

# AWBW Day of Wellness: Trauma-Informed Yoga Toolkit



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**TRANSCENDING SEXUAL TRAUMA THROUGH YOGA**

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AS TAUGHT BY ZABIE YAMASAKI

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# About Transcending Sexual Trauma through Yoga

[www.zabieyamasaki.com](http://www.zabieyamasaki.com)

## MISSION

Our organization's mission is simple: "We empower survivors of sexual trauma to heal through the practice of yoga."

**Zabie Yamasaki, M.Ed, RYT**  
**Founder**

## METHOD

Transcending Sexual Trauma through Yoga instructors teach from a trauma-informed perspective. Every cue offered in class is an empowering invitation as the teacher reminds each student that they are always in control of their own practice. There are no physical adjustments offered in class; instead only verbal instruction is used. Students have the opportunity to create an environment in class that feels comfortable for them.

## MANTRA

I am safe. I am loved. I am home. I am in my body.

## Healing through Yoga

Transcending Sexual Trauma Through Yoga is an organization dedicated to empowering survivors of sexual violence to heal through the practice of trauma-informed yoga. Memories of sexually violent experiences can be intrusive, which can create challenges for survivors. These memories can make it difficult for those looking to establish connection to themselves and others and learn how to trust again. The entire experience of practicing yoga can help survivors find union between disconnected and challenging aspects of the self, allowing participants to slowly build the pieces into an integrated whole. Talk therapy can often times feel intimidating for survivors and may be re-victimizing as they share details of their assault and their experiences. By offering multiple pathways to heal and incorporating the mind, body, and spirit into treatment, we offer survivors an opportunity to heal using their innate resources.

## A Mindful Method

This program provides a venue for survivors to become acquainted with and reclaim their bodies, helps them become grounded in the present moment, and allows them to explore the benefits of mindfulness as they flow breath-to-movement in guided trauma-informed practice and meditation. Classes are comprised of a 5-week series, 8-week series, or drop-in format, which focuses on intentional themes, encompasses various chakras and restorative postures, and most importantly facilitates healing off of the yoga mat. Classes are also coupled with guided activities including debriefing exercises, journaling, drumming, and art therapy. Classes explore the deeper meaning behind strength and pain, and allow survivors to build community in a safe, supported, and peaceful environment.

## Holistic Healing

This program focuses on self-acceptance and provides survivors with tangible benefits that will become noticeable throughout their practice. This gradual integration can be transformational

and healing for survivors. This program provides the opportunity for survivors to:

- Find peace and healing through yoga practice
- Exercise the choices they have to move their body in ways that feel comfortable
- Learn to establish connection to self, trust others, and strengthen relationships
- Establish safety and stability in the body
- Build skills and positive coping strategies for managing painful experiences
- Build a strong and supportive community of peers
- Regain power and control through mindful movements and reconnection to the body
- Access additional resources when they feel ready, with the program as a safe entry point

The impact trauma has on the body's physiology is far-reaching, as such it is essential to incorporate evidence based and culturally relevant practices that provide alternative forms of healing for survivors. Because trauma has so many physical effects, it is essential for interventions to move beyond talking. Van der kolk, a leading trauma therapist in the field, reminds us, "It's great to be able to put your feelings into words, and feeling that somebody understands your suffering is enormously comforting. But it doesn't make your body know that you are safe. The real method is resetting your physiology." (Yoga Activist, 2015) This proposal outlines how trauma-informed yoga can work in conjunction with advocacy services and group counseling to provide a holistic approach to healing for survivors.

Yoga provides a safe and accessible way for survivors to explore their healing internally, and uncovers layers of pain to get to the core of who they have always been. It offers them a form of expression that moves beyond trying to find the words to articulate how they feel. These

inward experiences of healing on the yoga mat can create positive outcomes and tangible skills that survivors may have been working for years to achieve in cognitive therapy. Past participants have shared that they were empowered to report to the police and/or Title IX what had happened to them because they felt strong and stable in their bodies, others were able to be intimate again with a partner because they felt they could assertively communicate their boundaries, and many survivors expressed their ability to take control of their binge eating because they did not feel the need to have control in an unhealthy way.

Survivors have also shared that the yoga as healing program increased their confidence and self-esteem, helped them learn how to trust themselves and others, allowed them to develop a strong sense of community, helped them incorporate self-care strategies, and empowered them to seek other resources.

# The Impact of Trauma and the Intersection of Yoga

“Trauma has a deep and long-lasting effect on the entire organism, from chemical and anatomical changes in the brain, to changes in our body’s physiological systems, to the subjective impact on the experience of a survivor. We believe that treatment for trauma must consider the person as a whole and address the broad-ranging effects of trauma on an individual. This needs to be done through an equal measure of patience, compassion, and gentleness. If we are to help people recover from the insidious violation of their humanity that is trauma, we must be able to offer a varied array of tools to aid in this task.” - Bessel A. Van Der Kolk, MD

Due to factors such as cultural barriers and stigma around seeking mental health services, it is essential that support services for survivors offer multiple pathways to heal. Trauma-informed yoga offers a different entry point for survivors and allows them to access resources when they are ready.

To provide a framework for this approach we must first understand that an individual’s experience of trauma impacts every area of human functioning: physical, mental, behavioral, social, and spiritual. Trauma is a somatic reaction, so often times survivors are registering their trauma as sensations in the body. Below are common symptoms of survivors:

- o Dis-regulated breathing
- o Throat constriction
- o Lack of presence
- o Nervousness
- o GI Issues
- o Sweaty palms
- o Heart palpitations
- o Flashbacks
- o Anxiety
- o Insomnia
- o Heightened sensations
- o Clenched muscles (neck, shoulders, jaw)
- o Sunken chest, heavy heart
- o Aches and pains (headaches and backaches)
- o Migraines
- o Loss of skin sensations
- o Numbness

In addition to the physical manifestation of trauma, the moment a victim of trauma shares their story, their body can also react with these somatic symptoms. When trauma survivors are forced to discuss their experiences, one person's blood pressure may increase while another responds with a migraine headache, and others may shut down emotionally. Researchers in the lab during this time have been able to detect their racing hearts and stress hormones (Bessel van der Kolk, 2014). Additionally, trauma can linger in the body long after the incident(s) occurred. Symptoms of trauma can remain dormant, accumulating over years or even decades. Then, during a stressful period, or as a result of another incident, they can show up without any warning. A seemingly minor event can give rise to a sudden breakdown, similar to one that might be caused by a singular catastrophic event (Peter Levine, 1997). If a survivor has a flashback or a nightmare or they see their perpetrator, they can be placed right back in that experience of trauma as if it is happening in that moment.

If clients are coming into therapy feeling exhausted, zapped of energy, and unwilling to talk, practicing breathing exercises can help elevate their mood. Perhaps engaging in synchronized movements like seated sun salutations can be effective. Breath can create a critical gateway for processing (Amy Weintraub). When trauma survivors can gain mastery over the sensations and emotions being experienced internally, it can help them self-regulate and become grounded and centered. From this place of calmness, presence, safety and stability, more effective healing and recovery can take place. This body awareness and opportunity to be anchored in the present moment can empower survivors to express themselves more openly and freely in talk therapy if that is an option they choose.

