

Yoga for All

Teacher training manual

written by Dianne Bondy B. Soc. Sci ERYT500

edited by Cristina Matteis RYT200



yoga
for all



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Yoga and Body Image

What is Body Image?

Body image is defined as an individual's concept of how their body looks and changes based on their feelings about themselves. This includes one's impressions, thoughts, feelings, and opinions about his or her body. Body image is heavily influenced by mainstream media, our relationship with our surroundings, our peers, and most importantly, ourselves. Our culture tells us that the external way we look can control our internal feelings; it tells us that how we look is the most important aspects of ourselves.

Our thoughts and feelings about the way in which our body looks physically, as well as the way in which we feel others are judging our body and appearance, both play a key role in the development of body image. Race, gender, and an unrealistic, yet idealized standard of beauty, are all factors in the development of body image, as well as sources of identity for people of different cultures.

Ultimately, perpetuating negative thoughts and feelings about one's own physical appearance leads to the development of a negative or "poor" body image. While in contrast, a positive or "healthy" body image is the result of thoughts and feelings that are positive in nature.

Our body image is a major factor in the development of self-esteem, as the way in which we think and feel about ourselves as a person, helps us to navigate and define our place in the world. In this way, our body image can profoundly affect how successful we are in life and relationships.

How Does Practicing Yoga Affect Body Image?

At its root, the asana (or physical) yoga practice is designed to promote holistic wellness, as we aim to cultivate the mind-body connection. A healthy and regular yoga practice should be viewed as a self-care practice, in which the practitioner utilizes the practice as a safe and comfortable tool for compassionate self-study. In this view of the yoga practice, it is impossible to ignore a direct correlation between practicing yoga and the development of one's own body image.

Taking a closer look at the affects of yoga on body image should be a top priority for both seasoned and aspiring teachers, as the role of the teacher may have long lasting implications on body image development in students.

For years, mainstream yoga publications, websites and clothing companies have carefully crafted a very specific image of what yoga looks like. Pictures of very thin, almost exclusively Caucasian women are being disproportionately featured in advertising and promotion for yoga. Very rarely do you see an "average" or "regular" sized person doing a simple yoga pose. You rarely see men, older students, or any real elements of diversity in yoga advertising.

Thin, attractive, flexible, fair-skinned women sell yoga magazines. This aesthetic was very carefully crafted by aspirational marketing. Society creates this impossible image so companies can make money off your insecurities about yourself and your body—insecurities that this type of marketing helped create in order to sell their products. The notion that a "yoga body" must be young, thin, and flexible, illustrates how standardized ideals of beauty are making their way into the yoga practice. Many yoga teachers come to the practice with a natural flexibility and the privilege of an able body. Sometimes, however, this privilege may inadvertently affect our ability to serve students with body types that are different than our own. Due to a lack of understanding, we may feel unsure of how to modify poses for students who come to our classes with different body types and levels of ability. While it is not our intention to exclude students due to our own lack of understanding or unfamiliarity - it happens!

When we neglect to provide an atmosphere of understanding and appreciation for different body types and abilities in our classes, we can cause students to feel marginalized and alienated from the asana practice. In this way, we leave the student feeling as though they are unable to execute or experiment with a particular posture, or worse, we can leave them feeling as though the entire asana

practice and all its benefits are not within the student's reach. Sadly, this then creates the internal message that there is something "wrong" with the student's body, and thus perpetuates negative impressions, thoughts, feelings, and opinions about the student's own body. In this way, the yoga teacher and the yoga practice may have negatively impacted the student's body image, potentially even causing the student long term emotional suffering.

In actuality, it is not the student's body that needs adjusting, but rather the asana or posture itself that requires an adjustment or the use of a different prop for support. We can use this new reflection on yoga and body image, as well as the realization that all postures are within reach when applying a proper understanding of different body types and abilities, to provide an atmosphere of understanding and appreciation for all bodies in our classes. As a result, we can come to serve all of our students in an effort to improve and elevate a positive and healthy body image. If we can help shape the consciousness of our students, by encouraging them to view their bodies in a different way, we can ultimately help them create a more positive sense of self, and in turn, we can positively impact their body image. Yoga is a powerful practice which involves the body, mind, and higher self, and as teachers of this sacred practice, we need to honour the body in all its forms.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KM4Xe6DlpOY>

Our primary challenge as yoga teachers involves elevating the awareness of our students, while also assisting our students in tapping into

their own consciousness and power. Part of overcoming this challenge requires us pay close attention to the language we use both on and off the mat. We must begin to change negative narratives, such as: "you need to lose weight" or perpetuating the notion that weight loss is the primary goal of the yoga practice. Rather, we must begin to transformation these narratives into something more positive, such as: "we are working toward health and wellness by teaching self-love and acceptance". If we start from a place of self-love and acceptance, our students will begin to adopt a more positive sentiment towards their own body image. As students begin to feel better about themselves as individuals, they will naturally aspire to take better care of their physical, emotional and mental well-being. The result is that good health will follow on its own accord. When we remove judgment and criticism from the equation, the message we create and foster becomes, "come to know yourself", rather than the notion that the yoga teacher knows what is best and what works best for each student.

