

## Guidelines for Yoga Therapists Working with Clients for Pain Management

By Lori Rubenstein Fazzio

Working with clients in chronic pain can be daunting. However, the more we as yoga therapists understand about chronic pain, the less overwhelming it will be to work with such clients. Pain is a stressor, and stress can contribute to the experience of pain. Yoga therapists offer many tools for stress management, and these tools are often very powerful when working with those in chronic pain. When a body has been in pain for a long time, the body has been in a stressed state for a long time. This often results in susceptibility to more health issues; thus clients in chronic pain often present us with a list of their medical diagnoses and medications. At a minimum, it is important that you know what the diagnoses mean, precautions and contraindications associated with such diagnoses, and potential side effects of any medications.

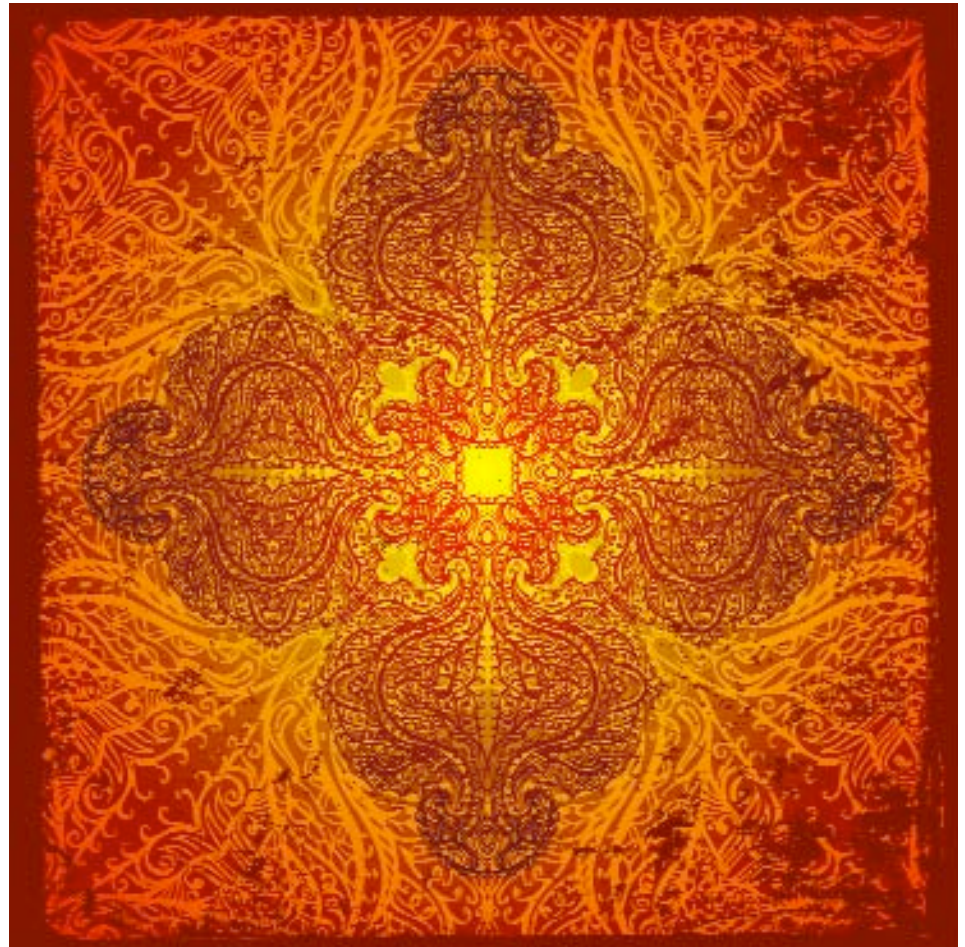
### Working with Medical Diagnoses

As yoga therapists, we do not treat medical conditions; rather we use yoga practices to help support patients who may have them. We need to know what conditions our patients have so that we can best support them and, above all, so that we do no harm (*ahimsa*). Patients do not come to us to cure them; they come to us to feel better. It is important that we recognize what the patients' goals are for their yoga therapy. In achieving these goals, clients may also alleviate some of their comorbid health conditions. Say a client has had multiple surgeries; we need additional information in order to better understand what movements this person can safely do. What kind of surgery? Are there any long-term postsurgical precautions? It is often helpful, with the client's permission, to speak with his or her physician, surgeon, or nurse to discuss precautions or contraindications for yoga therapy.

