

## Working with Trauma: General Guidelines & Tools

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People process trauma and stress in many different ways. These guidelines and tools are generally recommended best practices but are not to be applied dogmatically. The most important tool to use is one's own observation and good listening skills. The student or client should guide the process and feel comfortable and safe to say when something doesn't feel right. Look, apply, assess and adapt to what you see and the client's/student's needs.

- Create a safe physical and emotional environment: minimize environmental triggers in the room and set ground rules for communication and interaction.
- Use somatic tools to experience the present moment. Activities such as breath awareness, movement, simple standing yoga poses and tuning into the five senses help to regulate the nervous system and develop a sense of safety and present moment awareness.
- Provide them with choices and use invitational language (e.g., “When you are ready...”, “Consider...”, “Notice...”) and give students/clients permission to accommodate, say “no” and to take space if necessary.
- Help them to take effective action: a common theme in trauma is a loss of control, so add opportunities for clients/students to practice self-efficacy.
- Support healthy life habits, self-care and routines (healthy food, sleep, exercise, time in nature) and social support as trauma can create disconnection from family and friends (isolation) and from one's own body (dissociation).
- Provide trauma-informed yoga classes with simple yoga sequences conducted as a group to: 1) connect to the present moment through the physical body, 2) create safety and predictability through a routine, 3) regulate the nervous system through slow, rhythmic breathing, 4) develop a sense of strength and physical control, 5) provide deep proprioceptive input and vestibular system stimulation to help regulate, and 6) provide social support through the shared experience of being in sync with other people.
- Observe the students and yourself to notice clues of distress: eyes, posture, activity level and other clues the body gives. It is very important to regulate yourself first.
- Use simple, descriptive, body-centered language. In a firm but loving voice, describe and normalize what you see and why you are doing what you're doing. For example, “It looks like your body is in a flight response. I will help you move through this.” “It looks like you are having a ‘storm...’”
- Be honest; if you're not calm, don't “fake it.” Better to say, “I'm a little afraid, too, but we will work this out together.”
- Apologize if you try something that doesn't work. Triggers are common and we often make mistakes in how to handle them.
- Provide consistent routine. Structure your client session and classes in a way that's predictable.

- Know when to refer. Other health issues (e.g., diabetes, etc.) can look like triggers/trauma.
- Know your own triggers, and if triggered, apply self-care practices and get help for yourself. Having your own counselor or therapist is recommended if you will be doing regular work with trauma survivors.

The mnemonic **P.A.C.E.** was created by Kathy Flaminio to help us remember the above guidelines with working with our students and clients:

**P – Predictability:** It is important to have a predictable routine – a beginning, middle and end – when working with all individuals. This provides a sense of safety and structure. When life is chaotic, it is helpful to know the routine; for example, saying before class, “We will start with a centering activity, experience an active sequence of movement/games and end with rest.” The pacing is also important. We don’t want movements to be too fast, causing an individual to “dissociate,” or too slow, which could cause flooding to occur. So as the leaders, we watch the group closely to determine the best pace.

**A – Attentive to Language:** When working with individuals who are processing trauma it is important that we pay attention to the language we are using, avoiding words like “push harder, relax, don’t move, buttocks, bottom, thighs,” and in some settings where there is a lot of cutting/self injury, perhaps not using “wrists.” Again, it depends on your setting and population. In settings where you might only see youth one time, it is best to stay more conservative with the words you use.

**C – Caring and Present Instructor:** “We know self-care is important, but do we realize how critical it is in our work?” When we show up present, centered and in our bodies, this is an intervention. In other words, our nervous system regulation greatly impacts those with whom we work. Taking time to breathe slowly and set an intention for our work can and does make a difference.

**E – Environment of Choice:** Trauma People who suffer from trauma experience extreme lack of choice and disempowerment, so empowering individuals to have control in how they want to move their bodies is in fact a most important aspect of healing and recovery. As David Emmerson, author of *Overcoming Trauma Through Yoga-Reclaiming Your Body* and *Trauma-Sensitive Yoga in Therapy Bring the Body Into Treatment*, states, “I am fully committed to not tell you what to do or how to feel.” He suggests the importance of using inviting language, such as “if you like, as you like, maybe, possibly, you could perhaps, you might notice, when you’re ready, you might discover, listening to your body,” to empower individuals to choose and be in choice.