

Editorial

The Yoga Community Needs Yoga Therapy, Minus the “Therapy”

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Can just any Yoga teacher work in a hospital, prison, recovery center, or psychiatric facility? Can a Yoga teacher without a healthcare license or specialized training be trusted to work with someone who is depressed, in treatment for cancer, or living with chronic pain?

Many people within the Yoga therapy community, not to mention outside the profession, think the answer to these questions is no. Not just any Yoga teacher is qualified to offer Yoga to people who are suffering in very specific ways.

For this reason, the pages of this journal are typically filled with arguments about how and why to set the bar higher for Yoga therapists. This may be a fair argument and an important issue for the field. But in this editorial, I want to make an argument for lowering the bar. Not the bar for who is qualified to share Yoga with special populations—that we should probably keep high. I’m talking about the bar for who we think needs what Yoga therapists have to offer.

While the Yoga therapy community is busy distinguishing itself from the general Yoga community, the Yoga community desperately needs what Yoga therapists take for granted. At the top of this list is the idea that Yoga is a practice for ending suffering and the principle that Yoga is adapted to the individual, not the other way around.

These are core values of the Yoga therapy community, common to all systems and specializations. Consider, for example, the following recommendations taken from articles in this issue:

- All poses and practices should be adapted for individuals and modified based on participants’ abilities and tolerance. (Kelly, “Is Yoga an Effective Treatment for Low Back Pain: A Research Review”)
- Make safety a priority. Encourage each student to participate at her level of comfort and ability. (Balk et. al, “The Effect of Yoga on Markers of Bone Turnover in Osteopenic Women: A Pilot Study”)
- It is important to design Yoga interventions that connect to the religious or spiritual values, as well as other ethnic and cultural differences, among various populations. (Wang, “The Use of Yoga for Physical and Mental Health Among Older Adults: A Review of the Literature”)
- Each Yoga teacher should have an understanding of how Yoga postures can be modified to accommodate contraindications and have the ability to clearly explain both postures and contraindications to students. (Tatum, Igel, & Bradley, “Effect of Therapeutic Yoga on Balance and the Ability to Transfer from the Floor in an Older Adult Population”)
- Teachers and students must both know what constitutes appropriate levels of effort. The teacher must know how to spot overzealousness and alignment risks before injuries occur. (Fishman, Saltonstall, & Genis, “Understanding and Preventing Yoga Injuries”)
- We always want to give several options in any posture: “If this doesn’t work, try this or this.” (Emerson et al., “Trauma-Sensitive Yoga: Principles, Practice, and Research”)
- Demonstrate a welcoming and accepting attitude throughout class. (Emerson et al., “Trauma-Sensitive Yoga: Principles, Practice, and Research”)
- Empower the client through awareness, rather than fixing the client or “doing to” the client. (Philbin, “Transpersonal Integrative Yoga Therapy: A Protocol for Grief and Bereavement”)
- Create psychological safety that invites deep inner work. This sense of safety can be established in many ways, in-

cluding the teacher's appearance, body language, mood, and attitude toward students. (Philbin, "Transpersonal Integrative Yoga Therapy: A Protocol for Grief and Bereavement")

- Students are invited to try something, but are not required, coerced, or pushed. We do not place value so much on students doing exactly what we say or pleasing us, but in being willing to listen to their own bodies and acting accordingly. (Emerson et al., "Trauma-Sensitive Yoga: Principles, Practice, and Research")
- We encourage our students and clients to become aware of how the *kleshas* (ignorance) create *duhkha* (suffering) in their lives. (Rothenberg, "A Case for Collaboration")

These are just a few expressions of what most Yoga therapists consider common sense. As I edited the articles in this issue, I found myself thinking again and again, these principles should be common sense for all Yoga teachers, and they should be the norm wherever Yoga is taught. But many Yoga teachers and studios without a therapeutic orientation operate on very different assumptions.

Yoga teachers who share the values and follow the principles of Yoga therapy are needed in Yoga studios, gyms, community centers, schools, and anywhere Yoga is taught. As the field of Yoga therapy becomes ever more specialized and sets higher barriers to entry for professionals, it is important to remember that Yoga therapists are also Yoga teachers.

Some might argue that Yoga therapists are needed where the suffering is greatest, and this is a valid point. Why teach

in the Yoga studio around the block, where students are likely to first walk in the door looking for a good workout? There are plenty of people in physical or emotional pain who need highly skilled teachers and individual instruction.

But we are kidding ourselves if we think that "regular" students in "regular" Yoga classes aren't also suffering from depression, anxiety, chronic pain, addiction, grief, trauma, eating disorders, injuries, or serious illness. Even students with no serious physical or emotional issues are suffering from the usual afflictions of the human mind. They all need Yoga teachers who understand the causes of suffering. They all need classes that support healing and freedom from suffering.

I recognize that for our profession, there is prestige and credibility that comes from distinguishing what Yoga therapists do from the work of Yoga teachers with less clinical or therapeutic training. But in the process, I hope that Yoga therapists will continue to bring their wisdom and compassion into settings that need Yoga from a Yoga therapist, even if they don't need Yoga "therapy." Part of the *dharma* of Yoga therapy in the West may even be making the principles of Yoga therapy the norm within the broader Yoga community. To make this happen, we need to not just raise standards for Yoga therapists, but to keep reaching out and welcoming more students and teachers into our world, and into our classes.

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