Ultimately, if we plan on using yoga as a tool to enhance our health both physically and spirituality, we must also examine yoga intellectually and politically. How are the messages and images in the yoga industry affecting the psyche of our students? How are we, as yoga teachers, creating or perpetuating harm in the yoga practice? How does what we do with our yoga practice affect the world around us? What are we doing to provide a safe and inclusive space for all? How do we change the images and the conversations around yoga? Cultivating insightful solutions for the benefit of all beings requires us to take a closer look at all of these questions.



Shifting Our Awareness to Health at Any Size

The most important step in creating an atmosphere of understanding and appreciation for different body types and abilities in our classes, and thus creating a truly inclusive yoga class, requires us to first meet our students where they are. We want to focus on encouraging students to come to the mat, and we also want to accept where they are in their own practice. Some students come to the mat with a genetic privilege, and this can happen in all bodies.

When students with bigger bodies come to your yoga class, don't make assumptions about their health or their level of ability. Everyone is different and we, as yoga teachers especially, need to treat everyone as the unique individual that they are. Bigger bodies can be very strong and very flexible. It does take a certain amount of strength to move in a bigger body. So set aside your ideas about how this student came to be in your class and embrace their desire and their need to be a part of this practice.

The goal here is to emphasize and focus on the inclusion of everyone on the mat by creating classes that offer students different opportunities to explore asana on their own terms. We need to create and hold space for personal expression, and this is why yoga is a great tool for teaching people to live more joyfully and skillfully. Yoga can be the tool that both elevates and sustains positive body image.

The incredible popularity of yoga is due, in large part, to the fact that it works on improving so many different challenges, ranging from the emotional to the physical. Yoga has the power to save the mind and the body. I have seen sick and injured students improve their health, as well as sad and depressed students improve their mood, while students who are totally lost have found themselves and their way once again. Yoga is a great tool for creating a body positive consciousness in children and teens, seniors, people of colour, transgender and people with bigger bodies. More and more people are finding the courage to step on to their mats and come into the studio. The action of coming to your first public yoga class can be terrifying for anyone, but it is especially terrifying for those of us who feel self-conscious.

Being Body Positive in Your Yoga Classes & Helping Students Overcome Self-Consciousness

What most seniors, beginners, people of colour, and people with bigger bodies have in common is a shared feeling of self-consciousness when approaching the yoga practice. So many students come to the mat feeling self-conscious in their own skin. In response, there is a definitive need to focus on what students can do in a class, rather than on what they can't do. By turning the awareness back to what

can be done during the yoga class, and by focusing on the concept of "coming to know the self", we continue to remind students that they are their own best yoga teacher. This extends to reminding students that the images they see in the media and the people they see all around room, are not reflections of what they can or can't do in their own personal practice.

Sadly, both the yoga community and the media have chosen to focus on the physical practice and the asana with practice, rather than shifting the focus to the holistic approach of the mind-body connection. In order to teach to a diverse group of students, we must attempt to connect with each and every individual in the room. Not everyone is going to want to engage with us in return, but in my experience, if you remain open, honest, and authentic, more and more people will want to be in your vibe.

Making Yoga Classes Accessible to Everyone

The focus of this training is to increase your confidence as a teacher in teaching and leading a well-rounded class that is accessible to every body. Keep in mind that not everyone is suited for a public class. Some students have limitations that are best suited for smaller private and semi-private classes. It is a huge challenge when some of these people find their way into a mixed level class.

Every class and every pose is an opportunity to dig deeper, and learn new asana modifications. Teachers and leaders need to connect with each student in the room, just as they are. As mentioned earlier, the first and most critical step involves meeting the student where they are – but we don't want to leave them there! It is crucial for yoga teachers not to be discouraged by a student with a physical challenge. Instead, we must take these experiences as opportunities to learn more about the practice, your student, and yourself.

Let's start by examining some of the most common challenges facing students in a mixed level, inclusive yoga class.

