

6 Trauma-Sensitive Yoga & Mindfulness Tools to Support Youth

WITH CHELSEA HYLTON

FOUNDER OF PROJECT PEACEFUL WARRIORS



Trauma

AN INTRODUCTION

It's safe to say that at one point or another, all of us have felt stress in our lives. But what makes everyday stress different from trauma? Trauma refers to an event that overwhelms our ability to cope and respond. When we experience trauma, we feel helpless, hopeless, and out of control.

A person is traumatized when they can't bring their mind and body back into balance after the event is over. In other words, if you experience a stressful event that you do not recover from, then that event is traumatic.

Yoga Ed. Mind-Body Resources are yoga-based tools designed for youth who have been exposed to traumatic events or circumstances. These resources develop the mind-body connection to enhance health, well-being, learning, and behavior. Through breathing, movement, and relaxation, students learn how to find safety in their bodies, navigate both uncomfortable and comfortable sensations, become aware of their internal state, and utilize mind-body resources to regulate their emotions and behavior

The three primary mind-body resources we work with at Yoga Ed. to support youth who have experienced trauma are:

- Orienting
- Grounding
- Centering





Orienting



Orienting refers to knowing where we are in time and space. When we are oriented, we are in the present time. This allows our mind and body to calm down more easily as we notice that there is no immediate danger in the room. Simply looking around and noticing our surroundings with all our senses (vision, hearing, smell, taste, and touch) can decrease our arousal.

In your class, you might notice a student whose shoulders are in their ears, eyes wide, and their breath is caught in their upper chest. They look trapped. This student most likely has a hypervigilant nervous system that is always scanning the environment as they are often easily distracted by other students or small changes in surroundings (light, sound). Constantly scanning for a threat makes it nearly impossible to experience the ease of the present.

Orienting: Ocean Breath Lying Down



Benefit

+ Calms the Mind

Instructions

1. Begin lying down on your back.
2. Inhale through your nose.
3. Exhale, open your mouth "hahh" making the sound of an ocean wave.

Orienting: Walking Consciously



Directions

Students walk around the room integrated, committed, and using their center.

Then, students walk around the room imagining that they have no center and all their body parts just seem to move independently. Direct students to notice how that feels.

Students return to centered walking and repeat this affirmation, “I am strong, centered and committed.” Students walk with confidence and strength but with nothing to prove, moving swiftly, but without hurry. Ask students, “What does this walking feel like? Imagine moving through your life like this. What does that feel like?”



Grounding



Grounding is a physical resource of being present with your body, especially your feet, your legs, and the earth beneath them. When we are grounded, we have a sense of support that gives us security. When we are not grounded, we do not feel safe, secure, or relaxed. Physically, anxiety and dissociation often shunt energy up the body and away from the legs. The invitation to feel our feet on the floor, or to feel our legs move, can shift energy into our lower body and change tension patterns.

For students who have a tendency to dissociate, grounding is an incredible tool to help them feel empowered again. These students may look spacey, fall over easily, and lack energy in their arms and legs. Asking these students to feel their feet on the floor and focus on energizing their legs, empowers them to ground, a resource they may never have known they had. For students who are defensive and guarded, feeling grounded invites their minds to release any grip around fear and calm that which is safe in their bodies. These students may lock their knees back in an attempt to feel secure. Softening the knees and accessing the quadriceps foster a solid sense of support in the body.

Grounding: Balloon Breath



Benefit

- + Relieves Symptoms of Stress
- + Promotes the Relaxation Response

Instructions

1. Place one or both hands on your belly and breathe deeply. Inhale, feeling your belly rise.
2. Exhale, feeling your belly lower and contract.

Grounding: Mountain



Benefit

- + Builds Focus
- + Increases Alertness

Instructions

1. Begin standing.
2. Inhale, step your big toes to touch.
3. Exhale, extend your arms down, palms facing the sides of your legs.
4. Breathe.



Centering



Being centered means knowing that your center of existence and personal power is inside of you. When we have experienced trauma, we can feel disempowered and uncentered. Being uncentered can mean having your center in other people or situations, not having a strong sense of self, or not feeling like you have any control in your life. We feel like other people or other things have power over us.

Students who are disempowered or uncentered often have a hard time recognizing where they are in time and space. They often experience flashbacks and have difficulty bringing their mind into the present moment. They may seem like they are daydreaming, have difficulty staying focused on one particular activity, and struggle with controlling their physical impulses (e.g., toe-tapping, pencil tapping, fidgeting). Physically centering oneself by getting in touch with the muscles in the abdomen, or even simply imagining a central locus of self and control, is a powerful resource for healing trauma. In a yoga practice, emphasize lifting the lower belly muscles and the spine. This serves to cultivate a sense of center in one's body.

Centering: Humming Breath



Benefit

- + Focuses the Mind
- + Increases Relaxation

Instructions

1. Inhale through your nose.
2. Exhale, making the sound "hmm" like a bee.

Centering: Constructive Rest



Benefit

+ Calms the Mind

Instructions

1. Begin lying down on your back with your knees bent.
2. Inhale, walk your feet back towards your bottom.
3. Exhale, step your feet as wide as your mat. Allow your knees to touch.
4. Inhale, reach your arms in the air.
5. Exhale, cross your right arm over your left and turn your palms towards one another. Bring your fingers to interlace here.
6. Inhale, turn your knuckles toward your body, bringing your hands through your arms.
7. Exhale, rest your hands underneath your chin.
8. Breathe.
9. When you are ready, exhale and untwist.