

Trauma-Informed Yoga + Empowered Consent

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Establish a shared definition of trauma
2. Build foundational understanding of its characteristics and impact
3. Share conversation about our role and responsibilities as trauma-informed yoga practitioners
4. Yoga as a tool to support healing
5. Trauma-informed Care Principles applied to classes/group settings
 - a. CHARACTERISTICS OF A TRAUMA-INFORMED YOGA CLASS
 - b. TRAUMA-INFORMED TEACHING PRINCIPLES
 - c. TRAUMA-INFORMED CUEING
 - d. HANDS-ON ASSISTS + EMPOWERED CONSENT

WHAT IS TRAUMA?

“Trauma is a disease of not being able to be present.” -- Bessel A. van der Kolk

TYPES of TRAUMA

- Interpersonal/Relational Trauma
- External Trauma
- Inherited and Historical trauma - “epigenetic inheritance”
- Cultural trauma experience
- *Trauma/trauma response is on a spectrum/continuum*

Examples of trauma include, but are not limited to:

- Experiencing or observing physical, sexual, and emotional abuse
- Childhood neglect
- Having a family member with a mental health or substance use disorder
- Experiencing or witnessing violence in the community or while serving in the military
- Death of loved one
- Accidents, natural disasters, war, medical procedures
- Poverty
- Systemic discrimination

TRAUMA STATS (from 2020, pre-pandemic)

- 70 percent of adults in the United States have experienced a traumatic event
- 60 percent of adults report experiencing trauma during childhood
- 1 in 5 develop posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- What about the other 4 in 5? How they are responded to matters.

WHY WE NEED TO BE TRAUMA-INFORMED

- Probability is high that ***you will have one or more students in your class - maybe even a majority - who have experienced trauma***
- How you show up for your students can be helpful or unintentionally harmful

GOAL: *Understand trauma; Support as best we can; Avoid re-traumatizing*

EFFECTS of TRAUMA

Trauma is defined as a deeply disturbing or distressing harmful experience caused by an external source that the body interprets as life-threatening.

- Sympathetic (fight/flight/freeze) vs. Parasympathetic nervous system (rest/digest)
- Physical brain damage -- specifically the amygdala (fear center) and hippocampus (memory storage and retrieval)
- Childhood trauma and adverse childhood experiences have profound developmental effects that are lifelong (autoimmune, heart disease)

CHARACTERISTICS OF TRAUMA

- Traumatic experiences involve a loss of power and choice
- Trauma is not time-bound (doesn't heal with time)
- For many who have experienced trauma, one's body can feel like an unsafe place, leading to avoiding being present or connected with one's body or involuntarily dissociating
- Trauma affects the whole person, including the mind, body, nervous system and how one relates to and connects with others

PHYSIOLOGY + WAYS WE ASSESS SAFETY/THREAT

- Parasympathetic Nervous System: Immobilization
- Sympathetic Nervous System: Mobilization
- Vagus Nerve: afferent and efferent
- Perception (Proprioception, Interoception)
- Neuroception (Not at the level of conscious awareness)
- Window of Tolerance/Zone of Presence

"To the traumatized body, all threats -- current or ancient, individual or collective, real or imagined - are exactly the same." -- Resmaa Menakem

YOGA AS A TOOL TO SUPPORT HEALING + RESILIENCE

“Physical self-awareness is the first step in releasing the tyranny of the past.”

-- Bessel A. van der Kolk

Yoga can help develop **skills** that aid students in coping with and healing from the effects of trauma. Skills include:

- Present moment awareness vs. trapped in past or negative thought patterns
- Embodiment and reconnection vs. avoidance and dissociation
- Empowered choice making vs. removal of will and being stuck in “freeze”
- Self-awareness and self-compassion vs. disconnection and shame

6 PRINCIPLES OF TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE:

(SAMHSA’s six principles of a trauma-informed approach)

- Safety
- Choice
- Collaboration/Mutuality
- Trustworthiness + Transparency
- Empowerment
- Cultural, Historical and Gender Awareness & Respect

CHARACTERISTICS OF A TRAUMA-INFORMED YOGA CLASS:

What do Trauma-Informed Care Principles look like when applied to yoga?

