

# **Embracing Ageless Vitality Through Yoga With Leslie Matthews**

## **JaniceHost00:43**

Welcome to Restless to Renewed Women Redefining the Silver Years. I'm your host, Janice Neely, and joining me today is Leslie Matthews. Leslie is a certified yoga instructor who offers remote classes that can be accessed from anywhere in the world. Hello, Leslie, How are you doing?

## **LeslieGuest01:03**

Hi, Janice, I'm doing great .Thanks for having me.

## **JaniceHost01:06**

You're welcome. I'm anxious to talk to you today about your work as a yoga instructor, and I understand that you're 77 years old and that you started practicing yoga several years ago. So when did you first become interested in yoga?

## **LeslieGuest01:23**

Well, I've always been interested in the mind-body-spirit connection and I did that through dance for a long, long time. And then I first tried yoga about 30 years ago to help calm my overactive mind and looking for peace, and I found that through yoga.

## **JaniceHost01:42**

That's nice. I actually tried yoga back in the 1970s when I was pregnant, and I bought a book called Healthy Pregnancy the Yoga Way, and I did all my poses and I dropped off. So I need to get started again, but you have been really, really helpful to me and inspiring about yoga, so I think that I need to take part in it a little more often than I've been doing. Anyway, what profession were you in before you became a yoga instructor?

## **LeslieGuest02:14**

I was a dancer and dance teacher. I created the dance program at Harpeth Hall School in Nashville in the fall of 77 until 1999 and then created the yoga curriculum there until I retired in 2020.

## **JaniceHost02:30**

So you were a dance teacher. What did that look like at Harpeth Hall? I'm just curious.

### **LeslieGuest02:37**

Well, when it started it was very different from what it evolved to. But I started with just one or two little classes. They had just built this building, an art center, and so they wanted to dance there. So I started with that and then started with dance clubs after school and from that we built concerts and then the curriculum grew and it just evolved and evolved and it's still a really active program there.

### **JaniceHost03:03**

It sounds like so much fun. I would love to have been part of that when I was in school. Getting back to yoga, now you switched gears and you became a yoga instructor, and so today you have your own business, and I'm wondering what type of yoga that you teach currently?

### **LeslieGuest03:21**

Well, my training is in Lyengar based yoga and I have sort of let that evolve through the years. So I teach a mindfulness and alignment based yoga. Alignment is really really important in your skeletal system and mindfulness and how you think about it and how you're working with it. And then I use that same base in my chair based yoga, it's just that we use a chair for support there.

### **JaniceHost03:47**

So what is your preference when you teach? Do you like the mindfulness best or the chair based, or do you even have a preference?

### **LeslieGuest03:54**

They're different, but they're the same. So I would say that mindfulness and alignment goes right into chair based yoga as well. Chair based yoga is designed for people that can't get up and down off the floor easily from knee injuries or hips and sometimes back injuries. I really love teaching that because it allows people that are older or injured to still have a practice, whereas my regular mindfulness and yoga classes are still pretty gentle, but you do go up and down off the floor a lot. I use the same poses and everything is the same. Everything in mindfulness yoga can be modified to chair based yoga.

### **JaniceHost04:37**

Okay. So if you're a person who needs or feels more comfortable taking a chair based yoga class, that doesn't mean you'll be missing out on anything.

## **LeslieGuest04:46**

Oh no, oh no, oh, you'll get the exact same benefits.

## **JaniceHost04:51**

That's perfect. Then you mentioned the type of yoga that you've been trained in. Can you give us a little brief history about yoga for those people who are not familiar with it?

## **LeslieGuest05:09**

Yoga was created in India. That's where it started over 5,000 years ago, and Mr. Lyengar is the one that really brought yoga to the whole form. It wasn't seen much until about the 50s. That's when he brought it over here. But Lyengar yoga is using props like blocks and bolsters and belts and blankets, and it's just to allow you to access the poses more efficiently so that you have the correct alignment.

## **JaniceHost05:43**

Oh okay, I noticed on your website that you used some props in the pictures, but I also noticed that you are very intentional about making sure people are safe.

## **LeslieGuest05:59**

Yes.

## **JaniceHost05:59**

During the class.

## **LeslieGuest06:00**

That's probably my first priority is that people are safe. I don't think people understand that you can get hurt in yoga if you don't understand what you're doing. So knowledge is the key that's really, really important to me, and that you work safely, that you work at your level. People get hurt when they try to push past their understanding and knowledge of the poses or what their body abilities are.

