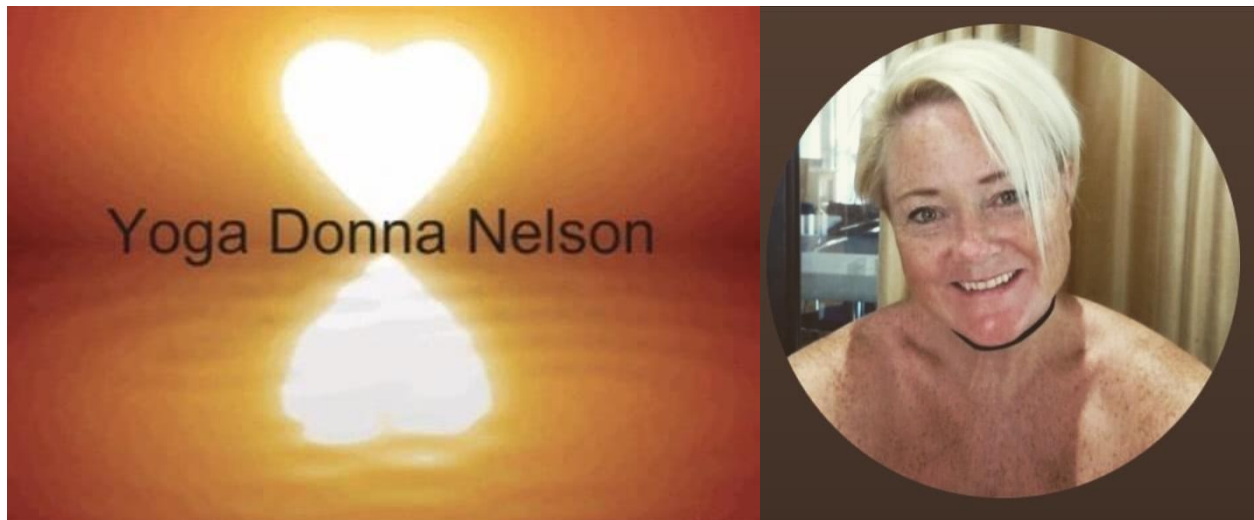


## **Nurture Yoga with Donna Nelson 'Yoga and Autism top tips'**



My background is working with autistic children and adults including over 20 years in front-line Social Work and as a Chief Executive Officer with an Autism charity in Scotland. In 2017 after many years of yoga practice, I became a Registered Yoga Teacher confirmed by the Yoga Alliance Professionals

Based on these experiences, over the last few years I have developed 'Nurture Yoga with Donna Nelson'

I deliver individual and group sessions in a wide variety of generic settings including at festivals as well as teaching Special Needs yoga to children with Autism and ADHD in local primary and secondary schools (and teaching yoga for stress relief to staff in Primary and High Schools) . I am the SUP (Stand Up Paddle) Boarding Yoga Teacher for a charity called (BBEL) Beyond Boundaries East Lothian for adults with Special Needs, Autism and ADHD.

Over the last few years I have become passionate about the benefits yoga can give to individuals with autism. The 1:1 sessions and group sessions I have delivered are 'Yin' based on an overall calming approach with a mix of pranayama (breathing), asana (gentle posture practice), mindfulness (grounding and being present) and savasana (guided relaxation). My workshops are more theory based allowing parents and fellow professionals to take some of the strategies and principles that I teach back into their homes or workplaces to experience for themselves the benefits of yoga. This is based on my ©'Nurture Yoga' classes that I teach to autistic children, young people and adults.

I believe that when presented in a way that is safe and accessible, yoga can offer tremendous benefits to autistic children and adults. As a result of the difficulties in body awareness and struggles with motor coordination and gross motor skills which are common in autistic people, yoga can be an effective tool for reconnecting them to their bodies, supporting balance, coordination, bilateral movement, and strength.

In addition, yoga can also add to their flexibility, and muscle endurance. It can enhance focus, concentration and reduce anxiety, impulse, and negative behaviours.

Based on my practice here are some top tips that can help autistic individuals (or anyone) to get the best out of their yoga time:

1. **Focus on the positive.** Just like anyone else, autistic children and adults like to know when they are being successful. Being specific ('that's great deep breathing') and encouraging positive self-awareness ('can you see how you are breathing slower?') reflects on the success of the experience, even if the achievement is as simple as being calm and in the same place as myself.
2. **Stay consistent and on schedule.** Everyone likes the predictability of routine and understanding of what is happening next and particularly autistic people. I always am on time and ready for the planned session. I try to give consistent guidance and instruction about what is happening and what comes next. This makes it more relaxed and enables practice of what they have learnt outside the Yoga space. I try to talk to their families, teachers or support staff about what I am doing try to align on a consistent set of techniques and methods of interaction across all areas.
3. **Make it fun.** If it's seen as fun time and a time that's special and personal rather than more education or therapy the individual is more likely to connect with me. This is so beautiful to see when you see this happens in a yoga session.
4. **Give it time.** Sometimes I have to try a lot of different techniques, treatments, and approaches as you figure out what's best for the person. I stay positive and try not to get discouraged if they don't respond well to a particular method. In some sessions it can take weeks for an autistic child to even get on their yoga mat. I make sure that they know that it is 'their' mat and they are welcome to sit on it whenever they want. It is so important that you meet the child with no expectations of what you think they 'should' be doing in a yoga session. You need to meet the child where they are at and always invite them to decide.

I believe yoga offers a holistic and healing system for supporting autistic children and adults and their families, and for helping them to live the healthiest, most vibrant, and meaningful lives possible. As I support these individuals in working with their challenges and building their confidence and self-esteem, I also help them to recognise their strengths and abilities, which allows them to celebrate their unique inner light, and to shine that light brightly for all the world to see.