ours are never the same. Well, actually postmenopause, that's what I love about postmenopause.

think it is a time of balance and stability in women. But between puberty and postmenopause is all these various cycles, as you said, of women. And it makes us, it makes our lives so rich. And as long as we listen to them and work with them and don't fight them, and as we've said already a few times, be in tune with our body, I think it makes our lives so rich, so amazing.

Petra Coveney (48:39.49)

But it also then makes us so connected to the world around us that the world around us goes through seasons and cycles. And we see the manifestation of change constantly in the environment around us. And so I think it gives us that connection with the world around us that I think does make us.

does give us a role if we are allowed to step into it, a role of protecting and caring for the world and society around us. I think the disharmony or dis-ease in our modern cultures and societies is that older women, post-menopause women, have not been given the right to step into the leadership roles

that we hormonally, mentally, physically are actually designed for in order to support the human race and look after the environment around us. But maybe I'm stepping out of the boundaries of this podcast by talking about that.

Joyce (49:53.848)

No, not at all Petra, you and I are many other beautiful women. We're on it, we're giving women the power, we're giving women the permission to make post-menopause, as many of us have said, maybe the best time of our lives, for sure.

Petra Coveney (50:15.352)

For sure it is. Oh, for sure it is. Now, don't get me wrong. You come out of your post-menopause and initially you might feel great or some people feel a bit wobbly on their feet. You know, it's not the same for everyone. The greater stability or predictability of your hormones does make life a hell of a lot easier. And I personally do not miss my bleeds. But that's, you know, some people

and I understand that grief and sense of loss. So there can be bumps along the way as you find your feet, but if you can find your feet and find a community that supports you and if you have connection with people like me and you and others who are helping you to find your new role or purpose in society.

then that is also going to help you to flourish in what you know is described as second spring, that rebirth renewal in your postmenopause, which is a concept from ancient traditional Chinese medicine, but which has so much relevance for the modern world. Don't you agree?

Joyce (51:39.254)

I totally, totally, totally agree. Petra, let's just go through. So 15 years ago, you started the menopause yoga. So let's go through what you do. So you're training the trainers who are now taking this worldwide. But for women who are listening to this and want to follow you and come to what you're offering, if they're not a teacher, but they want, so they're an individual that wants to come to your classes, what else do you offer women?

online classes, face to face, etc. What can women do?

Petra Coveney (52:14.433)

So first of all, I'd just like to say everyone is welcome. You don't have to be an experienced yoga practitioner or yoga student. You don't have to be a teacher. Everybody and every body is welcome. And I also just want to use the inclusive language of saying it's women and people who are going through the menopause because transgender men also experience the menopause symptoms.

if they still have an intact womb space. So everyone is welcome and menopause yoga has been designed to be as accessible as possible so you don't think you're going to be doing acrobatics and headstands or handstands. Now because I've been training other yoga teachers since 2019, I think it was 2019,

There are over a thousand, I think maybe 1,300 trained teachers all over the world. And those teachers who are fully qualified are listed on my website in a teacher's directory. The reason I'm mentioning that is it can be so nice to meet up with a local teacher and actually go to one of their classes or workshops because then you get to meet other people.

Most of my work, not all, is actually online these days apart from some retreats that I run in Brighton. And I'm also teaching in Belgium this year as well. If they buy the book, the pink Menopause Yoga and Wellbeing book, there are QR codes in the book that link to recorded video classes. So they just have to...

hover their phone over the QR codes and it will lead them to one of the classes. But if they do want to come and practice with me, just come to my website menopause-yoga.com and I have weekly classes and courses. At the moment Joyce, my focus is on the launch of my strength.

Petra Coveney (54:30.442)

in menopause and after courses and classes. That's because many of the women who I have taught over the years, they're also in their post-menopause and they really want to know how to get stronger for longer to stay fitter and positive in their whole lifestyle. And so they come to those classes.

But yeah, come to my website, menopause-yoga.com.

Joyce (55:04.898)

Brilliant, brilliant. Yes, and I'll put that in the show notes as well so everyone can see that. And you've mentioned now that very important strength training, you're bringing that into your practice. But also, I know you have mentioned as we were talking, breath work, and we're doing a podcast about breath work next, but also meditations. So yoga is so much more, isn't it? Don't think they've got to, as you said, do headstands and things and that they mustn't be scared of trying.

So they should come along. yeah, how important is the breath work and the meditations as well?