- **Triggers:**

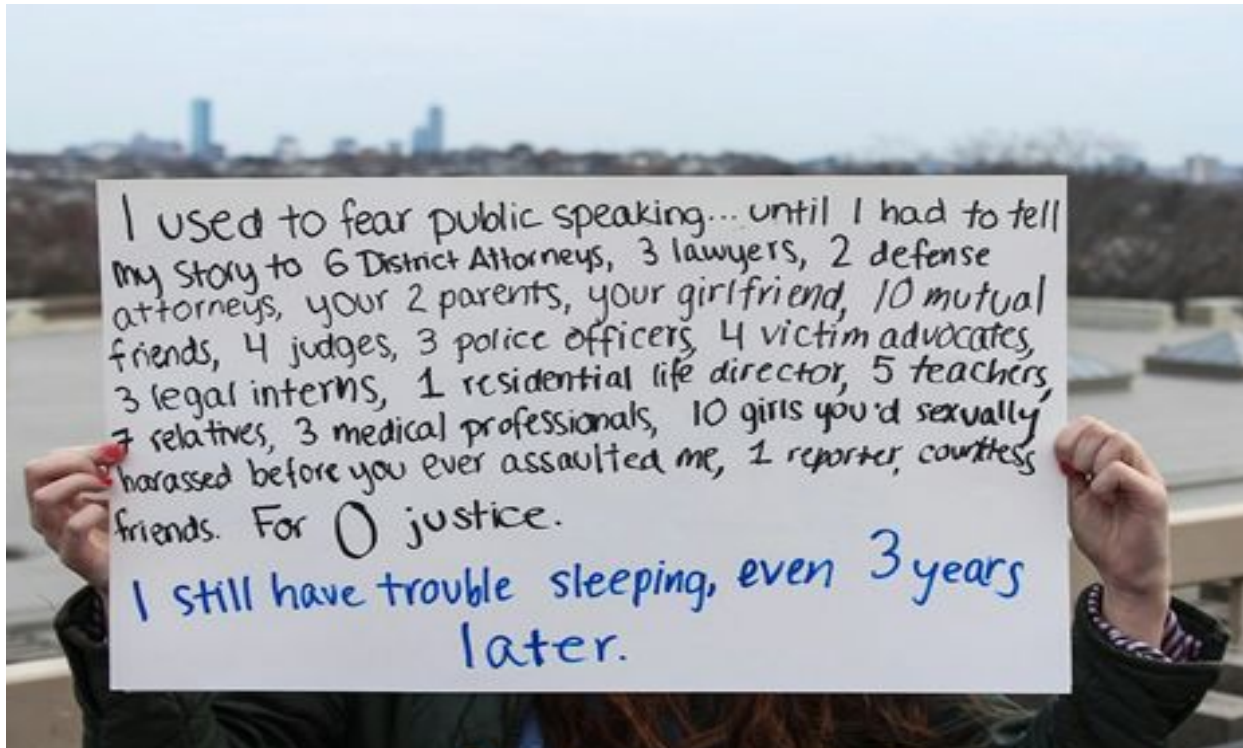
- A trigger is a physiological response outside of the survivor's control that remind them of past trauma.
- Symptoms of trauma can remain dormant, accumulating over years or even decades. Then, during a stressful period, or as a result of another incident, they can show up without any warning.
- A seemingly minor event can give rise to a sudden breakdown, similar to one that might be caused by a singular catastrophic event. (Peter Levine, 1997)

## *A Look into an Individual's Experience with Trauma*

*"I don't know of one thing I don't fear. I fear getting out of bed in the morning. I fear walking out of my house. I have great fears of death...not that I will die someday, but that I am going to die within the next few minutes. I fear anger...my own and everyone else's, even when anger is not even present. I fear rejection and/or abandonment. I fear success and failure. I get pain in my chest, and tingling and numbness in my arms and legs every day. I almost daily experience cramps ranging from menstrual type cramps to intense pain. I just really hurt most of the time. I have shortness of breath, racing heart, disorientation, and panic. I'm always cold, and I have dry mouth. I have trouble swallowing. I have no energy or motivation, and when I do accomplish something, I feel no sense of satisfaction. I feel overwhelmed, confused, lost, helpless, and hopeless daily. I have uncontrollable outbursts of rage and depression."*

(Excerpt from Peter Levine's *Waking the Tiger*)

## *The Unique Experience of Sexual Assault Survivors*



This visual sums up all of the hoops that survivors have to jump through when trying to get connected to support services. As I read this, I am reminded of all of the times this survivor, and so many others across the globe, are re-victimized by having to share their story over and over to folks who may not have advanced knowledge on the impact of trauma or may engage in victim blaming responses.

Many survivors are searching for something deeper to help them manage the painful experiences and triggers they are faced with every single day. Trauma is a somatic reaction and often times survivors are struggling with dis-regulated breathing, flashbacks, nightmares, heart palpitations, anxiety, depression, insomnia, aches and pains, migraines, the list goes on.

By focusing on holistic approaches like trauma-informed yoga, we are helping to change the way the world responds to trauma and supports survivors. Many programs have found that survivors who are uncomfortable with or express a lack of interest in talk therapy have



flourished in art or movement based formats. We must integrate the body, mind, and spirit in treatment (Holistic Healing White Paper, 2013).

## *Symptoms and Trauma Reactions*

### **Post Traumatic Stress Disorder**

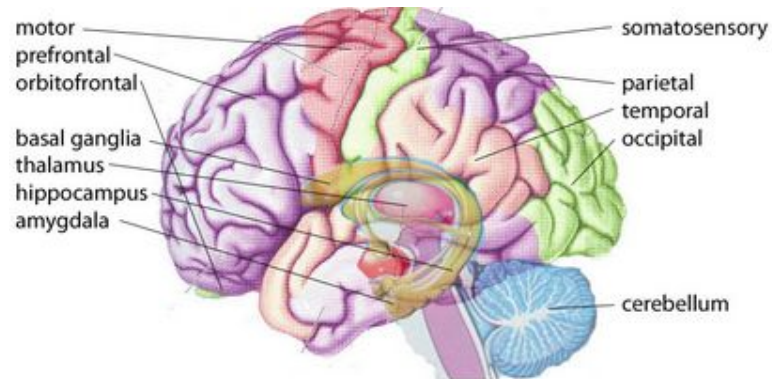
#### Three Symptom Clusters

1. Persistent, episodic recollection (nightmares, flashbacks, etc.)
2. Numbing: loss of emotional tone, avoidance
3. Increased anxiety
  - a. For one month persistence, related to traumatic event
  - b. Less than one month = Acute Stress Disorder (ASD)

### **Rape Trauma Syndrome**

- **Acute Stage:** This stage occurs immediately after the assault. It may last a few days to several weeks.
  