CHALLENGES OF MIXED LEVEL INCLUSIVE YOGA CLASSES

- Breasts, butts, thighs and larger body parts can limit accessibility to certain postures
- Self-consciousness and fear of public shaming
- Fear of not being able to get into the postures
- Judgments about a student's level of ability
- Inappropriate comments about gender and culture
- Music (swearing, inappropriate cultural reference or sexist language)
- Gender specific cues

Overcoming these challenges requires you, as a yoga teacher, to use your yoga practice to become a more conscious teacher. It may sound strange to consider using your own practice as a way to get to know others, but it is absolutely true! Look at your students and pay attention to what you are asking them to do and how you are asking them to do it. It is easy to default into "teacher mode" or to click into auto pilot. Now is the time to get really grounded and present in order to be the best teacher for your students.

Here are the top three steps to great teaching at any level:

1. Focus on your students
2. Be compassionate; and
3. Remain conscious of your language



Class Set-Up: Creating a Safe Place for All Shapes, Sizes and Abilities

Creating and holding a safe space for students to enjoy and transform within their asana and yoga practice can be very challenging. Not only are teachers required to make the practice safe physically, but also emotionally. Students with bigger bodies, students who are older, students from diverse backgrounds, students with varying levels of physical ability, and quite frankly, all students, can be very self-conscious in a yoga class. The scariest emotion to overcome is feeling as though you don't belong. This is why the first step is to be welcoming! Greet students, support students, and encourage them to come to class. It is in our ability to be welcoming that sets the stage for creating that atmosphere of understanding and appreciation for different body types and abilities in our classes.

10 Easy Tips and Strategies for Creating a Safe Place for All Shapes, Sizes, and Abilities:

1. If your goal is to serve a specific population, then create a plan for that population specifically. Creating a specialty class may be your way of creating your unique voice in this amazing practice. The need for specialized classes comes from the real knowledge that people feel excluded or not welcomed in a yoga studio, class, or group setting. If all students felt included, welcomed, celebrated, represented, and encouraged to practice - we wouldn't be having this conversation!
2. Create options for setting up specialty classes for different populations (Big Asana, Yoga for Bigger Bodies, Queer Yoga, Seniors Yoga, etc.).
3. Plan your classes. Come prepared to your yoga class. You have no idea who may show up, but is always great to have a plan. I love to create a theme for my classes. It is nice for students to have a message they can take away with them that relates to their lives

and invites them into the spirit of "coming to know yourself" through the physical practice.

4. Take extra steps to make sure your student feels welcomed. Smile, shake hands, and initiate conversation by introducing yourself.

5. Learn your student's name. Read their intake form and be friendly and conversational as you open up the space to discuss any of their challenges or concerns. Remember: always focus on what a student can do.

6. Invite the students into the class and reassure them they have done the right thing just by showing up to class.

7. Introduce your student to others in class. Find one of your regular students and introduce them to your new student. Have a regular student grab props for the new student, show them around the studio, or even point them in the direction of the washroom. The goal here is to create a warm, inviting atmosphere, while inviting students share their experiences.

8. Never ever judge the student or the situation. Admittedly, this is a hard one. We are all hardwired to judge. So please check in with yourself. Figure out what makes you uncomfortable and recognize this experience as a major part of your own practice of teaching yoga. You have no idea what this person is capable of based on their physical appearance. Just because a student might be bigger, older, or different physically, doesn't mean that they can't do the practice.

9. Say what you mean, enunciate your words, speak loudly, clearly and slowly.

10. Keep instructions simple. Use the KISS method: Keep It Super Simple! The truth is, if your instructions are too detailed and OVER complicated, you're going to lose the student completely.

The Power of Props

Bigger bodies, people who are new to the practice and stiffer bodies can benefit immensely from the use of props. Props can make the difference between classes that are exclusive versus classes that are inclusive. Props can be used as a tool for resistance, stability, and support in an immense variety of poses.

Basic yoga props include: mats, blankets, bolsters, straps, and blocks. Teach your class to embrace props as aids that can help them to access a posture, support their body, and ultimately improve their well-being throughout the entire duration of a yoga class. You will be astounded by how expansive and inclusive your asana practice will become with the inclusion of props – especially in meeting the needs of different body types. Walls, tables, balls, books, socks, neckties, and towels, can all be used to deepen your practice and the practice of all students.

