

-- Speaker 1 00:00:27 Welcome to another episode of Dr. MC's Self-Care Cabaret podcast. Today we're going to talk more about yoga and how every body can do yoga. You do not have to look a certain way or be able to bend yourself into a pretzel to find joy and experience the magic that is yoga. Joining us for this discussion is my friend Michelle Sullivan. Michelle is a plus sized body positive yoga teacher. She teaches yin, restorative vinyasa and hatha forms of yoga in her classes. She focuses on creating an environment that is welcoming, inclusive, and accessible to every body. Through the use of props such as blocks and straps and bolsters, she can help you to make the poses more accessible or to improve your alignment. Michelle firmly believes in yoga for everybody, as do I. I am excited to chat with her today and learn more about how she found the confidence and courage to take the yoga teacher training and step in front of a class for the first time. And also talk to her about how she prepares for any negativity she may face as a plus size yoga instructor. I'm thrilled to welcome Michelle to the podcast today.

Speaker 1 00:01:50 Well, thank you so much, Michelle for joining us here today on the Dr. Mc Self-Care Cabaret podcast.

Speaker 2 00:01:57 Thank you for having me. I'm excited. Yeah.

Speaker 1 00:01:59 We're gonna, we're gonna jump right in. I like to just right away ask my guests, how do you like to practice self-care?

Speaker 2 00:02:08 Oh, I have, I've always been a big believer in self-care. Probably like one of the big things I do is I love to cook. So usually like I may cook something that, you know, from a childhood recipe, some family recipes, something that makes me bring back memories or what I've been into a lot that I started doing. Oh, the pandemic. I mean, I'm married, I have a son, so it's not usually that I'm alone. But during the pandemic and working from home, I was home a lot and it was hard to keep a routine eating breakfast. It

Speaker 1 00:02:44 Was hard to make a routine <laugh>,

Speaker 2 00:02:47 But like it's so hard to cook a meal for one or even just put together breakfast. That, and when you do it doesn't usually look too good. It's usually something just slap together. So I would take the time and was usually maybe an extra two to three minutes just to make something look good for myself. Hmm. Like take whether it was, you know, cottage cheese and veggies or an asai bowl instead of just dumping it in, put it together nicely, like make it look like somebody took the time to make me a nice breakfast.

Speaker 1 00:03:20 I love that.

Speaker 2 00:03:21 Um, that would, so doing that helped me like stay on track without, you know, going, not eating my first meal till like one o'clock or just grabbing some handful to put in my mouth. Um, adapt to that. Watching a movie, spending time at my son. Some people hate meal plan and prep, but because I love to cook, I love to meal plan and prep. Okay. But it helps me get through the week. Well, a lot of people may see that as a chore. I don't because I know it sets me up for success during the week and takes so much stress off of me. So that is me that I care for myself that way by setting myself up for success for

Speaker 1 00:04:03 The week. I love that. That's awesome. In

Speaker 2 00:04:06 Therapy.

Speaker 1 00:04:07 Yeah, therapy in therapy

Speaker 2 00:04:08 Really.

Speaker 1 00:04:09 Yeah. Really important.

Speaker 2 00:04:10 Yep. And taking one of my favorite yoga, yoga classes. Um, I keep that, that's been with me forever too. So yeah, those are some of those things that I do to take care of myself.

Speaker 1 00:04:25 I love it. And

Speaker 2 00:04:26 Even just, if I can't get to any of that, even if I just take like a half an hour outta my day where I just say I need a half hour to myself and just go sit in my bedroom and do some deep breathing or even flip through TikTok for 10 minutes, just to have that few minutes to myself, that's what I do.

Speaker 1 00:04:47 Awesome. You touched upon several like domains of self-care, right? Because we know that Manny Pettys can absolutely be part of any routine, but that's not like the real meaning of self-care can be part of it, but like it's much more, it's deeper than that. Right? So you talk about, right. I love the idea of making your meals like more --

-- special. I call that eating as an act of love. Like you're taking the time to make your food presentable, like you said, instead of just slapping something in the dish. Actually taking the time to make it look good and really taking the care into preparing. I think that's really important.