- Safety: Focus is on internal experience vs. external appearance (how a posture feels vs. how it looks)
- Choice: Judgment-free cuing (both positive and implicitly negative); Model choice (choose to demo and practice at lowest level in the room)
- Collaboration/Mutuality: Neutralizes power dynamics (teacher as equal; predictable):
 - Setting up space (circle)
 - Orienting to space
- Trustworthiness + Transparency:
 - Teacher on mat, announce when leaving mat and why
 - Set and follow through with expectations (we’ll be here for about three breaths)
- Empowerment:
 - Invitational language that empowers choice
- Cultural, Historical and Gender Awareness & Respect: E.g. avoid using gendered language like “okay, ladies.” Be aware of the various lived experiences in your class.

TRAUMA-INFORMED TEACHING:

- 1. Educate (transparency):** **What** the posture/practice is and the **Why** (intended outcome)
- 2. Explain:** **What** the group will be doing (e.g. moving in and out of expansion and contraction of the shoulders/chest to help the body find neutral)
- 3. Offer true, empowered choice** (all choices equal)
- 4. Empower** (Client/student gets to keep agency and gets to own their experience)
- 5. Transparency:** Articulate clear timeframe for a movement (e.g. three breaths)
- 6. STABILIZE** throughout

TRAUMA-INFORMED CUEING

- Tenets of invitational, judgment-free cuing that empowers choice:
 - EMPOWER: Offer multiple options in a way where all options are equally valid
 - REAFFIRM: Whatever you choose is okay. Model choice.
 - TOUCH-FREE: Use language to guide students toward inner experience and prompt self-adjustment
- Language examples:
 - In your own time
 - In a way that feels comfortable in your body
 - If you'd like, (experiment, explore, see how it feels to)
 - You might notice (sensations, etc.)
 - What feels right today?
 - Build an invitational, choice-based lexicon that feels authentic to you
- Avoid assuming what your students' experience will be (e.g. "This breath technique calms the mind." Or "This posture is deeply relaxing.")

CHARACTERISTICS OF A TRAUMA-INFORMED YOGA TEACHER/THERAPIST:

- Present
- Communicative
- Curious
- Responsive
- Voice modulation
- Facial expression
- *Taking care of your own nervous system is an important part of TIY teaching! (neuroception)

RECOGNIZING RE-EXPERIENCING

Window of tolerance - capacity to self-regulate

- **Hyperarousal:** Fight/Flight: Overwhelmed, anxious, racing thoughts, rigidity, agitation, restless, need to move
- **Hypoarousal:** Shutdown: numbness, “checked out,” “auto-pilot,” spacy, lethargic, poor memory, emotionally flat, low/ absence of sensation, **can't say no**
- **Fawn Response Pattern:** People-pleasing; excessive apologizing, boundary issues, fluid or lack of identity, place others' needs above their own, complementing. "Fawn types seek safety by merging with the wishes, needs, and demands of others" (Pete Walker)

*In these states, “no new learning can take place” - Steven Porges

TRAUMA-SUPPORTIVE PRACTICES:

- **REPETITIVE:** repeat the same movements
- **RELATIONAL:** notice arm in relation to leg (this is a key part of SomaYoga :-)
- **RHYTHMIC:** rocking, bouncing, sifting, swaying, free standing twist
- **CROSS-BODY MOVEMENT:** moving opposite sides of the body at the same time (e.g. back lift)
- **FACE & HOMUNCULUS:** cranial nerve stimulation - cue facial movements (lion's breath)
- **SYNCHRONIZE:** Breath and movement (inhale on expansion/opening; exhale on contraction/closing)
- **MANTRA:** or vocalizations to improve vagal tone
- **MUDRA:** e.g. kali to up-regulate, cin to down-regulate

GOAL & SCOPE OF TRAINING: Understand trauma; Support students as best we can; Avoid re-traumatizing

