

Creating a Culture of Universally Inclusive Yoga

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Community

This paper is offered to people who share yoga of any lineage — and in any format or environment. This includes yoga studio owners and teachers, as well as people who offer yoga in less conventional contexts.

Motivation

We are motivated by the highest sense of safety and care around the sharing of yoga, as well as by the desire to make yoga accessible to every person. Yoga is a practice of discovery and self-discovery, as it often allows forms of vulnerability into one's own body and self. When we share yoga with others, we cannot know their full history or true vulnerabilities, and as such we have the sacred responsibility to be as safe as possible at all times, so that each person can participate in the practice of yoga, no matter their circumstance.

UNIVERSALLY INCLUSIVE YOGA

Who Is Universally Inclusive Yoga For?

In short, yoga is for everyone, and especially for anyone who practices it in any form. In terms of specifics for this paper, consider:

Studio owners. Yoga studio owners are businesspeople, community members (and sometimes community leaders), yoga practitioners, and individuals who often handle not only day-to-day tasks but the shaping of the studio ethos. As such, this is a position of great importance, and we are greatly appreciative of the significance of studio owners in the sharing of yoga. Our intention in building this shared agreement for universally inclusive yoga is to support studios in becoming more successful both as businesses and as beacons in their communities.



OMEGA

Yoga teachers. This is a time of great abundance in the teaching of yoga. There are those working in studios as part of a specific lineage or discipline; those volunteering to teach in prisons, community centers, and schools; and those simply and powerfully teaching themselves through quiet daily practice. In the context of this work, we believe that *anyone* who offers yoga to another is filling the role of yoga teacher. A universally inclusive trauma-informed framing encourages teachers to be as safe as possible, to share widely, and to teach with discipline and proper scope of practice.

Those working in related roles at detention facilities, schools, community centers, treatment facilities, and other nontraditional settings. We recognize that those who offer yoga in nonconventional settings often juggle multiple responsibilities at once, fulfilling roles of program manager, on-site support, and more. Working within a lens of universally inclusive yoga allows for the adaptation of yoga practices to many spaces and populations.

Key Tenets of Universally Inclusive Yoga

Our united vision for universally inclusive yoga includes sharing and teaching yoga in ways that:

- Are as safe as possible for everyone
- Are accessible and welcoming to each person
- Support all participants in being heard and seen
- Help co-create an environment that fosters our individual and collective life journeys and supports us living with brilliance, strength, and resilience
- Always warmly include and support people who have experienced trauma, including critical life situations and sexual and/or family violence

Facilitating universally inclusive and trauma-informed approaches allows yoga to be offered in a conscious relationship between yoga service provider and diverse populations, and in every conceivable locale.

Universally inclusive yoga is as safe as possible for every person. To understand being *as safe as possible*, we have found it helpful to understand the

opposite of that: feelings of un-safety that lead too many people — people who could most likely gain great measure for themselves if they had a place to practice that felt safe — to avoid yoga.

Safety (in this context) means that the body and mind do not panic or freeze during yoga, that breathing does not race out of control, that wariness goes down not up. Yoga, especially for people who have or are experiencing trauma, can increase feelings of vulnerability and trigger a stress response in one's nervous system. This triggering occurs because many people live their daily lives inside layers of survival strategies, and those survival strategies rely on the utmost predictability in moment-by-moment living. Since yoga invites personal inquiry and movement of body and breath that are outside the realm of everyday experience for most people, body, breath, and mind are subject to new sensations and perceptions. This can be unsettling for people for whom predictability is the cornerstone of their navigation through the day.

Yoga that is designed and practiced to be *as safe as possible* requires:

- Real-time predictability
- Orienting
- Containment
- Flexibility
- Ongoing commitment

Safety is a more complex idea than we may initially consider. In the context of yoga, there are a few core elements to safety that should be considered and implemented to ensure that the practices are supportive of each person's individual experience.

