

Aviva: Hello! It's Aviva! From Dogwood Studios. I'm here with my good friend Melissa Russell, and we're going to get a chance to learn a little bit more about Melissa, and what iRest is. Before we dive in, let me give an introduction to Melissa. She's an amazing person and is a certified Yoga therapist, a 500 hour registered Yoga teacher trained in Ashtanga and Asusara and Pelvic floor health. In addition, she is an iRest level 2 meditation teacher. Melissa began her Yoga journey over 20 years ago while leading innovative teams in the world of publishing and educational technology. Five years ago, Melissa left the corporate world to pursue Yoga Therapy full time.

What an amazing background! Thank you so much for taking your time to talk to us and tell us a little bit more.

Let's start with what we all start with. Yoga. What brought you to Yoga?

Melissa: Well, first of all, thank you for having me here, and for doing this interview. It is a pleasure to be here.

Why did I start doing yoga? I started doing yoga when I was 14. My parents took me to my first yoga class. They were hippies back in the sixties. Since then I have done yoga on and off, but at that time it was mostly just for exercise.

My practice turned a little bit more spiritual, and became even more important in my life when I was introduced to a practice called Ashtanga. And although this practice is very physical, which appealed to me at the time, it also required something called a home practice. What did that mean? I was practicing on my own in my basement, 5 to 6 times a week. And this inspiration to practice at home without the guidance of a teacher - I did have a teacher who I would see once a week, to kind of give me corrections and keep me on my path - made it so that the physical yoga practice became a meditation. So practicing on my own, following my breath, following my gaze, really became a moving meditation.

And then I became not only interested in the physical aspects of Yoga, but also in the meditative aspects, which is how I came to be doing iRest today.

Aviva: I think that is a common story that lots of times it starts with the physical. And you notice at some point when you're ready, that there's so much more to yoga.

What brought you from practicing Yoga to teaching Yoga?

Melissa: Well, the practices of Yoga had helped me throughout my whole life, which is why I kept doing Yoga, throughout difficult times in my life but also during joyful times. I came to teach Yoga because I knew that the practice had, as I said, helped me. I used to teach Yoga at work because I would talk to people about my practice, and they would say, "Oh, you know I would love to do that too." And finally they invited me to teach Yoga at work, and I really noticed how much it was changing people's lives - that their days were better, that they had more peace, more ease, as they went through the day. There are lots of ways that we can help ourselves through yoga. You can help with overwhelm, stress, mental or physical pain. This Yoga practice really lets us tap into a place of peace and ease, and Yoga helps us really find that place.

Aviva: So True. We wanted to learn more about iRest. Let's dive in. What exactly is iRest?

Melissa: iRest is a type of Yoga Nidra. It's a led meditation practice. That's usually the way I describe it. It's practiced lying down, sometimes it's practiced sitting up to help prevent a person from falling asleep and it might feel safer to them if they sit up. It's led by a teacher, which, in the cases when I teach it, is me. And that teacher guides students through what Yoga philosophy calls the koshas and that guidance is taking to us a place of deep rest and healing, where we experience ourselves as an unchanging field of awareness, a kind of a different state than we experience in our waking moving lives. To be specific, the practice takes us through what we call the feeling body - sensations of your feet, your hands, your torso, so kind of what we feel with our body. It takes us into the breath body - sensations of breathing, inhaling and exhaling. It takes us into the mind body - the part of us that learns, takes in the world around us, and analyzes - that thinking part that we use very often. It takes us into the wisdom body - the part of us that knows what to do without thinking. It's an intuitive side but it's also

the part of us that can hold onto old scars. These are what Yoga calls samskaras. The practice keeps going and takes us into the joy body - the part of us that feels connected, that feels love and joy. And then finally back into that awareness itself.

Aviva: And you started with this, but it's a form of Yoga Nidra, and that it goes through the koshas. A lot of other Yoga Nidras do the same thing where they take you into a meditative state. So what makes iRest unique and different from that field of therapeutic relaxation?

