

Gentle YOGA: an evolving practice

by Angela Jones

A series of life events led me to discover the benefits of a regular Yoga practice. In my late twenties I began the journey of recovery from substance abuse. This new perspective gave me insight for understanding adaptive behavior and distorted thinking learned from childhood trauma related to interpersonal family violence—all of which has been an invaluable resource throughout my career and especially in my development as a parent. During the events of the World Trade Center disaster of September 11, 2001, I was in the middle of my Yoga teacher training and my children were young. This, combined with my volunteer involvement with the NH Behavioral Health Disaster Response Team, initiated an unexpected and deeper journey into my understanding of the complex nature of all forms of trauma. This continues to influence all that I do—especially in how and why I teach Yoga—because it provides an effective method for calming the neurological system and opens our capacity for holistic and lasting change, without having to rely on talking about or rehashing old memories.

The following quote reflects the in-depth nature of trauma-sensitive Yoga practice. The quote is from a training I took in 2008 at the Trauma Center of the Justice Resource Institute with the authors of the 2011 publication, *Overcoming Trauma through Yoga: Reclaiming the Body*:

Introducing Yoga into the field of trauma therapy is a bit like introducing poetry into a physics class: it is a leap from the objective to the subjective, from the empirical to the felt . . . Trauma exists in the space between the scientific, the neurological, the chemical, and the effect on the organism as a whole—and the individual's subjective experience of what life is like now, post-trauma. Yoga can meet people in this space between: where the body and mind, science and the subjective converge.



Trauma-sensitive practices are a unique feature of Gentle YOGA and enhance principles of mutual respect through intentional use of “choice language,” i.e. when you are ready, if you like, you may choose. Intentional efforts from the instructor include protecting the privacy of the class and the individuals; provide opportunity for one-on-one conversation about special needs or concerns; asking for permission prior to offering hands-on assist; assuring that the room is prepared and welcoming; constant awareness of tone of voice and pace of instruction; and always inviting input regarding the needs of each participant. Having a trauma-related history is not a requirement to participate; everyone is welcome!

Designed to enhance and prepare the mind and body for seasonal changes, all Gentle YOGA classes are an opportunity to become involved with the internal inquiry process embodied by Kripalu Yoga and the physical dynamics of traditional Hatha Yoga. Practical interpretation of the Sanskrit language is used when introducing the history of traditional postures or practice and reference materials help illustrate vital anatomical structure, benefits, and cautions. Humor and lots of props are a hallmark. Many participants describe their favorite part as relaxation at the end of class. Others say they like it when Harley (my therapy dog) joins us. Class can appear, at times, chaotic because all postures are adapted to each individual including pace and rhythm, adapted with a chair or other props. Frequently, class starts or ends (or both) with traditional Yogic chanting of Om and often includes vinyasa (linking postures in a flow or series such as the Sun Salutation).

The idea for this article was inspired by folks who have been taking my Gentle YOGA classes over the past several years. To read more on this topic visit www.AngelaThomasJones.com, click on the Yoga link, and select the PDF “Literature Review.”