## **JaniceHost06:26**

Well, that's important because I understand you have some older students and you want to ensure that they are safe and that there's no injury during the class.

## **LeslieGuest06:46**

My students age, I mean I have some in their 30s, but mostly I would say that the majority of my students are in the 50 to 90 age group.

## **JaniceHost06:57**

That's amazing.

## **LeslieGuest06:58**

Yeah, but I do have some younger students that do it and I have some younger students that really enjoy their chair based yoga, because it just meets their needs in a different way.

## **JaniceHost07:08**

Well, I think that it's very encouraging that it doesn't matter what age you are that you can participate. I know there's a lot of activities that people feel like they've aged out of.

## **LeslieGuest07:27**

It is, and you're just never too old for yoga or too young. It just kind of meets you where you are. So if you have certain things, yoga fills in in one way, or if you have another injury, it just complements everything. It's not going to work against anything that anybody does.

## **JaniceHost07:45**

Well, that's helpful to know because I think that some people think stretching or whatever is going to pull muscle or whatever. So you guide them through that to make sure that they don't push themselves too hard and grow into it.

## **LeslieGuest07:59**

Absolutely. And I think that I've never had a student, never had a student that had the right teacher and was working at the right level and worked with knowledge that didn't improve. And you're right there on stretching, that you can get hurt on stretching, because stretching is working one way. Weight training is working another way. running is working one way. playing tennis, playing golf, all of these things work one way. So, for example, if you're running, you can be really tight in your hips and your calf and your ankles and yoga meets you there and it fits it up. If all you do is do a lot of stretching, you might be weak because you're not building any muscle and there's a lot of strengthening that goes on in yoga. If you are playing tennis or golf, you're one-sided, you're asymmetrical, so yoga comes in and balances that. It just balances everything, and then it also balances your mind, body spirit too.

## **JaniceHost08:59**

Okay. So when you talk about mind, body spirit, can you give me a little bit more information about what that means and what the connection is?

## **LeslieGuest09:09**

The connection is the breath. But you can. So you can do this in other things too. You can be doing it with music or painting or playing an instrument. It's connecting your mind emotionally, physically, and spiritually. You've been there, right? You see a piece of art and you go, oh, wow, it expands your spirit. Yoga does that because you are working those three things mind, body, spirit and connecting it with your breath so that your mind works one way, the emotions work one way, and if you want to change your feelings or your emotions. So if you're an angry person, if you can change your body and your breath and your mind, you will change the other things too. Mindfulness also means being present in the moment. That's so hard. It is for everybody.

## **JaniceHost10:03**

Yeah, that's just so hard. I think we all experience daydreaming, the mind wandering and thinking about oh, when am I going to get to the grocery store?

## **LeslieGuest10:11**

Today I call them brain breaks. You can just go somewhere like that. That's part of the practice is really bringing you into focus and if you're focusing on your breath and if you're focusing on what it is you're doing and if you understand, this is really important. If you understand what it is you're doing and why that's a really important part for me in training people. That way you can't think of other things. But it takes practice. I mean it's not going to happen overnight.

## **JaniceHost10:39**

Well, you and I talked about my inability to breathe at the proper time during yoga, but I never thought about the fact that I would have to practice breathing. Yeah, it comes to you naturally.

## **LeslieGuest10:51**

The breath pattern that I use is called the one-two ratio breath and this is really good for any of the listeners. If you're stressed out or you have anxiety or you have trouble sleeping, just take a deep breath through the nose, not through the mouth. You just breathe in for whatever counts two to three, four counts and then double that exhale. So if you breathe in for three counts, you exhale for six counts and it's just very, very common to your nervous system.

## **JaniceHost11:21**

So that makes me think, then, that I wouldn't say it's a cure for anxiety, but it'd be a real help for anxiety issues.

## **LeslieGuest11:32**

It helps anxiety. Yeah, I'm not going to say it's cure anxiety by any means, but it's very helpful and what it does is bring you into the present so that you don't have all those wheels going on. If you're thinking about your breath and you're working on that, you really can't think about a lot of other things. If you're counting your breath, you really can't think about a lot of other things.

## **JaniceHost11:52**

That makes sense. So I really need you.

## **LeslieGuest11:57**

Well, you have me. Janice, You've got it.

