

## Compassionate Presence: *Teaching Trauma-Sensitive Yoga*

**K**rishnamacharya said that **breath is central to yoga** because it is central to life, and yoga is about life. His son, T.K.V. Desikachar, famously said that “the mastery of yoga must not be measured simply by the ability to master the techniques . . . but how it influences our day-to-day living, how it enhances our relationships, and how it promotes clarity and peace of mind.” Trauma is a part of life, but we do not have to allow it to define us. I am drawn to therapeutic yoga and working with trauma survivors because I am a survivor of multiple traumas. Having worked my way out of my own emotional maelstroms, I know that yoga and meditation are signposts pointing the way out. As both a trauma survivor and a yoga teacher, I know that offering compassionate presence and bearing witness to someone’s suffering is hugely empowering for that person. Yoga is about replacing old unskillful patterns with new skillful ones, one step at a time. Like yoga, healing is a lifelong practice with setbacks and breakthroughs, all of which are necessary and valuable. For a trauma survivor, yoga is a self-directed practice that serves to reintegrate body, mind, and spirit, one breath at a time.

Humans have a natural stress-response continuum. It ranges from normal stress to intense stress to chronic stress, all of which can be effectively managed with various techniques. Traumatic stress, however, is inescapable and overwhelms our coping skills while it is occurring. Its demands on the physiological system often result in a profound and lasting sense of vulnerability and/or loss of control. Traumatic stress causes the natural protection response to go awry and keeps its victims stuck in the cycle of reliving a traumatic event. An event can “trigger” a response that makes the individual feel as if the past trauma is happening in the present.

The essential feature of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is the development of symptoms following direct personal experience of an event that involves

- actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one’s physical integrity
- witnessing an event that involves death, injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of another person
- learning about unexpected or violent death, serious harm, or threat of death or injury experienced by a family member or other close associate

Some responses to traumatic stress are dissociation from the body, self, or social relationships; insomnia; flight-or-fight responses; depression; chronic pain; persistent re-experiencing of the traumatic event; persistent feelings of anger and shame; and substance abuse.

Not everyone who experiences trauma develops PTSD. After a traumatic event, most people experience an “acute stress reaction” that helps them to process the event. However, others experience a longer-lasting effect that develops into PTSD.<sup>1</sup> According to the teachers at my Trauma-Sensitive Yoga training at the Trauma Center of the Justice Resource Institute in Brookline, Massachusetts, in the United States alone, around 7.7 million American adults age eighteen and older, or about 3.5% of adults in a given year, suffer from PTSD. Trauma touches many lives and takes many forms. The National Center for PTSD lists the following different types of trauma: combat or war exposure; child sexual or physical abuse; terrorist attacks; sexual or physical assault; serious accidents, such as a car wreck; natural disasters, such as a fire, tornado, hurricane, flood, or earthquake.<sup>2</sup>

Traditional talk therapy, while effective for a trauma survivor,



can only go so far, because trauma affects the body’s physiology and traumatic memories are stored somatically. Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, director of the Trauma Center, believes that the body-centered activity of yoga combined with talk therapy is much more effective in treating trauma survivors with PTSD. A physical yoga practice can be a way for a trauma survivor to make peace with the body, reclaim the body, and learn that the body can be reliable, safe, and effective again.

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Many trauma survivors may have heard that yoga can help them to heal, but can feel overwhelmed walking into a general yoga class faced with a group of people sweating, deep-breathing, and straining to get into weird shapes. Words we typically use in a class may be triggers for some people; even closing the eyes may feel impossible for someone who does not feel safe. In addition to having an instructor with specific awareness of specialized needs, trauma-sensitive classes can also help to create a community of people who will know they are not alone in their struggle to heal.

Following, I offer some guidelines and suggestions for how you might run a trauma-sensitive class. Since the experience of each trauma survivor is different, and because each type of trauma may have its own particular effects, it is not possible to know exactly what will trigger whom and what each individual may need in any given moment. However, knowing some general principles to apply can give you the skills to respond to each situation and to know when you need help. The top three requirements of a trauma-sensitive yoga class are be consistent, be predictable, and above all, be safe.

### Environment

Creating a safe and predictable environment can reduce the likelihood of triggers and provide a supportive foundation for the practice

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of yoga. Some things that make it difficult for a trauma survivor to relax are an open door, having to practice with one's back to the door, a too-dark or too-bright room, people unpredictably entering the room, or sudden noises.

### Word choice

The language of a typical yoga class can be soothing and encouraging for many yoga practitioners, but needs to be modified in a trauma-sensitive yoga class. Take care to use invitational language of inquiry that directs attention to the body. Bringing the student's awareness to mindful movement and body sensing helps to dispel the need to "do it right." The direct experience of sensation begins the process of reclaiming the body as a friend rather than a foe to be judged or beaten down. Use concrete language—no "out of body" metaphors. Many trauma survivors are dissociated from the body; for them a major benefit of yoga is to become grounded. Above all, emphasize choice: "as you are ready," "if you like," "you decide," "you choose." Trauma-sensitive yoga teachers invite people to begin to make choices again in a direct relationship to their experience. All these choices are about safety, comfort, and ease. We must allow trauma survivors to regain a sense of comfort and ease with their body in their own time.

