

Perspective

The Future of Yoga Therapy and the Role of Standardization

Ginger Garner, MPT, ATC, E-RYT

Founder and Executive Director of Professional Yoga Therapy Studies

Thanks to IAYT, Yoga therapists have a forum where we can find one another, collaborate, research, educate the public, and have a professional association to call home. IAYT's mission is to establish Yoga as a recognized and respected therapy. I fully support and believe in IAYT's mission. I am a practitioner of Yoga therapy, combining physical therapy, Yoga, and Ayurveda to specialize in women's health, chronic pain, and orthopedic injuries, and am the founder and director of a Yoga therapist training program. Having well-familiarized myself with the definitions of Yoga therapy from each of the current Yoga therapy programs in the U.S., and having followed the discussions about standards in Yoga therapy on the *Integrator Blog* (theintegratorblog.com) and in IAYT's publications, I humbly offer what I believe would be a positive step in the future of the recognition of Yoga therapy as a healing therapeutic discipline in the U.S.

What is Yoga Therapy, and Who is a Yoga Therapist?

IAYT has a well-defined mission, but concerns about the definition of Yoga therapy itself have arisen during the infancy and growth of Yoga therapy in the U.S. What is Yoga therapy? Who is a Yoga therapist? How do we ensure that Yoga therapists are appropriately trained to be the authority and disseminator of Yoga as a healing therapy in the United States?

As Yoga therapists, we face the challenges of professionally identifying ourselves and helping the public identify who we are as Yoga therapists. Yoga therapy is a young profession and very few people in the general public are aware of Yoga as a method of therapy. Furthermore, there is argument within our own profession of Yoga therapy about whether Yoga therapy should be considered a healthcare profession.

Yoga Therapy is a Healthcare Profession

Although many may argue that Yoga therapy is not a healthcare profession, I must disagree. I do not believe a Yoga therapist, or anyone who labels themselves as a Yoga therapist, can safely teach an *āsana* or *prānāyāma* without knowing the potentially damaging effects it could have on someone who has a specific disability or disease. Knowing the contraindications for *āsana* and *prānāyāma* in the treatment of specific diseases, disabilities, or disorders requires a thorough, working knowledge of anatomy, physiology, and pathophysiology. All healthcare professionals must embark on a journey of acquiring this knowledge in order to treat disorders, disabilities, and diseases, and I do not think Yoga therapists should or can be excluded from this work. The study of anatomy, physiology, and pathophysiology is one of the hallmarks of earning one's degree or license as a healthcare professional. There is a huge injury potential in teaching Yoga as therapy or teaching Yoga in any form. Even something as seemingly simple as teaching a breathing exercise can be very hazardous if not pursued carefully, with a full knowledge of the respiratory system and its synergistic and energetic relationships with other systems. Injury or disease further complicates the affected systems. A course of safe therapy must be carefully selected to avoid exacerbating the original diagnosis or potentially causing additional or new injury.

If a client comes to you for a Yoga therapy session, will you as a "Yoga therapist" know how to ask that person about the specific illnesses that would contraindicate bending forward in *uttānāsana* or attempting *bhastrikā*? As a Yoga therapist, would you know how to screen your patient or client for signs of depression or osteoporosis? What would be the proper course of action if someone came in for a Yoga therapy session with a cervical spine fusion and wanted a comprehensive Yoga program? Would you know how to

speaking professionally with his or her healthcare provider, be it a physician, surgeon, or physical therapist?

If you could answer any of these questions, congratulations and well done. As a Yoga therapist you are also a healthcare provider in the truest sense—responsibly able to recognize your scope of practice, your abilities and limitations as a Yoga therapist, and able to safely prescribe (by individualizing and not cookbook) a course of Yoga therapy to improve a person's whole well-being and health based on his or her individual needs. If you could not answer those questions, my concern is magnified. Your Yoga therapy program should have prepared you to comprehensively answer those questions or educated you to realize that your scope of practice may preclude you from seeing that person without a consult from a physician or other therapist. I would go so far as to say that of the conditions I listed above, a well-trained Yoga therapist should be able to manage a well-thought-out Yoga therapy program. However, this cannot be guaranteed with the current system of Yoga therapy education in the U.S. As a result, Yoga therapy will not receive the respect it deserves and wants from Western healthcare practitioners until there is some standard for competence.

