

# Research

## Yoga Communities and Eating Disorders: Creating Safe Space for Positive Embodiment

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### Abstract

With adequate education and guidance, yoga communities, as part of the therapeutic landscape in the 21st century, can play a significant role promoting positive embodiment for those with, and at-risk for, eating disorders (EDs). To do this, yoga teachers need to know how to create a body-positive community and be able to recognize and respond to those at risk and struggling with EDs in their communities. In order to address yoga teaching methods associated with EDs and ED risk, broader conceptual approaches and specific practices associated with positive embodiment are offered. These include the broader conceptual approaches of: intentional inclusion and acceptance, experiential emphasis, supporting positive embodiment and inquiry. Studio pragmatics are also detailed as related to the body, breath, emotions, and community. Assessment, referral, and community engagement are also addressed.

### Introduction

As part of the therapeutic landscape in the 21st century, yoga communities can play a significant role promoting positive embodiment for those with, and at-risk for, eating disorders (EDs). Research suggests that yoga may be beneficial in the prevention and treatment of eating disorders (Carei, Fyfe-Johnson, Breuner, & Brown, 2010; Cook-Cottone, & Scime, 2006; Hall, Ofei-Tenkorang, Machan & Gordon, 2016; Klein & Cook-Cottone, 2013; Dale et al., 2009; Mahlo & Tiggeman, 2016; McIver, McGartland, & O'Halloran, 2009; Pacanowski, Dier, Crosby, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2016; Scime & Cook-Cottone, 2008). The studies reviewed and describe within this manuscript contain varying results with much to be sorted out, such as: dosage (i.e., duration and frequency of yoga), delivery method (e.g., group vs. individual), participants (e.g., clinical populations, those at-risk, body dissatisfied), style of

yoga (e.g., Hatha, Vinyasa, Viniyoga, Iyengar, Ashtanga), and added intervention content (e.g., psychoeducational or therapeutic content). In general, studies using yoga as an intervention with patients with clinical EDs and higher dosages of yoga (> 45 min/week) have seen decreased ED behaviors and correlates (Klein & Cook-Cottone, 2013). When effectively offered, yoga has been shown to be a particularly useful active, experiential practice for teaching emotional regulation (Menezes et al., 2015). Despite the need for additional research, doctors, psychologists and social workers have expressed feeling confident in recommending the discipline of yoga to those with EDs (Frisch, Herzog & Franko, 2006). Accordingly, yoga studios are seeing a documented increase in the number of people with EDs in their classes (Valera, Ruiz, Valdespino, & Visioli, 2014; Neumark-Sztainer, Eisenberg, Wall, & Loth, 2011). It is currently unclear whether these individuals are participating in yoga as an expression of their ED or as a safe space to explore their relationship with their bodies. We do know that their presence signals a need for yoga teachers to think about how they create communities dedicated to positive embodiment.

Positive embodiment is the ability to sense and feel through the body in the present moment. *Thinking about the body* is replaced with practices that help to *experience the body*. The study of the perceptions and the primacy of embodiment has a long history (Cook-Cottone, 2016; Svenaeus, 2013; Merleau-Ponty, 1945). Anthropologists have coined the term embodied space as a model for how the human body interacts with the world to craft a sense of place and belonging. Embodied space is defined as “a location where human experience and consciousness takes on a human and material form” (see Low, 2003, p. 9). The yoga studio is an embodied space with the potential to positively affect the experience of the body, wherein participants can embrace, explore and unravel their own relationship to the body.

Yoga teachers are often natural and gifted healers who draw on their own experience, charisma, intuition, and a wealth of counter-culture knowledge. They are not, nor are they expected to be, mental health experts. Without specific training it can be difficult to see that the thin student who attends class twice a day, or the large student who hopes to be invisible in the back of class are really hoping yoga can relieve the relentless belief that they will never measure up. Yoga teachers need to be able to recognize and respond to community members at risk. This can be difficult. Due to the stigma of mental illness, up to 80% of those who suffer may feel embarrassed, ashamed and secretive about their condition (Byrne, 2000; Clement, et al., 2015). Further, those with EDs spend incredible energy to hide their behaviors (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). For those struggling with EDs, practices ordinarily considered “healthy” easily become a facade that disguises the pursuit of perfection (Roff, 2014). The implications are serious, as exercise such as yoga can be both a pathway to healing and a manifestation of pathological ED behavior (Calogero & Pedrotty, 2004). To illustrate, individuals with anorexia nervosa (AN) limit the intake of food and water as their primary method of manipulating the body (APA, 2013). Add a vigorous yoga practice in a heated room and the already dehydrated and malnourished individual can experience irritation, headaches, muscle cramps, and low blood pressure that may cause them to pass out, suffer with seizures or experience heart failure (see Smink, van Hoeken, & Hoek, 2013).