### Touch

Even in general yoga classes, instructors need to be careful in their approach to touch, and many ask permission before giving a physical assist. A majority of traumas involve physical violation of some sort, with women experiencing a high incidence of sexual abuse. Asking for permission to adjust physically may be problematic and a potential trigger for someone who was never allowed to say no to sexual violation. Trauma-sensitive yoga should be about a survivor reclaiming his or her body, not about a teacher manipulating the student into a shape. Cultivate your ability to offer verbal assists. Above all, always respect a student's boundaries. If you do decide that a physical assist would help a student, be clear about what you will do and how it will help. Remember, predictability is an essential component for this population. Offering physical assists is a finely tuned dance. Touch may be very comforting to some students, but to others, even seeing a teacher touch someone might be enough to shake their confidence and raise doubts about the safety of the class. It is important to be sensitive and attentive to each student and to be approachable and comfortable with feedback if a student questions any aspect of the class.

*(continued on page 22)*



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## Choosing yoga practices

### Physical yoga practice

Trauma is disruptive to one's emotional sense of well-being. For many trauma survivors, a slow and repetitive class can be comforting. The undemanding pace and the predictability may help to regulate the nervous system and restore emotional balance. In my own experience with teaching yoga and mindfulness meditation to domestic violence survivors, I have found that a slow *vinyasa krama* (step-by-step) practice with emphasis on breath awareness works very well. According to Amy Weintraub, for some, longer holds of standing poses can help to release stored tension.<sup>3</sup>

Certain *asanas* can serve as triggers and should be avoided until you know your students better. For example, many hip openers can expose private body parts and can feel frightening or humiliating. Strong chest openers and backbends may stimulate powerful bodily sensations and create powerful emotions, so introduce *asanas* slowly and incrementally. Bookend a new pose with a familiar pose. Remember the necessity for consistency; you might need to teach the same patterns for some period of time before the students feel comfortable enough to try new *asanas*.

Traumatic stress responses such as hyperarousal, disassociation, and flashbacks may come up in class. If a stress response occurs, it can sometimes help to invite the student to start moving the large muscles such as the gluteals and quadriceps (for example, in the warrior poses) because those muscles use up the stress hormone cortisol. For some students, encouragement to focus on the breath to calm the nervous system can be helpful. It can also be helpful to have an assistant who can remain with a person who is triggered in class, so you can keep your attention with the remaining students.

### Other yoga practices

(i) Mindfulness meditation is an integral part of my work with domestic violence survivors. This practice helps them bring their awareness to the present-moment internal experience with the intention of simply observing rather than trying to change anything. I encourage them to come out of any past- or future-centered mental situations in order to observe their experience without judgment or blame. Especially important is the use of *metta* (loving-kindness) meditation where they repeat silently, "May I be well and happy and peaceful, may I be safe."

(ii) One of the best techniques I have found in my work with domestic violence survivors is *nyasam* (a Sanskrit word meaning "placement"), a simple practice using the fingers that gives a tangible reference for people whose minds are so scattered they cannot feel the breath in the body. The slow movements are also calming. Some women tell me they use this technique to help them fall asleep at night.

(iii) According to the Integrative Restoration Institute, iRest® yoga nidra practice has been found to be effective with combat veterans and active duty military suffering from PTSD.<sup>4</sup> Because service members are constantly "switched on" in combat, the feeling of deep relaxation that yoga nidra provides is beneficial. But for the survivor who was told "be quiet and don't move" during their abuse, deep stillness could be a PTSD trigger.

(iv) During my last training at the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram in March 2012, Kausthub Desikachar told us that by teaching someone how to change his or her breath, miracles can happen. *Pranayama* can help people to notice the changes in their breath in order to notice their body's experience in the present moment. Mind-

ful awareness of the breath and some simple breath techniques can facilitate healthy coping and centering skills that can disrupt a trigger and re-establish stability.

Some breath practices appropriate for a trauma-sensitive yoga class are *simple breath awareness* (constant attention to the breath); "add a little" breath, i.e., making the exhale longer by increments to reduce, slow down, quiet, and calm; *nadi shodana* (alternate nostril breathing), and ratio breathing, i.e., using different counts for the inhale/exhale. Techniques such as *kapalabhati* and *kumbhaka* (breath retention) should generally not be used in a trauma-sensitive yoga class because they are too stimulating.

Breath is the doorway to the nervous system, and many trauma survivors have layers of physiological defenses in place that serve as psychological infrastructure and protection from implicit memories. Removing these defenses too quickly can result in significant psychological destabilization. Slowing the pace teaches students to take time and become friends with their bodies again. Take care, however, to find a good rhythm so that students stay engaged.

### Establish your support group

It is important for a teacher not to do this work in a vacuum, but to connect with a mental health professional, a veterans' center, a domestic violence shelter, or similar agency. Be aware that safety might be an issue if a student has flashbacks. The Trauma Center has protocols in place when working with students:

1. The student must also be working with a psychologist, psychiatrist, or other mental health professional who can work together with the yoga teacher as a team.
2. The student must continue taking his or her medication, if any.
3. The student must not have been hospitalized for any psychological issues within the last six months.
4. There can be no active psychosis.

In addition, it can help to have a colleague or mentor to discuss (always confidentially) your own experiences and challenges in teaching such a class and to have a supportive friend, family member, or other loving person to whom you can turn when needed. Also helpful, of course, is the sustenance of your own yoga practice.

Please bear in mind that all of the above cautions and guidelines are just that. The last thing we want to do when teaching a trauma-sensitive class is to be tense because we are afraid of triggering our students, or to try and control their experience, or to try and fix them. Your compassionate and attentive presence and your gentle guidance can go a long way toward creating a container for your patients to find their own resilience and healing. **YTT**

### References

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Linda Karl has studied yearly at the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram in Chennai, India, since 2005 and in 2012 began the Svastha Yoga Therapy Program with Dr. Ganesh Mohan. She is also certified to teach trauma-sensitive yoga by The Trauma Center, Brookline, Massachusetts.