What is the Responsibility of the Yoga Therapist?

If Yoga therapists want to be recognized, then they must also accept the huge responsibility that comes with healing others. Other healthcare professionals must take oaths as a part of their licensing to “first do no harm” when administering therapy or treatments to another human being. This is a responsibility not to be taken lightly. There are many Yoga therapists already out there practicing and calling themselves Yoga therapists—hence, the birth of IAYT. But how do we know they are safely treating their clients? Yoga can heal, but also can harm if not practiced properly. In many cases, the elements of a Yoga therapy program that may heal a condition in one individual can also cause the same or create another condition in another individual. Again, the ability to think critically and differentially diagnose a condition is required to prescribe the right *āsana*, *prāṇāyāma*, or *mudra*, whether in an acute or chronic situation.

As Yoga therapists, we cannot have our cake and eat it too. This means, we cannot practice medicine without a license. We cannot wield the proverbial scalpel of *āsana*, *prāṇāyāma*, *mudra* and meditation—which have the potential for deep and longstanding physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual, energetic, and social transformation—without having

proper knowledge in the workings of our subject. In this case, the subject is the human body, mind, and spirit. Yoga therapy is a specialized healthcare profession that should be able to consider the whole person, energetic and physical anatomy alike. This unique approach gives it a more comprehensive, far-reaching potential than other healthcare professions have. As a Yoga therapist, we are taught to look at the person as a whole, so you cannot just ignore the fact that a patient or client cannot raise his or her arm overhead, and just treat his or her mental health issues. Or, you could not just treat a painful neck and headaches and ignore a broken spirit.

Yoga therapists must be able to screen their patient or client for systemic illnesses (a process called differential diagnosis) and recognize when a problem is outside their own scope of practice. Being a Yoga therapist does not mean we are replacing the role of the physician, physical therapist, psychologist, or Yoga teacher. Being a Yoga therapist does mean that you hold a specialized skill in being able to apply Yoga as therapy, and that you are able to realize, because of your training, when an outside referral or team approach is necessary. Being a Yoga therapist also means you are able to carry on a professional dialogue with any other healthcare professional who may be involved with caring for your patient or client.

We must accept the honest truth that we are, in fact, an integral part of the healthcare profession. If we are not, then we have no right treating clients as Yoga therapists, and we open ourselves up to huge liabilities and even criminal lawsuits for practicing medicine without a license. In addition, we will have no grounds for establishing a rapport or gaining respect from the current healthcare profession in America and the West today. If we cannot speak their language, the language of modern medicine, then we are failing to incorporate the vast and very beneficial amount of modern technology and medicine that saves lives everyday. Even in ancient Ayurveda, the benefit of surgery was recognized. We must embrace the best of the ancient medicine of the East and the modern medicine of the West. I believe that the modern Yoga therapists of the future will stand up to this challenge, so that we will be able to apply the ancient art and science of Yoga as therapy while embracing modern technology and research.

Training Standards

To protect therapists as well as the client, training standards and oversight are needed, lest litigation relegate the entire practice of Yoga therapy into secrecy. This means that if

we do not step up to the responsibility of what we are doing (treating the human body and mind with Yoga as therapy) and create some professional standardization for Yoga therapist training, there will eventually be accusations from the public and other healthcare professions, charging us to declare our intentions and delineate our exact scope of practice.

We do not have to and should not abandon our current methods of Yoga therapy training in the United States to establish “professional schools.” There are some wonderfully gifted Yoga therapists in this country who have beautiful rapport with the Western healthcare world and established referral sources. So, I am certainly not suggesting that all current methods of Yoga therapy training are inadequate. On the contrary, I am suggesting that the current Yoga therapy educators out there join together to help self-regulate and establish some standards of Yoga therapy practice for the future. The hard work put into Yoga therapy programs out there deserves formal recognition, but also formal evaluation.