Unleash the Power of Props with these 5 Steps:

1. Introduce and normalize the use of props in the practice. Have everyone grab a prop prior to the start of your class – even if students think they may not need it. Then, ask student to try poses with props to see and feel the difference in their practice. Let your class know that that props are enhancements and not necessarily “crutches”
2. Teach your students how to use a variety of props
3. Experiment with new and innovative ways of using props with your own body as you plan your classes
4. Beginners, seniors and bigger bodies may need extra support and more visuals. Set these students up in the back of the class, close to a wall, and towards the middle of the back row. This will allow the students to see everyone around them and provide a sense of safety and security.
5. Grab props if you can for everyone, regardless of whether or not students need them. Teach the modified version of the pose using the prop first. This normalizes the use of props and doesn't single anyone out

Transitions

Beginners, older students, and students with bigger bodies, may have trouble with the constant “ups” and “downs” of the yoga practice. Min-

imizing your transitions within your classes can help make the class more accessible and comfortable for everybody.

One of the hardest transitions for bigger bodied and new students is the ‘step-through’ transition, in which the student moves into a posture by stepping their foot forward between their hands, commonly from Downward Facing Dog. Students with weak abdominal muscles, tight hips, larger bellies, thighs, and breasts, will likely experience trouble executing this transition smoothly. The best solution here is to utilize the “step-back” method, by giving students the option to begin in a Forward Fold, and then ‘step back’ into a posture, substituting the ‘step-through’ transition from Downward Facing Dog.

Once students become more comfortable, introduce the ‘step-through’ transition by encouraging students to shift their hips forward as they swing their foot forward in between their hands. You can also encourage the student to lower their back knee or the supporting leg to the floor before the transition. This will make the pose more accessible and easier to flow.

Here is a video to help illustrate the step through method:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EiTMk9ABVow>

Hopping, walking, or stepping forward from the Downward Facing Dog position, can also be difficult for some students. Bellies and breasts can get in the way of moving to the top of the mat from Downward Facing Dog. Knees tend to splay out to the sides, especially in the “hop-through” transition, causing the transition to lack smoothness and safety. An accessible substitute that most students can do with ease, involves “walking the hands backwards toward the feet”, moving into a forward fold at the back of the mat. Students can then rise to standing from here, and safely walk to the top of their mats. This is the foundation for creating an excellent and accessible Sun Salute.

Building from the “step-back” transition method, you can now move into a Wide-Legged Forward Fold, by turning the toes to face the long edge of the mat. This gives the teacher and student the opportunity to transition to lateral facing poses with easy transitions. From this position, students arrive at a stable platform for moving towards a wide variety of lateral facing postures, such as: Warrior 2, Triangle, Side Angle, Half-Moon Pose, and more.

Lateral facing pose transition: <http://youtu.be/kIXCET-uJXs>

The Step Back



Quick Tips:

- Minimize transitions. Start in savasana and work with supine poses first, then make your way to seated postures, standing postures, and finally returning back down again. Moving in this way helps student find their bearings
- Celebrate the small successes!
- Encourage students to do the things that make them feel more comfortable in order to take the focus away from what they “can’t” do. Our culture puts far too much value on a false perception of what we need to do, and how we need to do it. We create personal language like: “when I lose the weight, then I will be able to do this with my life...” or, “I am going to wait until I can do this pose before...” which ultimately adds unnecessary guilt and hinders our ability to see beyond limitations.



The Bus Stop Method – Slow & Steady Wins the Race

One of my favourite asana teachers is Christina Sell, as she is exceptional at breaking down asana, or postures, in a way that is both progressive and accessible. She calls this approach “the bus stop method” and it is a great strategy for making your classes more accessible. The first step is to choose the posture you want to teach and practice it in your own body. Take a moment to look at the shape of the posture, consider what other postures share similar shapes, and then group the postures together.

Work with Poses Progressively

The chart illustrated below groups together postures that are similar in shape.

Seated Postures	Standing Postures (Lateral Facing)	Standing Postures (Forward Facing)
Baddha		
Konasana	Parsvakonasana	Urdhva Hastasana
Janu Sirsasana	Trikonasana	Adho Mukha
Pascimottanasana	Vasisthasana	Svasasana
Upvitha	Virabhadrasana 2	Handstand
Konasana		Virabhadrasana 1
		Anjaneyasana

The Bus Stop Method in Action:

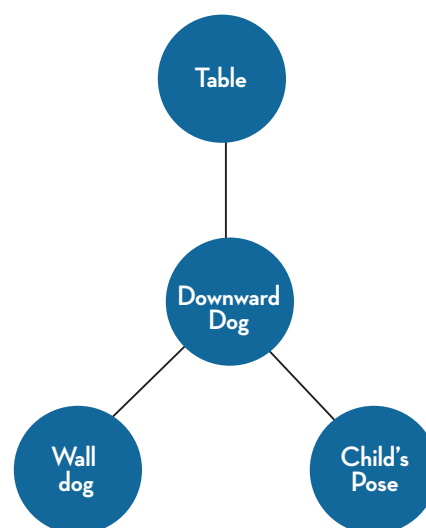
1. Start at the basic form of the pose and work your way to the final destination.
2. Invite your students to “get on the bus” at the first stop.
3. As the pose builds and becomes more complex, offer the students the opportunity to get off the bus at different stops before arriving to their destination.
4. Remind students to slow down and enjoy the ride!