Oftentimes, a physician will tell his or her patient to let "pain be the guide." With acute pain this may be helpful; however, with chronic pain this can be detrimental. It is important to be able to distinguish

types of pain so as to be able to guide patients safely back into movement. It is also very helpful to know what clients understand about their condition. If a client believes that his or her spine has degenerated and associates pain with

ated with actual or potential tissue damage, or described in terms of such damage."<sup>1</sup> How does acute pain become chronic pain? According to the IASP, chronic pain is pain that continues when it should not. The IASP further defines it as



harm, then educating about pain and working to reduce fear of movement will be most beneficial in helping the person become more active again.

### Understanding Types of Pain

In order to understand chronic pain, one must first understand the nature of pain. Pain is often misunderstood as being indicative of the extent of injury to the physical body. According to the International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP), pain is defined as "an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associ-

"pain, lasting beyond the usual course of acute illness or injury or more than 3 to 6 months, and which adversely affects the individual's wellbeing."<sup>1</sup> When pain persists beyond the expected time frame, an all-too-common response is fear, stress, and worry that something is *really* wrong. However, chronic pain is not actually correlated to the severity of injury or disease.<sup>2,3,4,5</sup> One of the biggest risk factors for developing chronic pain is a person's coping strategy.<sup>5,6</sup> State of mind is a stronger predictor of chronic pain than the severity of the injury of illness.<sup>5,6,7,8</sup> This does not mean that pain is "all in the mind,"

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but it does mean that the mind affects the experience of pain. The good news is that yoga therapy offers many practices that can shift the pain experience, reduce fear and stress, and shift states of mind.<sup>9</sup> Understanding the science of pain, explained in other articles in this issue, enables the yoga therapist to wisely choose and adapt these practices.

### A Yoga Therapy Approach to Chronic Pain Management

A key component of the IASP's definition of chronic pain that calls to yoga therapists is that it "adversely affects the individual's well-being." Mentoring yoga therapy students in a chronic pain clinic, I often find that the students are trying to "fix" the patient. These patients have often endured years of unsuccessful attempts to fix them, which only contribute to their self-concept of "brokenness." As yoga therapists, we hold the space for patients to safely become aware of their current condition as a multidimensional experience, to soften their neurophysiological response to pain, and to gain an aware-

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ness toward that part of themselves which is beyond the pain. In doing so, the pain often dissipates.

### SOAP Format for Yoga Therapy Client Evaluation

In Loyola Marymount University's Yoga Therapy Rx Level IV clinical internship, we document in the patients' medical record with standardized SOAP notes. Our evaluation format is guided by this medical approach to evaluation and includes

- Subjective evaluation or intake.
- Objective/physical examination composed of
  - o Breath assessment and
  - o Movement assessment: asana assessment for range of motion, strength, coordination, balance, pain.
- Assessment including all *koshas* (sheaths, bodies, or layers of our being).
- Plan.

### Subjective Evaluation or Intake

The subjective evaluation helps you to get to know clients, understand their medical history, their pain experience, their goals, and their lifestyle, and—most importantly—to develop a relationship with the patient. Establishing a safe and trusting relationship is crucial when working with any client. The most important aspect of



this is *listening*. Listen attentively with interest, with compassion, and without judging. One of the Chinese characters for "listen" is made up of ears, eyes, open heart, and undivided attention.

