

Yoga East Trauma-Informed Yoga Guidelines  
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All yoga classes at Yoga East follow trauma-informed yoga guidelines. Assume that all of your students are survivors of trauma. We have no way of identifying students who are trauma survivors. It might be the least likely-looking person in the room, including the young and confident, men and women.

#### What is Trauma?

Trauma is a deeply distressing or disturbing experience. Trauma can range from disturbing events of everyday life such as divorce, illness, accidents and bereavement to extreme experiences of war, torture, rape and genocide.

Recent statistics show that over 10 million women in the U.S. have been victims of sexual assault. Racial, religious, trans-gender, and ethnic minorities regularly experience discriminatory, hostile, demeaning and abusive treatment and media messages, including negative messages from political authorities and public figures. We all experience images of war, extreme violence, brutality and cruelty on a daily basis.

#### What is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder?

The American Psychiatric Association's current definition of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), introduced in 1994, states that a person must have experienced or witnessed an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others, and which involved fear, helplessness, or horror. There is debate as to whether this definition is too restrictive:

First is the view that PTSD results from a stressor that is so overwhelming that no matter what the person's resources they will develop PTSD. As such the diagnosis of PTSD does not reflect any personal vulnerability.

The second is that people who develop PTSD are vulnerable in some way. As such the diagnosis of PTSD does reflect inner vulnerability. Those who do not develop PTSD are resilient.

And sometimes people who take the former view are dismissive of those who have received a diagnosis of PTSD following more everyday events as if their PTSD is somehow less valid. It is claimed that PTSD is being over-diagnosed.<sup>1</sup>

Victims of trauma experience higher rates of depression, obesity and heart disease. Studies show traumatic experiences creates changes in the brain. Yoga can re-wire the brain after trauma.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Joseph, PhD., <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/what-doesnt-kill-us/201201/what-is-trauma>

## Trauma-Informed Yoga Practices

Trauma affects our sense of worth, our ability to feel and respond to love and our sense of mission. A sensitive yoga teacher validates a student's worth and conveys the message that each student in class matters. Through our teaching, we convey the message that "Your knee matters." "Your aching back matters." "You matter as a unique individual." A sensitive teacher teaches with love, compassion and kindness.

Oftentimes, trauma survivors have had to deaden themselves physically or emotionally to survive trauma. They have disconnected from their own body, sensations and emotions. "Sensations" is feeling one's own body from within - to feel your own heartbeat, to be aware of the breath, of feelings of hunger or fullness, of bodily pain, sensations of stretching or compression. This is called interoception. Exteroceptive reception is perception of external stimuli (pressure, heat, cold, stickiness of yoga mat, etc.) Proprioception is awareness of the body's movement and position in space, largely influenced by eyesight and stimuli of the inner ear. The kinesthetic sense is the awareness of relationship between movements in our body parts such as bones, joints, muscles and tendons. "Emotions" are emotional states of anger, sadness, happiness, fear, and so on. All of these states, perceptions and special senses come into play in yoga practice.

Yoga postures, awareness and breathing help to re-wire the brain and reconnect mind and body. When mind and body connect, other things in life matter again and have meaning.

A sensitive yoga teacher gives students safety, choice and trustworthiness and also explains reasons for the instructions you give. When teaching, we are like "good parents".

We can use language in class that cultivates present moment awareness. In this moment, everything is okay. If we dwell in past painful memories or worries about the future, things are not okay. Right here, right now, in yoga class, everything is okay.

Invitation - "I invite you to step the feet wider if you feel stable."

Reason - "Widening the feet can allow you to go deeper into the pose with less strain."

Choose - "Rest your elbow on your thigh, or place your hand on the block or fingertips to the floor. See what feels right for you at this moment."

Allow - "Allow the posture to deepen on its own."

Notice - "Notice how your body feels". "Be aware of the feeling of the breath."

Emphasize choice and agency - that the student is in control of her practice.

But what about giving short simple commands? "Commanding is not giving orders. Obeying is not groveling in the dust. Obeying is imbibing the Truth, and commanding is being the Truth. Only one who obeys can command." <sup>2</sup>

Teach what you, yourself, practice.

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<sup>2</sup> Gurumayi Chidvilasananda, Resonate with Stillness, May 5.