

# Trauma-Sensitive / Trauma-Aware / Trauma-Informed Teaching Guidelines



## Lesson Overview

In this lesson, we apply knowledge of trauma effects to help identify triggers and to optimize teaching using a trauma-sensitive approach.

### Objective

*Become familiar with foundational considerations related to trauma-sensitive teaching and review specific tactics for promoting emotional and psychological safety in the classroom.*

### Description

*Explain why an awareness of trauma-sensitive teaching is useful and important for all yoga teachers. Describe the heart of trauma-sensitive teaching and provide trauma-sensitive teaching guidelines. Discuss the difference in approach when moving about the classroom in more common teaching vs. trauma-sensitive teaching. Provide considerations for verbalizing. Discuss touch from a trauma-sensitive perspective. Describe how to avoid causing common triggers. Explain clues that may indicate a student is being triggered and how you might respond. Give trauma-sensitive considerations related to Savasana.*

### Questions Answered Here

- 1. Why is an awareness of trauma-sensitive teaching useful and important for all teachers?*
- 2. What is at the heart of trauma-sensitive teaching?*
- 3. Give five trauma-sensitive teaching guidelines.*
- 4. Describe a consideration regarding the act of coming to a public class.*
- 5. Discuss the difference in approach regarding moving about the classroom in typical teaching vs. trauma-sensitive teaching.*
- 6. Describe considerations regarding verbalizing in a trauma-sensitive way.*
- 7. Discuss touch from a trauma-sensitive perspective.*
- 8. What are two common triggers and how can you teach instead?*
- 9. How might you recognize a particular student being triggered and how might you respond?*
- 10. Describe considerations related to Savasana.*

# Introduction

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## Why Trauma-Aware Teaching is Important

*Sometimes people think that a trauma-informed approach is only for people with major trauma. And yes, it is absolutely critical to teach with a trauma-sensitive lens when working with people experiencing acute trauma symptoms. But the truth is that we all hold and carry a lot in our bodies-minds-hearts. Trauma-informed yoga is for everyone, no exceptions. – Rosa Vissers*

- Trauma-sensitive teaching promotes psychological and emotional safety, a key consideration for all teaching situations.
- One in four students in your class is likely to have trauma in their history.
- While trauma survivors “may or may not still be reactive to it... we won’t know unless we inadvertently trigger something.” (Celeste Mendelsohn) Teachers are unlikely to be made aware of such triggering because students who experience generalized anxiety or flashbacks, for instance, are not likely to report such experiences to the teacher.
- Teachers unaware of trauma-sensitive principles may cause students to turn away from body-based practices. (Dr. Jamie Marich)
- Becoming informed about trauma will also prepare you for teaching during crisis. If your community experiences a natural disaster, for example, this preparation will help you to skillfully provide support within your community.

### **There is No “Look” to Trauma Survivors**

*How well do you know these characters from your class? The burly, muscle-bound man who is regularly complimented on his posing. The strapping yogini who was just directed to bend forward and exhale deeply. The soccer mom who seems at home in Lululemon, lingering by the door to chat before sneaking in late to class. The Zen, mala-wearing mama whose form was adjusted with a touch on the back (and the bra strap). How do you recognize when you are dealing with a survivor of trauma? This could be from sexual assault, domestic abuse, child neglect, or any sort of complex trauma. There is no single way they look, talk, or act. Any one of these people might be someone with a history of painful experiences, triggered by seemingly innocuous words and gestures. Chances are that every single yoga teacher has already encountered, or will encounter, at least one or more survivors in their class. – Julie Grossman*

## What You'll Learn

Research shows that successful trauma treatment requires healing the effects that trauma has caused in the body and nervous system. Thus, yoga can be an optimal tool in trauma healing and is a prime opportunity for supporting students in their healing process.

Trauma-aware teaching will give you the skills to:

1. Prevent unknowingly causing re-traumatization in students.
2. More effectively support individuals who may be on a trauma healing journey.
3. Promote an emotionally and psychologically safe space for all students.

