

Module 1

Yoga For All: Creating Body Positive Yoga Classes for All Shapes, Sizes & Abilities

Diane: Welcome to Yoga For All online teacher training. Amber and myself are so excited to take this journey with you. Welcome to Module 1. In Module 1, we're going to talk about yoga, body image, and how to set the foundations for a body-positive yoga experience. Thanks for joining us. Let's get started.

Hi everybody, Diane here. Amber and I would love to welcome you to the Yoga For All online teacher training, Module 1: Principles and Foundations for Creating Body Positivity in your Classes. Let's get started.

We can't have body-positive classes if we don't first talk about what body image is. Body image is defined as an individual's concept of how their body looks and changes based on their feelings about themselves. This includes one's impressions, thoughts, feelings and opinions about their bodies. Body image is heavily influenced by mainstream media culture, our relationship to our surroundings, our peers, and most importantly our relationship with ourselves.

Our culture tells us that the external way we look at ourselves can control our internal feelings. It tells us that how we look is the most important aspect of who we are. Our thoughts and our feelings, and the way we look in our bodies, and the way that others judge our bodies play a key role in the development of body image. Race, gender, and unrealistic idealized standards of beauty are all factors in the development of body image.

We want to really impart on our students that the practice of yoga in its spiritual sense around body image tells us that what is inside, what our spirit is, is the most important part of ourselves. With a body-positive, all-inclusive excessive yoga practice, this is the message we are imparting on our students: to come as they are, use what they have, do what they can.

As we know, our body image is a major factor in the development of self-esteem. Yoga has the ability and the power to affect body image in both a negative and positive way. At its root, the asana, or the physical practice, is designed to promote holistic wellness. We aim to cultivate a mind-body connection. A healthy and regular yoga practice can be viewed as a practice of self-care.

In this view of the yoga practice, it's impossible to ignore a direct correlation between practicing yoga and the development of one's body. We want to remember when we're creating the idea of positive body image, that yoga is a function of health, wellness, creativity, self-expression, and self-love, and is not a function of beauty. We want to take a closer look on how body image is a top priority in our yoga classes. We want to remember to treat our students with compassion and love, and to teach students to love their bodies.

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Let's take a closer look on how the effects of yoga can change our perception of our own bodies. We want to help teachers and students create a safe place for learning about themselves, their bodies, and how this practice can help them.

Here's the thing, when you're teaching yoga, it's easy to want to commiserate with your students. It's easy to want to have a shared experience around how we feel in our bodies. We want to be really careful not to create harm. We know in the yoga practice, harm or the creation of self-love can often be linked to the idea of ahimsa, nonviolence. Making sure that when we're in front of our class, that we're not bringing our own baggage to class, that we're not creating unrealistic goals for our yoga classes, so we're coming to class with a full menu of all of these poses that we want to get through that may be unrealistic.

We also want to remember our own genetic privilege, the fact that we may have been practicing for a number of years, the fact that we come to this practice perhaps with a little bit more self-knowledge or self-awareness about what our bodies can do. Often, as yoga teachers, we're attracted to this practice because we're able to do it. Some of us come from backgrounds of dance, and gymnastics, and perhaps figure skating or activities that require us to use our bodies in very specific ways, and activities that help us create an awareness of the physicality of our own bodies. We have to remember, not all of our students come from that awareness of how their body works and feels.

We want to make sure that we're not showboating, so if there's a favorite pose we have and we can get into it easily, we don't always want to be demonstrating that pose in front of a diverse class. It really does start to look like showing off, and it really does start to impact your students feelings about themselves and their feelings about their practice.

We also want to avoid highlighting the more flexible and stronger students in the class. People can gain their own inspiration if they choose to by looking at these students, but catapulting them into the, this is what yoga should look like or here's the most advanced pose that you want to see from this particular student is not helpful in creating positive self-esteem and positive body awareness within the class. We want to avoid those activities.

