



# TEACHING TRAUMA SENSITIVE YOGA

A PRACTICAL GUIDE

BRENDON ABRAM

Foreword by Mark Stephens, author of *Teaching Yoga*

Afterword by Margaret A. Howard, MFA, LCSW

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TO COLIN, THE SOLDIER WHO SET  
ME ON THIS PATH. YOU ARE MY  
INSPIRATION, YOU ARE MY MOTIVATION,  
AND YOU ARE MY HOPE.



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## FOREWORD BY MARK STEPHENS

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Polonius quipped that "brevity is the soul of wit." It can also be the heart of clarity, as we find in this succinct yet no less deeply insightful and practical book from Brendon Abram on teaching trauma-sensitive yoga.

When teaching workshops or trainings for yoga teachers, I often ask how many plan to teach prenatal yoga. Typically, about 10 percent of participants raise their hand. Then I ask how many plan to teach public classes, to which nearly everyone readily responds with an affirmative hand. My response is that everyone who teaches public yoga classes will be a prenatal teacher, if only because pregnant students will be in their classes, adding that it is therefore incumbent upon all public yoga teachers to have at least a basic knowledge of common conditions of pregnant students along with at least some understanding of relevant indications, contraindications, risks, and modifications by trimester and in postpartum reintegration.

It is no different with trauma. Trauma is an issue for at least one-third of people in modern society, and many students come to yoga classes with deeply internalized trauma. Yet trauma is rarely or only very obliquely addressed even among most of the very best yoga teacher training programs.

A couple years after I completed my first teacher training in 1995, I started a program to bring yoga into Los Angeles County juvenile institutions. While I had a comfortable basic knowledge of general principles, methods, and techniques for teaching postural yoga, I was utterly unprepared for what I experienced in teaching yoga to incarcerated youth at the height of the LA gang wars, this despite many years of working with gangs on the streets and in the same institutions. My young students were both

victims and victimizers, most with emotional issues rooted in early childhood abuse and abandonment and nearly all with a history of substance abuse (indeed, many were born addicted to cocaine). It was only with the guidance and support of dedicated clinical staff that I started to learn how to adapt yoga practices, including asana, pranayama, and meditation, to make yoga accessible and meaningful to these students. As we developed this project into Yoga Inside Foundation and expanded into hundreds of trauma-intensive settings across North America, we learned along the way that with each new setting and condition we had far more to learn.

Fortunately, we now have the considered and distilled experience, knowledge, and wisdom of Abram to offer practical guidance to those stepping into the intensity of serving students whose every breath, thought, and movement is affected by traumatic experience, including an increasing number with PTSD.

Abram seems to come to his work in writing about teaching trauma-sensitive yoga with a humble and light-hearted sense of being, but his insights arise from deep personal experience of trauma and its emotional, interpersonal, and social consequences. Abram is a thirty-year veteran of the Canadian Forces who served with the United Nations in El Salvador and NATO in Bosnia, places where the terrors of war and violent social conflict offered up daily traumatic events in the lives of the local population as well as those like Abram sent there to protect them.

Abram grew up with the difficulties of an alcoholic father and a mom who struggled with mental illness. He too became an alcoholic and before finding Alcoholics Anonymous was well on his way to perpetuating the cycle of suffering in his own family. With sobriety came a new lease on life, one informed by a personal understanding of what it is to suffer, and struggle, and then suffer and struggle some more. From this personal experience, he also became sensitive to the suffering of others, and he discovered yoga.

In the latter years of Abram's military career, when soldiers started coming back from Afghanistan, he saw the horrible effects that PTSD was having on them and their families. It struck deep to the bottom of his heart. There was one young soldier in particular, Colin—to whom he dedicated this book—in whom he took special interest. He taught Abram



a really important lesson: that we can never “fix” another person, but only (and inestimably importantly) show them the tools and help set the conditions for them to do their own work. Embracing this idea, and now into a personal yoga practice, Brendon expanded his knowledge of trauma and trauma-sensitive yoga through workshops with David Emerson and Daniel Libby as well as through collaboration with a student in one of his yoga classes who invited him to work with her to incorporate mindfulness into her clinical practice.

Through his devotion to this work, Brendon started teaching workshops on trauma-sensitive yoga, then wrote a study manual for these workshops, leading to the timely gift of this important book that should be read by every yoga teacher who cares about the overall health and well-being of his or her students.

Brendon fully appreciates that the diversity of students’ conditions and intentions invite teachers to offer appropriately individualized practices, all the more so when one’s students are living with trauma. Rather than prescribing a set approach to every student, a central theme of this book is that each unique student should feel safe and comfortable in doing yoga, further underlining the sensibility that yoga teachers are more guides and facilitators than authoritative sources of transmission. In providing guidance in this way, Abram gets and conveys that yoga teachers are playing a potentially vital role—a therapeutic role—in helping students to discover the truth of their own being, and with it deeper and lasting inner sources of living with a sense of inner peace and empowerment in their lives.

“Therapy” and “therapeutic” have strong medical connotations, causing much concern among yoga teacher and yoga therapy organizations when one mentions yoga and therapy together. To wit, the etymological root of *therapy*, the Greek *therapeuin*, means “minister to, treat medically,” but we also find the Greek term *therapeia*, “healing,” which does not necessarily involve a medical degree or license, especially as healing has the added meaning “to make whole.” We heal in many ways, potentially and hopefully restoring the wholeness of being that is present in our DNA and all too often disturbed by experiences on the path of life.

We also make choices in healing that can be distinguished from those that might be fully curative or medical in nature. A concept coined by

Tiramulai Krishnamacharya and popularized by his son T.K.V. Desikachar, *yoga chikitsa*, means “yoga therapy,” and is said to relate to all practices of yoga that help us cultivate wholeness in our lives. Wherever one is on the continuum, from deep trauma and suffering, to mild stress, to a sense of wholeness and healthy connection in life, we can engage with yoga therapy to heal, accept the intrinsic beauty and inviolable worth of ourselves, and share in a more fulfilled life.

This is part of the promise of teaching trauma-sensitive yoga. Deep bows to Abram for helping to show us the way.

—Mark Stephens, April 2018

*Mark Stephens is the author of four textbooks, Teaching Yoga, Yoga Sequencing, Yoga Adjustments, and Yoga Therapy.*

## PREFACE

**A**s a former military officer, I have observed firsthand the devastating effect that a trauma-related disorder such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can have on men, women, and their families. As a recovering alcoholic who grew up the “hard way,” I have some understanding of the suffering that comes with living with trauma. As a yoga teacher I have witnessed the remarkable benefits that the application of yogic principles and practices can achieve when employed in either a clinical setting or a public yoga studio. Over the last five years I have worked to apply what I learned from the teachings of David Emerson from the Trauma Center in Boston and Daniel Libby from the Veterans Yoga Project. Through this work, I have gained experience that has helped me turn theory into practice. It has not always been easy. I have made mistakes, misjudged people and situations, had to readjust my approach, or in some cases, start all over again. With each mistake came a valuable lesson. With each lesson came a deeper conviction that yoga can help those living with trauma.

The purpose of this book is to offer a practical guide for teaching, sharing, or practicing trauma-sensitive yoga. In it I hope to convey three important lessons that can be incorporated into any yoga offering. First, it is the basic principles of yoga that bring power to the practice. Breath, mindful movement, focused awareness, and acceptance of the present-moment experience are the foundation of any yoga offering.

Second, each person is a unique individual and will interpret the application of these principles based on their own worldview. There are many different perspectives about what yoga is and how it should be delivered. No single perspective is completely right for all of the people all of the time.