

# therapeutic teaching

what yoga teachers should know about yoga therapy

by john kepner

When yoga teachers are trained to adapt a practice to the abilities, needs and aspirations of their students, and when they have the space and time to do so, they are already far along in implementing a therapeutic approach to yoga. In my view, mindful exercise, long, slow breathing and deep relaxation are inherently therapeutic. However, the training, time and space mentioned above may be a big "if" for many new yoga teachers, especially in crowded classes with new students, so let's review the first principle of yoga therapy, which is safety.

This is but one version of the fundamental axiom of health care: "Do no harm." It is important to remember this concept in all yoga classes. It is even more crucial with new students, as well as older and less fit students who increasingly attend yoga classes.

One element is proper sequencing; this includes proper warm-up, preparation and counterbalancing poses for *asana* classes. Another element, one that is perhaps intangible, but no less critical, is creating a psychological space where each student feels comfortable *not* doing a pose, and *not* pushing themselves too hard. These boundaries should be defined by the student.

The International Association of Yoga Therapists (IAYT) recommends that studios utilize an intake form documenting each student's personal health history including previous surgeries, medical history and injuries. If experienced teachers review these with new students, both students and teachers can be aware of possible risk factors for and contraindications to types of practice. A resource listed in the sidebar, written by physical therapist Matt Taylor, provides more information regarding this type of form.

This can be challenging for new teachers and seems to develop with experience. For example, the purpose of a forward bend is to stretch the back of the body, not to touch the floor. An experienced teacher will help a student stretch his or her back in a safe way without necessarily practicing classic *uttanasana* (standing forward bend). The focus is on function, not form.

To step back even further, the purpose of an *asana* class is to move the body in a safe, beneficial and mindful way. The class setting should be such that contraindications for risky poses are discussed and all students have alternatives to poses that may not be suitable for them. An attentive teacher will ensure that all students can practice something safe and beneficial, without the need to attempt all poses or all functions.

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## Selected IAYT Resources:

- "In the Classroom: Adapting a Class for Students with Low Back Pain" by Nicole DeAvilla in *Yoga Therapy in Practice*, Volume I, Issue I (September 2005). This is a funny and sage article about the common situation when a student with low back pain comes to a group yoga class. What do you do?
- "Risk Management: Conscious Ahimsa" by Matthew Taylor, PT, PhD in the *International Journal of Yoga Therapy*, No. 14 (2004). This is useful for yoga teachers and studio owners, with advice on how to create a safe studio. The article is written from the perspective of an IAYT boardmember who has served as an expert witness in liability cases concerning yoga injuries.

Yoga Therapy in Practice is available to members online or for reasonable fees to nonmembers.

Individual articles and back issues of the International Journal of Yoga Therapy are available at reasonable fees from IAYT.

*Pictured: Matibew Cohen teaches yoga, tai chi and qigong at his Sacred Energy Arts Center in Santa Monica. He also teaches in yoga teacher trainings at Greenleaf Yoga, among others.*

*Sacredenergyarts.com  
Photo by: James Wvinner*