



**Trauma Sensitive Yoga: Helping Clients find Compassion and Emotion Regulation
through Embodied Awareness**

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**Please connect with me and continue this discussion,
and visit my yoga studio for a complementary, trauma sensitive yoga class.**

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Trauma Sensitive Yoga is an empathetic, compassion focused, autonomous yoga experience that reconnects clients to their own sense of personal power. Trauma is stored in the body in how it affects the clients' nervous system. Teaching from this point of view invites healing for body, mind, and spirit. Yoga strengthens body image and self-esteem while cultivating emotional balance, non-judgement, and mindfulness.

Creating Empathy for Our Clients

Bring to mind an experience that has changed you (or someone else) dramatically (please choose something that won't be extremely triggering for you). Bring that experience into your mind and heart as you sit with the potential discomfort. Breathe. Scan your body. What sensations and emotions do you detect in your body?

Think of an experience of wholeness and/or wellness. Bring that time of feeling wellness into your mind and heart. Check in with your body again. What do you sense now your body?

What is Trauma?

A negative event that changes us, physically and emotionally.

- SAMHSA defines trauma as “experiences that cause intense physical and psychological stress reactions. It can refer to a single event, multiple events, or a set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically and emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.” (SAMHSA News, 2014)

- “Being traumatized means continuing to organize your life as if the trauma were still going on - unchanged and immutable - as every new encounter or event is contaminated by the past,” (Van Der Kolk, 2015).

Small “t” trauma: events that exceed our capacity to cope, and while they are not necessarily life threatening they disrupt our emotional functioning. Several small t traumas have a cumulative effect.

Large “T” trauma: an extraordinary or significant event that leave the individual powerless and possessing little control in their environment.

*Small t and Large T trauma are subjective to the individual

Trauma may lead to several different mental health diagnosis such as:

- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Generalized Anxiety Disorder
- Major Depressive Disorder
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
- Borderline Personality Disorder

How is trauma stored in the body?

Tension: attempt to protect from further injury, physical or emotional

Sympathetic Nervous System: chronic stress response and health issues. The brain’s normal fight-flight-freeze response is blocked from action, the response continues

Symptoms: hyper vigilant, restlessness, insomnia, somatic symptoms (butterflies in chest or stomach), lack of appetite, overeating, alcohol or drug use, self-harm, isolation,

shortness of breath, ruminating or obsessive thoughts, panic attacks. Feelings of guilt, anxiety, depression, shame, sadness or hopelessness. Symptoms may fade as time passes, and then increase around anniversaries or when triggered/reminded of event.

Contraindications/Triggers: these students may not want to be touched. Feeling confined can be potentially triggering. Loud noises/music, fast pace, or abrupt movements. Too many people. Huge heart openers that may trigger vulnerability. Not being able to see behind them, they may want to be at the back of the room.

How yoga helps:

Yoga has been studied to increase neurotransmitter GABA, which decreases anxiety and depression. Yoga initiates the relaxation response, turns off the Sympathetic Nervous System and turns on the Parasympathetic Nervous System. Yoga teaches people to self-regulate, that they have the ability to calm-down and can be in control and make choices when it comes to their bodily experience.

Trauma Sensitive Yoga Classes are different:

- Teachers are empathetic and have an understanding of trauma
- a safe, non-judgemental environment. Students attend to their personal needs
- focus on students strengths and ability
- encourage non-judgement and compassion
- put the power of touch in students hands
- Teachers are mindful of how they move about the room
- Teachers are mindful of arrangement of the room (i.e. some students may need to face the door or be in the back of class)
- always offer option for eyes open
- reconnect to the body in a safe way (interoception)
- learn to trust the body again by making choices based on paying careful attention to how one feels
- Mindful use of non-triggering language
- slow to moderate pace of class
- grounding practices
- music without words/not popular music they'd know
- incorporate relaxation
- Attending to students anxiety/restlessness
- encouraging mindfulness of the present moment

A trauma-sensitive yoga teacher is:

- Not a trauma expert - they won't talk about trauma in class or make diagnosis

- Welcoming, friendly, safe, empathetic
- Honors everyone's individuality
- Encourages students to find their own practice, as opposed to being strict or critical, while still teaching a class that is safe in terms of alignment
- Can't keep everyone from being triggered, but has knowledge of trauma and tools to support someone who may be triggered

Breath Practices

- Ones to use: 3 part breath, square breathing, 1:2 or 1:1 ratio breathing, ujjai
- Avoid: anything fast paced or shallow, long holds
- Any focus on the breath may be triggering to anxious students or those with PTSD. Encourage them to breathe naturally. Always give permission to return to normal breathing.

Resources, References, and more information:

Books:

- Van Der Kolk, B. (2015). "The Body Keeps The Score" New York, New York: Penguin Books.
- Emerson, D. and Hopper, E., (2011). "Overcoming Trauma Through Yoga: Reclaiming Your Body" Berkley, California: North Atlantic Books.
- Pransky, J. and Wolf, J. (2017). "Deep Listening" New York, New York: Rodale.

Podcasts:

- JBrown Yoga Talks. (2017) Alexis Marbach and Caitlin Lanier - "Trauma Informed" Social Workers, Yoga Teachers, and Members of The Breathe Network - Nov 20, 2017
- The Body Awake. (2017) Somatic Experiencing, Early Trauma and The Vagus Nerve with Irene Lyon Jan 30, 2017 ep 17

Scholarly Articles:

- Emerson, D., Sharma, R., Chaudhry, S., and Turner, J. (2009). Trauma Sensitive Yoga: Principles, Practice, and Research. *International Journal of Yoga Therapy*. Volume 19, pp 123-128.
- <http://www.simply-yoga.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Yoga-en-TSP.pdf>

Website:

- SAMHSA News. (2014). Key Terms and Definitions. Retrieved from https://www.samhsa.gov/samhsaNewsLetter/Volume_22_Number_2/trauma_tip/key_terms.html