To understand the core constructs of safety, one must consider that:

- Safety is situational and depends on a large array of information, experience, biology, and more
- Safety cannot be guaranteed; to promise otherwise is a potentially unsafe proposition
- Any work to increase the safety of any situation must include all stakeholders
- Safety is more likely when it is empowering and inclusive; this includes using language that reflects the diverse students in our spaces at any given time

- Safety is not a tangible thing but rather a continually shifting experience of the present moment that grows from personal experience
- Safety largely offers containment and predictability; structure is one of the surest ways to bring safety into any yoga service situation
- Safety is enhanced when it includes personal choice; we can move toward this tenet by not creating hierarchies in language around forms and sincerely not assuming everyone is going to have the same experience in every form or breathing practice
- True safety must take into account the most vulnerable person in the room at all times; this includes the teacher and their ability to know themselves and their own shadow areas
- Last, safety is the responsibility of everyone, including teacher and practitioner

To co-create yoga that is universally inclusive and as safe as possible for every participant requires additional responsibility from the person offering the practices: the yoga teacher. This teacher should offer the forms, practices, and precepts from a place of great personal grounding, and continually affirm the ongoing well-being of the participants. This skill set includes listening to students, inviting questions, pacing classes spaciously, reading the energy of the room, remaining humble, and, most of all, focusing on approaches that give each participant the chance to glean from the practices exactly what they need in any given moment. To teach inclusively and safely like this then becomes a practice of its own, a continual opportunity to be mindful each moment while teaching.

Universally inclusive yoga is accessible and welcoming to each person. Universally inclusive yoga includes the co-creation of spaces where people feel safe and supported to explore their own lives through yoga. We acknowledge that there are many thousands of people who struggle to access yoga in studio settings because of fear, doubt, physical limitations, financial limitations, or past traumas. We believe great good will come from expanding access to yoga and that such expansion will foster our capacity as human beings to learn from

and deeply support each other. When universally inclusive, yoga classes in community centers, studios, schools, and any other space where yoga is offered are welcoming and inclusive to everyone who has the curiosity and drive to explore life through yoga; classes are not limited to only those who appear capable of joining such a class.

Universally inclusive yoga supports all participants in being heard and seen. One of the hallmarks of inclusivity in its highest form is that it values the voice and input of each person. This does not mean that every yoga class will turn into a talking circle. It simply means that each person in attendance is viewed as a full and important part of the class.

To be *seen* is a hallmark of inclusive yoga and is initially a responsibility of the person or people who are offering the yoga practice, class, or session. It may require deepened skills in observation of others, spaciousness, humility, and curiosity, blended with a willingness to provide opportunities for people to share of their own experiences in relation to yoga. Opportunities for shared experience can also help build community. To be *heard* involves creating ways for people to be able to speak their truths, add their opinions, ask questions, share stories, and more. This might involve ending sessions five minutes earlier than usual and inviting time for group reflection on the experience of the yoga just shared.

Universally inclusive yoga helps co-create an environment that fosters our individual and collective journeys of living into our brilliance, strength, and resilience. This tenet is an opportunity for yoga spaces to embrace the sacred task of helping build community, while at the same time supporting each person on their journey of discovery and empowerment. This grows from a ceaseless awe at the vastness of what yoga has to offer joined with a rooted appreciation that each person can (and will) find their own path and their own understanding. Yoga teachers can help with this by using words that demonstrate a supportive appreciation for this vastness, rather than teaching that there are fixed or rigid truths.

Universally inclusive yoga always warmly includes and supports people who have experienced trauma, including critical life situations and sexual and/or family violence. One of the frequent ongoing aftereffects of significant trauma is that many survivors feel not only dissociation in the body but a parallel disconnection from society and healthy relations with others. As such, many people experiencing post-traumatic disruptions find it very stressful to take public yoga classes, to share space with others, or simply to go out in the world. Trust feels scarce for many survivors and, because of that, accessing yoga becomes a daunting endeavor.

One way to gently and continually counter this is to create with them a space where they can access and practice yoga. One example would be simple orientation practices before every class, very clear guidelines around permission to leave the class anytime, and pointing out all of the exits. Additionally, skillful use of words can make people of all genders and personal histories feel more welcome. Also, having thoughtful approaches to childcare, scheduling, cost, and duration can create added opportunities for inclusivity.

Why Is This Needed?

Yoga exists within the context of multiple and complex challenges. Within our society, systemic structures exist that can perpetuate and even reward abuse and abusers. Yoga itself is situated within a historical structure of hierarchy and control. Further, there is the potential for abuses of power in all places where yoga is being practiced and shared.

In discussing the role of yoga within a sexual trauma context, and within the context of trauma more generally, we must recognize both yoga's capacity to empower and support resilience as well as its place in a culture of trauma. We must acknowledge the role of problematic power differentials in the yoga community as well as the potential for harm through inadvertent re-traumatization by insensitive teachers or outright abuse by yoga teachers with poor boundaries or even predatory intent. As such, we have the highest responsibility to be very intentional in how our yoga is offered and to remain informed about the context in which yoga is offered.