Speaker 2 00:05:24 You are worthy of that. Yeah. Like if y'all gonna spend the time and prepare a meal for your family, at least I do. Like if I prepare a meal for my family, I'm gonna take my time, do it right, put it together and I'm gonna make it look like aesthetically pleasing. But that's the cook in me. Right. So why not do that for myself and take those two, three minutes because I'm worth it by myself too.

Speaker 1 00:05:48 Yeah. No, I love that. I think that's great. I'm wondering, what is your favorite thing to cook?

Speaker 2 00:05:55 My favorite thing, it's probably anything Italian. Like I love, like, like comfort food. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, like making gravy and meatballs. I love having people over, which I don't do as much cuz we've been busy lately, but we do like to entertain. Um, my son's a little picky, so I haven't, don't always get to cook what I love. But fish, I love to cook. Fish. Um, I love salmon. I some, sometimes I just love to keep it simple. Um, especially now getting into grilling season. Just a great piece of fish. Some seasoned veggies. Um, that will be my go-to those in Dom's, Turkey tips. I have an obsession with those <laugh>.

Speaker 1 00:06:42 Nice. I was just curious. I love cooking Italian too. I'm al also almost all Italian and Yeah. It just kind of comes naturally to me. Although I will say, I heard you call it gravy. We do call it sauce in my family, but I do,

Speaker 2 00:06:56 I

Speaker 1 00:06:56 Won't hold that against you, Michelle. I promise. That's fine. You can be team gravy. I'm on Team Sauce, but that's awesome. Thank you for, for sharing that. And I do wanna talk about what made you become a yoga teacher, because I know this was a bit of a transformation for you and you know, how did you build up the confidence and decide to just go for it and do it?

Speaker 2 00:07:20 So yoga has been with me on and off for probably seven, I'd say seven or eight years. And I had been going to the studio and I loved like the classes that I took and I loved the atmosphere. And then I took a yoga class and I literally left there and I said, I don't know what just happened, <laugh>, but I want more of

Speaker 1 00:07:44 It. Oh, nice.

Speaker 2 00:07:46 So from there I started exploring different yoga classes at different studios. There were some studios that almost made me never wanna go back. Hmm. To yoga.

Speaker 1 00:07:58 Can you talk a little bit about

Speaker 2 00:08:00 Why? Yeah. The reason why is because it wasn't, it was stereotype. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, it was your stereotypical thin white teacher

Speaker 1 00:08:12 Who can bend themselves into

Speaker 2 00:08:14 Azel <laugh>. Yep. Not a diverse crowd. Um, not, and I know enough to look at the class descriptions and see, you know, this was billed as in all levels welcome class. But there was, there really was no help. It was a Vig Vinyasa class. There was no assists, there was no helping with any of the poses. There was no props, um, in the assists. There were no props offered. I'll get back to props in a minute cuz that's a really big thing Yeah. In my practice. Um, and there was no, there was no sense of community. It was, there was no, it was a workout planning, plain and simple. And I knew there was more to yoga than a workout. So I, because I had that feeling when I left my initial class, I was looking, I wanted to try some different places. Um, some places I liked, some I, some I didn't. Where I found a good home was at Montre in Danvers where I had a teacher who was, he was a six foot tall marine. I think he was a marine, former Marine, um, big bearded guy. Somebody you would never in a million years think was a yoga teacher.

Speaker 1 00:09:50 <laugh>. That's awesome.

Speaker 2 00:09:51 And he played Beatles. He played guns and roses. And I was like, this is amazing. And he was awesome. And he would say at the beginning of every class, go get the props. Go get all the props, get the bolsters, the blocks, the straps, get them all props. So you have friends. And I didn't really understand how to use them because --

-- the classes I had been to before, they were never, they were there, but they were never encouraged. They were never really

Speaker 1 00:10:27 Used. Right. It was almost like a, I, I've been in classes like that where it's almost like a, like an ego thing to not use props like that. Somehow using props as like a failure. Like Yeah, I know <laugh>.

