

Trauma Informed Yoga is *People* Informed Yoga

By Hala Khouri, M.A, E-RYT

“Trauma Informed” and “Trauma Sensitive” yoga trainings are getting more and more popular these days as research is showing the benefits of yoga for those struggling with trauma symptoms. Yet being trauma informed is not just necessary when teaching people who have trauma symptoms, it is important for everyone. Everyone has experienced some sort of trauma, big or small, as well as general stress; and both can impact our ability to *self-regulate* (to feel safe, grounded and present).

The yoga postures offer a unique opportunity to both strengthen the muscles and stretch areas that carry tension. This combination, along with an emphasis on breathing and mindfulness is why yoga is often called a “mind/body” practice because it can get us in touch with our sensations and emotions. This is different from other workouts that don’t emphasize body awareness.

In college, when I worked out at the gym regularly, I don’t remember ever trying to “connect” with my body, I was simply trying to burn calories and sculpt my thighs. I took my first yoga class at that gym. I remember how kind, calm and grounded the teacher was. The class moved slow and I was instructed to breath deeply in each pose. Although I loved the teacher, the class made me feel uncomfortable and a little agitated. I couldn’t really tolerate being in my body in such a focused way. I left knowing that yoga would be very good for me one day, but not feeling ready to do more just yet. Eventually I started doing power yoga. That was my doorway in, and eventually I worked my way to slower styles as well as meditation.

Many yoga classes (not all) invite participants to notice their sensations and breath. Many people are like I was in college- we’re used to being distracted and disconnected from our bodies. We rush from one thing to the next, and when we have any down time, we fill it with food, alcohol, TV or some sort of distraction. *Stillness is not a regular part of the average person’s life.* When we step onto the yoga mat and move and breath consciously, we can get in touch with emotions or sensations that are uncomfortable and that we’ve managed to avoid. For people

with complex trauma or PTSD, this discomfort can be overwhelming and even re-traumatizing.

When a yoga teacher understands that students walk into class carrying lots of different experiences in their body and hearts, and that during class they may connect with parts of their body and psyche that they have shut off from, she will treat them differently if she sees them struggle or get distracted. She has an opportunity to normalize how uncomfortable it can be, and offer techniques to work with that discomfort.

A trauma informed perspective asks us to come at our students with compassion and curiosity rather than judgement or pressure. This perspective isn't afraid of discomfort, and doesn't ask everyone to be happy all the time (one of my pet peeves is the instruction to smile during a pose).

Celine had a very sick child at home. He was on a respirator and needed medical attention 24/7. One day she finally makes the effort to get to yoga. She's constantly nervous that there will be an emergency, so she keeps her phone discretely by her mat just in case. She knows this will be the only way she can get through class without getting up to check it. When the teacher sees the phone, she comes over and tells Celine, in a critical tone, that phones are not allowed and that she must put it away because phones are simply a distraction. Celine is terribly embarrassed and ashamed. She doesn't have the courage to speak up to the teacher, so she quietly leaves class.

A trauma informed approach might have looked more like this:
"Excuse me, I see that you have your phone with you. We don't normally allow that. Is there something going on that makes it necessary for you to have your phone?"

Being trauma informed doesn't mean we assume everyone is broken or hurt, we just err on the side of caution so as to not create shame, pressure or pain unnecessarily as we take people into vulnerable territory. ***Just like we are taught to offer safe physical alignment to everyone, not just those with injuries, being trauma informed is a safety protocol that we should offer all students.***

Whether someone is suffering from full blown Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or simply feeling stressed because they have a lot going on, they will benefit from a teacher who understands that human beings are complex, and that part of healing means feeling safe to go into the uninvestigated parts of ourselves with courage and compassion so that we can shine a light on the areas we've been too afraid to acknowledge. A trauma informed teacher will first assume that a student has a perfectly good reason to do what they are doing whether they have their phone out, are resting, look distracted, or don't want to use a strap for example.

Yoga teachers have an incredible opportunity to offer what therapists call a "corrective emotional experience" to their students. I assume that most people tend to be hard on themselves, worry about belonging, or have a harsh inner critic. If I can, as a teacher, not empower these voices but rather offer the opposite, I will.

A student of mine shared with me that she had been very intimidated to try yoga or any group exercise class for that matter. She always felt like she had to keep up but was falling behind. This was connected to several childhood memories, one where her father literally left her behind on a hike and she was left alone in the woods. In her first yoga class, she heard me tell the students that they could go at their own pace, and then when I stayed consistent with that, she said it was the first time she ever felt comfortable in a group class without fear of doing it wrong and being punished. Through coming to class and being consistently met with compassion, she is healing the part of her that assumes that she will always be left behind.

We are all impacted by stress and trauma. in fact, we are shaped by life's challenges, and the impact of these challenges.

I think of being trauma informed as being "people informed." A framework that asks us to consider the impact of trauma and stress on our actions and words, asks us to be cognizant of the peoples' humanity while engaging with them, and values safety and respect as the most important qualities of a teacher.

Here are some guidelines for teachers wanting to be trauma informed in a general class:

1. Assume people are doing the best they can; approach them with curiosity and kindness.
2. Take responsibility for your own triggers and reactions; don't come at a student if you are having a big reaction to them.
3. Remember that it is not your job to fix anyone; your job is to do your best to create a safe environment for students to move through what they need to at their own pace.
4. Let go of your agenda. Some people may find peace through their practice, but others may connect with sadness, grief or anger. Don't make them feel wrong for feeling bad. Rather invite them to be compassionate.
5. Know your scope of practice- if someone is in severe distress, refer them to a good therapist for help.

This is by no means a comprehensive list. For more information on being trauma informed check out this blog- [12 Simple Ways to Make Your Class More Trauma Informed](#).

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