## **JaniceHost12:01**

So are there any other health benefits you want to mention?

## **LeslieGuest12:04**

Oh, there's so many health benefits. Of course, as I've told you before, I think all exercise is beneficial. It's going to help everybody. It's what's going to keep you younger and it's going to keep you just going forward instead of going backward. But yoga complements and fills all the other spaces that you have.

## **12:23**

But there's been a lot of scientific studies that show yoga improves flexibility, and I found these in myself. So it improves flexibility, strength, posture, and body awareness. It's helpful with inflammation and mental health. That's what we were talking about with anxiety. And what I love so much, especially as we get older, is that most of the poses are held and are isometric, so they're holding the bones and it's been shown to improve bone strength. So for people that are tending toward osteoporosis or osteopenia, which does have its own things, if I'm teaching somebody with that, I have a different, a little different approach because I don't want to cause any more issues with it. But one of the things they say is strengthen the bones, and the way you strengthen the bones is you pull against the bone and that makes the bone stronger.

## **JaniceHost13:18**

I know that everything you mentioned just now was beneficial. But there are two things I think about after we cross over that 50 year mark in our lives, and one of them is the posture. I noticed it myself. I'm starting to bend over a little more and you know, you see people that are looking down and part of that is the fact that our bones change. You know if you have osteoporosis or something. But that's one thing. And then the second thing is inflammation. Oh my gosh, that causes so many problems in your body.

## **LeslieGuest13:58**

Right. Well, you know that we're sitting working at the computer and on the telephone or driving the car or you know anything. It pulls you forward and I've actually had students that have come to me privately that we've counteracted that. But it comes to a point if you do it too long those bones calcify and you get that hump on your back. But I've had real success with one of my students and we've done a lot of work with opening her shoulders because she was starting on that dowager hump. That's what you call it, right, a dowager. You know what I'm talking about.

## **JaniceHost14:40**

Right.

## **LeslieGuest14:41**

And we did a lot of work on opening the front side of the body and we made some really dramatic changes with her. So you know, there it is mind, body, spirit, intention-based, idea-based, focus-based, and the inflammation reduction just comes from the whole body experience, the breath and the movement and releasing of stress.

## **JaniceHost15:03**

It's amazing how much stress can affect inflammation and pain and joints and so forth.

## **LeslieGuest15:09**

Right, and you know, one of the things I haven't talked to you about this, but one of the things that really has brought me to working with students like that.

## **15:18**

I have a lot of people that come to me that have had injuries or two things.

## **15:23**

One is they want some help with injuries and keeping in practice, and the other is they just want to learn how to do yoga so they can go take a class too. But I've had several major, major injuries, and the one thing I've had there was a six-year period where I had three major surgeries. One was a detached hamstring, one was a foot injury and one was a back injury. And that's a lot of that came from dance, because that's hard on your body, and one of the things that it taught me about myself when I'm working with other students is that you can actually look like you're not in pain, but you can be really suffering, and I understand that because I've been through it myself, and the compassion it has given me for working with those students is really, really important for me, because I want people to know that they're not going to be disregarded because they you know they hurt, they say they hurt, I know you can hurt and not look like you're hurting.

### **JaniceHost16:22**

Right, you don't have to be limping around or holding your back or whatever.

### **LeslieGuest16:27**

Right, especially people with back injuries. I mean I think people, you know, really discount people sometimes because of that and I don't believe in that. I believe in seeing people and them being seen.

### **JaniceHost16:39**

Well, what is your favorite pose and why?

### **LeslieGuest16:43**

First of all, let me say that yoga is for everyone, but some poses are not for everybody.

### **JaniceHost16:50**

Right.

### **LeslieGuest16:50**

So I love the warrior poses because they're standing poses and they help develop stamina and open your hips and your shoulders and they really help you improve your breath work, your breathing work, and a lot of people hold their breath all the time. Everybody right now, take a deep breath.

### **JaniceHost17:11**



You're going to hear me now on the microphone. So you meet someone and they start asking you about yoga and they are interested, but they say to you yoga would be too hard or I'm not flexible, I can't do that, or I can't get down on the floor, I'm too old, or I think other means of exercise are more beneficial than yoga.