- **Outward Adjustment Stage:** During this stage, a person resumes what appears to be from the outside their “normal” life. Inside, however, there is considerable turmoil which can manifest itself by certain behaviors
  
- **Resolution Stage:** During this stage, the rape is no longer the central focus

## Trauma and the Brain



The Limbic System (responsible for emotional bonding) includes the amygdala and the hippocampus.

Source: Alexis Marbach Yoga

- **Amygdala: area of the brain responsible for keeping you safe, responsible for the fight or flight response**
    - Also called the *emotional brain*, connected with the feelings of anxiety and anger ([Nurrie Stearns](#), pg 18)
    - When you have experienced trauma (either a one-time singular event or long-term chronic trauma), the amygdala stays in drive, and is constantly identifying danger even when no threat of danger is present.
- “The amygdala is overactivated by stress. Those who have been traumatized are often in a perpetual state of amygdala over activation, so much so that the amygdala begins to shrink.” (Amy Weintraub, Yoga Skills for Therapists)
- **Hippocampus: responsible for memory, understanding concepts, adoption new skills**
    - Responsive and receptive to stress and stress hormones such as cortisol (steroid hormone that is released in response to stress)

- When your amygdala is constantly searching for what it perceives to be imminent threats, the hippocampus gets flooded with cortisol. When the hippocampus is inundated with cortisol, it is challenging to remember certain information or understand a given situation.
- This is why when you are very frightened, it is hard to think clearly.
- The information that is coming into the victim's brain and body during a sexual assault is traumatic. It is threatening. It's one of the most psychologically damaging forms of crime that anyone could experience.
- During traumatic stress, the speech center shuts down—one reason why many people cannot completely put what happened to them in words or why their memories may be fragmented.
  - "This is why talk therapy is limited in helping someone recover from or heal from overwhelming stress," says Moore.
  - People who've experienced trauma have more difficulty processing information than those who haven't. All of this information is helping the trauma community better understand—and help—those in need.

(SOURCE: Yoga Activist )

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"Trauma is much more than a story about something that happened long ago. The emotions and physical sensations that were imprinted during the trauma are experienced not as memories but as disruptive physical reactions in the present...in contrast with the rational brain, which expresses itself in thoughts, the emotional brain manifests itself in physical reactions. The fundamental issue in resolving traumatic stress is to restore the proper balance between the rational and emotional brains. Neuroscience research shows that the only way we can change the way we feel is by becoming aware of our inner experience and learning to befriend what is going on inside ourselves." -Bessel van der Kolk

## *What does Trauma-Informed Mean?*

Treatment that incorporates:

- A thorough understanding of the profound neurological, biological, psychological and social effects of trauma and violence on the individual
- Safety, consistency, and choices are central to treatment
- Avoids re-traumatization of the survivor
- Care is **collaborative, supportive, and skill based (Jennings, 2004)**

### CORE PRINCIPLES OF A TRAUMA-INFORMED CULTURE

|                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| Safety              | Ensuring physical and emotional safety; “do no harm”  |
| Trust               | Maximizing trustworthiness, making tasks clear, maintaining appropriate boundaries  |
| Choice              | Prioritizing survivor choice and decision-making; supporting survivors’ control over their own healing journey                      |
| Collaboration       | Maximizing collaboration and sharing power with survivors   |
| Empowerment         | Identifying strengths, prioritizing building skills that promote survivor healing and growth  |
| Cultural competence | Ensuring cultural applicability of services and options; sensitivity to the role of culture in lived experience and decision-making |

Adapted from Proffitt, 2010

(Source: Building Cultures of Care, A Guide for Sexual Assault Service Programs)

## What is Embodied/Holistic Healing?

- **Common terms:** embodied, holistic, alternative
  - Treatment that incorporates the *whole person*
  - Healing modalities that address the **impact** of trauma on one's *body, mind, and spirit*
  - These modalities allow survivors to regain a deep sense of wholeness that enhances inner resilience and gratitude.
  - Techniques that allow survivors to re-establish a sense of comfort within their physical shape, to non-verbally process feelings and sensations that transcend language, and promote one's innate capacity to heal.
  - Supporting survivors in an ongoing physical, mental, emotional, energetic and spiritual journey towards healing and self-discovery. (The Breathe Network, 2013)
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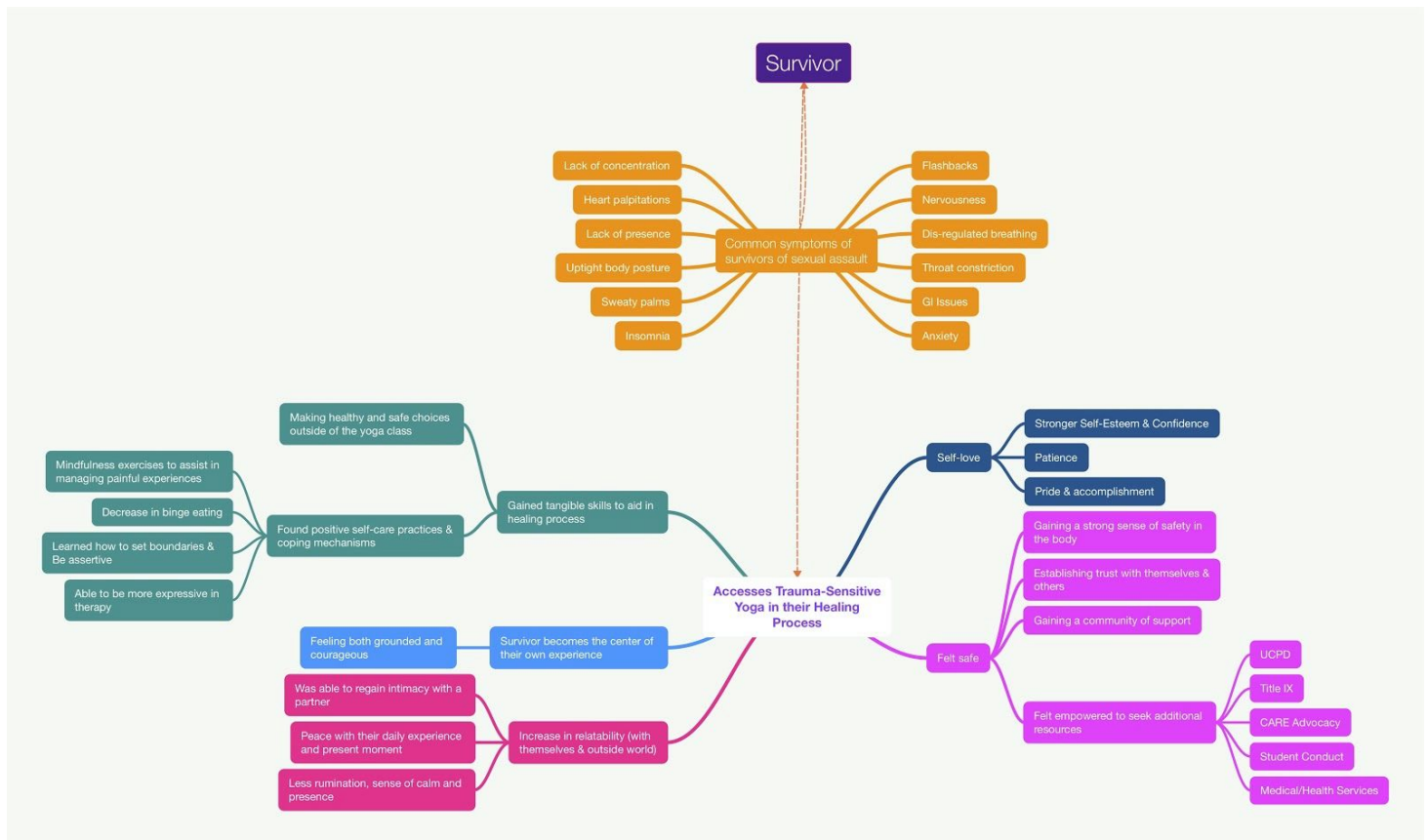
### Making the Connection: Trauma & Yoga

