The joy of movement

Reynaldo Espineli took up Iyengar yoga after crippling knee pain and a stage-four osteoarthritis diagnosis. Now he's got his mobility back

Bhakti Mathur
life@scmp.com

A diagnosis of "end-stage" osteoarthritis usually signals the termination of an active life: the end of mobility, the inevitability of surgery and the narrowing of life's possibilities.

But Reynaldo Espineli was not going to let it slow him down.

The 68-year-old Hong Kong finance professional has spent the last two years proving that severe bone-on-bone joint degeneration does not have to spell physical decline.

In his coming book, *The Fifth Stage: Living Beyond Stage Four Osteoarthritis*, Espineli shares a view rarely heard from the doctor's surgery – a deeply personal blueprint for outmanoeuvring a debilitating diagnosis and reclaiming a full, active life.

The book explores severe osteoarthritis from the perspective of the patient, not the clinic. His thesis is simple: your joints might be degenerating, but your mobility does not have to.

"Stage-four osteoarthritis is not the end. It is a threshold. Beyond it lies a lived stage, the fifth stage, where degeneration remains, yet inhabitation widens," Espineli says.

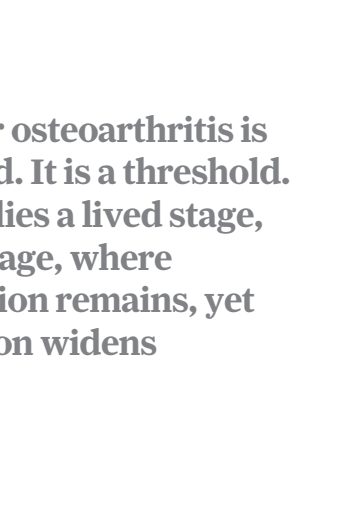
Originally from the Philippines, Espineli was raised in San Diego, California, and has called Hong Kong home for more than three decades.

His life has always been shaped by discipline and movement. Sport was central to his upbringing. He began learning martial arts at age 14 in San Diego and across the border in Tijuana, Mexico. At age 50, he took up Muay Thai in Hong Kong.

"I was drawn to its technical precision and conditioning demands," says Espineli, who also earned his PADI (Professional Association of Diving Instructors) scuba diving certification around the same time.

That attracted him for its "discipline of breath, buoyancy control and measured movement beneath the surface, an environment where tension wastes

> **Stage-four osteoarthritis is not the end. It is a threshold. Beyond it lies a lived stage, the fifth stage, where degeneration remains, yet inhabitation widens**
>
> REYNALDO ESPINELI



The Virabadhrasana II, or Warrior 2 pose (left), enables Reynaldo Espineli to explore movement in his knees without putting the sole focus on the knee, while George Dovas (right) helps Espineli to execute Virasana, the Hero pose.

energy and calm awareness is essential".

He also started hiking Hong Kong's trails and mountains, from the MacLehose Trail to Dragon's Back and Sunset Peak.

Imaging in 2008 had already revealed early degenerative changes in his knees.

"At the time, the symptoms were intermittent and manageable," he says. He continued training without any significant hindrance, despite stiffness and occasional swelling in his knees after intense workouts.

More than a decade later, in late 2019, Espineli began preparing for a demanding desert trek in the White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico. His knees felt strong, and he had no sense that the degeneration in their joints was advancing.

Then Covid-19 happened. Between 2020 and 2022, prolonged inactivity disrupted his training rhythm, exposing underlying muscular imbalances that years of conditioning had kept in check. As strength and neuromuscular control declined, his knees lost dynamic support. Stiffness increased. Inflammation and swelling followed.

"I began getting cramps in the evenings in my calves and hamstrings, sometimes intense enough to wake me up from sleep," he recalls.

What followed was more subtle and consequential: his gait gradually changed to that of an old man.

"I began walking as if I were protecting something fragile. My stride shortened. I avoided bending the knee fully and pushed off less through the affected leg. I shifted weight prematurely to the other side," he says.

"Without realising, I began bending slightly at the waist, leaning forward to reduce pressure through the knee. What began as a protection mechanism became a pattern."