## **LeslieGuest17:38**

I can take those one at a time really to say that yoga is too hard. It can be really hard, but you need to start. You need to have a teacher that would give a few private classes to help them just begin to understand what the poses are. You need to have the teacher and a class that's right for you. So not every teacher is right for every student, and so they need to do their homework a little bit and find a class if they're not flexible. This one I always find so funny. My answer to why you take classes is to improve your flexibility. For example, if I wanted to learn how to play tennis, I would take classes in tennis. I wouldn't have to be a tennis player to learn how to play tennis.

## **18:24**

The getting down, up and down on the floor that's a really big one for a lot of people, and I talked about it a little earlier. And that's where chair-based yoga really comes in. It's so great because you can be really active and you can do every pose that you do, but you have that support. So if you have chair-based yoga, you don't even really have to worry about going up and down off the floor. Like I said, I just think that yoga is for everyone. I'll just say that it'll come to you when you're ready for it. I know that when I was younger and dancing, I felt a little slow. For me, now, it feels just fine. Dancing is a little fast, but I just think it's really important to do your research. Don't go into a big, huge class at the Y unless you know the teacher or you've talked to the teacher in the beginning. It's a commitment. It's not a one-time fix-all. It's a commitment.

## **JaniceHost19:19**

So you're doing your classes via Zoom. So how do you make accommodations from a distance? Is there a certain way that you ask questions prior to their class?

## **LeslieGuest19:32**

Yes, yes, this is. This was a challenge for me when I started teaching on Zoom because, you know, I don't have any hands-on experience with them. What I really like for people to do if they're going to sign up for my classes is I usually will email and say do you have any movement limitations that I need to know about? And most of the time, when somebody does you know, they'll say gee, I have a hip injury, I have this, I have that, and they'll tell me about it, and so I will try to address that when I'm teaching class. Like Janice, your shoulder, I know you have this bad shoulder. Maybe you want to bend your elbow here instead of shaking your arms straight out, that sort of thing and most of them will let me do it.

**20:16**

Communication is really really essential, and I am open to emails and texts from my students. It's not an imposition for me. I feel that's part of my job. So if somebody doesn't understand something, if they don't tell me, I won't know. So if they'll just let me know and then we'll find a way to work through it and address it. Is that enough of that, if you think?

**JaniceHost20:40**

I think that people might assume that, because it's a distance learning class, that it is not personalized, and it sounds like what you're doing is actually more personalized than a lot of in-person classes.

**LeslieGuest20:54**

It's true. It's true, I think you're right on that, and the beauty of the technology is that we can have two different time zones and people in different places and do it on Zoom and the comfort of your own home and all of that. But it is easy for it to be isolating. So it's been really important to me to reach out to my students and be open to them. I really want questions. I really want people to connect with me.

**JaniceHost21:25**

And I understand that in your class, they can either turn their screen on and you can see them, or they can turn it off if they're, you know, want to work out in their pajamas or whatever.

**LeslieGuest21:35**

That most of my students turn their cameras off. I love it when they leave them on, but I certainly understand that. And yes, if you want to take it in your pajamas, that's fine. I think that I give cues that are clear enough for people, once they get used to doing the same, I know people just listen to me. They watch me, but they listen to me more and I don't really have to see them. I try to address everything with verbal cues.

**JaniceHost22:01**

Yeah, well, I know I did a class the other day and I was needing to watch because I wasn't sure about where my body parts were supposed to go. But if I would practice like you said, then your verbal assistance would be enough. I think I just need to take a few classes to know what's going on.

**LeslieGuest22:22**

Right. And also, you know, the part of yoga is not a one shot deal. I mean, it's a commitment and it's a lifetime practice. It's not something that you can do in my opinion, this is my opinion, I shouldn't say that, but I, you know, I think people need to understand that it's not going to be just an exercise class. It's a much deeper level. You get plenty of exercise, but you have to study a little bit, you have to practice, you have to be consistent if you want to grow and if you want to make yoga a part of your life, that's it, it will be part of your life.

## **JaniceHost22:56**

We had a friend a few years ago, it was a guy that my husband used to coach ball with when our kids were young. He had a heart attack and he was a very thin guy and very fit but you know you would never assume that he would have a heart attack. His doctor recommended that he start yoga and he told my husband it was wonderful. He said it was life changing for him.