As learning is inherently social, the yoga studio can be conceptualized as a space that actively participates in defining the unspoken rules and regulations of relating to our bodies and ourselves. The yoga studio, in effect, becomes a space where individuals who are concerned with the body as a site of transformation can find new ways and methods to encounter themselves (Heyes, 2007). They are communities of practice where individuals come together not only to enhance their skills of embodiment (Davies, 2013; Douglass & Bottrill, 2016), but to learn how to live more peaceful, easeful lives (Satchidananda, 2001). As interdisciplinary conductors of spaces that balance support, self-evaluation, reflection and interaction; yoga teachers can create safe, embodied spaces that respect bodily diversity and the invisible wounds of those who come into their communities, thereby fostering physical, mental, and spiritual growth.

### **The Disordered Experience of the Body**

The culturally normalized discontent with one's body image in Euro-American societies has led to increased acceptance of dieting, exercise, and other body modifications (Ethan,

Basch, Hillyer, Berdnik, & Huynh, 2016; Fiske, Fallon, Blissmer, & Redding, 2014). In this context, many down-play ED behaviors as a choice. They are not. For those with AN, bulimia nervosa (BN), and binge eating disorder (BED), genetic, biological, and psychological factors coalesce to create a life-interfering, relentless fixation with food and a distorted relationship with the body (APA, 2013). There is a tendency to judge, ignore, and disconnect from one's body, a sense of loss of control over eating, and failure to respond effectively to internal cues of hunger and satiety (Cook-Cottone, 2015a). Often those with EDs have difficulty processing experiences and emotions, such as frustration, boredom, and anger (Cowdrey & Park, 2012; Hayes, Wilson, Gifford, Follette, & Strosahl, 1996). Those with EDs can show cognitive inflexibility, poor interoceptive awareness, negative affect, and self-objectification (Cook-Cottone, 2016a; Espeset et al., 2011; Keel & Forney, 2013; Tiggemann & Williams, 2012; Trace, Baker, Peñas-Lledó, & Bulik, 2013). Their bodies, food, and eating become the sole foci of once vibrant lives (APA, 2013). Especially relevant to yoga, the individual is often “unwilling to remain in contact with... private experiences (e.g., body sensations, emotions, thoughts, memories, behavioral predispositions) and take steps to alter the form and frequency of these events and the contexts that occasion them” (Hayes et al., 1996, p. 1155; see <http://www.apa.org/topics/eating/> for more information).

Individuals suffering with EDs are uniquely vulnerable to socio-cultural influences and expectations (Cook-Cottone 2016a). Fortunately, making space for individuals who have EDs is likely to positively impact body image for everyone at the yoga studio. Environments that encourage positive embodiment can serve as a centripetal force that draws the individual to experience themselves fully in the present moment (Cook-Cottone, 2016a). Conversely, environmental factors (such as mirrors, competition, and an emphasis on the look of the body in postures) can increase these individuals' risk and pathological thoughts, encouraging them to distance themselves from the present moment through their behaviors (Cook-Cottone, 2016a). The challenge is how to encourage individuals to feel safe enough to explore their own body in new ways.

### **Creating a Safe Space for Positive Embodiment**

The self is crafted in community. While there is an inner dynamic of emotions and thoughts, we enact these ideas with feedback from the complex dynamics that are an integral part of the communities we participate in (Cook-Cottone, 2006, 2015a, 2015b). How individuals perceive and experience their bodies involves an ongoing interaction among the inner (body, emotions and thoughts) and outer aspects of self (family, community and culture) (Cook-

Cottone, 2006; 2015a, 2015b; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). A person is neither the sole author of his or her identity, nor solely the construction of cultural and community discourses and roles. As part of the therapeutic landscape in the 21st century, yoga communities play a significant role promoting positive embodiment. While the philosophical texts upon which yoga is based claim that the body is only of tangential use in finding freedom, many of the yoga communities of today are focused on reshaping their bodies through diet, yoga postures and breathing practices. In yoga communities, the focus on the body lives alongside a narrative that yearns for mental freedom, a community of support (*sangha*) and an ecumenical spirituality that provides a context of meaning for embodiment. The promise of physical and mental wellness through transformational narratives and embodiment practices makes the yoga studio an increasingly attractive to individuals with EDs, who find themselves enticed by the promise of reshaping their identity and body in a community dedicated to the pursuit of wellness.