Speaker 2 00:10:40 Yeah. And it's not so as the yoga teacher may will tell you, yo props are meant to support you, to help guide you blocks. They're meant to bring the floor to you. It's not, you know, I'm not flexible yogi by any means. So I use a lot of props. But they're also for a seasoned yogi who maybe they're working towards a deeper pose, they're to assist them into getting deeper into that pose. So it's not just to help somebody who can't touch their toes, which a strap will do if you use straps you in a forward fold, like a seated forward fold. Mm-hmm. <affirmative> use a strap to help bring you closer. I can't touch my toes. I never could. But a strap can help you do that. And over time you can increase your flexibility, but you're doing it with that tool to help you get there. So I did a lot of his classes and I learned a lot about it. And when I didn't know and there was a great, there was a lot of regulars there that I knew and his wife was also a yoga teacher. And then I got out of it, oh, for some reason I think I was buying a house. We were looking to buy a house and

Speaker 1 00:12:00 I had life got in the way

Speaker 2 00:12:02 <laugh> life got in the way looking to buy a house. We had a, you know, cut thi something somewhere. Sure. And then I had gone here and there, but it was during pandemic that my body craved it, my anxious mind needed it. I do have a lot of anxiety. So as soon as stuff started to open like studios, you know, we had P V C pipe with plastic shower curtains is barriers,

Speaker 1 00:12:37 Whatever it takes. We

Speaker 2 00:12:38 Were, we were wearing masks, but we were there, we were out of our houses. We were in a studio. And the yoga teacher who she is also a plus size teacher, I knew her. Mike, I know you, I knew her from Mantra. Oh cool. Like, I couldn't remember her name, but I knew her and I had been in a lot of the same classes. So her and I became friends. So this was a yin yoga class. And if you've never done yin or if you're not familiar with that style of yoga, it is much slower. Mm-hmm. <affirmative> very, it is matte paced. It is more meditative, longer held passive stretch poses. And it helps, it stimulates your parasympathetic, parasympathetic nervous system and really starts to slow you down and slow that mind down. Yeah.

Speaker 1 00:13:36 Nice.

Speaker 2 00:13:38 So I needed that through to deal with my anxiety through covid and I just kept going. But it also became like a girl's night because classes, there was only two or three of us in classes cause that's all we could have. We became very close. Um, it was a very unique experience to have that, those small, intimate classes. But I got so much of that mentally it helped so much. I'm like, I need to, I need to learn more and I need to be able to give this back because if this could help me. And at one point I was, it was suggested to me by a doctor to use to try yoga for my anxiety. And I basically told her where to go. <laugh>.

Speaker 1 00:14:28 My goodness, you had a medical professional promoting yoga and you <laugh> like how we never get that <laugh>.

Speaker 2 00:14:36 Yeah. So, but it did so much with I'm like, I, I need to give back. And so I did. Like I, once I was sure enough I said it, I put that out into the universe. Cause I'm very big on energy in the universe.

Speaker 1 00:14:53 Absolutely.

Speaker 2 00:14:54 You're putting things out there and manifesting. And I did, trying to find a yoga teacher. Training during pandemic isn't the easiest thing. I Sure. Um, especially one that was in person. But I did, so I went to Salty Buddha. Um, they have locations in Peaty in Salem. And it was an amazing experience with very supportive class, very supportive environment, very diverse, very inclusive of, of shapes, colors, genders. This is, it's a very inclusive community. Awesome. But I will tell you, the first night of training, I pulled up there and I almost didn't go in the doors. Oh no. I sat in the car and cried and wanted to throw up, but I put my big girl pant --

-- s on, said I paid the money for this <laugh>, I'm going. And it, it was the best, one of the best decision decisions I've ever made.

Speaker 1 00:16:02 Oh, I'm so glad that you found the confidence and the courage to move forward. Cuz it sounds like it was definitely something that was a calling or became a co kind of a calling for you. I think that's awesome. And you talk, we talk a lot on the podcast about the parasympathetic nervous system because that's your rest. Mm-hmm. <affirmative> and digest response, which is the opposite of fight or flight. Yep. So deep breathing can help activate that gentle yoga, stretching. Yeah. Awesome. Love it.