## How to Prepare



- Attending a workshop on trauma and trauma-sensitive teaching through an outreach organization is of tremendous help in developing awareness, sensitivity and skill to safely serve students. If you're going to teach specifically for the purposes of trauma healing then, of course, such training is highly advisable.
- Whether or not you attend such a training, we've worked hard to bring you solid material for maximizing your effectiveness as a teacher in your community.

## See Also

- Healing Trauma & PTSD (Please don't miss the Inspiration section.)
- Adjustment & Assisting Guidelines
- Grief & Yoga

## Teaching Guidelines Overview

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At the heart of trauma-sensitive teaching is granting complete student autonomy. Students are in charge of what they do with their body and how they interpret their feelings and experiences.

Some ways to communicate and uphold this vital priority include:

1. Behave in a way that acknowledges that some students may be carrying trauma and stress.
2. Avoid the appearance of governing or judging.
3. Be cautious with space and touch.
4. Speak respectfully, clearly and mindfully, giving explicit autonomy to students to have their own experience.
5. Avoid common triggers and respond to apparent triggers with care.

Following are more detailed considerations for each of these five topics.

### **Typical Yoga Classes Can Be Triggering to Survivors**

*There are many aspects of a typical yoga class that you might not even realize can be harmful or triggering for survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault – like facing away from the room's entrance/exit or having an instructor circling around the room and touching you to correct your form without warning. – Laken Howard*

## Be Aware

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#1 Behave in a way that acknowledges that some students may be carrying trauma and stress.

1. Be aware that some students may have had to overcome tremendous fear or inner resistance simply to arrive at class. Preparing to inhabit and move their body in public can be terrifying for many reasons.
2. Kindly welcome all students with a genuine smile and calm demeanor.
3. Be sure that entrances and exits are not being inadvertently obstructed.
4. Arrange the room in a way that allows for some students to have their back to a wall if possible. Also, make the entrances and exits visible to students from their mat, as possible.
5. In your opening remarks, you may wish to congratulate students on doing something positive for themselves and explicitly give them autonomy over themselves and their practice, including permission to leave the classroom if they wish.

## Facilitate vs. Govern

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### #2 Avoid the appearance of governing or judging.

1. Most students will see the teacher as an authority figure which will cause particular internal reactions based on the individual history of each student. In a trauma-sensitive approach, the teacher is seen as a “facilitator” and much is done to help set this tone. Specifically, teachers are advised to avoid appearing as if they are an outsider that is governing or evaluating students.
2. In the more common class paradigm, teachers are advised to move around the room in order to better observe and adjust students. Trauma-sensitive teachers are aware that some students will have a need to know where the teacher is at all times and therefore, moving around a lot may cause hyper-vigilance in those students. Therefore, teachers are advised to be mindful about their movements and to consider staying in the sightline of students. Avoid coming up behind students.
3. In trauma-sensitive yoga, the facilitator enters into “a shared, authentic experience” with the students and is therefore more likely to engage in *asana* movements simultaneously with students.

## Respect Student Space

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### #3 Be cautious with space and touch.

1. Do not touch students or invade their energetic space in any way without explicit permission.
2. The default trauma-sensitive approach is to not use touch due to the extremely high likelihood of traumatized students losing trust, dissociating or experiencing re-traumatization.
3. Students who attended classes at the Trauma Center (which specifically does not use hands-on assists) came to find an increase in their enjoyment of touch in general. Thus, the yoga itself works to increase students' enjoyment of being in their bodies without the necessity of touch from the teacher.
4. In cases where touch is included in class, be very well-versed in hands-on adjustment guidelines and provide an extremely comfortable way for students to decline.

*Try teaching without any hands-on assists... it will, according to our study, help trauma survivors feel safer and more in control of their own body, both of which are key. - Overcoming Trauma through Yoga*

## Speak Clearly & Mindfully

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#4 Speak respectfully, clearly and mindfully, giving explicit autonomy to students to have their own experience.