#### *Intentional Inclusion and Acceptance*

There is evidence that individuals attending yoga classes may be at greater risk than the general population for engaging in ED behaviors (Neumark-Sztainer, Eisenberg, Wall, & Loth, 2011). Note, there is so much more for researchers to sort out. To illustrate, the Neumark-Sztainer et al., (2011) study did not differentiate between yoga and Pilates and the link for risk was only observed among young men and not women. In practice, leaders in yoga communities across North America have already begun to speak up about what they feel is a genuine lack of acceptance of body types and difference. This is evidenced in the successful creation of such organizations as the *Yoga and Body Image Collation* and Dianne Bondy's *Yoga for All*. These organizations are not trying to treat mental illness, rather they have the genuine hope of making yoga truly accessible and welcoming to all body types. As individuals nourish themselves with wellness practices, their experience becomes dissonant to the narrative of the need "to improve," defend or explain themselves. This desire is also expressed in institutions of higher education, where marginalized populations have felt a need for their own spaces to "protect themselves from the 'insincere narratives' of a predominantly white" group (Brown & Mangan, 2016, p. A6); a space where no one is marginalized as less than, better than, or more ideal than others.

Body-positive communities do not call for participants to change who they are, but they do call for communities to adapt and nourish all who are present. Body positive spaces are messy; they are places where race, class, gender, and sexuality intersect with one's spirituality. In body-positive

spaces, participants are able to discuss how and why they do not feel welcome. These are spaces where participants are as welcome to feel angry, sad, and frustrated as they are peaceful, kind and loving. Having conversations that are real, and based in acceptance of difference, are difficult in yoga communities, whose therapeutic landscapes promise an experience that is purified, accepted, and "good." Despite the philosophical yearning for unity that many yoga communities espouse, the truth is that as yoga's popularity grows there is a real split about who is and is not welcome in healing spaces. The predominance of thin white, seemingly controlled bodies that are present in most yoga classes expresses an implicit bias that makes the space unwelcoming for the diversity of individuals attracted to yoga's ability to help us feel positively embodied. In spaces that are optional, such as yoga studios, individuals who do not feel comfortable will simply not come back. To be sure, absence of certain types of bodies signals that studios are struggling to convey a consistent welcoming message across body types.

#### *Experiential Emphasis*

Yoga is wholly experiential in its essence. The practice of yoga offers the possibility of embodiment within a broad range and variability of breath, body, movement, emotion, and connection. Intended to help stop the turning of the mind, yoga provides the opportunity for full, physical presence in the here and now. In this way, yoga offers a variety of experiences, styles, and spaces in which being fat, thin, happy or angry are all welcome expressions of the human experience. For example, some participants may be attracted to athletic yoga classes in which they are learning to understand their relation to endurance and strength, while others may be attracted to a calm and slow yoga practice as a way to explore their relationship with letting go, and exploring whether it truly is safe to relax. Conversely, yoga is not a practice of avoidance, judgment, suppression, or transformation to an idealized way of being. Ineffectively, yoga studios often implicitly promise that they will be able to shift negative thoughts and feelings into positive ones (a concept known as *pradipikshabhavanan*). In such spaces, the acceptance of the normal range and complexity of human emotions is replaced with an idealized aspiration to stay centered, balanced, and calm in all situations. This false promise aligns with a common ED ideation, as those who struggle seek a romanticized emotional perfection free of internal and external conflict (Cook-Cottone, 2015; Crockett, Myhre, & Rokke, 2015; Evers, MarijnStok, & de Ridder, 2010; Guarda, Schreyer, Boersma, Tamashiro, & Moran, 2015).

#### *Positive Embodiment*

Positive embodiment is sensing and feeling through the

body in the present moment with a suspension of judgment, resistance, and avoidance. Emphasizing the importance of a body-positive culture can play an important role in decreasing the risk for EDs and in contributing to positive ED outcomes (Cook-Cottone, 2016; Tylka, 2012; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). Yoga communities can have an incredibly important role to play in helping their members experience positive embodiment as they set cultural norms that prioritize the felt sense of the body (as powerful, agile, strong, flexible, healthy) over a sexualized and restrictive norm of the “good” body (as thin, white, heterosexual and docile). This includes promotion of: a broad and diverse conceptualization of beauty, body connectedness, comfort, personal agency, use of body signals to make decisions, and attuned self-care (Hall et al., 2016; Piran, 2016; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015)—all natural fits for the yoga community.