Instead, we want to create a place for safe experimentation within their own bodies, a place where they can use their mats as an opportunity to get to know themselves, a place for inclusion is always what's on the agenda. Our primary challenges as yoga teachers are to, A, shape consciousness, B, elevate awareness, and C, assist your students into tapping into their own power. We are working towards health and wellness by teaching self-love

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and acceptance. We are asking students to come to know themselves as they are as opposed to the traditional idea that teacher knows best.

You know best as a teacher, your own body. You may have a great understanding of how asana works in the body overall. We do not really know what each student is feeling in the pose, or how each student can move through the pose, or what each student is looking for in their asana. As teachers, we want to be open to conversations and dialog around what the students are expecting from their yoga classes, and we also want to be there to help them be their own best yoga teacher, to listen to sensation, to move slowly, to use the props that are available to them, to move into the posture to the best of their own abilities.

Shifting our awareness to health at every size is the key to understanding and appreciating different body types and abilities. This involves avoiding assumptions when it comes to ourselves and others. Let's remember that all bodies have different strengths and different abilities. Each student needs to be celebrated as the unique and special snowflake that they are.

When a person comes into your class that may have a physical limitation or challenge, or are in a bigger body, it's easy to judge. It's easy to look at them and think oh, no, or oh, yay, whichever way you want to look at it. I have an opportunity to dig deeper into the asana and provide more opportunities for variations for these specific challenges. Also know that it's not necessarily the truth when they come into class, that they're going to automatically need your help, that they aren't going to be able to do the practice based on what they look like. You're making a snap judgment based on what they look like. The best way to approach this is to approach the student individually and ask them, "How can I serve you best in this practice?" and then approach the class as a whole and ask them, "How can I serve this class within this yoga practice?" being very careful about what our biases are, and leaning boldly into the biases.

I made the comment, "Oh, yay, I have a person who has a challenge. I'm going to be able to explore what I know and increase my knowledge as a teacher," as opposed to, "Oh no, I have somebody in class whose going to need my help. It's going to slow my class down. I don't know what to do." We're here to learn the steps and strategies to make this practice a lot more accessible to the people around us, and the people who show up in our classes.

Here's the truth of the matter. We have to identify that everybody in North America has some kind of body image issue, especially women. We probably, at some point in our lives, have been on a diet. There's a lot of emotion wrapped up in the size of our body and the need to constantly seek self-improvement in our bodies. People are always

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talking about losing weight, and we've also linked weight loss to health. We are allowing students to come to the practice and learn who they are to reduce their stress, to better manage their lives through their yoga practice. We want to include the opportunity for students to come as they are, and focus on what they can do, and to get stronger based on what they can do. It's really important to meet our students where they are, but don't leave them there. Give them the opportunity to move deeper if they decide to move deeper, or support them where they decide to stay.

Every class is an opportunity to learn about yourself, to learn about deepening the definition of asana, to support your students in a greater understanding of themselves. Let's also remember that not all students are going to be comfortable in a big, public class. Sometimes a smaller, more semiprivate class is a better way to make yoga accessible to people who may have a physical limitation that would make them feel alienated in a bigger class. I'm all for creating specialty classes if that's something that appeals to you.

I've seen a lot of classes like curvy yoga for example, or yoga for round bodies, or big asana. There's queer yoga; there's brown girl yoga. There's a lot of different kinds of yoga classes out there that create a safe space for people who often feel like they've been pushed to the margins of this practice. If it's in your ability to create these types of classes, they can be very beneficial for people to learn about themselves, for allowing people to relax because the teacher in the class looks like them, the people around them look like them, and it really gives them a different perspective on how this yoga practice suits their particular culture, or gender, or sexuality, or body. Really, Yoga For All means designing and creating a practice that everyone can participate in.

