



Body Acceptance, Larger Bodies, Body Dysmorphia

Description

Creating an Inclusive & Body-Positive Practice Space



It's incredible how transformative it can be to be in a space where it's not only okay, but welcome, that you just live and be happy in the body you have today. — Anna Guest-Jelley

Here we explore these philosophies and actions that you can take to support students in having a body-positive experience:

1. Be intentional in setting a space of non-judgment and body acceptance.
2. Authentically model body positivity, self-love and acceptance.
3. Teach the opportunity that yoga provides to develop a healthy relationship with body and mind — a critical component of inspiring body positivity.
4. Promote a safe, noncompetitive environment.
5. Foster community.

Intention & Commitment

- We propose that every teacher be intentional about setting a space of non-judgment and body acceptance.
- Such a space can provide an opportunity that some students may encounter nowhere else.



- [Trauma-sensitive yoga](#) teachings provide excellent insight into how to provide psychological and emotional safety for all students.
- See also: [Inclusive & Accepting Word Choice](#)

Authenticity

- Teachers who acknowledge their own personal limitations and challenges can make a big impact through authentic modeling of body positivity, self-love and acceptance.
- See also: [Mindfulness, Humility, Boundaries](#) and [Teaching Authentically](#)

Developing A Healthy Relationship with Body & Mind

You do not have to already be strong or flexible to do yoga! The physical practice of yoga itself will give help you to achieve them. I feel that the mental part of yoga is what helps me the most in my practice. Helping me to calm myself through the daily struggles of life. — Valerie Sagun of Big Gal Yoga

- The opportunity that yoga provides to develop a healthy relationship with body and mind is a critical component of inspiring body positivity.
- For example, during practice a student can be guided to become aware of unkind self-talk and limiting beliefs. After noticing current patterns, a student can be supported in such efforts as shifting awareness to breath and body sensation without judgement and gradually replacing unhelpful thoughts with more supportive ones such as gratitude for the body's strength and resilience.
- Also, key (as noted in quote below on Beginning to Discern Physical Cues) is the increasing empowerment gained by paying closer attention to bodily sensation.
- Stress relief in general is associated with body satisfaction. — "When we're stressed, we tend to be harder on ourselves, that inner critic creating a more permanent home for herself in your mind. This can quickly evolve into a vicious cycle as the inner critic in turn generates more stress." (Sophie Heller)

Accessibility & Adaptation

- A critical aspect of inspiring body positivity is fostering a safe, noncompetitive environment.
- This includes providing variations, alternatives and personalized options. If a class is too large to provide individual attention, avoid risky and/or complex postures.
- No two people are alike, even if they are facing the same condition. One-on-one time can help you to understand individual needs and issues in order to assist each student in experiencing maximum comfort and benefit during a group class.
- See also: [Promoting Student Safety](#)

A Sense of Community

- Many students find that a key to the peace and joy they find in yoga is in connecting with community.



- Building rapport between teacher and student, as well as among students, creates a feeling of belonging. Introducing members by name, encouraging communication and feedback and allowing time to get to know each other on a deeper level beats the feelings of loneliness and instead creates a place of belonging. • (Jennifer Williams-Fields)

From the Experts

THE RARE EXPERIENCE OF SAFETY IN A PUBLIC SETTING

As a trans person, my body has been under so much scrutiny that it can be really vulnerable and difficult to do anything with my body in a public setting. I really appreciate having a space for focusing on my own body, feeling an intense stretch or trembling muscles, and building strength and flexibility. It means so much to have my body not just be something that's a liability or an excuse for people to mistreat me but something that I appreciate and that makes me feel strong. • 8 Limbs Yoga Centers newsletter

MAKING A GROUP CLASS LESS INTIMIDATING TO NEWCOMERS

To make her specialized classes less intimidating to newcomers, Varshell insists on initial private consultations with her clients to determine each individual's needs and abilities. • I have found that no two people are alike, even if they have the same medical condition, • she says. • For example, two people who suffer from fibromyalgia may have completely different symptoms and limitations. Some larger-sized students may be flexible, whereas others are stiff. • This approach also helps students feel more comfortable, Varshell says. • Diane Lofshutl

OVERCOMING FOUNDATIONAL BELIEFS & FEARS

As a personal trainer, I have worked with hundreds of people who want to transform their physical bodies with the expectation that the physical transformation will solve a host of emotional struggles within them. Through these interactions, I've discovered that training the body alone only gives temporary results. Training the mind along with the body not only gives lasting results, but also cultivates the confidence and perspective needed to face and overcome the beliefs and fears that cause body image struggles in the first place. • Lanee Neil

MAXIMIZING PSYCHOLOGICAL & EMOTIONAL SAFETY

[We can turn to] the growing field of trauma-sensitive yoga • Regardless of whether students represent a more specialized 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