## **LeslieGuest23:23**

It changed my life. It really did. It changed my life. You know people say yoga will come to you when you're ready for it. The teacher will come and yoga will come. That same way. It is wonderful and it is so great for stress release. I always have at least a 10 minute savasana at the end. That's a rest period. It's so calming and relaxing and it's also the time that the body processes all the information that you gave it. So this is a lying down position on the floor where you might have your legs up or on a pillow or something, but where you focus on your breath and letting go of any tension in your body, and that also helps with soreness too. Now yoga can be really strenuous. There's other types of yoga, ashtanga and power yoga. I don't teach that kind of yoga, but there are people that that's the kind of yoga they want. Nothing wrong with that. It's just not the way I teach. But it is wonderful.

## **JaniceHost24:23**

Yeah, I think I mentioned to you the other day too that I was telling my son about you and he said that a lot of professional sports figures are taking yoga classes now, and it's not just for the flexibility and so forth, but it is actually strength building, because when you hold a pose, you're building some strength.

## **LeslieGuest24:43**

Right Bone strength as well as muscle strength, and also a lot of athletes are taking yoga for the ability to learn how to keep their mind really focused on what it is they're doing. There's a guy in Nashville that was a big basketball player named Clyde Lee. I don't know if you remember this man, but he played for Vanderbilt, I think, and he became a yoga instructor. So when I was teaching yoga at Harpeth Hall for the sports teams, I called this man and I said what is it? What do you recommend? Where do you think that I should focus? And that was his main thing is focus on visualization and staying present. So it's mind, body, spirit. Remember, it's those three things connected with the breath.

## **JaniceHost25:27**

Mind, body and spirit. But even the sound of yoga, or the word, concerns some people. What would you say to them to ease their mind?

## **LeslieGuest25:44**

I would say do your homework about your classes and your teachers and find the one that's right for you. Find something that resonates with you. Don't just say, oh, I tried yoga and I hated it. You just have to find the right teacher in the right level of class to work. And remember not to be inhibited or Intimidated, because everybody had their first yoga class and you know when I used to teach live classes when someone would come in I'd say, oh, janice is here today and this is her first class, and everybody would say, yay, we know what it's like and were really happy for them to do it. So it's again. It's just Important to understand that it's a lifetime journey and it takes patience and consistency to achieve those many, many benefits that are available to you. Yoga has so many health benefits. I mean, we've talked about them and, like I said, I've never seen anyone not improve over time. So if you're really unsure, you really want to do it. it's an investment in your health and wellness.

## **JaniceHost26:46**

Can you cover the steps that someone would need to take if they want to attend classes?

## **LeslieGuest26:52**

It's really easy, okay, so you just go to my website, Leslie Matthews dash yoga and you click up at the top. There's some little tabs and there are scheduling rates. You click on the date that you'd be interested in taking a class and I get a message and I'll get back to you and send you the link. And once you get the link, all you do is click on the link. You don't have to do anything else. And if you want to do a recording, you'd have to tell me you want a recording. Then I would send you a recording link later.

## **JaniceHost27:27**

Okay, and so you offer individual classes and also package offerings. So this sounds easy enough. So do you have any closing words for us?

## **LeslieGuest27:40**

Oh well, first of all, I want to thank you for being interested in this. For the listeners that don't know Janice, she is an amazing human being and she's just done so many things that have helped me, so I'm just so grateful for that, Janice, really, and just remember everyone that yoga is for everyone. When you're ready for it, don't try to force it. Take the steps just like you were

learning anything else. It's a learning curve, and be patient, be consistent and you'll get there and you'll reap huge, huge benefits.

## **JaniceHost28:14**

Well, I can't see how anyone would argue with that. This sounds so wonderful and I would encourage everyone to go to Leslie's site. So if you want to learn more about yoga in general, or if you want to schedule an online class with Leslie, just visit her website and, like she mentioned, it's Leslie Matthews dash yoga.com. You can also follow her on Facebook and Instagram, and in addition, Leslie's information is going to be listed on our Restless to Renewed website, so there'll be a little bio there and some links and also this podcast. And as a last bit of encouragement to you about the class, the best thing is for new people your first class is free, so can't beat that.

## **28:59**

Finally, I want to thank our audience today. This podcast serves as a forum for women over 50 to highlight their hopes and their dreams and their achievements. If you would like to learn more about Restless to Renewed, visit the website at [RestlesstoRenewed.com](http://RestlesstoRenewed.com). There you will find links to other episodes, bios on the Restless to Renewed women and recommended resources. Thank you for listening today and please join us again.