Examples of Progressive Teaching Using the Bus Stop Method:

Tree pose Knee into chest	Bus stop 1
Warrior three Standing split with blocks	Bus stop 2
Standing split with blocks one arm out to the side 1/2 moon pose with block	Bus stop 3

Quick Tips:

- Make sure you have 2 or 3 variations for each pose. Work out these variations on your mat before you teach them in class. Take the time break down each pose in this plan. See the example diagram below.



- Give students permission to get off the bus at any stop
- Pay attention to all students in the room. Create classes in which 80-90% of the postures can be easily and comfortably executed by all of your participants
- Incorporate 10-20% of the more challenging postures as an opportunity to teach strategies and tips for safe execution and experimentation. Students are generally open to learning new things in classes, as long as they feel safe and supported
- Be creative!

The Power of Language and Intention/ Full Expression of the Pose

Yoga teachers commonly use the phrase, “full expression of the pose”, which is very misleading and increasingly growing more and more archaic. Personally, I feel this phrase boxes people into a corner by limiting their view of what a posture should look like within their own body. What if we changed our perception to recognize that “the full expression of the pose” is really just your very own, uniquely perfect expression of the posture on a given day?

We want to keep asana accessible to students and not in any way harmful or dangerous. When students hear the phrase, “full expression of the pose” it can very easily trigger a default visual to the some of the unrealistic images we see on cover of Yoga Journal magazine. When these visuals start to filter into our consciousness, we have a tendency to wind up hurting ourselves both literally and figuratively. The internal conversation in the mind of the yoga practitioner begins to transform into one of self-doubt, criticism and judgment, as thoughts like, “I’ll never be able to do that”, start to creep up. I call that the downward spiral on our mats.

<http://www.doyouyoga.com/how-to-stop-the-downward-spiral-on-your-yoga-mat/>

As yoga teachers, it’s our job to positively impact consciousness, and to support our students by making them feel safe, welcomed, and celebrated. In order to do this effectively, we must change the language we use in our class and even off of our mat.

Instead of relying on limited and outdated clichés like, “the full expression of the pose”, create new phrases and concepts like, “come into your individual expression of the pose”. Give students the freedom to explore this idea in their own way. Encourage students to come to know themselves by choosing positive words like: feel, explore, engage in the pose right where you are, do what feels good in your body.

QUICK TIPS

- Watch for gender specific language (he, she, use you and your)
- Stay away from slang or stereotypes that may offend someone
- Peaceful and inclusive language is always the best
- Always remember: students are either empowered or devastated by the language we choose to use as teachers

Challenges of Mixed Level Classes

The Mixed Level Class has become the misnomer, as this format has continued to become harder and harder and harder. What you see in many of today's "Mixed Level" or "All Levels" classes are more accurately described as an Intermediate class, designed for students at the intermediate level. Let's start by breaking down the mixed level class into digestible chunks.

1. Determine your apex pose or class theme first. Start simply with your warm up and build poses from there. For example, select your apex pose and then begin to investigate postures in the same group (i.e. sharing similar shapes). Use simple postures from the same group to build a warm up sequence.
2. Start introducing modifications for poses in the warm up. This will introduce students to modifications that they can later utilize when you arrive at the apex pose.

3. Observe your students and identify which poses are causing them to struggle during the warm up. Use this observation to start tweaking your class accordingly.

QUICK TIPS FOR MIXED LEVEL CLASSES:

- Be okay with everyone doing something slightly different in your class
- Offer personal time. Set a timer, chose a pose, and walk around offering assists
- Add a "Yogi Play Time" at the end of your pinnacle pose or in place of a pinnacle pose to allow your students to experiment, while feeling out their own bodies

Creating Your Own Yoga For All Class

You want to create a flow and options that are accessible, fun, and rewarding to each and every student in your class. There is no one formula for creating such a class, but there are some great ideas for adjusting a class so that it is accessible to everybody.