Listening in this way can guide you in how you may best help the client. Your job is to know what questions to ask, to listen to the answers, and to be able to discern what the answers tell you. It is likely that your client has seen many doctors and therapists and has shared his or her history repeated times. Employ *viveka* (discernment or intuitive discrimination) to help guide you in your questioning, to help determine how deep to go with questioning on this first session, and to help you to understand how the pain experience is affecting the client's life. Your compassionate attention and presence can profoundly influence your clients' ability to unwind their experience of pain.

Useful evaluation topics include

- **Pain pattern.** Being able to identify the type of pain the client is experiencing may help you to know when to refer to another healthcare practitioner or how much and which kind of activity is safe

for the patient. Types of pain and their patterns include nociceptive, radicular, referred, and central pain.

- **Aggravating and easing factors.** Knowing what makes the pain better or worse will guide you in selecting which types of movements to start with and which to be cautious with. May also highlight emotional or situational triggers.
- **24-hour pattern.** Medical practitioners use this to help determine types of acute pain. With chronic pain there is often no clear pattern, but one example of a common pattern in chronic pain is that the pain worsens as the day progresses. This is often due to weakness and fatigue and can guide us to focus on helping the patient build strength and learn how to pace activity. Pay close attention, because sometimes pain at a particular time of day may be related to what the patient is doing then or even how they may feel about what they are doing.
- **Lifestyle.** Educating patients about healthy lifestyle practices can be very beneficial, yet it is important to remain within our scope of practice. General lifestyle advice on things such as water intake, balanced diet, sleep habits, body mechanics, stress management, and healthy relationships are all helpful interventions. Many people in chronic pain tend to do too much on the days they feel better only to end up in bed recouping on the following days. By applying lessons from the *gunas* (elements of our nature): *rajas* (movement), *sattvas* (balance/harmony), and *tamas* (inertia/dullness), we can help patients recognize unhealthy lifestyle patterns and help guide them towards a more balanced lifestyle.
- **Social factors.** What kind of *sangha* (community or support system) do they have? Pain can increase a sense of isolation. Spending time with supportive family, friends, pets, a yoga therapist, or attending a gentle group yoga class can all help to soothe that sense of isolation. As yoga therapists, we help clients to find ways to connect with their *sangha* as well as with themselves.

### Questions to Ask Your Clients

- What meaning does your pain have for you?
- Why do you think your pain has persisted? What do you believe is necessary for you to feel better?

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- How much of your life is impaired by your pain? How would your life be different without it?
- How much better do you believe you can feel?
- Did you discover anything about yourself through being in chronic pain?
- What is your emotional response to pain?
- What brings you joy? What inner resources do you have?
- What are your goals?
- Do you have any previous yoga experience? What is your understanding of yoga therapy?

## Objective/Physical Examination

The objective examination is often referred to as a physical examination. This will largely be dictated by the client's capabilities, pain level, and type of condition. We evaluate and re-evaluate patients each time we see them to monitor and recognize progress and to alter the program as needed, so focus on what is helpful for you to know about the patient during each session rather than putting the patient through all kinds of movement assessment on the first day that could potentially increase the pain experience. Again, use *viveka* to discern what movement assessment will best guide you in developing a program tailored for the individual you are working with.

## Your compassionate attention and presence can profoundly influence your clients' ability to unwind their experience of pain.

### General guidelines for physical examination

Assess active range of motion for pain, quality of movement, movement patterns, emotional response to movement, and body awareness. Movement, balance, strength, and coordination can all be assessed through asana or a functional movement exam. Observe how the client moves, walks, sits, stands, and talks. How much effort is needed? Does the client exhibit pain behaviors, fear of movement, guarding, ease of movement? If the client appears fearful of any movement, your physical examination should be cautious and limited. The physical examination will help you in choosing safe asana and in recommending appropriate lifestyle habit modifications.

### Breath Assessment

Breath assessment is a key component in the evaluation of all patients, particularly in those with chronic pain. Because people in chronic pain are often living in a state of heightened sympathetic nervous system activity, they often present with short, shallow breath patterns. Many tend to hold their breath in response to pain or brace with their abdominal muscles, resulting in decreased diaphragmatic mobility and excessive use of the accessory breath muscles that may contribute to chronic neck pain. Below are some questions to answer during a breath assessment.