BEGINNING TO DISCERN PHYSICAL CUES

I had no clue how to discern my physical cues. It wasn't until I started realizing how much I'd been learning about my body's physical cues on the yoga mat that things started to connect. I



started to notice the light distraction I felt when I was starting to get hungry, whereas before I'd only really noticed when I was ravenous. Ditto for the content feeling I had when I was full, whereas before I'd only really noticed when I was so stuffed, I was uncomfortable. Over time, I wanted even more of this kind of inner information. Because once I began to tune into what my body wanted and needed, I discovered many more things I'd been hungry for but had been missing by instead focusing all my attention on what I hated about my body, what I wanted to change. These hungers were for things like rest, connection, knowing, replenishing, learning, embodiment, mindfulness and more. — Anna Guest-Jelley

AGING

When did the system of Yoga begin to espouse the philosophy of youth over experience? When did Yoga adopt the idea that once your body begins to age that your mind, heart and accumulated experience become irrelevant? And why are we made to feel ashamed of the inevitable, even beautiful, process of growing deeper, wiser and more equanimous just because our bodies no longer fit into a shallow, limited and completely arbitrary cultural idea of beauty? My theory is this: We are a body-oriented culture. We are our bodies. Our bodies are our Selves. We judge ourselves by our appearance and our body's ability to perform. When our bodies change—as they inevitably do—our self-worth goes with them, for better or for worse. — Charlotte Bell

Considerations for Larger-Bodied Students



- Some larger-bodied students may wish to avoid undue attention. However, there is also a vital risk in not attending to a student who needs assistance in finding the optimum pose for her body. If a student is unable to fulfill your instructions as given and feels ignored, she may come to the conclusion that her body is wrong for yoga.
- It is recommended that teachers avoid touching any student without permission. (Even how you ask for permission is important. Please see [Adjustment & Assisting Guidelines](#) for more information.)
- In addition, be respectful of the fact that a student with a larger body may have had painful experiences directly related to how her body has been perceived and accepted by others as well as herself.
- Consider how you can teach students to find and value comfort and relaxation in their practice.

A PLEASANT, FUN EXPERIENCE

I really don't care and don't want to know where my anterior deltoid is; I just want to relax my shoulders. Maybe later I will be open to learning anatomy, but for now I am here to learn how to relax, open and stretch my body in a way that won't hurt me. Please don't point me out in a class and draw attention to me. Give me suggestions but let me stay back in the corner if that is where I feel



comfortable. Please don't touch or adjust my body without my permission. You may think that I can go further into a pose, but my body or mind may not be ready yet. I can't bear to touch myself, so having you touch me without permission is very stressful. If you provide a pleasant, fun experience and I am much more relaxed and open than when I walked in, I will come back. If I feel intimidated and in pain the next day, you will probably never see me again. • Lanita Varshell

IF THERE IS NO ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF THE STUDENT'S EXPERIENCE

I have many students who had a bad first experience in yoga and never went back until they found me (someone who looks like them and understands their bodies). When they were ignored in class, they didn't assume the teacher didn't know how to work with them. They just saw a class full of people doing what the teacher asked while they got no acknowledgement that they were having a different experience. They felt uncomfortable, maybe they injured themselves, but in any case, they definitely left the class knowing for a fact that their body was wrong for yoga. Everyone else could do the poses as the teacher demonstrated them, but they couldn't, so their body was wrong. • Amber Karnes

Body Dysmorphia / Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD)

Body dysmorphia is a persistent obsession with a perceived flaw in physical appearance. • Some of the primary characteristics are:

- Feeling flawed, ugly or deformed
- Extreme self-consciousness; an excessive preoccupation with how they look
- A belief that how they look is very important
- Perfectionist tendencies
- A higher likelihood of camouflaging the perceived defect, avoiding eye contact, or escaping •

Learn More

- Clark, Sara, Yoga Journal, 8 Poses to Cultivate Courage and Reduce Self-Consciousness (includes personal story of BDD)
- Heshmat, Shahram PhD, Psychology Today, 10 Faulty Thoughts That Occur in Body Dysmorphic Disorder
- Leibrandt, Erica, Elephant Journal, The Secret Shame Behind Body Dysmorphia

Self-Love Audio by Louise Hay

So how are your thoughts affecting your health now? Do they lift you up, make you feel happy, and energize you? How can you start to look at yourself lovingly instead of critically? By saying positive affirmations daily. Louise Hay knew all about self-love, and for 30 years, that's what she taught, beginning with her little blue book • Heal Your Body. In this excerpt, Louise reminds us how our thought patterns can contribute to the process of disease or injury and shows you how to shift this thinking to create healing, instead. • Hay House

Self-Love Audio by Louise Hay

- In this 19 minute [audio](#), Louise Hay focuses on the topic of self-love.
- Features many affirmations.

Asana Variations



Please see [Poses At a Glance: For Larger Bodies](#) where we bring together pose variations for some of the more common considerations among students with larger bodies, such as making more space for breasts or belly, for example, and options for protecting joints.