What You Will Need:

- Pen and paper or notebook
- Inspirational books or resource books
- You and your yoga mat
- Props (bolster, blocks, tennis ball, chair, wall and strap)
- The ability to replace your "teacher's mind" with the "beginner's mind" by truly becoming the beginner student on the mat
- An open mind and a willingness to be a little unconventional

Understanding Your Students

There are 4 major student archetypes, regardless of the body shape, age, ethnicity or size of the student. Ultimately, we come to the mat for the same reasons, but our way of getting there is just a little bit different. Understanding these 4 archetypes will help you begin to understand your students:

1. Poets & Mystics: These students know for themselves that yoga is more than the physical asana. These students are looking for that deeper level of the practice that goes far beyond the physical. They are looking for a little bit of philosophy weaved into their asana class, and they are eager to learn how to apply yoga philosophy off their mats. They love Rumi poems and hearing about the Yamas and Niyamas.

2. Engineers & Anatomy Junkies: These students read about and understand the benefits of yoga, but are much more interested in alignment and how the body moves through the asana practice. They want to know exactly what to do and how to it, and are interested in the quantitative and qualitative values of the practice.

3. Athletes & Weekend Warriors: These students measure the efficiency of their yoga class by how much they sweat. These are the people who want to know about calories and aren't all that interested in Savasana. You'll find that these students don't want to Om and they get bored if you slow the class too much. They need and want a physical challenge.

4. The Curious Observer & Would-Be Participant: These students know they should be doing yoga – all their friends are doing it and loving it, or it may have been recommended to them by their health care provider. Despite all of this external encouragement, they may be scared and intimidated by the practice and are unsure of what they are getting themselves into. They are scared to be singled out in the class, however they need our help and attention but may be too afraid to ask, or are unsure of how to ask for help. They are usually older students, bigger bodied students, or beginners.

Responding to the Needs of Bigger Bodied Students

Don't politely ignore bigger students or students who are culturally diverse or different. It is your job to make these students feel both welcomed and accepted, as these students deserve the benefits of the yoga practice just like everyone else.

Introduce yourself and let them know that you are there to both guide and help them. Remember, this is your job and pledge as a yoga teacher, so start with ahimsa and do no harm to your students. Students are arriving to your class with their own ingrained body image, and it took a lot of courage for that new student to come to your class – don't make them regret that decision!

Here is how you can help bigger bodied students to adapt an asana if needed, while still maintaining proper alignment and ensuring safety:

1. Start by setting up the room so that everyone has exactly what they need: props, access to the wall, etc.
2. Make sure beginners and student who may need assistance are at the outer edges of your class, and closer to a wall so you can access them quickly without disturbing other students.

3. Know your audience, know who is in your class, and know what they are able to achieve.

4. Make sure 80% of your class is accessible to all students. Create opportunities for students to work on poses that they are struggling with.

5. Plan one or two challenging poses for students to work on during a set Play Time period in the class. I call this Yogi Playtime, and typically offer 5-7 minutes of free yoga expression so that every student can have the time and space embody their own personal yoga experience. This also gives you time to assist students who are struggling and have questions. Be open to quietly answering questions and offering demos at this time.

Setting the Stage for a Body Positive Yoga For All Experience

Setting the stage for a body positive Yoga For All experience, begins with a strong centering and warm up. Your centering is about setting a positive intention, as well as a space to begin introducing and teaching breathing techniques. Be sure to meet your students where they are, and keep the centering and opening portion down to 3-5 minutes in length.

As you start the class, move the larger muscle groups first to safely warm up the body and prepare for deeper movements. Be sure to start with a few spine lengthening poses that can help the body and shoulders open up, prior to moving in postures like Warrior 2. This will help your students become more successful in their practice.

Quick Tips for Centering & Warm Ups:

- Start your class with a message or theme that promotes acceptance of where your students are in their own practice.
- Keep your theme and message short and accessible.
- Create a theme with a common goal. (i.e. ; Ahimsa, slowing down, feeling strong, finding balance). A great theme for a Yoga For All Class is "Come As You Are, Use What You Have, Do What You Can". Creating a universal theme goes a long way in creating a feeling of belonging in the practice. It can be a powerful way to connect with your students, while also providing a beautiful and even playing field for everybody in your class.
- Build your opening sequences with standing poses in your sequence. You want to get people up and moving relatively quickly. Standing poses are accessible to more body types and it helps students build confidence with their practice.

- If you are working with bigger bodied, older and stiffer students, or beginners, you may want to transition from the seated opening by having students come to laying on their backs. Starting with hip openers like Double Pigeon, Happy Baby, Butterfly or Baddha Konasana poses, are very helpful for these particular students. Remember to

keep the progression of the class simple, safe, and comfortable.