This is key: try not to be discouraged or rattled by a student who is different from you when they come to class. Really treat it as an opportunity to learn about yourself, to become a better yoga teacher, to learn something about someone who is different from you. This expands your awareness of the world. This actually is an opportunity to expand your own consciousness around your biases, around what makes you uncomfortable, around creating a class that is accessible to everyone. Every class is an opportunity to learn about yourself as a teacher, your student as a person, and to learn from each other. It bears repeating: a critical step to your teaching yoga is to meet your students where they are but not to leave them there.

Amber: Hey, Amber here. We're going to talk about the foundations of a body-positive yoga class, some best practices to put in your teaching toolkit.

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Here's a quote that goes along with the theme of some of the things we're going to talk about. "Ahimsa is the highest ideal. It is meant for the brave, never the cowardly." Gandhi said that.

Three foundations of a body-positive yoga class that we'll talk about in this course are: agency, consent, and permission. We'll talk more in-depth about each of these at periodic times throughout the course, but just briefly.

Agency: Reminding the students that their practice is their own, and that they are the ones that hold the power.

Consent: Consent around touch is paramount. The ethical burden is on us, as teachers, to obtain consent before we touch our students.

Permission: Encouraging students to give themselves permission to be okay with where their body is today. This might mean opting out of a pose, taking a break, or maybe even trying a more challenging variation on a pose.

These foundations are all based in the yoga principal of ahimsa. The yoga sutra says, "In the presence of one, firmly established in nonviolence or non-harming, all hostilities cease." Swami Satchidananda, according to the Swami, hostilities cease because the person committed to non-harm emits positive vibrations. In even a little bit of ahimsa is enough to elevate us to a higher state. The good news is, we don't have to be perfect; we just need to try. In essence, this is what I'm trying to do when I teach yoga in general, but especially when I teach students who are in larger bodies. By acting with the intention to reduce or eliminate harm to my students, I'm creating a space where they can be safe, welcome, and where hostilities that they normally face in fitness environments cease. Hopefully some of the hostility directed at themselves in the form of negative body image or negative self-talk can also be alleviated.

As a yoga student, when I choose to show up, take care of myself, and be a positive force in yoga classes, existing in my larger body, being visible that way, I'm also helping to create an environment of less harm by being an ambassador of sorts, by showing that it's normal to practice yoga in a fat body and that a body with limitations is okay. This can really encourage students when they see someone else that looks like them.

I've said before that my mat is where I have a cease-fire zone with my body. No negative talk or judgment is allowed. I try to create that environment in my classroom as well. We need to be able to take up space, and we have the same right to space as others. Just because we're in a larger body doesn't mean that we're worth any less, even though

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society ends up telling us that a lot of times. We need to encourage our students to stay in their power, as well.

Setting expectations at the beginning of a class is a great way to let your students know that they are entering a body-positive space. The question, do you have any injuries I need to know about, is something that most of us have been asked when taking a yoga class, or maybe we've even asked our students this before a class. In my experience, unless a person is recovering from surgery or has recently broken a bone, I rarely get an answer to that question. However, when I ask a different question like, "What is going on with your body?" or simply ask, "How are your knees, your ankles, your wrist, your back, your neck?" when I name a few body parts, I almost always get more information. Something like, "Oh, I'm fine. I don't have anything going on, but I can't really be on my hands and knees very long; that really hurts." That's pretty common. That's also going to change my idea about teaching cat and cow or balancing on the hands and knees at the beginning of class, so I'll find another warm-up, or I'll find a modification for that student that's going to work.

When you ask for more information about your students' bodies, they also start to understand that it's okay to talk about their bodies, and it's okay that their bodies aren't in perfect working order. This is empowering for your students, and it creates that culture of permission, that it's okay to practice yoga with this imperfect, injured, or broken body that we have today.

At the beginning of most of my classes, I give a little spiel. I tell my students that I have two rules: no suffering, no judgment. I'm going to run through that language for you, the language that I use, and you can feel free to steal or borrow any of it that works for you.