Speaker 2 00:16:28 So that is primarily what I teach. I'll teach all different modalities, but yeah, that has been pri primarily what I've been teaching and adding some more pranayama into it, um, with different breathing techniques too. Yeah.

Speaker 1 00:16:43 Nice. So I'm wondering, you know, the yoga world and you know, society in general isn't, uh, always particularly kind or does it make it easy for plus size folks and there's a lot of fat phobia in the world and of course that exists in the yoga world as well. So I'm wondering, as a plus size yogi, how do you navigate that?

Speaker 2 00:17:05 Well, I will be 47 in a week.

Speaker 1 00:17:11 Happy early birthday. I

Speaker 2 00:17:12 Don't mind. Please <laugh>. Thank you. And I don't mind putting that out there because I'm not someone that would lie about my age. But I also want people to know that somebody's looking to make a switch and do something in their life. It's never too late to do it

Speaker 1 00:17:26 A hundred percent. But

Speaker 2 00:17:28 Having lived in a larger body pretty much all of my life, I wanna say I've gotten used to it, but maybe I have a thicker skin than I did, you know, 15, 20 years ago. So having come from a supportive environment, I think I've taken that and I know, I know that I'm confident in myself and that I can walk into a studio and if it's not welcoming, I can see myself out the door and just be like, this isn't the place for me. Sure. But a, I know a lot of people can't do that and they don't know how to do that. So I try to advocate for that. I try to advertise myself in my classes as a very welcoming environment. I encourage people because a lot of my advertising, but my classes are through social media and I always encourage people to message me and ask me.

Speaker 2 00:18:34 And that is, a lot of the emails that I get are, I've never done this before. I'm not flexible. I am I too big to do this. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, I don't know how I can do this or my, I don't have that much mobility. So I encourage that and I will talk people like I will look through different, if I know they're coming I will, you know, look research different, um, variations of poses for them. Um, but I know the people that aren't always gonna be coming to me. But some things to do is somebody who wants to try it. There's a lot of great resources online. And somebody I would refer to is Jess Stanley. Oh,

Speaker 1 00:19:23 I adore her.

Speaker 2 00:19:25 <laugh>. Yes. The underbelly plus size woman. I love her. I love how outspoken she is. I love he self-love. And even when she's not feeling the self-love, at least she just puts it all out there. Yeah,

Speaker 1 00:19:39 Absolutely.

Speaker 2 00:19:39 And I adore her for that. And she has a great yoga practice and she cues a lot for a larger body. And if anybody wanted to try yoga and is free to wa walk into a yoga studio because they didn't have the confidence, I would highly recommend her website, the end of belly.com. And I think she does. I looked at it and I think she does like a 14 day free trial. Okay. She has great cues and I am confident that she would be able, taking her classes would give somebody confidence to walk into a class. Yeah.

Speaker 1 00:20:22 In your classes, Michelle, do you have opportunities for folks to use, obviously like props, but um, do you have opportunities for like chair poses and stuff like that? Or

Speaker 2 00:20:32 At the studio? Uh, when I teach at the studio, I do, we do have props to use. Um, and I will always tell, I'll always tell people grab blocks in a strap. We may or may not use them, but grab them anyways. Sure. And if I don't incorporate them into my practice that night, I will keep an eye o --

-- n my students to see, you know, like if they're not, they're having a hard time, I will show them how to use a block and to see if that makes a difference for them.

Speaker 1 00:21:03 There's so much you can do though. I think people don't realize that even if you just do standing poses or poses where you're on the mat the whole time, or even if you have the ability to use a chair or whatever else, like you still feel the benefits. It's not like, it's not a sign of weakness doing like a, just a standing pose. It's not that like it's still beneficial.

Speaker 2 00:21:26 Yep. And like I said, all it does, you can't get to the ground. The ground is gonna come to you. If you can't, you need to do chair yoga, you're still gonna be moving, you're not gonna, it's not gonna be a sedentary practice. Yeah. You're still gonna be moving and you're still gonna be feeling it. You're just gonna have the additional support that your body needs. I'm always about, and I will always say over and over my classes, listen to your

Speaker 1 00:21:54 Body. Yes.

Speaker 2 00:21:56 <laugh> don't ever do something with your body that it can't do.