"Trauma has a deep and long-lasting effect on the entire organism, from chemical and anatomical changes in the brain, to changes in our body's physiological systems, to the subjective impact on the experience of a survivor. We believe that treatment for trauma must consider the person as a whole and address the broad-ranging effects of trauma on an individual. This needs to be done through an equal measure of patience, compassion, and gentleness. If we are to help people recover from the insidious violation of their humanity that is trauma, we must be able to offer a varied array of tools to aid in this task." - Bessel A. Van Der Kolk, MD



i bend  
so i  
don't break

# Overview: What is Trauma-Informed Yoga?



*This graph visualizes the impact that trauma-Informed yoga programs have had on survivors of sexual assault. Many survivors gained tangible skills, positive coping mechanisms, and experiences of empowerment through participation in trauma-Informed yoga that they had been working on for many years in talk therapy.*

Regardless of the nature of the traumatic incident, survivors may suffer from physical pain and emotional unrest after experiencing a trigger, or as a chronic underpinning of their daily activities. There is no doubt that trauma impacts brain functioning. After experiencing trauma, the amygdala goes into over-drive and anticipates danger even when there is none. Trauma can leave the body feeling dis-regulated and unsafe. The practice of trauma-informed yoga can help survivors establish safety and utilize their body in a way that feels authentic and manageable—truly unique to their needs.

Transcending Sexual Trauma through Yoga includes the following components into classes, which were partly informed by a training with trauma-sensitive yoga experts Bessel Van Der Kolk, Dave Emerson and Jen Turner from the Justice Resource Institute ([http://www.traumacenter.org/clients/yoga\\_svcs.php](http://www.traumacenter.org/clients/yoga_svcs.php)):

- **Empowerment-based language and Integration of choices**

- This language creates a choice-based environment where survivors are in control and choose to participate in ways that feel comfortable. It allows them the opportunity to be gentle with themselves. Examples of cues given in class include:

- “As you’re ready”
- “If you’d like”
- “You can always modify to suit your experience”
- “Please bring this exercise to an end whenever you feel ready”
- “Feel free to come out of the posture at any time”
- “I invite you to listen to your body”
- “I Invite you to meet your body and breath wherever it is today”
- “You are always in control of your practice”
- “Everything is optional”

- Choices are central to the practice of trauma-informed yoga. Words used in class to facilitate this environment include: notice, feel, explore, experiment, and maybe

- **Supportive Presence**

- Trauma-informed yoga instructors create a supportive and non-judgemental environment. Their presence in the room is safe, predictable, and consistent. They maintain healthy boundaries and support survivors in exploring what boundaries and assertiveness looks like through movement and reconnection to their own bodies.
- Trauma-informed yoga instructors create an environment where survivors can engage in their practice in their own way and challenge themselves

when they feel ready to do so.

- Trauma-informed yoga instructors are genuine, caring, and authentic and create a space where survivors can come to the yoga mat and be exactly who they are.

- **The Art of Assisting**

- There are NO physical assists in trauma-informed yoga instruction.
- The Trauma Center at the Justice Resource Institute considers physical assists to be a clinical issue and they do not recommend them.
- Physical assists can be incredibly triggering for survivors and can take away from the present moment. Many survivors are not ready to be seen and prefer not to have the extra attention on them.
- Trauma-informed practice is about teaching students about their own capacity to self-regulate. There are varying degrees of pain in the body and in the heart, and these classes respect the wide spectrum of survivor needs.
- Lastly, often times survivors struggle with setting boundaries and asking for what they need. By providing only verbal instruction, trauma-informed yoga instructors empower survivors to find comfort in their own shape.
- “We create spaces where freedom and personal embodiment are valued and cherished. We can create a deeper connection with students as we verbally assist them in the process of navigating and reclaiming their bodies. We give them freedom to explore their bodies exactly as they are.” - Alexis Marbach

- **Safety and Space**

- Survivors are invited to set up the yoga space in whatever way they feel comfortable. Not only do we help facilitate regaining power and control of the body but also of the immediate environment. Trauma-informed yoga instructors offer choices around lighting, room set-up, music, and props. Our organization strives to create empowering environments to give survivors permission to take care of themselves.



- **Invitation of Postures**

- Survivors are invited to notice the sensations in their own bodies and to exercise choices through the various postures and modifications provided. These experiences often times facilitate healing off of the yoga mat. Trauma often involves being physically held down or immobilized. Trauma-informed yoga practice always allows the survivor to be in control.
- For example, one of the first statements made in class by a trauma-informed yoga instructor is, “Know that the hardest part is over, you made it to your mat. If you wanted to find one posture that you connect with and stay there for the entire time, that would be perfect.”

- **Breath and Trauma**

- Trauma-informed breath practices involve breathing in and out only in ways that feel safe and comfortable for the survivor. Often times breath can be linked to triggers associated with trauma including holding the breath, accelerated heart rate, constricted breathing, inability to breathe, shortness of breath, and suffocation. As a result, there are no constricted breathing cues in trauma-informed yoga classes.
- There are many therapeutic benefits to breathwork including:
  - Increased awareness of breath patterns
  - Decreased anxiety and self-regulation
  - Energizing and calming
  - Reconnection
  - Grounding and presence

- **Sensitivity to Triggers**

- Trauma-informed yoga instructors are trained in supporting students through triggers as they arise and providing them with strategies and tools for processing and coming back to the present moment.

- **Themes and Philosophy Integration**

- Classes are closely tied to Bija Bennett’s “Emotional Yoga” and incorporate

themes very relevant to the needs of survivors including: safety, mindfulness, boundaries, assertiveness, strength, trust, and community.