Yoga can be a tool for well-being and help to foster resilience for all practitioners. In the context of sexual violence, yoga can be a support for survivors, both in the wake of trauma and in negotiating the long-term impacts of trauma. It can offer an opportunity for people to rebuild relation with their own bodies in nonjudgmental and nonsexual ways.

Yoga can offer community and interpersonal connection, and it can even serve a preventative role by empowering individuals with agency and resilience. Yoga spaces can become critical components in offering a haven for people who have experienced violence, cruelty, and despair.

In all of this, we must acknowledge that yoga is a vast field of practice, history, lineage, precepts, disciplines, texts, teachings, and approaches. Those working within the yoga community need to recognize both yoga's history and its contemporary place in service to trauma survivors, and to act accordingly with the deepest respect and humility.

UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA

Trauma represents exposure to experiences or situations that overwhelm a person's ability to adapt or cope and that may cause the individual to feel powerless. To the body-mind, traumatic event, or the continual assault of chronic trauma, is experienced as a mortal threat to continued existence. According to the American Psychological Association (n.d.):

Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea. While these feelings are normal, some people have difficulty moving on with their lives.

Trauma can result from a multitude of varied experiences. What often comes to mind are the personal and community-based situations, including combat, sexual assault, terrorist events, and natural disasters. Each of these represent a potentially traumatic experience, but

there are other more subtle or insidious types of trauma including both systemic and historical traumas. Poverty, discrimination, racism, oppression, and ethno-violence can impact both an individual and a community in traumatic and enduring ways.

Trauma Response

Trauma responses can lead to extremes of reliving or avoiding situations, places, or interactions, and they can be the root cause of hyperarousal or emotional numbness and physical dissociation. All of these responses are effective initial protective mechanisms. However, if they remain in place over time, potentially long after the acute threat of trauma has past, these survival strategies can become maladaptive.

It is important to understand that the trauma response is a normal response to an abnormal situation. Trauma responses are biologically derived adaptations that have developed to protect us and keep us safe. For example, the fight-flight-freeze response is a longstanding innate biological reaction derived from our body's attempts to survive. The problem comes when a person gets stuck in a stress and trauma response; this can occur as a result of chronic stress, poor post-trauma support, ongoing danger or violence, or family dynamics, as just a few examples. As a result, a survivor's mind and body can lose the ability to accurately assess a true threat of danger. This leads to people continually overreacting to perceived (but nearly always nonexistent) threats, triggering a trauma response that then perpetuates the disordered cycle over and over again.

Emotional Self-Regulation

Emotional self-regulation becomes an important part of our capacity to grow stronger and foster resilience. Bessel van der Kolk (2014) describes self-regulation as including the following components:

- Finding a way to become calm and focused
- Learning to maintain that calm in response to images, thoughts, sounds, or physical sensations that remind us of the past
- Finding a way to be fully alive in the present and engaged with the people around us
- Not having to keep secrets from ourselves, including secrets about the ways we have managed to survive

The way we perceive stress becomes an important

part of how we experience it. Some level of stress is necessary in order to help us accomplish goals. Picture the experience of stress as falling on a bell curve, with optimal performance occurring with a moderate and acute (passing) experience of the stress response. We benefit from the stress response when we need to perform. However, too much stress can be detrimental. When we are unable to return to homeostasis or our state of "normal," our system is unable to balance itself, which leads to chronic stress and even disease.

Stress and trauma responses are biological adaptations that serve important—and potentially lifesaving—functions. These adaptations can allow us to escape danger or to foster a sense of connection that can promote resilience. It is only when our stress responses become chronic and out of balance that they become potentially toxic. In responding to and attempting to regulate stress and trauma responses, we can look to practices including yoga and mindfulness meditation to foster balance and promote long-term well-being.

TRAUMA-INFORMED YOGA

Trauma-informed yoga is a discipline of nuanced seeing and heightened understanding of how each yoga participant is experiencing the practice at any given moment, in any circumstance. It considers the *safest possible* experience of yoga to be the surest path for each person to become a stronger, more alert, and discerning individual.

By understanding how trauma can impact the mind and body—and especially how it dysregulates the whole person—coupled with recognition of the barriers trauma often creates for survivors trying to access yoga, trauma-informed yoga allows teachers to respond to each student (and each class moment) in ways that create practices and spaces that see each participant as whole while accounting for each participant's needs for empowered choice, safety, and dynamic predictability.