Lower back pain followed. Going downstairs became difficult. Eventually, reciprocal descent – alternating one foot naturally after the other – became impossible. Getting down to and up from the floor was a chore. A Baker's cyst, a fluid-filled lump, developed behind his left knee, adding to the stiffness and irritation.

In February 2024, an MRI confirmed stage-four osteoarthritis, the "bone-on-bone" stage. He was told surgery was the logical next step.

"I wasn't angry, but I felt confronted. The language made it sound definitive and inevitable, as if I had no agency left," he says.

He had already begun to explore whether knee function could still improve despite severe physical damage. He and his wife had started attending classes at the Iyengar Yoga Centre of Hong Kong (IYCHK) in July 2023, and he committed to a disciplined practice.

The turning point came in August 2024, when he joined the "specific needs" class at IYCHK, designed for students working with injuries or medical conditions. By May 2025, he was attending twice a week and practising at home for 30 minutes each day.

The director of IYCHK, George Dovas, says helping Espineli did not begin with the knee.

"I observed his movement patterns – where there was restriction, where there was possibility. As awareness increased, we gradually introduced more movement around the joint. The key was building confidence in movement within an environment of safety," Dovas says. "It is not the pose that does the healing, but the approach to the pose. In Virabhadrasana II [Warrior II], the focus was on bringing stability to the shin bone, giving a feeling of safety to the nervous system, which leads overly protective mechanisms to release their grip and make more movement come than was possible before."

The transformation was incremental rather than dramatic.

The range of motion returned over two years, Espineli says, and he was able to walk down stairs normally again. His lower back pain gradually went away, the inflammation subsided and the cyst resolved.

Before taking up yoga, Espineli had iced his knee each evening.

"I no longer need to do that. I am pain-free. The cartilage did not regenerate. The osteophytes did not vanish. The stage four classification did not change," he says.

"What changed was the system around the joint – neuromuscular coordination improved, and load was redistributed more efficiently. Iyengar yoga did not fix my knee; it gave me the conditions to listen to it."

He adds: "There was something quietly powerful about practising alongside people who were also navigating pain, limitation or recovery, without comparison or competition. Progress was individual, but the atmosphere was collective."

Today, Espineli maintains his daily practice and continues his yoga classes. He and his wife, Betty, have started to travel again. In recent months, the couple have visited Sri Lanka, the Jebel Akhdar mountain paths in Oman, and several rugged areas in mainland China – including Huashan in Shaanxi province, the Loess Plateau, and the scenic regions of Guilin and Yangshuo.

> **Iyengar yoga did not fix my knee; it gave me the conditions to listen to it**
>
> REYNALDO ESPINELI

For Espineli, the implications extend far beyond joint pain – his journey reframes ageing itself.

"Ageing is not optional. Structural change is part of it. But restriction and dependency are not automatic consequences. The body adapts. The question is whether we give it the conditions to do so," he says.

He recalls looking at the medical imaging that seemed to define his future. "The MRI showed narrowing, cartilage loss and osteophytes – structural change. It did not show how my body could reorganise itself around those changes. Structure sets boundaries. Adaptation defines experience within those boundaries."

Finding ways to adapt has given him the physical vitality to stay fully engaged with his career and move without fear – proving that degeneration does not dictate destiny.

He recalls a favourite quote from B.K.S. Iyengar, the founder of Iyengar yoga: "Yoga does not just change the way we see things; it transforms the person who sees."

For Espineli, that transformation is evident in the way he walks ancient capitals, navigates mountain paths and continues to inhabit his body with dignity and grace.

The steep hill of Pottinger Street is no obstacle for Reynaldo Espineli; (below) with his wife visiting the Ganquan Grand Canyon in Shaanxi. Photos: Jonathan Wong, Iyengar Yoga Centre, Reynaldo Espineli

'Optimism doctor' looks to own advice after life-changing family issue

Kavita Daswani
life@scmp.com

Three years ago, Dr Deepika Chopra was just months into writing a book about optimism when she found herself confronting a crisis that threatened to dismantle everything she thought she understood about hope.