Speaker 1 00:22:02 And I think we'll name that the episode title because it is so important. We tend to be just so disconnected cuz we run around crazy mm-hmm. <affirmative>, we do all kinds of things and we're just like, oh no. Like I can remember back when I was kind of, um, in my eating disorder days and not, you know, using exercises, punishment and not listening to my body. I can remember like, I would refuse to use a prop because I felt like that was a, an area of weakness. Like, oh, if I'm using a prop, like it must mean like, I'm not, like how ridiculous. Like, I got this all twisted up in my head, um, about like props and I refuse to use them. And now I'm like, they're awesome <laugh>. Like I need to use 'em. They actually, they help me. You feel better, you can get deeper into the poses.

Speaker 1 00:22:45 And now, you know, obviously I've done a lot of work in my healing to get to this point where I'm okay and I feel good in my body and I appreciate my body for what it can do. Took a long time to get here, but I also recognize, you know, chair poses, standing poses, whatever it is, like still benefits still feels good. So I love it. And the Je Stanley, when I first saw her picture, she stopped me like in my like track. She was on a, um, an advertisement for yoga journal and I remember it like popped up on the website and I was like, whoa, who is this beautiful heavyset black woman that is crushing it in the scorpion pose right now? Um, and I was just, I captivated by her image and went and because

Speaker 2 00:23:28 She's everything that you don't ever Right. See Right.

Speaker 1 00:23:31 In yoga. So I went to like find out who she was, found out who she was. I always, when I teach my workshops and I post on self-care and we talk about yoga as part of, you know, it can be part of a healthy self-care routine if folks choose, I usually put her picture on the slide and I always get comments. People are like, oh my God. Like thank you for putting her on the slide and like letting us see her image because like, that's just not typically what you see.

Speaker 2 00:23:58 Right. I love it. And yeah, it's, it, it isn't And I, I love seeing that. I love, and she was recently on the cover of, uh, was it Shape Magazine? Oh,

Speaker 1 00:24:12 Might have been. She's on, have you read her book? We'll make sure everything's linked in the episode notes too.

Speaker 2 00:24:16 Yep. I do have, uh, I have every, I have yoga for everybody or everybody yoga. Yeah. I have not read *Yolk* yet. Oh, that is, I didn't realize she had a second one. Read it yet. She does. Awesome. She has another book. I think it came out maybe like a year, year and a half ago.

Speaker 1 00:24:32 Oh no, she, she, uh, retweet, not retweeted, what's it called? Regrammed my Instagram story the other day where I tagged her. Maybe we'll have to get her on the podcast. Podcast.

Speaker 2 00:24:40 I saw that. I was so excited for you.

Speaker 1 00:24:42 I was pretty pumped about that too. I was wearing her her, uh, sweatshirt, um, with her brand. But anyway, back to you. What is your favorite yoga pose?

Speaker 2 00:24:54 My favorite yoga pose, without a doubt is pigeon pose.

Speaker 1 00:24:58 Ooh. I love pigeon. --

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Speaker 2 00:25:01 It's so, pigeon pose is a very, I love that you love it because pigeon is a polarizing Oh

Speaker 1 00:25:09 No, I like those hardcore hip openers.

Speaker 2 00:25:11 <laugh>. Yeah. It's one of those poses that you either love, you think. Yeah. There really is no middle of the line with pigeon. And I started out hating it. It is a deep intense hip opener. I'm like, oh Jesus. And I would, I was practicing yin, so you're looking, hold that pose for a, anywhere from two to five minutes, whatever the instructor is holding. And I'm like, oh dear Lord, but going to yoga. So this is before I even decided I was going to go to yoga training. When you go to yoga classes, there were certain yoga teacher freezes yoga to hear. One of them is surrender to the pose

Speaker 2 00:25:59 S or surrender yourself to this, but surrender. And somehow, and a lot of times like it, it takes a while sometimes to understand what they mean and a and then sometimes out of the blue, like they'll just click. It was in pigeon pose that surrender the po to the pose actually clicked for me. And I knew what it mean meant to go deeper into a pose because after doing it for a while, I could feel, I could feel it in my body that, yeah, me at first it was uncomfortable, which in yin part of the thing is you wanna, you wanna find your edge, you don't wanna stay, you know, somewhere where you're not, you wanna feel sensation without being painful. So you like, you wanna stay between like a four and a seven. Like if 10 was, you know, your most uncomfortable. If you wanna stay between a four and a seven, engage it that way.