## *Benefits of Trauma-Informed Yoga*

There are many incredible benefits to a trauma informed practice that survivors have shared:

- the recognition of choices in one's life
- feelings of safety and strength
- ability to be more expressive in therapy
- development of positive coping methods
- learned self-care strategies
- the gaining of trust in self and others
- a development of a strong sense of community
- the establishment of boundaries and how to be assertive
- the ability to be intimate again
- decreased feelings of depression, stress, and anxiety
- the feeling of empowerment to seek other resources such as counseling, medical support, and/or the gaining of confidence to report the assault to police or Title IX
- increased confidence
- strengthened self-esteem
- key themes: assertiveness, courage, groundedness, balance
- gained emotional, physical, mental, and interpersonal skills

*"I learned so much from this program. Not only did I learn yoga, but I also learned about myself and my body. I learned to take care of myself, to be conscious of signs that point to me doing the opposite of self-care. I learned how to read my emotions, to pay attention to my surroundings, and to be more assertive and strong. But most of all, I learned how to let myself become the person I am meant to be, to let myself see me for me. It allowed me to view myself in a positive light."*

# *A Helpful Guide to Linking Thoughts and Body Sensations*

## A HELPFUL GUIDE TO LINKING THOUGHTS AND BODY SENSATIONS



*Content from The Body Knows the Score by Bessel van der Kolk.*

# *The Nervous System and Yoga Postures*

## Core Concepts:

- "After trauma the world is experienced with a different nervous system. The survivor's energy now becomes focused on suppressing inner chaos, at the expense of spontaneous involvement in their life. These attempts to maintain control over unbearable physiological reactions can result in a whole range of physical symptoms, including fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue, and other autoimmune diseases. This explains why it is critical for trauma treatment to engage the entire organism, body, mind, and brain." -Bessel van der Kolk, M.D.
- During trauma, the nervous system becomes very reactive in order to respond to a real or perceived threat. Even a threat that is not real, can send us into a frenzy. Trauma can push us into a state of hyperarousal. The trouble with hyperarousal is that over time, it exhausts us. Our bodies are not built to constantly be in this state. "When the nervous system is over-stimulated or hyper aroused, one may tend toward anxiety, anger, irritability, or restlessness, whereas when it is under-stimulated one is more likely to experience depression, dissociation, lethargy, and/or fatigue. Yoga postures can stimulate, soothe, and balance the nervous system, which helps with the therapeutic goal of balancing out these extremes. A healthy nervous system sets the stage for mental and emotional health." –Lisa Danylchuk
- The key to healing is **balancing the nervous system.**

# ToolKit: Yoga Postures

*"If you really want to help a traumatized person, you have to work with the physiological states, and then the mind will start changing."*

*-Bessel van der Kolk, M.D.*

Survivors of sexual assault can experience a range of symptoms including: numbness, shock, self-blame, flashbacks, nightmares, anxious thoughts, frequent headaches, heartburn, stomach pain, nausea, dry mouth, dis-regulated breathing, aches and pains, and a variety of somatic reactions.

When working with trauma survivors, body awareness and body scanning exercises, where movement is intentionally paired with attention to sensation and breath, can be incredibly healing (Amy Weintraub). Giving survivors opportunities to notice the sensations flowing through their body is critical to helping them focus on the present moment.

**Sample Yoga Toolkit:** Here are some postures to help release trauma and stress held in the body:

**- Supported Bridge:** Supported bridge is a restorative posture that can allow your body to gently relax and help you manage chronic pain, stomach and digestion problems, and physical discomfort. This posture can be a gentle release from a busy and anxious mind to a quiet one.



**-Warrior III:** Balancing postures like warrior III can allow you to focus on the present moment. This can be helpful when experiencing anxious thoughts and dis-regulated breathing. Because of the impact this posture has on core strength, it can help improve digestion and detoxify stress in the belly organs. The key is to allow your breath to be a guide and to self-regulate to a level of the posture that feels comfortable for you.



- **Tree pose:** This posture helps with feelings of grounding and balance and can be helpful when experiencing flashbacks. The posture can allow for feelings of safety, stability, and confidence building- reminding us that we have the power in overwhelming moments to tap into our innate tools.



- **Fists of fire:** This posture is a variation of warrior I that involves drawing the fists in towards the body on each exhale breath. If you are experiencing depression or feeling lethargic, this can help reinvigorate the body, help to channel nervous energy, and allow you to focus on the connection of movement and breath.



- **Seated shoulder and neck rolls:** Inviting students to move at their own pace, as fast or as slow as their body allows, reversing the direction at any time, bringing the exercise to an end whenever they feel ready. This posture can give you the opportunity to release tension and stress in the body. This is a wonderful self soothing technique and energy boost!



**- Seated restoratives and side twists:**

There's no denying that we carry stress and trauma in our bodies. After a long week you may feel aches, pains, and tension in various parts of your body. This physiological imprint is hard to ignore. So why do we continue to push ourselves when our bodies are begging us to rest? This restorative yoga posture involves placing one block vertical and one horizontal at top of mat and laying a firm pillow or bolster on top. If you don't have blocks you can stack blankets and pillows to create a slight elevation. You can explore with placing a bolster, pillow, or blanket under your knees. If you'd like, you can roll two blankets and rest your arms on each side of the body. Feel free to explore multiple variations that resonate with your body. Perhaps draping a blanket over you or resting on your side, bringing a pillow in between the knees for added support. I invite you to inhale and exhale at a comfortable pace. Letting go of your week, letting go of any distractions, letting go of whatever it took for you to give yourself this time out of your day. Allow this to be a gentle space for you, your body, and your breath. You deserve it. You are your most valuable resource. Rest.

There are many options for resting postures to explore in your body. This variation creates a relaxing and energizing feeling in the body because of the release of tension in the hips by elevating the legs on a chair and the slight heart opener by placing one block horizontal for the shoulder blades to rest and one block vertical to rest the head. This allows the body to feel fully supported by allowing the props to hold you up. If the heart opener feels like too much, you can explore with placing additional pillows underneath the body to allow for a deeper relaxation and restoration back to balance. If you like aromatherapy, a lavender and lemon



mist can create a nice balance because of its relaxing, yet energizing elements. Explore a variation that works for you.

- **Reclined Hero Pose:** Reclined Hero Pose has many benefits including: supports digestion, helps to open up the body and relieve muscular tension and stress, stretches the spine, relieves tightness or tension in the legs and helps with joint pain, can create an opening in the heart to free energy that is blocked, can release emotions that are stagnant and have manifested as pain in certain parts of the body, and brings overall feelings of relaxation and restoration. This posture can be intense in the lower back, quads, and knees- please find a comfortable variation that works for your body. You can explore modifications with the legs if the stretch feels like too much such as lengthening them in front of you or drawing the soles of your feet together and placing blankets or pillows under the knees for added support. Always explore the shape of your body in your own way and know that you know your body best. Gently connect to your breath and allow the body to drop into this moment. Allow the sensations in your body to connect to the strength of your breath. Stay as long as feels safe for you.





**- Legs up the wall:** Legs up the wall pose can help aid a variety of symptoms including anxiety, aches and pains, migraines, headaches, depression, chronic sleep problems and insomnia, and stress. It's one of my go-tos when I need balance, quiet and clarity and to calm my nervous system. You can place as many pillows or blankets as you need for extra support under the hips. Stay as long as feels comfortable.