Her son was 2½ years old when, as she recalls it, their lives changed "out of nowhere".

"One moment he was playing with his brother, and the next moment we were in hospital dealing with a rare, serious medical issue," says the Los Angeles-based psychologist and author. "It shattered us." She declines to name the condition.

Despite being known as the "Optimism Doctor", she confesses she is not the most optimistic of people. "I don't err on the side of optimism. I've had to work on, develop and cultivate [it]."

Despite all she had learned, Chopra – no relation to wellness guru Deepak Chopra – found it challenging to reframe her thinking in the aftermath of her son's diagnosis. Instead, she had to find a way to accept that her son happened to be one of the two in a million children diagnosed with the condition.

"The doctors said it was just bad luck," she says. "I was completely paralysed for a few months. I couldn't eat or sleep, and could only ask myself, 'How can this happen?' It brought on so much rage."

Despite this, Chopra finished her book, *The Power of Real Optimism: A Practical Science-Based Guide to Staying Resilient, Curious, and Open Even When Life is Hard*. Published by Simon & Schuster in March, it has gone on to become a USA Today bestseller.

The central tenet of the book is that optimism is a learned skill and not an innate trait only seen among naturally cheerful people.

"We have misunderstood optimism as a personality trait, and have had a fixed idea that it's something either you are born with or not," Chopra says. "But in reality, what we are seeing is that it's much more of a learned skill. It's a muscle that can be strengthened over time."

That distinction matters, she says, because from an evolutionary standpoint, humans are naturally inclined towards pessimism.

"When our ancestors were out hunting and running away from sabre-toothed tigers, they had to prepare for worst-case scenarios," she says. "That trait survived. The brain doesn't prioritise happiness. It prioritises safety."

Chopra shares her tips for approaching pessimistic thinking, based on how she responds to friends and clients.

"I wouldn't immediately try to make them feel better or convince them to look on the bright side," she says. "Real optimism starts with acknowledging reality, not denying it. More often than not, people aren't looking for us to fix their problems. They're looking for a safe space to unravel, to be heard, and to feel seen."

When the time is right, Chopra says, "I might gently remind them that they've been through difficult seasons before and found their way through them. One of the things we know from psychology is that when we're struggling, we tend to forget our own resilience.

"As I often say, most people don't need a solution first. They need a witness. Real optimism begins not by changing someone's feelings, but by helping them remember their strength."

Chopra notes that optimism is linked not only to greater emotional well-being but also to positive physical health outcomes.

According to a 2019 study published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences journal, people with a more optimistic mindset tend to live 15 per cent longer than average, experience lower levels of inflammation, recover better from respiratory illnesses, and face fewer cardiovascular problems.

Optimistic people are also more likely to engage in behaviours that actively support their health, including following through with medical advice, investing in good habits for long-term health, and maintaining strong social and community connections.

Chopra is careful to distinguish optimism from the sort of forced positivity, good-vibes-only messaging that is a hallmark of social media.

"People assume optimism means denying reality or insisting that everything will work out," she says. "But the opposite is true. Real optimism is grounded in reality and fully acknowledges hardship and uncertainty. Because ultimately, none of us is immune to struggle."

The main difference between people rooted in optimism and people who are not is the former's ability to move forward through difficulty, even when the outcome is unclear.

At the heart of that process is what Chopra calls "cognitive flexibility" – a way of interpreting circumstances in more than one way.

"Something goes wrong, and we all think, 'This sucks. This isn't what I planned for.' But to be optimistic is to start thinking, 'Here I am. It's not how I intended it. How can I change? What else can I do?'"

At her practice, Chopra gives clients tools to help them develop that mindset. One involves helping people recognise how often the brain automatically fills pockets of uncertainty with catastrophic thinking.

"I don't discount worst-case scenarios," she says.

"I allow them to come. I validate them. But then I ask myself, 'What could be a best-case scenario? What other outcomes are possible?' Because even if you don't fully believe that positive outcomes are possible, the exercise itself is valuable."

Deepika Chopra and her two sons. It was challenging to reframe her thinking when one child suffered a serious medical problem. Photo: Instagram