More Readings



KNOW IN YOUR BONES YOUR WORTHINESS

I want you to know in your bones that your body is worthy of your love right now. No exceptions. I want yoga to be a support and friend for you, a way to stay connected with yourself—especially when it feels impossible. I want you to free up your time, resources, mental energy, emotions, and anything else you have invested in hating your body and channel those into living and loving your life. — Anna Guest-Jelley

THE MOST DIFFICULT POSE IN YOGA



At the root of my method is the power of loving yourself, exactly as you are, right now, in this moment. This is perhaps the most difficult pose in yoga. â?? Lauren Walker

YOGA PRACTITIONERS AND TEACHERS HAVE A WIDE RANGE OF BODIES

Itâ??s still hard for many to believe that a wide range of bodies are capable of yoga and that fat people, in particular, can be longtime regular practitioners. So powerful is our desire for yoga to â??fixâ?• our fitness and appearance â??flaws.â?• So powerful is our desire to see the teacherâ??s body as a goalâ??because surely, they got to look that way by doing yoga. â?? Kimberly Dark

BODY ACCEPTANCE IS A PRACTICE

I definitely used to think that being body accepting would mean I never, ever had a negative thought about my body ever again. But now I think it means hearing those thoughts quiet and knowing how to support myself when they do come back around. Because I think we all have moments where doubts or old self-criticisms or comments from a hurtful person come rushing back, but that doesnâ??t mean weâ??re back to square one. â?? Anna Guest-Jelly

DEMONSTRATE YOUR WORTH WITH SELF-CARE

Another key to recognizing that your body is worthy, just as it is, is to establish some baseline measures of self-care that you can practice every day. We donâ??t usually hate things that we take care of (and we donâ??t take care of things we hate). So, self-care demonstrates to yourself (and to others) that youâ??re worthy of attention and youâ??re worthy of care. I find it a lot harder to be totally pissed off all the time at my body if I am tending to my needs and taking care of myself. â?? Amber Karnes

HAVING A CONVERSATION WITH YOUR BODY

In Rahawa Haileâ??s essay about solo hiking the Appalachian Trail, she writes the experience was the longest conversation she had ever had with her body. Itâ??s interesting how pain is often the invitation for these conversations. I was given the opportunity to hate my body and myself after the explosion, to see my burns as affirmation of my difference and unlovability. Instead, what blossomed was an admiration for my body and a renewed identity. â?? Morganne Armstrong

LOOKING AT THE SYSTEMIC ISSUES

There is no inherent unhappiness to womanhood, or to fatness, or to blackness, or to anything else that American beauty standards have long treated as a problem. The conditions under which we loathe ourselves are socially constructed, but in practical terms, theyâ??re very realâ?| These companies, with all their resources and reach and ability to manipulate public opinion, have done something they do frequently: Theyâ??ve conflated identifying a problem with solving it, and if we let ourselves be convinced these issues are headed in the right direction and our problems really are internal, then we ignore the very real reasons so many people donâ??t feel good about being the people they are in the world we live inâ?| A lot of people are genuinely sick of being pushed to feel bad about themselves all the time, and they probably also donâ??t want to expend the energy required to performatively love



themselves in the body positivity mode preferred by the idea's advocates online. They probably just want to buy and use soap that works, have access to clothing in their size, and not think about their physical selves so much. They also probably don't want to be denied job opportunities or refused lifesaving medical care because of what they look like. None of that requires a body wash brand to weigh in on anyone's self-worth, and maybe the most helpful thing brands could do for all of us is shut the fuck up. — Amanda Mull

THE DIETING INDUSTRY, WESTERN MEDICINE & DEHUMANIZATION

I'm not sure if you know, but the guiding force behind the dieting industry is shame. And do you know the guiding force behind the so-called "obesity epidemic"? is the diet industry? And the guiding force behind the diet industry is capitalism, not healthcare? Did you also know that the western medical system prescribes diets for weight loss as the "cure" for obesity when there is no scientific data that shows diets equate to lasting weight loss? There is actually more data that shows dieting leads many into a lifetime of disordered eating, which often results in a higher set point weight—the weight the body feels comfortable and stable at! I did not choose to be fat. In fact, I've cycled between starving and gorging my body almost my whole life because of my fear of fatness. I am a lot fatter now because I tried to tamper with my body's hunger system rather than allowing this amazing body of mine to be trusted to sort itself out. Now you may be thinking, "wow this person who I don't know, is sharing a ton of information with me, all because I used the word obesity"? Yes, because using the word obesity is a micro-aggression and every time, I hear it, I feel a little paper cut on my heart—a little reminder of what the world thinks of my body and me. Every time I hear the word obesity, I know someone around me is sitting in shame because someone else has just pathologized their body and dehumanized them. Fat people are dehumanized daily by society. — Anna Louise Eileen Chapman

SYMBOLIC GESTURES VS. TRUE INQUIRY & ACTION

For those who don't know, tokenism is the practice of making only a perfunctory or symbolic effort to do a particular thing, especially by recruiting a small number of people from underrepresented groups in order to *give the appearance* of sexual or racial equality within a workforce! We need to truly listen to the concerns of those diverse voices involved in generating creative solutions to these problems, especially those traditionally marginalized in the practice or industry as well as those social justice, body-positive activists who have been engaging in this type of work for many years. — Amara Miller

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