### *Inquiry*

The living, embodied spaces of yoga studios are important as they allow for the flourishing of counter-narratives on health and healing that shift the meaning individuals make of the body (Douglass & Tiwari, 2006). These narratives are important for those who are seeking a positive relationship with their body as they can help to re-envision care and embodiment of the self. Given the depth and gravity of this charge, we must find a way to develop disciplined inquiry in our daily lives; this includes questioning the safety of our shared practices for everyone in our communities. Each practice delivered to students needs to be delivered with a solid understanding of the “why?” and the efficacy. For example, if we offer classes on fasting and cleanses it is imperative that the practices we recommend be based in research so that we do not unwittingly foster pop-psychology concepts of the body as “toxic” or in need of “purification.” While conceptions of the body as “in need of internal cleaning” have no basis in Western medical science, they do reference attitudes that are part of North America's puritanical culture which rests, in part, on ideas of self-denial and discipline. Cleansing practices do have deep roots within yogic theory and its associated medical science, Ayurveda. When integrating these ideas the yoga teacher can contextualize cleansing as a therapeutic, indigenous theory and practice. It is important to clarify that Ayurvedic theories of cleansing typically involve mono-fasts of kitchari (beans and rice), rather than a focus on juices or raw foods, which would be aggravating to vata-based conditions such as EDs. When the objective of the yoga teacher is health promotion it is imperative that the message be tailored to the person in need of healing, including taking into consideration such variables as eating disorders.

### **Studio Pragmatics**

Leaders of yoga studios need to be clear in articulating the values they desire to promote. The culture created is important as it contributes to how we think about our bodies, what we do with our bodies, and the bodies who feel welcome in our spaces. Yoga communities challenge us to expand our vision of what embodiment means, and how it can be a positive experience for one's self as well as the larger community. A successfully embodied yoga space is one where individuals work in conjunction with the community, inventing different possibilities for being embodied. Body-positive spaces are places where individuals can make mistakes and will not be reprimanded, but will be challenged in ways that open their perspectives to wider, more inclusive, audiences. For example, yoga teachers can simply find moments of goodwill that people experience towards their body and expand on these moments through the language used, the images in their studios, the books and merchandise sold and the presence or absence of mirrors in the studio (see Table 1).

Studio owners and yoga teachers who are interested in creating a studio focused on positive embodiment may still need to identify and refer those with EDs for help outside of their communities. To do this, have an updated list of treatment options and local mental health professionals, medical doctors, and nutritionists who specialize in EDs. Studio owners can also refer individuals to the Eating Attitudes Test-26 online anonymous assessment (<http://www.eat-26.com/>). This online test is one of the most widely used standardized self-report measures of symptoms and concerns characteristic of EDs (Garner et al., 1982) and may help individuals begin to identify a negative pattern of relating to one's body. Note, other risk factors include: overvaluation of appearance, body dissatisfaction, perceived pressure to be thin, drive for thinness, dieting, negative affect, and lack of family support (Hall et al., 2016; Stice, 2016). Yoga teachers can feel confident in reaching out to local organizations, professionals and trained psychologists with their questions and concerns about EDs. Together we can create a dedication to creating communities of wellness that support positive embodiment.

### **Conclusion**

Yoga communities often mirror the socio-economic, racial and mental health challenges that exist in the wider culture. What yoga has that so many people are seeking is a method for deeply engaging in the present moment. In the space of a yoga class, the distractions of politics, economics and the digital age recede. One is able, for a brief moment, to sim-

