

Excerpted from:

Taylor, M. *Harvesting the Full Potential of Group Yoga Therapy Classes*, Intl J of Yoga Therapy, 16, 2006, 33-37.

Curriculum Design

The structure of group yoga therapy classes varies by lineage and experience of the therapist. These suggestions may be standard for some traditions and if so, skip ahead to the next section. For others these suggestions invite reflection and challenge the reader to evaluate their own assumptions. Basic to all group process is the principle that changing the structure of group sessions shifts the process that occurs during the classes.

The key component in these suggestions is the addition of a more participatory role for the students, shifting from a relatively passive theater style with students following the directions of the therapist as they all move through the therapist-designed curriculum. As co-inquirers, if the students are given a larger role in the class, then a host of benefits can be appreciated by both the students and the therapist. This was a feature missing from the traditional back schools and an aspect that participants highlighted as being empowering in our study. The art of this process is sustaining balance between the need for structure and security on the one hand, and the flexibility and opportunity to adapt as the groups' needs change. The following is a list of suggestions to consider implementing to maximize the creative healing opportunity of a group experience. While these are based on the modern action research theory of collaborative inquiry (Hearon & Reason, 1997), the underlying worldview upon which this form of research was developed is that of a participatory, integral (yogic) philosophy. That philosophy holds that learning occurs in multiple ways, but to be most transformative must have a participatory experience and actionable skills as outcomes.

Curriculum Agenda: Rather than presuming you know what the students need to explore, in the first class give the group a list of related topics/themes and then ask them to brainstorm and determine what, as a group, they are most interested in exploring (stress management, concentration, emotional/spiritual issues and how they impact their health challenge, etc.). The opportunity to be heard is empowering for them and the themes they choose can be surprising and informative for the therapist. Surprisingly in our study the group had very little interest in anatomy or pathology, but wanted a fair amount of time committed to exploring how spirituality, emotions and relationships affect their pain.

Opportunities for Feedback: Beyond the usual benefits of a check-in process putting in opportunities for students to briefly share their experiences/insights also allows others to learn or have their perspective supported or challenged neither of which is found in most traditional environments. Typically a few minutes at the beginning for a check-in and then again toward the close of the class works well. There is no discussion and sharing is limited to brief statements of experience by who ever feels compelled to share or be heard in an environment of supportive listening. Be sure to encourage a variety of mediums beyond words to include drawings, poems, or music.

Off the Mat Correlates: Provide specific examples throughout classes of how the activities (asanas, pranayama, awareness/focus, etc.) correlate to everyday activities to generate a full-time process of discovery. Assigning several areas in daily life to explore at the close of class offers a concrete point of focus and will yield fascinating sharing at the opening of the next class where both the therapist and students learn from other's lived experience.

Include an Individual Session: One insight we discovered in our group process was that there is a tendency to dichotomize programming into either private, one on one or a group process. Our group felt that their experience of having both an individual session of instruction and the group experience brought a valuable third programming alternative into play. In your next group offering consider pricing the program to include one private session for each student. Individual tailoring of activities and the increased depth of relationship between the therapist and student is known to increase participation levels at home and achieve student goals in conditions involving chronic pain (Cameron, 1996). The experience can be deepened further if a member of the student's social

support network is invited to observe as this provides better understanding and support at home for the new behaviors being learned (1996).

Set Measurable Goals: Have the students write out measurable goals at the beginning, and allow them to modify them mid-way if it is a series of classes. This practice will increase focus and intention and has been shown to increase follow-up away from class (Kerssens, et al., 1999).