I have two rules in my classes. The first rule is no suffering. One of our goals in yoga is to reduce suffering, and we're going to do that right here on our mats. We're going to start right here. That means we have to pay attention to the physical sensations in our bodies, and we watch for good sensation and bad sensation. We're going to talk about what those are. Good sensations would be feeling a muscle stretch or work, shaking and trembling – those are good; that means we're working deep muscle fibers – sweating, your heart rate might come up a little bit. Those are okay and for most of us, it means we're building strength as we're doing some work.

In contrast, there are bad sensations. We don't want stabbing, throbbing, aching, burning pain. We don't want tingling. If you get pressure in your face or your throat, or your breath gets away from you. If you're grasping for breath, shortness of breath, these are all signals that we need to back off a pose or try something

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else. Only you're in your body. Only you know the sensations that you're feeling, so I ask that if you feel one of those bad sensations, you just back off the pose, try another variation that will be offered, or just wave at me and we'll try something different. There's really no one magical pose in yoga, and there are lots of other ways to get the same benefit. You will not be hurting my feelings or disrupting the class if a pose doesn't work for you. We'll just find another way to do it. So, rule number one: no suffering.

Rule number two: no judgment. We have people in the room who've been practicing yoga for more than a decade, and we have people here for the very first time. Welcome. We're so glad that you're here. I want everyone to remember that your practice is your own. If you look next to you and you see somebody stretching further, or doing something that you think is a more advanced variation of something, your mind can start to play this dangerous game. You may start to say to yourself, "I should be able to do that," "I used to be younger or thinner," or "I used to have such a good practice and now I've taken this break and my practice sucks. I'll never get there." The minute you start to do that, you come out of your body and you're in your head. These comparisons that you're making are stealing away the benefits of your unique practice. Our goal for the next hour is to connect with our own bodies, feel our own breath, do our own variations of these postures, and take home our own unique benefits of the practice. No judgment is going to help us get there.

This is obviously a lot of language; you're welcome to use any of that that seems like it would work for you and your students. I usually do this when I have new folks come into the room or I have a big wave of new students, or I start a new class series. This really goes a long way in setting up an environment where you're not going to have competition; you're not going to have people pushing themselves or striving in ego. It also helps the students start to attune to their bodies and realize what sensations are okay and what is not. It's that whole "listen to your body" that starts to teach them to do that.

Soon after a class starts, I have one more little thing that I'll usually state. Usually I'll do this in the first difficult pose like downward-facing dog or somewhere where the students are going to start feeling work happen in their body. I'll say something like, "There are no medals given out at the end of class, just so you guys know, for doing every pose or holding the pose the longest. If you want to take a break, take a break. Come down out of the pose, come to hands and knees, take child's pose. You can sit, you can lie down, you can leave and go to the bathroom. If your breath gets away from you, please take a break. Just back off, choose another variation. All variations that we do in class are going to get you the benefits of the pose, so if one isn't working for you, try another one. If you try a

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pose and you get frustrated or weird emotions come up just skip it. Its fine, you can do it next time if you choose to. Your practice is your own.

All these things start to create that culture of permission and let your students know that it's okay to opt out of a pose, to take a break, to not push themselves past their ability, and to respect their bodies.

How many times have we hears a teacher say this in a class: “Don’t push beyond your limits. Listen to your body”? I think this phrase it too simple. What the heck is that supposed to mean, “Listen to your body”? For students who are new to asana they might be completely new to reading their body signals, to understanding sensations and differentiate between the myriad of signals that our body can throw at us, all of these different sensations that we experience during yoga, and especially for students who have been disconnected from their bodies, whether through poor body image, or disordered eating, or self-harm, or even people that are going through gender transitions, or that just have had a lifetime of living from the neck up and not embodying their physical form. This can be really difficult to learn, and it’s something that you do have to learn. There is that learning curve.