- Keep an eye out for common misalignments, as well as maintaining awareness of which body parts need to be opened and which actions will be required in your key postures.

Challenges & Strategies for Bigger Bodies

Bigger bodies need space and room to practice. Encourage students to make sure they have the space they need around them. The following table illustrates some of the key challenges for bigger bodied

students, as well as successful strategies for accommodating and supporting these students.

CHALLENGES	STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS
Bigger belly, breasts butt and limbs : • means a different centre of gravity • difficulty folding forward • difficulty doing inner rotation of thighs (the feet turn out) • breasts may obstruct breathing or poses when inverted • belly may be in the way when twisting • Possible difficult holding weight in Plank or Downward Facing Dog	Use walls and chairs for balance postures Use walls for vinyasa Incorporate a wider stance to make room for bellies Normalize the use of props to provide support, resistance, and assistance Use straps to strap down chests Use universal language for making modifications. (i.e. “some students may find it easier to...”)
Twisting- Bellies, thighs and breasts may be an obstacle	• Offer a demo lunge twist with hand on knee Use props Encourage students to lift and move extra skin out of the way
Vinyasa – Moving too quickly or too many up and down transitions may be difficult to students.	• Minimize the ups and downs of vinyasa Group similar asana together (i.e. Start with all seated, move to standing, then to seated) Do not over correct and bring attention to the student. Too much attention like adjusting every pose can be uncomfortable to the student

Modifications for Twisting Postures in Bigger Bodied Students

Bigger bodied students often find twisting postures difficult. Helpful strategies include: using props and offering a demo lunge twist, keeping one hand on the knee in order to twist safely.

Modifications for Vinyasa in Bigger Bodied Students

The ups and downs of a vinyasa can be difficult and frustrating for bigger bodied students. Consider grouping similar postures together (i.e. start with all seated postures, then move to standing, then to seated). Be mindful not to over correct or bring too much attention to the student. Too much attention, like over adjusting in every pose, can cause the student to feel uncomfortable.

Modifications change the poses to be more accessible to bigger participants. The stretches may be different but the overall benefits are the same. It is about feeling successful in the postures and not about achieving a particular 'look' or execution.

Big Asana Modifications: a bolster, 2 blankets, a strap, 2 or more blocks, a willingness to be open to possibility.

The props you will need:



Adho Mukha Shvvanasana - Downward-Facing Dog

For improved balance and comfort, a bigger bodied student may prefer a wider stance in both hands and feet. The dolphin variation, where the forearms bear the weight, as opposed to the hands, can be used if the student is not yet strong enough to hold their weight on their wrists.





Ardha Matsyendrasana - Half-Spinal Twist

This pose is very hard for a bigger body because the belly and thighs get in the way. I avoid teaching this pose in classes. I stick to poses where people can feel successful and offer more difficult options for others in the class. Where bigger bodies are present, I opt for a seated or reclining twist. If you chose to teach this pose, recommend that the student raise the knee to a comfortable level only, and that they are not crossing the raised leg over the other knee.

Balasana - Child's Pose

Open the knees wider to make room for the belly. Introduce the use of a bolster between the knees, blocks for under the forehead, and blankets between your bottom and your feet to make pose more comfortable and relaxing.



Dhanurasana - Bow Pose:

The difficulty for bigger bodies with this asana is the tendency for the legs to splay open when bringing the feet to the buttocks and reaching arms back to grab feet. Providing a strap around the feet, and advising

the student to hold the strap rather than the ankles, can make this pose more accessible. For a hands-on adjustment, help the student roll their shoulders back to provide greater access to their legs.



Garudasana- Eagle Pose (one of my favourites!)

The extra flesh of the upper arms and thighs makes it harder for bigger bodied students to wrap one limb around the other. If the student has good balance and is otherwise fairly flexible, have the student place the foot of the raised leg on the lateral part of the knee, rather than the back of the calf. This allows more room for the thighs, although

admittedly, it sacrifices some of the twist. This modification provides the same ankle strengthening and balance practice that the full posture offers. For the arm position, allow whatever approximation the student can perform, while stressing that the forearms and hands should be (close to) vertical even if the full wrap-around is not possible.



Paschimotanasana – Posterior Stretching Pose

Use a strap for this pose and ask the student to move their feet a little further apart. Instruct your student to move the chest forward, keeping the back straight and the chest open. I don't even encourage them to bend forward; a bigger person with a belly will inevitably round the

back. Folding forward with a belly also makes it harder to breathe, which is uncomfortable and even frightening. When all else fails, offer the wide-legged variation.