**- Seated and standing twists:**

It is very common for survivors of sexual assault to experience a variety of psychosomatic symptoms, including stomach pains. Trauma can cause "chronic subliminal muscle contraction, to toxicity in our digestive system, to deep-rooted emotions and behaviors (Amy Weintraub). Postures like warrior and twisting poses as well as postures that lengthen the abdomen help to soothe abdominal distress and detoxify the stress in the belly organs. Yoga can help enhance core strength and improve digestion.

Postures to explore with if experiencing stomach pains: revolved half moon, seated vertical twist, crescent lunge twist, warrior I, warrior III, prayer twist, hero's pose, one legged downward facing dog- bend the knee open hip, camel pose, and supine twist.

Twisting postures for abdominal distress





**- Heart opening flow**

- Sun salutations on their own, to focus the mind, find balance and build self-esteem. Any movements are welcome which come up that feel natural- allow the breath to be a guide.

*See below for a strength-building sequence. Inviting survivors to notice the strength they are cultivating in their body, while inviting choices and modifications each practice, is a powerful reminder of the resiliency and courage they have off of the mat.*



**- Crescent Moon**

Feel free to take **Arm Circles** here



**- Warrior II + mindful flow**



**-Extended side angle**



**- High Plank**



**- Downward Facing Dog**



**- Child's Pose**



**- Three-legged Downward facing dog. Feel free to add a bent knee**



**- Body Scan in a Trauma-Informed Savasana**



# Specialized Postures



Specialized yoga postures (always incorporating the element of choice) can play a powerful role in healing a variety of symptoms and issues that survivors may struggle with.

Yoga helps us become more aware and release emotions and stagnant energy that may have become stuck in the body and manifest as tightness, compression and pain (Lockhart, 2015).

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**Symptom:** Dis-regulated breathing

**Impact of Yoga:** Yoga focuses on conscious breathing and invites survivors to notice the natural rhythm of their breath. Trauma-informed breathing is performed in the context of a muscular and physical form to facilitate grounding and present moment experience (Emerson, 2012). A trauma informed practice invites students to breathe in ways that feel natural and comfortable. Instructors use cues to encourage people to be aware of what is happening in their body in the present moment.

**Postures:** Seated meditation, invitational breathing, supta-baddha konasana- inviting one hand on belly, one hand on heart to notice the breathing (self-regulation), supported reclining twist

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**Symptom:** Heightened anxiety and flashbacks

**Impact of Yoga:** Yoga helps survivors maintain a sense of calmness by helping to regulate the body and sensations and by connecting breath and movement and re-establishing a sense of time inside. Balancing postures can also help with increased awareness and coordination and allows for focus on the present moment.

**Postures:** For anxiety balancing: supported child's pose, seated neck and shoulder rolls, supported reclining twist, seated twists, forward folds, face down relaxation, legs up the wall (Bo Forbes, Yoga for Emotional Balance), deep breathing, tree pose, warrior III, grounding mudra- Adhi Mudra: Bring thumb inside palm and rest on knees palm down in a comfortable seated position. Explore with a few grounding breaths.

**Symptom:** Uptight body posture

**Impact of Yoga:** Yoga can help survivors find balance and promote open body posture. Yoga allows survivors to feel specific points of contact (ex: “I invite you for a moment to notice both feet on the ground and at the same time find length in your spine.”)

**Postures:** backbends, camel pose, cat and cow, mountain pose,

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**Symptom:** Lack of presence

**Impact of Yoga:** Trauma-informed yoga focuses on experiencing the present moment, appreciating the body for whatever it wants to do that day, and most importantly understanding that there are always choices. Trauma-informed yoga helps survivors notice and orient to the space and sense the position of their body (ex: “I invite you to notice what happens when you disengage the muscles in the quads.”)

**Postures:** Chair pose, balancing postures

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**Symptom:** GI Issues

**Impact of Yoga:** Trauma can cause “chronic subliminal muscle contraction, to toxicity in our digestive system, to deep-rooted emotions and behaviors (Amy Weintraub). Specific forms like warrior and twisting poses soothe abdominal distress and detoxify the stress in the belly organs. Warrior III can help enhance core strength and improve digestion.

**Postures:** Seated vertical twist, Crescent lunge twist- release the back knee to mat, warrior I, warrior III, prayer twist, heros pose, one legged down dog- bend the knee open hip, camel pose, supine twist

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**Symptom:** Dissociation

*“Dissociation is one of the many defense mechanisms the brain can use to cope with the trauma of sexual violence. It’s often described as an “out of body” experience where someone feels detached from reality. It may be upsetting for someone to realize that they have dissociated, but it is a natural reaction to trauma.” (RAINN, 2015)*

**Impact of Yoga:** Yoga postures that incorporate active forms and twists and that invite survivors to move slowly and mindfully from sitting to standing can help with experiences of disassociation.

Yoga allows survivors to practice mindfulness: the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to things as they are (The Mindful Way through Depression, 2007)

**Postures:** Arm circles, prayer twist, sun salutations

**Important note:** lack of structure or too much quiet time in a restorative pose might prompt dissociation

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**Symptom:** Difficulty with relationships and intimacy

**Impact of Yoga:** People who experience trauma can become emotionally disconnected from themselves as well as other people. The trauma may induce a need to build walls and layers of protection (Brown, 2012).

Yoga can help survivors develop a strong connection to the body as well as trust of self and others. [Transcending Sexual Trauma through Yoga](#) has allowed survivors to strengthen their relationships by allowing them to have greater self-awareness and a strong understanding of how to set boundaries and be assertive.

**Postures:** supported bridge, restorative postures, camel pose, heart openers

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**Symptom:** Self-esteem issues, low confidence

**Impact of Yoga:** Many survivors disclose that thinking about their past experiences with assault can consume and drain their energy and breed negativity which has a significant impact on their self-esteem and day to day functioning.

Yoga helps to clear the mind and increases the supply of oxygen to the body which in turn helps reduce stress, increase energy flow and ensure mental clarity. Yoga can help to awaken body posture and helps those who feel emotionally disconnected from themselves and others. In essence, yoga promotes self-love which is the core of well-being.

**Postures:** crescent moon, low lunge twist, backbends, repeated sun salutations on own, reverse warrior, warrior II, tree pose, plank, explore positive affirmations,

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**Symptom:** Aches and pains, migraines, headaches

**Impact of Yoga:** Several studies at Duke University Medical Center found yoga as an effective tool for chronic pain (Katz, 2011). Yoga postures help reduce joint pain, muscle stiffness, and overall physical discomfort while greatly improving flexibility, range of motion, muscle strength, and mental strength.