Trauma-informed yoga specifically and intentionally takes the impact of trauma into account and recognizes the ways that yoga itself has the potential to traumatize and even re-traumatize. Yoga that is trauma informed forefronts the needs of participants, creating an environment that is as

safe as possible. Trauma-informed yoga offers yoga practice in a way that is consistent and predictable, while offering instruction in an invitational and nondirective manner. The primary focus is not on the physicality and exactness of bodily movement but instead on the internal experience of the student. Trauma-informed yoga takes into account the most vulnerable person in every setting and is structured around practices of orienting, containment, and body and brain positivity. It also builds on the great strengths each person — including survivors of every sort — brings to their practice.

YOGA AS A TOOL FOR TRAUMA RECOVERY

Yoga and mindfulness practices can help us to self-regulate the impacts of traumatic stress. As Bessel van der Kolk (2014) discusses in his book *The Body Keeps the Score*, there are two ways to impact our stress response. The first is by changing the way our rational brain monitors and responds to embodied experiences of stress; this represents a top-down approach. The second is by reprogramming our body's stress response via the autonomic nervous system; this represents a bottom-up regulation. Yoga and meditation can help us with both top-down and bottom-up regulation of stress. They can also help manage how our rational brain monitors bodily sensations. We can control our bodily responses through controlled breath, movement, and touch. If approached in an intentional and trauma-informed way, yoga can represent a tool to support a healing journey. Evidence to date suggests the potential for yoga to decrease anxiety, depression, and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Yoga has also been shown to improve mental health and well-being (Baer, 2003; Carmody & Baer, 2008; Cramer, Lauche, Langhorst, & Dobos, 2013; Impett, Daubenmeir, & Hirschman, 2006; Pilkington, Kirkwood, Rampes, & Richardson, 2005; Price, Turner, & Emerson, 2017; Rhodes, 2015; Rhodes, Spinazolla, & van der Kolk, 2016; Smith, Hancock, Blake-Mortimer, & Eckert, 2007; Somerstein, 2010; van der Kolk et al., 2014).

Yoga and mindfulness-based approaches offer a path to well-being in ways that other therapeutic approaches may fall short. If nothing else, yoga and

mindfulness offer a simple and accessible tool for addressing the impacts of trauma.

YOGA AS AN AGENT FOR CHANGE

We can view yoga and mindfulness as tools to promote resilience and well-being in the wake of trauma.

Yoga impacts trauma at multiple levels:

- Yoga offers the survivor the prospect of resilience
- At another level, yoga has the potential to impact the community surrounding survivors, as it provides an opportunity for collective well-being and social connection
- At a more systemic level, yoga that is approached mindfully and that is universally inclusive offers the potential for prevention and systemic change

Resilience

While there is no single experience of yoga, the unique pathway of yoga for any individual can facilitate well-being and resilience. For an individual survivor, yoga can become a tool for self-regulation. Yoga can facilitate agency. It can support an individual's ability to stand up for oneself. The journey of yoga can be a healing one — and one that empowers, allowing for the capacity to establish healthy boundaries and advocate for oneself.

Collective Well-Being and Social Connection

The practice of yoga can also facilitate community and the potential for healthy connection. In *The Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel van der Kolk states, “our capacity to destroy one another is matched by our capacity to heal one another. Restoring relationships and community is central to restoring well-being” (2014, p.38). Through yoga, we can come to recognize our collective responsibility to others. In seeking a universally inclusive approach to yoga, we offer the potential for many voices to be heard. We empower the potential to learn as a community. Seeking an intentional, accessible, and inclusive approach to yoga allows for co-creation of an environment where there can be oversight and accountability. Training and education can reflect common goals of empowerment and inclusion.

Social connection can be key in trauma survival, and building social connection can be healing in this capacity. As trauma expert Judith Herman states in *Trauma and Recovery*:

A supportive response from other people may mitigate the impact of the event, while a hostile or negative response may compound the damage and aggravate the traumatic syndrome. In the aftermath of traumatic life events, survivors are highly vulnerable. Their sense of self has been shattered. That sense can be rebuilt only as it was built initially, in connection with others (2017, p. 61).

If approached in an intentional and trauma-informed way, yoga can provide a mechanism for connection. Yoga also has the potential to harm if the role of community is not sought in a conscious and intentional way. We must foster a foundation of healthy connection. This renegotiation of connection allows for the prospect of resilience.

Potential for Prevention and Systemic Change

Finally, yoga offers the potential for systemic change. The pathway of yoga can support tools to empower both individuals and communities. This offers the capacity for a different response. Individuals may be empowered with agency and the strength and capacity to establish boundaries.

To be trauma informed, a practice must inherently oppose injustice. Yoga can empower communities to seek change and advocate for accountability. While the yoga community itself is not immune to sexual violence and other forms of abuse, yoga does offer a tool for change. In this capacity, the model of yoga service is a strong paradigm. Collective agency must come not only through the practice but through conscious relationship, inquiry, and reflection (for more on the definitional model of yoga service, see Childress & Cohen Harper, 2015).

