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Ask a Yoga Therapist

What is a Yoga Therapy Session Like?



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Ask the Yoga Therapist

This column is part of a new, ongoing column where you can submit your or your students' questions about yoga challenges and related health and safety concerns. Submit your questions to askatherapist@yogatherapy.com

Q: I'm searching for good articles on how to effectively structure a yoga therapy session...any ideas?

A: Yoga therapy has many facets of expression so there is no short answer to this question. There are general principles that can guide both the therapist and student in evaluating their experience in a Yoga therapy setting. First is the assumption that the student is presenting with at least one health challenge that prohibits/limits participation in a generally Yoga setting. Therefore the session should begin with clear and in-depth conversation between the therapist and student (s) to update any changes/new challenges that might affect participation.

Once the update is complete, a mutual intention for the session should be determined and communicated. In a group setting a one sentence sharing provides a rich bond of connection for the group. Holding the intention as primary, the session generally ought to proceed by leading a centering and calming opening for the hyperarousal of the student(s)'s central nervous system. The day in, day out 24-7 pace of modern living necessitates such a stabilization for nearly all students. From that place of enhanced stability and focused intention, then deeper inquiry can begin with the qualities of curiosity, openness, acceptance and love.

The specific technologies of Yoga therapy utilized from that point will vary based on the lineage of the provider (asana, pranayama, nidra, bhavana, mudra, mantra etc.). During each of these experiences the same qualities should be maintained, with the therapist holding such a space and seeking feedback if it appears those qualities are missing or waning. During each technical portion of the practice students are expected to stay alert for images, sensations, feelings and thoughts that generate new insight or discovery. The sharing these experiences with the therapist as appropriate invites adaptations and support in this mutual process of discovery. In a group setting this may include journaling or small group sharing at some point in the session.

As the session proceeds the therapist should be offering regular feedback and seeking understanding of the student(s)'s experience. Support should be returned by altering the practice to teach, create safety, adapting technique or the offer to seek out information if something arises beyond the understanding of the teacher. Frequently student's have experiences not readily referenced by a therapist and the best practice for the therapist is to acknowledge any limitation of understanding first, then promise further investigation and feedback in the future. Not knowing is neither an embarrassment nor a time for bluffing.

A key principle throughout a Yoga therapy is flexibility and responsiveness. No matter the original goals or structure, the therapist should be able to alter sequencing on the spot in response to the student(s)'s needs. Any breach in responsiveness diminishes the sense of safety so essential in maintaining a healing environment. The therapist must be on alert for their own agendas and needs, carefully reflecting how those may be coloring the session as well. As I've written before, Yoga therapy isn't about the therapist fixing the student, but rather a mutual process of being with one another to discover healing together for both party's benefit.

The session should move toward a close with order and support rather than just dwindle down to an end. Generally a sharing of the experience takes place with new intentions or affirmations made for after the session. Guidance may include home practice suggestions, additional reading or meditation topics and clarity around any expectations for obligations on either the therapist or student's part prior to follow up sessions that are planned. The student should also have a way to contact the therapist between sessions if something develops that requires additional support or resources.

My intention here is to begin the conversation about what might enhance a Yoga therapy session, not to provide the answer. I look forward to your feedback and suggestions.

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