Sarvangasana Shoulder-Stand

Blankets, Blankets, Blankets

I don't teach this asana because it is extremely difficult for a bigger bodied person. The primary challenges for a bigger person in this asana comes in placing the hands on the back and the elbows close enough to the body to provide proper leverage and the strength required in hoisting the hips upward. There is also the factor of being suffocated by your breasts.

If you still wish to teach this posture, start by placing 2-3 blankets under the shoulders, as well as blocks under the hips and a strap around the upper chest. Consider using the wall to lift hips, or using a chair instead.

Consider the legs up the wall variation if your student is uncomfortable.



Setu Bandhasana - Bridge Pose

The difficult part of this asana for the bigger bodied student is the position of the arms and putting the hands together under the back. I simply have the student hold a strap taut between the hands, and place a block under the hip or sacrum



Janu Shirasana - Head-to-the-Knee Pose

Here's another asana in which the abdomen gets in the way. A partial solution is to practice the variation with the legs wide apart. In this variation, the student is still required to turn their torso before bending over the knee, so some compression is inevitable. However, it is still easier to perform than the standard, leg forward version. Using a strap can enhance the experience as well.

Conclusion

Creating a new and inclusive vision for your yoga class can be a challenging experience. If you have the power and passion for sharing the practice of yoga with all students, then you have the power and the ability to change the world through your service. This manual is a simple guide to help get you started in creating your own inclusive yoga classes. It is designed to help you think outside the mat, and acts as a simple reminder that it is our dharma as yoga teachers to positively shape consciousness. It is imperative that we stay

mindful of the mind-body connection that is inherent in the yoga practice, while staying cognizant of the affects the yoga practice inevitably has on the psyche and body image of our students.

As teachers, we recognize that yoga is a powerful tool for self-transformation, and it's important that we remember that this involves the practice of teaching yoga just as much as the physical practice within our own bodies and the bodies of our students. I applaud you for taking the first step in sharing the benefits of this practice with others in creating your very own Yoga For All class!



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Meet Dianne Bondy

Dianne Bondy – Author, Motivator, Risk Taker, Educator, Yoga Teacher, and Leading Voice in the Diversity in Yoga and Yoga of Inclusion Movement.

With over 1000 hours of yoga training in diverse modalities such as yoga therapeutics, restorative yoga, meditation, and Anusara Yoga – Dianne truly believes that yoga is for all!

She is passionate about creating a more diverse playing field in the yoga community and is a highly recognized voice in the Diversity in Yoga and Yoga of Inclusion movements – where all shapes, sizes, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds are recognized and embraced both on and off the mat.

Dianne Bondy is an E-RTY 500 with Yoga Alliance, with extensive training in yoga therapy. She is a regular columnist for Elephant Journal and Do You Yoga, has been featured in Yoga Journal magazine, and appears as a guest author in the books: Yoga and Body Image, and Yes Yoga Has Curves.

She is the founder and Managing Director of Yogasteya virtual online yoga studio that specializes in yoga for all shapes, sizes, and abilities. The goal of Yogasteya is to empower people through yoga. She developed and continues to teach the Abundant Bodied Yoga Teacher and Yoga for All yoga teacher training programs, runs retreats and workshops internationally and is a founding member of the Yoga & Body Image Coalition.

To learn more about Dianne, check out her website www.diannebondyyoga.com and connect with her on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube.

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Cristina Matteis

Cristina was first introduced to yoga by her greatest Teacher – her mother. At the age of six, Cristina attended her first yoga class, and the first seeds were planted in her impressionable heart. Her curiosity and dedication to the practice increased throughout her teenage years as she became enthralled by the entirety of the eight-limbed path. Practicing yoga and meditation has been one of her most practical and helpful tools in overcoming severe anxiety and other health issues. She's been blessed by time spent studying and learning under inspiring yoga teachers in Windsor, Ontario and at the Sivananda Yoga Ashram in Val Morin, Quebec and Paradise Island, Bahamas.

Cristina completed the 200-hour Path to Transformation yoga teacher training program under Dianne Bondy at the Eastside Yoga School, where she learned not only the fundamentals of teaching yoga for all practitioners, but also the importance of positively shaping consciousness both on and off the mat. It is her dream to dedicate her life to sharing the practice of yoga with everybody so as to help others overcome anxiety, stress, and depression. She believes that the philosophies and practices of yoga can, and will, free us from our own limiting beliefs, and empower us all to choose our thoughts, words and actions - ultimately cultivating positive and lasting change in our world.