Petra Coveney (55:42.552)

So the very starting point of yoga is the breathwork. The breathwork is the bridge that connects or unites the mind and the body. So many of us are living in a disconnected world where we think we are our head, our brain and our body is very disconnected from us. So the breathwork is the starting point. This creates something called interoception.

which is an inner sensory awareness of your own body and what it's feeling, where it's feeling it. So then we start with some gentle warm up movement to help ease and release any tightness around joints and muscles, especially at this stage of life, whether it's menopause or post menopause. And then we very slowly, step by step,

In yoga we call it krama krama, wise progression. We step by step change some of the movement, increase some of the balance, some of the strength work, whether that's core stability, leg strength and stability, upper body strength and then we hold some of the poses for a little bit longer. It doesn't have to be a long time, just a little bit longer.

And in the physical balance and the breath work comes a sense of mental clarity. There is a stillness in some of the poses. Then we come back down onto the mat, we do some stretching and we do something called restorative yoga. Restorative yoga is so valuable at

all stages of perimenopause and menopause into postmenopause. In fact, restorative yoga is good for all hormone health because what it does is it brings you back into that balance, that satva, that equilibrium. And in that place of equilibrium, you can experience profound relaxation.

Petra Coveney (58:05.983)

which then prepares you for the meditation.

Your meditation may start with just being a few seconds of peace. It may be three minutes, five minutes of a sense of mental calm.

Once you have experienced that feeling of peace for one second, one minute, whatever it might be, it changes everything because you become aware that within you, your inner core is stillness and peace. And all you need to do is peel away the distractions.

Remember I started by talking about all the sensory overload, all the distractions around you. If you can then just practice tuning in, listening in, you know that that peacefulness, that stillness is always within you. You can always access it, even in the most troubled or stressful times. That's, in my opinion, amazing and life-changing.

Joyce (59:21.526)

And I think non-negotiable, I think every woman, maybe every man as well, everyone should be doing yoga for all of the reasons you said. It's not simply holding some poses. It's the whole package. the whole deal. And I must say that for me, I must tell you that my favorite part of the class is the meditation. And I really get deep. A couple of times I've fallen asleep in like a couple of minutes.

And what really amazes me is that occasionally, too often, some people leave the class just before the meditation. And I keep saying to the teacher, you need to lock the door. need to, because they're the ones, what they can't stay for five minutes. I always think they're the ones that really need it. But as I've said, also my friends who are doing lots of all the energetic classes without that balance with yoga.

I really, really feel passionately, everyone should be doing yoga, everyone at all stages of their life. They need to do it. I'm sure you agree.

Petra Coveney (01:00:28.819)

absolutely agree, but also remembering that some of us do have a heightened sensory overload in our nervous system because of the modern world and that we cannot just sit down and go, right, I'm gonna meditate. You know, that's why we have this movement and this mind-body connection with the breath to help bring you to the place of stillness. That is the point, the purpose.

I'm a yoga therapist as well, a qualified yoga therapist as well as a yoga teacher and trainer and author, et cetera. And with my clients, a client might walk in with extreme anxiety or digestive issues or migraine headaches or something else going on in their lives. And my role is to give them some gentle movement and different breathing techniques.

that then help them to experience some stillness, that sense of peace within. And as I said earlier, even if you only get a glimpse of that stillness, that's what changes because it means that change itself is possible. Many people who are caught in what they feel are physical or mental health illness, they believe they are stuck.

that change cannot happen, that they are always going to stuck in this. And that's why I say yoga therapy is so valuable because it gives them that insight that, something just changed in that moment. Therefore change is possible. And then that sets them on to a course of wellness. Does that make a bit of sense?

Joyce (01:02:23.534)

To me, totally, totally. And that leads me nicely. We're almost at the end now, but I wanted to just say you are one of the amazing women, one of the first women I interviewed for my book. And one of the first questions I asked was, I asked everybody was what was their view on aging? But also from what you've just said, what's your view on aging and how can we help women lead a healthy and happy life?

Petra Coveney (01:02:51.798)

So, number one, it doesn't have to be this way. So when we think about the older woman, so I'm just about to turn 60, entering my sixth decade, and I'm very excited. Now, I could be very depressed about my aging skin, my wobbly, saggy bits, my graying hair, all of those things.

But instead I'm embracing this in a really liberated way that I love my body, I'm grateful to this body. And it doesn't have to be this way that we don't need to be frail and fragile. Frailty is actually like a medical term for the older person who...

you know, loses their posture through osteoporosis and has the sarcopenia, loss of muscle mass and the lack of energy and depressive mood because of lack of purpose. It does not have to be this way. And Joyce and anyone listening, I do really believe that we, you, us, collectively,

We are a new generation of women who are looking after our health, educating ourselves how to get into post menopause stronger, fitter, healthier, more balanced and with a sense of purpose. Remember purpose helps with your mental health. And so I believe that the people like you and I going into our sixties

into this next decade, we are going to be transforming society's view of the older woman. And through community and connection with people like you and others, that we can experience great joy. I know that you and I, we've talked privately about sexual wellbeing and relationships. One of the things that...