1. At the heart of trauma sensitive teaching is the fundamental that students are “totally, completely, unequivocally in charge” of themselves.
2. Explicitly give students autonomy over their bodies and experience. If even one student is new to you, re-state the teachings that grant students authority over themselves and provide guidelines for staying safe. (See also: [Promoting Student Safety](#))
3. Avoid communicating in a way that can be construed as commanding, or implying there is a “preferred” or “right” way. As opposed to such an authoritative approach, trauma-sensitive teaching uses invitational language. This is not the same as “wishy-washy.” (See detailed considerations: [Inclusive & Accepting Word Choice](#).)
4. Speak clearly, directly and specifically. Celeste Mendelsohn explains that trauma survivors may find it particularly difficult to pay attention and suggests minimizing “flowery” language. Speaking more specifically about tangible, body-based actions is likely to be more effective with trauma-survivors.
5. As always, do not state that a pose or practice will have a particular result. For example, avoid such statements as “Notice how good it feels to x” or “This pose alleviates anxiety.” (See also: [Tips for Choosing Your Words Wisely](#).)
6. Don’t say that you are providing a “safe space” and instead endeavor to create one. (See more in Readings below to understand how saying a space is safe is akin to saying a student should feel what you tell her to feel.)



## Be Mindful of Triggers

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### #5 Avoid common triggers and respond to apparent triggers with care.

1. Closing the eyes can be anxiety-provoking for some students. Give instructions in a way that makes it okay to keep the eyes open. “Just hearing that they have a choice about the eyes, instead of feeling commanded to close the eyes, generally makes people more comfortable about giving closed eyes a try.” (Dr. Jamie Marich) For those who wish to keep their eyes open, suggest softening the gaze and choosing a drishti.
2. As always, do not compliment or comment on students’ bodies.
3. Be particularly mindful about *Savasana*. Use soft lighting as opposed to no lighting. Ensure students have blankets or anything else they need. Keep your movements to a minimum.
4. Do not direct a student’s experience but instead consider how you can guide students to try things. For example, do not tell a student to relax. It’s not uncommon for such a directive to be given by an abuser to a victim. Rather, inspire a feeling of relaxation as opposed to directing it. You might suggest a lengthening of the exhalation, gently drawing the belly in, releasing the shoulders, and softening the face. Some replacement words for “relax” suggested by expert Jamie Marich include “loosen,” “soften,” “ease” and “rest.”
5. Some considerations include using “seat” instead of “butt,” “heart” instead of “chest” and avoiding “groin,” and “pelvis.” In situations where the class is known to be trauma victims, consider also that the words “pose” and “position” can trigger sexual abuse victims who were forced to perform or be photographed. (Julie Grossman)

Be aware if a student makes a comment or joke or appears uncomfortable or confused:

1. Treat it as an opportunity to be supportive and to promote autonomy.
2. Quietly ask if the pose makes the student uncomfortable and express that there are alternatives.
3. Celeste Mendelsohn gave the example of teaching Cat-Cow flow. As a new student came onto hands and knees and heard instructions to move the spine and gaze, she appeared a bit shocked and said she hadn’t done something like this in this kind of environment before. Mendelsohn asked if the pose made her uncomfortable and when the student replied, “Yeah, sorta,” she suggested that the student try the spinal flow from a seat.



### **Acknowledging Potential Vulnerability**

*Some yoga poses can naturally be more triggering than others, like happy baby or downward dog, because of the potential vulnerability of exposing certain organs. You are certainly not expected to remove any potentially vulnerable pose from your class yet consider the power of publicly recognizing how vulnerable certain poses or exercises can be and giving your students options to modify the pose or to sit it out all together. – Jamie Marich PhD*

### **The Importance of “How” You Teach**

*Over the years, “what” I offer people has become much less important than “how.” How I am inviting people to make choices, how we are setting up the space, how I am encouraging people to explore sensations, how we balance predictability with curiosity—it’s all much more important than achieving a certain shape or completing a meditation exercise. – Rosa Vissers*