Yoga therapy training would benefit from both curriculum and apprenticeship models. Curriculum models of education are primarily classroom-style environments where the teacher is the lecturer but does engage the student in an interactive learning model. However, there is little to no “hands on” learning in the actual working field when compared to the apprenticeship model. The apprenticeship model can include some classroom-style learning and structured levels of coursework as the curriculum model does, but the apprenticeship model primarily employs “on the job” training. The student observes and works onsite, mirroring the teacher and learning by doing.

Once a student has completed the requirements of a Yoga therapy school, they should be eligible to sit for a Yoga therapy board exam. There is a large part of Yoga that is experiential and not “testable” (perhaps some of the most difficult skills to acquire), for example, compassion, intuitive healing, and the multi-leveled nuances of Yogic evaluation; however the objective element cannot be ignored. For example, our knowledge of both Western and energy anatomy and physiology; the foundations of the *āsana*, *prāṇāyāma*, *mudra*, and *bandha*; concepts in Yogic philosophy and its history; and the pathophysiology of disorders we expect and will encounter as Yoga therapists can be measured for competency.

Necessary Steps

Necessary steps include defining the standards in Yoga therapy that are measurable, the standards Yoga therapy schools must meet in order for accreditation, the standards Yoga therapists will be tested on, and what measure and

method of continuing education should be required after graduation. This will require the creation of some type of Board of Yoga Therapy Examiners, and the submission of all Yoga therapy schools to creating recognized levels of credentialing for Yoga therapists. Like other healthcare professions, there should be a hierarchy of recognition—based on training levels within Yoga therapy programs and a Yoga therapist’s additional medical/educational training—that is easily interpreted by consumers and practitioners.

Will Professional Licensing Destroy the Yogic Tradition?

Some may argue that formal testing and licensing of the Yoga therapist goes against the very nature of the Yogic tradition. Although everyone has the power to interpret the meaning of Yoga in his or her own life, I do not think that the client of a Yoga therapist should be subject to questionable qualifications due to a Yoga therapist picking and choosing what he or she should learn.

The analogy of individual taste in interpreting good music has been used to describe the vast diversity of Yoga and its “inability” to be defined or standardized. I must disagree with this comparison. Everyone is entitled to his or her own opinion about what kind of music to enjoy. However, Yoga therapy is not as simple as jazz versus classical. Listening to a piece of music may be sweet to one person’s ears and unlistenable to another person’s—but it does not render that person permanently disabled in some way. However, choosing the application of one *āsana* over another could substantially damage a person’s health. This is the reality of Yoga therapy’s power.

IAYT’s Role

Now we arrive at the crux of the concern. What can IAYT do about the future of Yoga therapy in the United States? Reread IAYT’s mission and you will see that it clearly stands for and supports the global promotion and dissemination of Yoga therapy information and research. I think IAYT is a wonderful and much-needed organization. However, I do not believe its responsibility includes licensing and credentialing Yoga therapists in the U.S. and abroad. I believe the purity of IAYT’s mission should be honored and respected, and it should continue to carry out its *dharma* and not submit to becoming the “board of licensing,” if there is to be one, of Yoga therapy. I do believe, however, that

IAYT should have a strong voice in the development of Yoga therapy standards and that it can serve as a much needed facilitator during the development of such standards. IAYT is a guidepost that shines bright for us as Yoga therapists, and we should do all we can to protect and support it.

Ways to Contribute to IAYT's Mission

As Yoga therapists, you have a professional responsibility to aid in the growth of Yoga therapy. Supporting IAYT and its mission is the first step. Secondly, as directors of

Yoga therapy programs, organizations, certification programs, and colleges in the U.S. we are responsible for the future sound foundation (or not) of Yoga therapy. We are influencing whether Yoga therapy becomes a respected, recognized therapy. Let's do all we can to safeguard the public by thoroughly educating and testing our students, establishing a professional rapport and dialogue with the Western healthcare world, and graduating the most comprehensively-trained Yoga therapists today.

Direct correspondence to Ginger Garner at 405 Christina Court, Emerald Isle, NC 28594. Phone: 252-725-9758. info@livingwellstudio.com