**Postures:** neck and shoulder rolls, self massage- palms to backs of shoulders, supported supta baddha konasana, gentle seated stretches, seated forward folds, seated twists and stretches right to left- can invite use of blocks under each knee in seated, invite use of blocks, supported reclining twist, legs up the wall, cat/cow, prasarita with block underneath forehead, belly down twist over bolster, revolved twist, child's pose with bolster and blanket, savasana with rolled blanket or bolster under knees, supported savasana

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**Symptom:** Depression

**Impact of Yoga:** Yoga helps to stimulate and awaken the body and mind and help students connect to a deeper purpose in life, an inner sense of calm, and an opportunity to channel nervous energy. A sense of groundedness and quiet to the body and opportunities to open up the heart to free up energy that is blocked. A body scan allows us to directly sense the body which helps to turn the volume of the body's messages up and the volume of the mental chatter down. This type of mindfulness provides us with another way to know our bodies (The Mindful Way through Depression, 2007).

**Postures:** child's pose, restorative postures, legs up the wall, butterfly, deep, full inhalations and audible exhalations, 1:1 breath- equal inhale and exhale, mindfulness, mountain pose, repeated sun salutations, cobra, heart openers, arm balances, body scan, mindful stretches- focus on sensations in the body, use of blankets and blocks, supported reclining twist, standing exercise: inhale, hold arms straight out from shoulders with palms down, exhale- sweep arms out to a T, inhale- arms up to mountain pose, exhale airplane chair, arms extend back; warrior I → fists of fire, chair pose → airplane arms, lotus mudra, invite open and upright body postures, seated mountain pose, explore positive affirmations such as: "I am safe. I am loved. I am home. I am in my body" or "You are enough. You are so enough. It is unbelievable how enough you are," or "Everytime I judge myself harshly, I break my own heart" (Swami Kripalu) or "I am wise, beautiful, and strong. I have so much goodness to give and receive. I am here to do my best" (HCSAY Program)

*Practicing asanas with adapted breathing, pranayama techniques, and guided relaxation will help to balance the nervous system. For example, doing standing postures and backbends with an emphasis on movement—during which you progressively lengthen the inhalation and the exhalation and gently hold the breath at the end of the inhalation—will activate the sympathetic response and energize the system*

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**Symptom:** Chronic sleep problems and insomnia

**Impact of Yoga:** The root cause of insomnia is overstimulation of the nervous system which is caused by stress (Restorative Yoga for Life, Grossman). Several studies discuss yoga's impact on reducing

insomnia. In one study, researchers found that the participants had significantly improved sleep efficiency, total sleep time, total wake time, sleep onset latency, and wake time after sleep onset at the end of treatment compared with before the treatment (Harvard study, 2009). Yoga is an effective treatment because it addresses insomnia's physical and psychological aspects (Sat Bir Khalsa, Ph.D., assistant professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School and associate neuroscientist at Brigham and Women's Hospital.) Yoga provides opportunities to come back to the present and re-route circulation.

**Postures:** reclining twist, deep, full inhalations and audible exhalations, supported bridge, legs up the wall pose, restorative options: side lying stretch, belly down with bolster at hip, child's pose with bolster, savasana with props or side lying, supported supta baddha konasana, supported downward- placing block or bolster under forehead,

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### **Symptom: Stress**

**Impact of Yoga:** Survivors often times experience overwhelming feelings of stress as they try and navigate next steps in their healing process. College-aged students have additional stressors of navigating classes, avoiding their perpetrator, accessing decentralized resources, and dealing with anxiety and depression, just to name a few. Restorative postures can help survivors prioritize stillness, relaxation, and a calmer state of mind. You may consider inviting survivors to incorporate props like yoga blocks, bolsters, and blankets to allow a fuller relaxation into every posture.

**Postures:** supported child's pose, seated meditation- one hand on belly and one hand on heart, downward, shoulder stand, standing forward bend with legs crossed, supported pigeon, supported bridge, downward, gentle sphinx, supported reclined bound angle, legs up the wall, savasana

### **Notes:**

*Overcoming trauma has everything to do with opening up the body.  
Yoga helps light up the brain.  
Breath is the doorway to the nervous system*

## Sample Trauma-Informed Yoga Class

### Theme: Intention

**Possible Mantra:** “I now take my own power back. I am safe and I am free.”

Know that everything is optional and you can opt out at any time. This is your body and always your practice. This is your window of time to honor you and your needs.

Feel free to get started in any form of lying down that feels comfortable in your body. Know that you can keep the eyes open, find a soft focus on anything in front of you, or close the eyes- whatever feels most safe for you. Perhaps that is laying flat on your back, allowing your arms to fall open and inviting your feet to drape to the corners of your mat. Allow a gentle relaxation through your shoulders- inviting them to nestle in to the safety and support of your yoga mat. If you prefer, you can explore with a fetal position on your favorite side- feel free to use any props to support you in finding a shape within your body that feels authentic for you. If you'd like you can draw the soles of your feet together, allowing your knees to fall open. If sitting up feels better, please respect and honor wherever your body is today. And most importantly know that there is nothing left to do. You made it to your mat, sometimes that's the hardest part. Honor your body. Honor your breath. I invite you to drop into this moment. Letting go of your day, letting go of any distractions, letting go of whatever it took for you to get here today. Know that the hardest part is over- you made it here. If you wanted to find one posture that really resonates with you and stay there for the entire class, that would be perfect and supported. This is your body and always your practice. Allow this to be a gentle space for you, your body, and your breath. Allow the practice to support your healing.

This experience is all about making conscious choices for your body. Know that the choices you exercise with your own body are celebrated in this space. I invite you to breathe in and out in ways that feel comfortable for you.

I invite you to spend a few moments quieting the mind and gently finding connecting to your breath. Feel free to inhale and exhale in a way that feels natural. No need to control your breathing in anyway. And maybe bring awareness to any sensations flowing through your body. Maybe notice the level of physical or emotional energy you are bringing to your mat today. There is no need to fix or change anything, just notice. Maybe listen to the sound of your own breath. Breathe into your spirit, breathe into your light. Cultivate a beautiful, full, authentic breath. Maybe invite a few moments here, just to listen to the sound of your own breath- let it support you. This is one of the most important tools to self-inquiry- leading to emotional balance and self-understanding. Take an inhale completely for you, open mouth exhale, let something go. Allow the body to surrender into this space and continue to take the breath at your pace.

In this moment, I invite you to set an intention for your practice. What do you need more of in this moment? Perhaps reciting a mantra is something that resonates with you tonight. Maybe it

is: "I now take my own power back. I am safe and I am free." You can repeat this as many times as you would like. Perhaps when coming across a challenging posture or thought, you can recite this mantra to yourself to bring you back to the present moment.

Continue to just take a scan- breathing into every aspect of you. *Maybe notice your verticality- the parts of you that go up and down. I invite you to connect to your spine and find a little more length. Let your verticality represent your dignity and allow yourself to grow.*

*Now I invite you to shift your awareness to your horizontality- the parts of you that go side to side. Let this represent your connection to others and also your boundaries. How far do you want to extend your awareness and connection today?* (from Daring Grateful, Brene Brown)

If it feels okay for you, feel free to place one hand on your belly and one hand on the heart. Try turning the volume of your heart all the way up, and the volume of your thoughts all the way down.