Area for Positive Embodiment	Examples of Studio Based Practices
<p><b>Body &amp; Breath</b>                      The body as a positive tool, a source of pleasure, and strength. The body is seen as a positive force with an emphasis on what it can do rather than what it looks like.</p>	<p>Use language that focuses on positive embodiment and present moment experience.</p> <p>Encourage interoceptive awareness by guiding students to notice body sensations in poses and transitions.</p> <p>Instruct to facilitate connection with the body, not correction of the body.</p> <p>Encourage <i>noticing and inquiry</i> associated with physical, embodied experience, rather than the need to fix, correct, or alter the size or shape of the body.</p> <p>Engage in touch, assisting, and partner work in an open manner inviting inquiry and choice. Emphasize personal connection with self as a priority. Offer safe ways to both verbally and nonverbally opt in or out of touch/assisting/partnering for each class honoring personal choice and empowerment above studio or style of practice protocols.</p> <p>Offer choices in each pose with an equal emphasis on accommodations and expansion of poses.</p> <p>Instruct to the journey and lesson inherent in each pose, above the final form.</p> <p>Avoid use of mirrors, so the student can focus on the felt sensations rather than the look of their body/form.</p> <p>Assure that photos and artwork reflect the wide variety of human forms and beauty.</p> <p>Encourage a wide range of body types to attend and teach classes.</p> <p>When programs include changes in nutritional behavior consult and/or collaborate with a nutritionist (e.g., fasting, cleanses, etc.).</p> <p>When selling merchandise, include a wide range of sizes for all bodies.</p> <p>Place warning signs of EDs in the bathroom, with referral information.</p> <p>Teach to feeling it all. Acknowledge and accept a wide range of emotions.</p> <p>Model compassion for the human range of emotions.</p>
<p><b>Emotion</b>                      Creating space for the development of compassion for others and one's self. As emotions are experienced through the body, body positive spaces allow for a range of emotions rather than a restriction of them.</p>	<p>Teach to an awareness of feelings as embodied, that arise and pass during practice.</p> <p>Instruct to breath and physical grounding to support emotional coping when students present as triggered in class.</p> <p>Provide ongoing permission for students to choose child's pose or a restorative pose and experience emotions on their own terms.</p> <p>Set clear boundaries.</p>
<p><b>Thought</b>                      Creating space to think through new ideas, be in inquiry, and construct more powerful narratives.</p>	<p>Instruct students to notice their inner dialogue and challenge the harsh inner critic while cultivating self-compassion, positive mantra, and present moment experience.</p> <p>Hold forums for exploring ideas of being embodied in community.</p> <p>Welcome challenging ideas.</p> <p>Provide workshops on positive embodiment.</p> <p>Deliver trainings on the language used in classes. Does the language distance the practitioners from their own experience of the body?</p> <p>Offer trainings for teachers on positive embodiment.</p>
<p><b>Community</b>                      Creating a body positive and welcoming community through inclusion and a diversity of ideas and people.</p>	<p>Promote diversity of bodies in literature and marketing materials.</p> <p>Engage in outreach that specifically is welcoming to a range of individuals.</p> <p>Practice being a "no negative body talk" community (including comments about body shape and size as well as yoga ability and skills).</p> <p>Shut down diet and weight talk.</p> <p>Prioritize diversity when hiring teachers.</p> <p>Commit to privately asking students if they are okay when you see the warning signs of EDs. Be ready to provide a referral list and follow up.</p> <p>Collaborate with local ED treatment providers for consultation and support.</p> <p>Develop a board consisting of directors of mental health facilities, ED clinics, researchers, activists and civic leaders to help build stronger, more resilient communities and effectively respond to challenges.</p>

**Table 1. Creating a Positively Embodied Studio**

ply embody themselves in the present moment. Yoga communities can be safe spaces where individuals can dedicate time to get to know themselves, their limitations and their strengths. They can be positive spaces where people explore, through the body, not only ways of being with one's self, but ways of relating to others in community. Those who run yoga studios can be central to the creation of a thriving yoga community that makes positive embodiment a priority. As those with EDs are increasingly finding their way into yoga communities, it is imperative to understand how to find ways to welcome their presence, nourish their journey and understand the limitations of what yoga can offer. Their presence asks us to step up, to be leaders, and to find ways to truly welcome and integrate those who struggle with embodiment.

Yoga teachers are valuable precisely because they give people their time and connect from the heart. Unregulated by the government and with professional standards still a contested part of the discipline, yoga teachers can and do provide what so many individuals in North America desire—authenticity, acceptance, inclusion, mutual respect, and a community that allows for exploration and reflection. Widening these communities necessitates finding new ways to be together; we need each other to truly serve the diverse communities in which we participate. Yoga was not, nor was it ever intended to be, a panacea for EDs or any mental illness (Douglass & Tiwari, 2006). Yoga communities offer all of us, including those with EDs, embodied spaces that have the potential to encourage and develop a positive relationship with one's body. The skills learned from practicing positive embodiment have the potential to teach individuals new methods of interacting with the wider world, because we often treat others the way we treat our own bodies.

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