CONSENT MYTHS & CONSIDERATIONS:

- Myth of binary “comfortable with touch” vs. not “comfortable with touch”
- Power dynamics and hierarchy
- Re-traumatization: situations mirror elements of original trauma
- Choice. Why it's especially critical for individuals with trauma history: Trauma is the ultimate removal of choice; the antidote then becomes empowerment and empowered choice
- Relational trauma and trust; No interaction is neutral (either helpful or harmful)
- Ability to be self-sensing and self-regulating vs. nervous system dysregulation (“nervous system SMA”)
- Prioritizing wellbeing of soma vs. individual performance of a specific movement
- Choice. How to offer true, empowered choice (and the subtle ways it can be compromised)

EMPOWERED, TRAUMA-INFORMED CONSENT:

Four-Step formula for offering Empowered Consent when considering hands-on touch.

1. Observe (Transparency): What are you as the instructor seeing?

E.g. "I'm noticing that when you protract your shoulders, your left shoulder isn't moving as much as your right shoulder."

2. Confirm (Collaboration/Mutuality; Empowerment): The student is the ultimate authority on their body and their experience. Including them in the process helps neutralize the power dynamic and signals that their experience and input is just as valid as the instructor's/therapist's.

E.g. "How does your left shoulder feel to you?"

3. Inform: (Transparency/Trust)

What will the hands-on guidance be? Include where on the body and what exactly the practitioner would be doing (tapping shoulder, pressing feet, gliding hip upward) and for how long;

Why - explain the intended outcome of the hands-on touch.

*E.g. "It can **sometimes** be helpful to have someone else tap on your shoulder blade for a few seconds to bring awareness there, and you might feel the movement in a different way."*

4. Offer empowered choice (Empowerment, Choice): Offer true, trauma-informed, empowered choice by *shifting the burden to Yes vs. the burden of No* -- AND -- Pairing the touch option with an equally valid non-touch choice.

E.g. "If you would like me to tap on your left shoulder blade a few times, let me know and I will be happy to tap your shoulder. We can also try going over to the mirror to see if observing your shoulder changes your experience of the movement <<offer touch-free choice>>. Let me know which you would like to try."

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If you receive empowered, affirmative consent (“YES”):

Four-Step formula for hands-on touch.

1. Collaborate (Empowerment, Mutuality)

If client says, “Yes,” reinforce their agency by explaining what the client’s role is so they can be an active participant (vs. passive while the practitioner manipulates their body).

E.g. *“While I tap on your shoulder, see if you can move your shoulder blade toward your spine.”*

2. Inform

Articulate a clear timeframe for touch. Before initiating the hands on, restate what you are doing and for how long. *“I’m going to tap your left shoulder blade for three breaths while you focus on drawing your shoulder blade toward your spine.”* Make sure you keep your word.

3. Observe & Respond

Knowing that “the body keeps the score” and that neuroception happens below the level of conscious awareness, observe the client’s body for visceral signs of discomfort with the touch. For example, they might tense their muscles, raise their eyebrows or tighten their faces. They might subtly move away from you or shift their eyes. Be aware for signs that even though they have offered verbal consent, their body may be saying “No.” Be prepared to respond to and honor the body’s “No” -- ideally by offering a stabilizing practice. *“How about we stabilize first and see how your shoulder feels after that?”* Then either revisit the movement with a non-touch option; or let it go and move on to another movement/focus for that day.

4. STABILIZE after hands-on work.

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Resources

- *“My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies”* - Resmaa Menakem
- *“Overcoming Trauma through Yoga: Reclaiming Your Body,”* David Emerson and Elizabeth Hopper, PhD
- *“The Body Keeps Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma,”* Bessel van der Kolk, MD
- *“Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma,”* Peter A. Levine
- *“What Happened to You?,”* Bruce Perry and Oprah Winfrey
- *“Yoga for Emotional Trauma: Meditations and Practices for Healing Pain and Suffering,”* Mary NurrieStearns and Rick NurrieStearns