"Today I choose to accept myself. I choose to be aware of what it is like to simply be without judgment. I choose to live each moment knowing that I am is enough to sustain me forever. I choose to sit quietly and open my heart to myself, expanding until my being fades into the infinite. Today I behold myself and know deeply that my capacity to love others and for others to love me is directly connected to my capacity to love myself. I choose love." - Louise Hay

Start to gently invite the movement and awareness back into your body. Perhaps begin with wiggling out the toes, circling out your ankles, bringing movement into your fingers, circling out your wrists. Maybe explore with interlacing your arms overhead finding a wall to wall stretch.

*(Continue with trauma-informed cues)*

Su-pine twist

Seated meditation

Neck rolls

Shoulder rolls

Side twists- R palm down to right side of mat, and left arm stretches up and over (switch)

Half and full pashimotanasana

Child's pose- stretch arms left and right- "I can be changed by what happened to me but I refuse to be reduced by it." -Maya Angelou

Table top- cat/cow- if comfortable- inviting any other postures that naturally come up for you, perhaps circling out the hips, or releasing back to child's pose.

Down dog

Step to top of mat

Rag doll- Let this be symbolic. Letting go of anything that does not serve you, your body, your practice, your life. Let it roll off of your shoulders and on to the safety and support of your mat.

Arm circles- I invite you to find a free flow expression with your arms- gently connecting your breath with the movement of your body. Feel the energy you have created circulate throughout your body- finding connection to yourself and those around you.

“What if the true art of healing isn't in fixing the broken things, but in holding space or vibration in thought that is so attuned to wholeness, that whatever enters that field of awareness is restored. Even that which appears to be broken.” -Alison Wilburn

Revolved twist

Samastitahi- I invite you to draw the palms together at heart center if that feels comfortable for you. Maybe rub your palms together to allow the heat to radiate. If it feels okay, place those palms over your heart. “The past is over and done and has no power over me. I can begin to be free in this moment. Today's thoughts create my future- I am in charge. I now take my own power back. I am safe and I am free.”-Louise Hay

Choose in this moment to live the life you've always dreamed. In this moment, create more space for your light, your joy, your heart.

I invite you to take three breaths here to unite our community, to unite our practice.

Sun Salutation A- inhale- mountain pose- extend your energy and intention high to the sky- offer it up, exhale-backbend- allow your heart to shine bright, inhale-mountain pose, exhale-forward fold, inhale-halfway lift, exhale-squat and curl (repeat as many times as you'd like, inviting students to explore their own expression)

Child's pose

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate, our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, talented, and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? As we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.” -Marianne Williamson

Explore with taking a deep full inhale and an open mouth exhale. Continue to breathe in and out in your own authentic way. Breathe here, slowing everything down. Maybe notice the quality of your breath. Check in with how you are feeling in this moment. I invite you to listen to the sound of your breath and feel the support of the earth beneath you.

## **Sun B**

(slow, intentional, mindful movements to allow students to notice the sensations and transitions)

R leg high, low lunge to crescent moon

Plant L palm, on the inhale I invite you to extend your R arm high

Plant both palms

Warrior II

Reverse Warrior

Windmill arms down- table top- cat/cows

(Switch sides)

Supta Baddha Konasana- find a shape that feels comfortable in your body. Know that you can use any props to increase your comfort. Perhaps you would like to explore with placing blocks or blankets underneath the knees for added support. Feel free to extend your legs out away from you if that feels better in your body.

“The most powerful relationship you will ever have is the relationship with yourself. It’s in the quiet space where your inner light shines bright. It’s amazing what you notice when you’re quiet enough to hear.” Inhale, Exhale. Softly, this is your body and your practice, you always have a choice.

Come to standing on knees for a heart opening flow. Allow the palms to come to heart center.

“There is a crack. A crack in everything. That is how the light gets in.” -Leonard Cohen

Inhale arms up in your own time, exhale arms can come through heart center. Take this at your pace, connecting breath to movement. Feel free to bring this exercise to an end whenever you are ready.

Slide forward on to the belly- Cobra pose

Bow

Camel

Supported Bridge- placing a block underneath the sacrum if that that feels okay for you. Mindful inhales, mindful exhales.

Remove block whenever ready

Hug the body in, one final moment of gratitude. Taking the time to honor you, to honor your practice. To honor this time that you have dedicated completely to you.

Savasana- feel free to find a final resting posture that feels safe and comfortable in your body. There is no exact way to rest and it is important find a shape, posture, or technique that helps you feel safe and supported. You can lie on your back, find a fetal position, or stay seated if that feels better for you. Take the time here to explore the needs of your body. We spend so much of our day neglecting the needs of our bodies. It is a powerful process to listen to what our body needs and respond. Listen and respond. Listen and respond. Allow the sensations of your body to meet the strength of your breath.

You can explore with placing hands on the belly to focus on your mindful breath. You can take a scan of your body, finding an anchor and support- connecting to the energy of the earth beneath you. You can bend the knees, sit against the wall, find a seated meditation, or even take legs up the wall pose.

If you prefer, you can explore with face down relaxation, using a blanket as support. Or child's pose is always an option for you. Find a shape that authentically resonates with you.

"Most of my life has been spent trying to shrink myself. Trying to become smaller. Quieter. Less sensitive. Less opinionated. Less needy. *Less me*. Because I didn't want to be a burden. I didn't want to be too much or push people away. I wanted people to like me. I wanted to be cared for and valued. I wanted to be wanted. So for years, I sacrificed myself for the sake of making other people happy. And for years, *I suffered*. But I'm tired of suffering, and I'm done shrinking. It's not my job to change who I am in order to become someone else's idea of a worthwhile human being. *I am* worthwhile. Not because other people think I am, but because I exist, and therefore I matter. My thoughts matter. My feelings matter. My voice matters. And with or without anyone's permission or approval, I will continue to be who I am and speak my truth. Even if it makes people angry. Even if it makes them uncomfortable. Even if they choose to leave. I refuse to shrink. I choose to take up space. I choose to honor my feelings. I choose to give myself permission to get my needs met. I choose to make self-care a priority. *I choose me*."

— Daniell Koepke

As it feels right, start to draw the awareness back in. Maybe wiggling out your fingers and circling out your wrists, wiggling out the toe and circling out the ankles. Gently bring the sensations and awareness back into your body. At your own pace, feel free to meet me in a seated position.

I invite you to bring the heels of your palms drawing the pinkies and thumbs together, allowing the fingers to blossom open like a lotus. The lotus flower blooms on the surface of the water, with

its roots deep below the mud- making it a symbol for light emerging from darkness. You represent this beautiful light.

If you'd like, bring your palms to your heart. Hands at your heart, may we live our lives compassionately, hands at your mouth, may we speak words of truth and of kindness, and hands at your third eye center, may we see beauty in all things. Bowing forward to seal our practice, to seal the magic we created in the room. The light in me always honors the light in you. Namaste.