There are lots of reasons why students might not be attuned to their body sensations, not to mention that sometimes injuring ourselves doesn’t actually hurt. Tearing your labrum isn’t going to hurt because cartridge isn’t innervated. There's not nerves there. It won’t actually start to hurt until there is referred pain in nearby muscles that are retracting around an injury or bones are knocking together because cartilage has collapsed. That’s another reason that listen to your body might not actually be great advice.

We also all have different relationships to pain. Women have a different relationship to pain than men do. Women who have given birth have a different relationship to pain than other women. Think about these peoples relationship to pain: people who are survivors of childhood or domestic abuse, masochists, athletes, or professional dancers, and musicians, people that are used to pushing their body to an extreme. Besides pain there are lots of other factors that might make listening to the body not so simple for some students: ego or cultural baggage around slacking off or having to push through, wanting to please a teacher and so taking or holding a pose that causes discomfort, peer pressure to keep up with the rest of the class, or even negligent or harmful adjustments on the part of the teacher can all keep a student from really tuning in and listening to their body.

My point is listen to your body as a simple catch-phrase is not enough. We want to teach our students to listen to their bodies, but first we have to teach them to recognize sensations. Talk about sensation; what’s okay, what’s not, what to do when they feel a certain sensation. We need to talk about the breath; we need to describe emotions, good

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and bad. Mindful awareness can help to cultivate this skill, but ultimately we as teachers can never know what's going on in another person's body.

We can normalize opting out of a pose or taking another variation, and say this explicitly in class. Say, "If you need to take a break, go to the bathroom, or you just don't like the way a pose feels, then come out. You can rest in child's pose, you can rejoin the class when you feel ready." Say out loud, say specifically, "Nobody will think it's weird. You won't hurt my feelings. It's normal to opt out of a pose or two; it's no big deal." Saying this to your students will give them the signal that it's okay to give themselves permission to work where they are.

We'll talk more about how to use empowering language in classes later in this course, but let's move on and address one more issue around body image and self-acceptance that Diane and I both feel strongly about. Society tells us that the way to end the stigma and discrimination of those in larger bodies is to make our bodies smaller through dieting. In study after study, it's been proven that diets do not work. Diets just don't lead to permanent weight loss for over 95% of people. I'm just going to emphasize that for a moment – 95% failure rate. One more time, 95% of people that go on diets do not permanently lose weight. Studies on long-term dieting show that the vast majority of people regain their weight after five years, many regaining more weight than they lost, meaning that dieting does not meet the criteria for ethical evidence-based health care. Every study that follows up with dieters five years out finds this. That's why most studies only follow up after two years or some even one year.

The next thing you're probably wondering is, well how much weight did these people keep off? For most participants, it's between 5 to 10% of body weight. For a woman who weighs 200 pounds when she starts her diet, she ends up between 180 to 190 pounds. This is only the 5% success story. This is what the diet industry considers long-term success. The anomaly, they might only lose 5 to 10% of their body weight. Even though this has been proven again and again, lots of us go on diets, all the time, chronically. This leads to weight cycling, that up and down, lose/gain cycle, which can really cause all sorts of health problems, and that's been proven in study, from cardiovascular problems, to all sorts of different health maladies.

Maybe you've even experienced this, the chronic dieting, the weight cycling, but this is an important question to consider. Have you ever blamed the plan or have you always blamed yourself? It's really common to blame yourself, and in fact lots of us believe that we need to blame ourselves in order to feel motivated to try again. The startling truth is that the diet industry is a \$60 billion a year industry with a 95% failure rate. They need repeat customers, and our self-blame works against us and for them. We propose trying

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something different, which is a health and wellness paradigm called Health at Every Size, which Diane and I have both adopted personally.

Health at Every Size principles help us be at peace in our bodies, supporting people of all sizes, and helping find compassionate ways to take care of themselves. It includes the following basic components:

Respect, including respect for body diversity, recognizing that bodies of all different shapes and sizes are natural. It's a natural part of human evolution.