Melissa: That's a great question, Aviva. The reason the iRest practice appeals to me is that it's more than doing the practice. Many of us do meditation and find a sense of stillness - that's often what we're hoping for. iRest is different because it takes the experience of doing the meditation, and while you're doing it, it actually gives us tools that we can use in everyday life. So it kind of takes the things that we do in the practice, and lets us apply those to our lives outside of the practice.

One example is that iRest uses something called an inner resource. During the practice we cultivate an inner resource - a sense of peace and well-being in our body. We use many different tools to cultivate this inner resource during the practice so that when we're facing something that's difficult whether that's a sensation in our body or whether it's a feeling or an emotion we can use this inner resource that we've cultivated in iRest to use in our daily life to process things that are difficult. By practicing this way, we're reminded that we do have this option for peace and ease. It's right there waiting for us. We just need the tools sometimes to access it.

And the other thing about iRest that I haven't seen in other places is that it's really research based. There have been many studies done with the iRest practice, and it has proven its effectiveness in hospital settings as well as with veterans, and the research has found that it helps with relaxation and can eliminate stress. People have found that it helps with insomnia. It's also used to solve personal and interpersonal problems. It's been researched with trauma as well as anxiety, fear, anger, and depression. So it has lots of different research based papers around it that show that it helps with these things.

Aviva: Could you go a little bit more into detail about that? How does iRest support healing?

Melissa: Sure. So the research shows that short periods of regular iRest meditation can reduce fatigue. They can increase energy, and that longer periods of iRest can initiate things like tissue repair. So it can actually repair our tissues, just like when we sleep.

It can decrease cortisol production. It also releases healing hormones that boost the immune system. I hinted that earlier that what happens with the iRest practice is that we're actually going into a deeper stage of sleep, and we're getting into those delta brain waves that help us repair our bodies.

Aviva: This May Dogwood studios is focusing on our commitment to meditation. You talk about it here and there. What's the link between iRest and meditation?

Melissa: Thanks for asking that, Aviva. iRest is a meditation practice, or I consider it to be one. Like many meditation practices, iRest helps us cultivate attention, concentration, and present-centered thinking. During an iRest practice we are prompted to stay awake. We follow a practice for 35 min. It is led, and that is cultivating attention, concentration, and staying in the present moment. And, also, like meditation practices, you are resting back into a tranquility state. That is what you're moving towards. So in that way iRest is similar to other meditation practices.

What I think is really cool is that if you don't have a meditation practice, iRest is a great way to start because it is led and you can do it lying down. Often people feel pressure to sit up and have this perfect posture. iRest allows you to lie down and rest.

The other thing, since it's been tested and researched, many people who are triggered by a meditation practice aren't triggered by an iRest meditation practice. So it's an opportunity for people who have had trouble meditating to try a different type which might have less triggers.

And if you do have a meditation practice, I had a strong meditation practice before coming to iRest, iRest can really deepen your current meditation practice. Because for many people, it's not easy to get into a tranquility state. I'll use myself as an example, I sat there being bored for a year. I was just bored to death in my practice. There was no tranquility. So this iRest practice, because it's led so beautifully and systematically can give people, who have a meditation practice, a real sense of that tranquility that they might not be experiencing in their regular meditation practice.

The iRest practice also helps people who are having a lot of feelings during their meditation practice or a lot of pain ways to process them. The iRest practice gives us ways to work with feelings, thoughts, and emotions that come up when we are practicing meditation,

Aviva: That is wonderful. You ignited the fire in me to get back to an iRest practice. I am super excited that you're gonna be joining us on May seventeenth for lunchtime learning with Melissa Russell to do iRest. I look forward to that. Thank you so much.

Melissa: Absolutely. I'm really looking forward to it. Aviva!

This practice is amazing. It's changed my life. And I'm really looking forward to introducing it to people who haven't done it before. And for those who have practiced iRest maybe they are excited to have a place to practice.