Speaker 2 00:26:59 So I'm like, oh, but that's what I meant. Like I could go deeper into it and it's when a lot of stuff about yoga clicked for me was in this pose. Mm. So surrender has, and you, I should back up a second even before that. So going through yoga, teacher training in learning, when you learn about the eat limbs of yoga, there is a, um, there's the yamas and the niyamas, which are like co they're basically like codes of ethics Okay. For yoga. And one of them, one of the niyamas is the last of the niyamas, I believe is <inaudible>. And it means to, it sounds great and it means to surrender to a higher power. Mm. And it can be interpreted in so many ways. Yeah. To surrender to the universe, to surrender to or God or deity, whatever it is. Or to surrender to yourself, surrender to your how yourself, to your meditation and surrender to oppose. But all of this, so once I learn more about it and always having that idea of surrender that came from pigeon, that has become a big theme in like, just in my personal practice. Um, which sometimes I try and work into a practice, um, that I teach, but it's so much like I actually have a, the phrase ishvara like tattooed. Aww on me. That was my graduation gift myself when I graduated yoga teacher training.

Speaker 1 00:28:42 Nice. You know what, I think I've changed my mind. I think we're gonna call the episode surrender because I think that is I

Speaker 2 00:28:49 Love that even more.

Speaker 1 00:28:50 I think that's better. We're changing it. Um, and I can do that. So <laugh> very cool. I think that's beautiful and it's a nice reminder. And I know as you were describing that I can remember like those moments of like having those breakthroughs and like when you really feel the surrender and like you can almost just like melt into the pose and just go deeper. It's really, um mm-hmm. <affirmative> powerful.

Speaker 2 00:29:14 It is. And then when you take that, and then once you get that, like you bring that off of the mat. Yeah. It's like once you have that breakthrough on the mat, it take, you carry it with you off of the mat.

Speaker 1 00:29:28 Yeah. For sure.

Speaker 2 00:29:29 And that has stayed with me a lot off of the mat too, is being able to surrender and listen to the universe and just no one thinks it's supposed to. I'm, things are supposed to happen and when they're not.

Speaker 1 00:29:44 Yeah. Nice. I'm so happy for you taking this journey and I'm sure that, you know, your classes sound amazing and I love the environment we you're doing and creating for folks. Oh, thank you. We need more people that are like real people teaching yoga and, and be creating those welcoming, inclusive environments.

Speaker 2 00:30:02 And we're get, we're getting there slowly bu --

-- t surely. Yeah, for sure. We're getting there.

Speaker 1 00:30:12 I just love Michelle's journey and her evolution into practicing yoga and that she is helping to smash barriers and expectation around what a yogi is and what a yogi looks like. And trust me, yoga is for every body and her advice about, you know, moving back into your body and reconnecting is just so, so important. Give it a try and meet yourself where you're at. If you happen to live in the greater Boston area, be sure to check out Michelle's classes. She teaches regularly around the area in SaaS. I believe she's also in Stoneham and maybe Medford, but you can find all that information and follow her on Instagram at michelle sully Yoga. That's Michelle. M i c h e l l e Sully, s u l l y yoga y o g a. She teaches weekly and you definitely have to check it out.

Speaker 1 00:31:10 Thanks so much for listening. I hope you're feeling more energized and empowered and I hope you're enjoying our bonus podcast episodes, including this one. This is actually the last bonus episode for vi. We'll be back to our regularly scheduled biweekly programming following this. But be sure to follow along on Instagram at Dr. MCs self-care and Dr. MCs Self-Care Cabaret on LinkedIn. You can also visit my website, dr mc self-care dot com for the latest updates and to sign up for the cast party, my eNewsletter. And if you're interested in ever having me present to an audience near you, email info dr mc self-care dot com. Thanks again. Stay well and do good.

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