- Where do you see movement? Where do they initiate movement? Belly? Chest? Ribs?
- What difference is there in breathing at rest and during activity? How much accessory muscle activity do you notice?
- How much movement? Deep or shallow?
- How many breaths per minute?
- What is the ratio of inhale to exhale?
- Is the quality smooth or erratic? Relaxed or labored?

Extended exhalation is a key to reducing the sympathetic state and increasing parasympathetic activity. However, many patients are unable to volitionally extend their exhalation. You should

know how to evaluate breath and how to then teach appropriate practices. It is equally important that you be able to identify when a patient is not responding to a practice and know how and when to adapt or use alternative practices such as cultivating positive mental states.

### Assessment

Once you have gathered this information, take some time to review your notes and summarize your findings. Using the *kosha* model, you can outline a picture of how the patient is coping physically, energetically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. This is also a good time for *svadhyaha* (study, self study), *viveka* (discernment, intuitive discrimination), *satya* (truth), and

*ahimsa* (non-harming). Be honest with patients about your experience level. What practices are you skilled to offer this person and when is a referral to another practitioner beneficial? Some clients may benefit from referral to a yoga therapist who has additional training, especially if your patient is not progressing at all or if you are having difficulty finding practices that the patient is able to do safely without increased pain. In any case, if a patient presents with new persistent symptoms, always refer them to a medical practitioner for diagnostic evaluation.

### Plan

The yoga therapist's toolbox for chronic pain may include asana, pranayama, meditation, chanting, lifestyle management, *bhavana* (visualization), relaxation, yoga nidra, Swara Yoga, ayurveda, and patient education. Depending upon your training as a yoga therapist, you may focus more on one area or another. Choose practices based on what your clients need. As explained in other articles in this issue, the brain and nervous system adapt when someone is in chronic pain, resulting in a lowering of the pain threshold. Pushing through the pain does not usually help. Start with lifestyle education and practices such as relaxed breathing, extended exhalation, yoga nidra, or guided imagery to stimulate the relaxation response. When the patient is in a relaxed state, start gentle and pain-free breath with movement. Keep the movements simple. Know how to modify asana, give clear instructions, and empower the patients by helping them to learn how to move without pain. This may entail layering practices such as relaxation with movement, breath with movement, and visualization. As a general rule, the more complex the client's situation, the more simple the practice should be.

### Working in a Team

Patients with chronic pain often benefit from a team approach. Working as part of a team requires its own skill set. Stay within your scope of practice, never undermine another practitioner's treatment, and communicate with one another. It is also a great way to build a referral network. Most importantly, it may be what is best for the patient.

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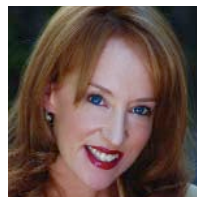
# Yoga Therapy in Practice

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Yoga therapy has much to offer those in chronic pain. Almost 50 percent of Americans report having some type of chronic pain<sup>10</sup>—that's almost 160 million people whose lives could potentially be improved with your help! **YTT**

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# Yoga Therapy in Practice

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## When to Refer Clients

If the pain worsens or if clients have not experienced any relief in a couple of weeks, then I would recommend that they see a healthcare provider. There are some injuries to the knee that yoga cannot fix. For example, there are some meniscus tears that may be in the area where there is blood supply and healing can occur, but other meniscus tears may be more severe and/or not in the area that receives blood supply and may require surgical intervention.

When I worked for Dr. James Garrick at the Center for Sports Medicine, he would put all of his patients on a rehabilitation program to strengthen the VM at the very least, whether the patient was a candidate for surgery or not. Sometimes the rehabilitation would work well enough that no surgery was required. If the patient still needed surgery, they would recover faster because the extensor mechanism, in particular the VM, was already strong before surgery. With this in mind, yoga therapists can still play an important role when they work in tandem with other healthcare providers in helping to optimize their clients' health and outcomes even when surgery is necessary. **YTT**

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