UNIVERSALLY INCLUSIVE YOGA IN ACTION

Community and Relationship

One of the most powerful aspects of contemporary yoga practice is that it so often takes place collectively: rich individual self-exploration in concert with others. With care and attention, this joined personal experience leads to building of actual community. As such, the Yoga Service Council has always supported every person seeking to do yoga, as well as communities and organizations small and large where yoga is offered and shared. In our work over the years, we have identified two of the most important aspects of building strong and vibrant communities: the simple willingness to put in the time to create strong relationships among the people of the community, and the understanding that *each* person in the community has the chance to be seen, heard, and listened to.

Safety

Being *as safe as possible* applies to so much more than being physically sound with yoga forms and sequences. It involves setting the space so that it feels welcoming and inclusive, striving to ensure that each person who comes to share yoga is *seen*, and honoring the needs that yoga can help meet.

Being as safe as possible involves each teacher recognizing the extent to which people can hold past experiences in their body. It also means acknowledging how yoga can bring some of those to the fore and, with that, striving to be both challenging *and* conservative, so that people can safely grow in their practice. Being “safe” means recognizing that safety cannot be guaranteed, that it is a continual practice of action and reflection, mindful speech, and clear boundaries. Finally, safety should not be seen as an add-on or impediment to progress but rather an opportunity to explore more deeply than ever before.

Resilience and Trauma

A universally inclusive approach to yoga can serve as a tool to support resilience in the wake of trauma for both individuals and communities. Universally inclusive yoga works to foster an environment and support practices rooted in common trauma-informed resilience building. In seeking a yoga

community that promotes well-being, it is important to provide teachers with trauma-informed training and ongoing education. Equally important is promoting active self-inquiry and reflection. To support resilience, all teachers must actively pursue current and emerging best practices. We should support teachers and community members in pursuing both empirical and experiential expertise.

In sharing practices that promote well-being and resilience, we should be mindful of our words. Language is powerful. In teaching and in supporting yoga and mindfulness communities, we should strive to use language that is compassionate, inclusive, and inviting. We must also acknowledge and actively work to do better when we fall short of this. We support resilience when we offer yoga practices and classes that engender strength and personal empowerment.

Empowering Policies

While yoga and mindfulness practices can embody a powerful and empowering tool for supporting resilience and building well-being, we must also recognize that the space of yoga is not immune to sexual violence and other abuses. Because yoga has the potential to offer tools for healing and, furthermore, because it offers a mechanism to seek connection and community, abuse in a yoga community can represent a double wound. It can be disempowering for an individual to have to disavow a support system. We must do the work to not only recognize and acknowledge but to actively eradicate problematic power differentials and abusive behavior.

There are clear and distinct practices that yoga providers and spaces can offer to empower participants and create a universally inclusive space. Studios and yoga spaces should establish, honor, and uphold clear sexual misconduct policies. Studios and providers should offer lines of communication with staff and management that are simple, clear, and open at all times. Providers should hear and actively investigate all complaints of sexual harassment and sexual misconduct by teachers. Yoga providers should recognize misconduct as a serious violation of trust, security, and ethics. Misconduct breaches student-teacher relationships. Providers should additionally pay attention to instances that include violation of the law and seek legal action if this is something agreed to by the complainant.

Open awareness, action, and advocacy in response to the harms that can occur in the yoga community is part of the practice of yoga. Seeking awareness and just action is part of the yogic journey. Trauma-informed and trauma-responsive practices must go beyond teaching style and inform the character of yoga communities. Empowered justice should be a core component of the environment in which we offer yoga practice and service.

United Action

Collectively, our power comes when we stand together for a world free from sexual violence in every form. Help us co-create how we embody this pledge: share with us your raw material, your successes, practices, challenges, and opportunities. Together we will continue to build a world of compassion, joy, and abundance, a world that finally includes the well-being of all beings.

CONCLUSION

As we collectively confront sexual violence head on — and hold compassionate space for not only survivorship but for creative growth as well — we come to realize that yoga is an even more powerful ally than we had imagined. By breathing with self-love, by reinhabiting our bodies with kindness, we find that we want a better world for *every* person. From there, effective, mindful action flows easily.

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Note: This community resource paper was authored by Danielle Rousseau, Mark Lilly, and Dani Harris as part of the Best Practices for Yoga with Survivors of Sexual Trauma project of the Yoga Service Council.