Petra Coveney (01:05:05.511)

I love about my postmenopause relationships with men is, or my man, my boyfriend, is that I just feel so liberated. A relationship in postmenopause is not about reproductivity. It's not tied to making babies. Your body is not needed for making babies and reproducing.

your body becomes your own again, like a teenager, like going full circle. I don't need a man. I choose to have a man in my life. I am heterosexual, I just need to say. I choose to

have a partner in my life for the joyous reasons. And I do experience a great deal of joy and laughter.

and sexual pleasure and freedom of being this age in a relationship.

Joyce (01:06:10.488)

Beautifully, beautifully put, beautiful. Petra, I totally agree by the way. I'm having great sex. Just to finish, the very last questions I always ask all my guests on all my podcasts. And I have asked you this for the book and you can say something totally different or the same. I can't remember what you said in the book. Petra, what makes you happy and where is your happy place?

Petra Coveney (01:06:34.069)

What makes me happy is making choices for myself, for my health and wellbeing. And for many women who are listening to this podcast, you may be familiar with that feeling that you have to subordinate your own needs, your own priorities in order to prioritise the health and wellbeing of others, whether it's your partner or children or family members or work colleagues.

And I'm now at a stage where yes, yes, I'm obviously going to be caring and look after people around me, but I also make choices about what I want. So if someone says, you know, do you want to come out to this late night event at a pub where we're all going to get drunk? I'll just go, no, no, thank you. I felt a lot of pressure in my early years to drink alcohol, a lot of social pressure. And now I just say, no.

because it makes me feel depressed and anxious and tired and drained and no, I'm not prepared to compromise my health. So I love this liberated feeling of making choices for me. And as I'm preparing to step into my sixth decade, I am shifting into a new phase,

and I'd love to come back and tell you about it. I have big plans, big change. And is Petra stopping? No. Is Petra developing and changing and learning new things? Yes. And will I be hopefully sharing this with people in future? Yes, I certainly hope that people will still choose to listen.

Joyce (01:08:13.069)

No.

Petra Coveney (01:08:30.932)

to want to hear what I have to share. So I hope everyone that feels a little inspiring for you. And one last thing I just wanted to say Joyce, because I am listening to you. You have mentioned several times on this podcast with me about meditation. And so I listen, I'm always listening. It's very interesting that as

we are moving, even though I talk about strength and being physically fit etc. As we're moving into the next stage of life in traditional Indian culture, so if you go back into philosophy in the Indian culture, we are stepping into vata, the dosha called vata and the age of the wise woman and with that comes

requirement for spiritual connection, spiritual preparation for your soul, whether you believe you've got a soul or not. And so actually a larger part of your yoga practice needs to be meditation and you are naturally feeling drawn to that because your whole mind, your brain, everything is drawing you to that more.

Shall we? Let's call it a soulful place. Yeah.

Joyce (01:09:59.983)

You're totally right. I often say to the teacher at the start of the class, can we just do the whole class as a meditation?

Joyce (01:10:11.086)

He will tell you yes, she does say that you know meditation with the meditation I love it. I do love it a Petra Petra that Yeah, it's we've got to listen to our body and the very very last question very last and I've again I've asked you this in the book and this is the very last part of my book I've written what all of the 50 women said to this because I think it's so powerful. What advice would you give your younger self?

Petra Coveney (01:10:12.106)

Thank you.

Petra Coveney (01:10:18.134)

It's instinct. Yeah.

Petra Coveney (01:10:44.586)

I know it's a cliché. It would simply be to trust that everything will be okay. To trust yourself and...

Put yourself first more often.

Joyce (01:11:06.926)

beautiful on that beautiful note Petra it's been an absolute pleasure I can't wait to see you face to face very very soon you off you just told me before we started recording you're off on some amazing adventures so have a wonderful wonderful time on your adventures and I look forward to seeing you very soon and thank you so much for a very beautiful deep learning wonderful

Thank you so much, Petra.

Petra Coveney (01:11:38.4)

Thank you for inviting me Joyce, it's always such a pleasure and I hope that anyone listening has gained something from this or at least had a little chuckle.

Joyce (01:11:47.758)

I'm sure they have.