Compassionate self-care. This includes eating in a flexible and attuned manner that values pleasure and honors internal cues of hunger, satiety, and appetite. Instead of eating based on a calorie intake, or some list of foods that an expert has prescribed, or cutting out entire food groups, we learn intuitive eating. We tune into our body signals, and we eat to honor those.

Finding the joy in moving one's body and being physically active, looking at movement and exercise as just part of your birthright as a human, to use your body in ways that bring you pleasure and that keep you strong, flexible, and healthy.

Critical awareness. This includes challenging scientific and cultural assumptions about fat, weight, diet, health. When a study comes out asking questions like who funded this? What was the sample size? Is the click bait-y headline on the article on the reading, actually accurate compared to what the study actually says? How did they follow-up with these people, following the money, that kind of thing.

Finally, it values body knowledge and people's lived experiences. It values the trust and the inherent wisdom that has been in our body since the day we were born.

A weight-centered approach to health like dieting suggest that we try to manipulate our body into a specific height and weight ratio and just hope the health comes along for the ride. Health at Every Size is a practice where the focus is on the behaviors rather than a body size. It's based on evidence, and that evidence says over and over in every study that habits are always a better determinate of health than body size.

Now, Health at Every Size does not say that everyone can be healthy at any size; it says that body size and health are two different things. People of all sizes should get to choose how highly to prioritize their health and the path that they want to travel to get there. It

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also says that the resources that we need to support those choices should be available and accessible.

At Health at Every Size, the focus is on choosing behaviors and then allowing our bodies to settle at whatever weight they settle. For those of us that choose this method of health and wellness, the scale no longer rules our choices. Our foods and activities are chosen based on our prioritization of our health and are focused around nurturing our bodies and increasing our odds for good health, rather than trying to make our bodies a certain size or height and weight ration.

Goals might be centered around movement. For example, I want to be able to lift my grandkid, or walk around the block, or they can be set around habits themselves, like getting 100 minutes of activity per week or eating five servings of vegetables per day. For most of us, it's an ongoing process but for lots of us, Health at Every Size and leaving diet culture behind is a big step towards self-acceptance. We can appreciate the bodies we are in today instead of trying to force them to become some arbitrary beauty standard or state-sponsored height and weight ratio. We can start appreciating our bodies for everything they do today. I can make choices as if my body and I were on the same side, as if my body was my ally rather than my enemy, rather than struggling with my weight or just seeing my body as the enemy.

For more information, you can visit www.LindaBacon.org, Dr. Linda Bacon wrote the excellent books *Heath at Every Size* and *Body Respect*. She's also done a lot of research around this. You can also visit www.HAESCommunity.org for further resources and information.

Diane and I have both adopted Health at Every Size as a paradigm, and it's been an absolute game-changer as far as our physical health goes, and our mental health. We encourage you to explore that for your students.

Congrats! You've made it to the end of lesson one. Now it's time to reflect on your learning. Something to think about: what is one way you can apply ahimsa to your own yoga practice? What about your teaching practice, how can you apply ahimsa there? Please visit the forum to share your reflection with the other teachers who are taking this course. There are also lots of different journaling prompts and other reflection prompts if you want to take your learning a little bit further.

Now it's time to take action. Write your mission statement as a yoga teacher. We have a bonus PDF for you: Bio-mission and Vision Worksheet. We'd like for you to craft your mission statement as a yoga teacher, and share that in the forum. There's a thread dedicated to this activity. Whether you need a bio or a mission statement for your

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personal website or your blog, or maybe you want to apply to teach at a festival or teacher workshop with a studio, this bonus PDF can be really helpful in helping you to craft that and put your unique skills and personality into words.

What's next? We will see you in Lesson 2, Using Body Positive Language to Empower Your Students. Thanks!