### **Maximizing Students’ Psychological & Emotional Safety**

*Within the yoga service movement, it’s commonly understood that teachers committed to working with populations that have experienced high levels of trauma, such as homeless youth, recovering addicts, prisoners, veterans, and domestic violence survivors, need to be trained to teach in ways that maximize students’ psychological and emotional safety. Consequently, there’s a growing body of work offering insights and techniques regarding how to do this... The rest of the yoga community would benefit from following this example. Regardless of whether students represent a [traumatized] population or not, there needs to be more reflection on the psychological and emotional issues they’re likely to bring into the yoga classroom. At the same time, teachers need to engage in ongoing self-study to become more intimate with their own psychological and emotional patterning, and learn to work with it as best they can. – Carol Horton, PhD*

### **Being Clear That the Student’s Experience is Her Own and is OK**

*For many individuals, particularly individuals who have been through trauma, the yoga practice can be uncomfortable at times. It is not easy to be present in your body, it doesn’t always feel good. In a normal regular class, if that is your experience and your teacher is telling you how amazing this pose should feel, you can feel like you are doing it wrong, you can feel shame. We tell our students that no matter their experience, it’s OK. Even lack of sensation in a pose, which is sometimes the experience of individuals who have been through trauma, is OK. – Laken Howard*

### **Slow & Simple Movements Can Be Extremely Effective**

*Moving from one asana to another, slowly and deliberately, encourages students to stay with sensation and notice what's happening in their bodies, and to approach each movement with a sense of curiosity. The simplest of poses (standing or sitting in a chair) can produce profound results. Just feeling his feet on the floor for the very first time gave one agitated survivor a sense of balance, stability, and safety... No matter what poses survivors choose to do—or how much they experiment with the breathing exercises—they benefit from knowing that each exercise comes to an end, that they won't get stuck in emotional overwhelm... the sensations are temporary, only around until the next posture or the next exhalation. – Linda Sparrowe*

### **Caution Regarding Obtaining Consent for Touch**

*Many emotionally vulnerable folks believe that they have to say “yes” to you in order for you to like them. Thus, people may say it's okay for you to touch them, yet... body language [may] suggest they are uncomfortable... If you can, approach students [outside of] class to verify their feelings about adjustments. – Dr. Jamie Marich*

### **Study Results: Trauma & Touch**

*Our National Institutes of Health (NIH) study [found] it is very common for adult clients to tell us that being touched by their children or intimate partners is one of the worst experiences in their lives exactly because they expect it to be enjoyable; they want to enjoy hugging and cuddling their loved ones but they can't. Many of the women in our study told us that after 10 weeks of trauma sensitive yoga (that involved no touch), they were in fact able to be touched by their children and partners whereas before the yoga, touch had been unbearable. – David Emerson*

### **Reconsider the Phrase “Safe Space”**

*Whenever I've been told, as a survivor of trauma, that I'm in a safe place, my body tenses and my palms get sweaty. My entire visceral being longs to cry out, “Please don't tell me what I should or shouldn't be feeling.” A client of mine recently resonated with this experience only her wounding around the word safe carried even graver implications. Her abuser often assured her that she was “safe” in his care. No doubt that for people such as my client, the word itself poses the problem... We can set the intention for ourselves to make our class, our therapy office, or our sacred spaces as safe as possible. We can do this by using inclusive language, avoiding statements that could be triggers for a good portion of people, offering modifications in the spirit of flexibility, and using the language of invitation instead of the language of command. However, it's up to the individual to evaluate their own experience of safety in that space. – Jamie Marich PhD*

## Cautions: Diagnosis & Referral

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1. As a reminder, yoga teachers—and even yoga therapists—are not trained or licensed to diagnose injury, illness or disorder. You may wish to be very clear about this point, and to ask students if they have obtained a diagnosis.
2. Be prepared to refer students to an expert. Have contact information for qualified experts that you can provide, as needed. See more in [When to Refer Out](#) which includes how to respond to students, and questions for their medical provider.
3. Yoga is likely to be an excellent supplemental resource for students. But of course, teachers must be cautious and clear when responding to students' individual needs so that yoga support is not construed as a diagnosis, a "prescription," or a recommendation for sole treatment.

## Online Resources

Please see [online version](#) for links to more resources.