

Module 2
Yoga For All: Creating Body Positive Yoga Classes for All Shapes, Sizes & Abilities

Dianne: Welcome to Module 2 Lesson 1. Join Amber and I as we show you how to set up your classrooms for success, how to teach to the people who are actually in the room, and what some of the challenges are for teaching yoga to people in larger bodies. Let's get started.

Get ready for success. One of my favorite quotes is by Benjamin Franklin. "By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail." Teaching a yoga-for-all yoga class or an inclusive yoga class takes a little bit of preparation, time, and energy on your part. Coming to class prepared is key for helping your students have a positive experience in your class.

First of all, we like to set up our classroom for success. We are in the business or in the process of holding space for students to enjoy and feel safe both in their asana practice and in their yoga practice. We want to encourage personal growth, we want to encourage movement, and we want to be ready to be there for our students.

It can be a very emotional experience to come in to a yoga class in a bigger body. The first thing we want to do is make them feel safe and secure and encourage them to come in to the class. We want to make sure they know that they've done the right thing. In this next module we're going to talk about tips and strategies for creating a safe place for students of all shapes, sizes and abilities.

What I like to do is create a class plan whenever I teach. I've been teaching for a very long time, over 15 years. My class planning strategies have really become condensed in that amount of time. If you are a new teacher this will happen just give yourself some time. If you can always put together a brief outline or have a thought or a quote that you're going to use for your class you can really create a dynamic, safe, and inspired class.

I like to create a theme for all of my classes. I find, with my students, a message can help them connect with themselves and with their practice and create a really great narrative for the class. The classes that I've themed have usually done much better. People have had a better experience in the practice than in the classes that I haven't themed.

The theme doesn't have to be complicated. My themes, for example, are very, very simple. I usually like themes like come as you are, use what you have, and do what you can – that's been a big theme of mine. Yoga-for-all is a theme. I've also had a theme about standing in your power where I spent a lot of time practicing standing poses so people could feel powerful in their bodies.

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I also like to do very specific types of classes: classes for back pain, classes for balance, teach people how to relax and de-stress. These are all ways you can theme your class. It's really important to take a few minutes, even if it's just a few minutes before class, to sit down and think about what it is you want to bring to this class so that this sets your class apart from other teachers.

Getting to know your students – this is huge. I like to do a lot of crowd sourcing through Facebook. I'll put up on my Facebook page, "Teaching at wherever I'm teaching tonight. I'm looking for pose requests. Is there anything that you want to work on?" When my students give me what they want to work on, I build my class around that particular pose.

When people come in to the class or in to the studio – I often work the front desk where I teach – I make it a priority to get to know the names of each and every one of my students. I smile at them, shake their hands, and initiate the conversation. Again, you want to make your students feel like they've done the right thing.

I also like to take the time to learn their name and learn something unique about them. A lot of people like to talk about their kids. I'm also a parent so I like to talk about my kids. That usually can be a common bond. We're both in bigger bodies for those classes that I teach that people come to in bigger bodies. I like to let them know that this practice is for them.

I talk about, sometimes, my unique experience of coming to the mat. I make sure I learn something about each and every one of my students and I engage them. This is number one for creating a really great class for your students.

Listen to your students. When you come to class with a class plan that you really, really want to teach and somebody shows up that isn't going to be able to keep up to your class, you have to scrap it and listen to their needs. When you listen to people, when you listen to your students, it's much easier to create a safe space and an inspired class because you're giving people what they want.

Ask your students how you can serve them better. I always look for feedback at the end of my classes. I always make it a joke. I say, "Thank you for coming. Are there any questions?" Often people put out, "I have a question about something." If people say nothing, I always say, "Any answers?" That always gets a laugh. I don't know for how much longer but it does. I always encourage people to engage me and figure out what it is they need that I can refine my classes to make them better.

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Invite the students in to your class; reassure them that they've done the right thing and that you're here to help them. That's the big part of it. I always tell my students, "I am here to help you." One of my favorite sayings is: I am a full-service yoga teacher. I will bring you a block, a strap; I will bring you a blanket. You only need to ask.

People are very, very nervous about stepping in to a yoga space. They're very unsure of themselves in bigger bodies that they're going to do the practice. I make sure to reassure them that I am here for you and I will help you. I won't leave you to struggle or figure it out for yourselves.

When you're looking out at your class and you're teaching, it's very important that you're paying attention, watching, and helping those students discretely grab a block, or a bolster, or whatever. You don't need to make a big deal about it or center them out in their classes but watch who you're teaching. Take information while you're standing up there instead of just walking around and watching the class. You need to be paying attention. You need to be engaged. You need to be focused. You need to communicate with your students.

I love doing this: introduce new students to a regular student in class; create a connection. When I'm signing people up at the front desk and there's more than one person coming in to the studio at a time I usually pick a student who's already set up with their mat and already set up in class to help the new student find their way. That way that new student feels like they have a connection.

There are certain people in my yoga class that are really, really good about breaking the ice and having people feel comfortable in that space. I make sure that I set those students up next to each other. I set the new student up to the student who's going to be there to help them.

Creating a no-judgment zone. This is huge. We are always judging ourselves as human beings and always judging each other. The first thing you want to be very clear about is not to make assumptions about your student's abilities or personality. You want to be sure that you're engaging and reminding your students that this is a judgment-free zone, that you do what feels best to you, ask questions, and have your own practice.

Your practice is not based on what I want. Your practice is based on what you need. Lean into your own feelings around judgment and biases. Explore how those biases and emotions come up in your teachings. This is really important.

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Prior to becoming a yoga teacher I practiced primarily at home and mostly with my mom. It was more or less just a fun activity for me. When I stepped into the yoga studio for the first time – a very popular studio in my town – it felt so uncomfortable because there were a lot of feelings of judgment based on my size, my color, and my body.

At the time, it actually made me do a little bit of self-study, do a little bit of exploration around my own feelings on how I judged my body and my own feelings on my biases toward people whose bodies are different than my own. It encouraged me to lean into those biases and explore those feelings that come up. Every time a student walks into my class and something bubbles up for me, it's my first opportunity to explore compassionate self-study. I ask myself, "Why do I feel this way?" and really start to figure out how I can change those biases that I make about other people.

Honestly, I think that's the key to changing what's going on in the world. Lean into those feelings, figure out why you're having them, and really explore those judgments that are coming up. I think you can be a better service to yourself and to your students if you do that. Communicate to your students that you are not judging them and ask them not to judge themselves.

I mentioned that already and I think it bears repeating because it's very, very important. I remind them that this is about them. It has little or nothing to do with me. My job here is to maintain a safe space for people to have an optimal experience. I am not judging what your body can and can't do. I have my own body and I know what my limitations are and what I excel at. I never want to take that away from one of my students.

Clarity. Queuing classes for bodies with different abilities and sizes can be a very difficult task, especially when all of those people are in the same place at the same time. The first key is to speak clearly. Take your time and breathe. What I do, especially when I'm queuing the breathing, is I actually breathe as many breaths as I'm queuing. If I ask somebody to hold a pose for three breaths, I actually breathe three full deep breaths so that they can get in to the pose.

The idea is to speak slowly and say exactly what you mean. If you're having a hard time conveying what you want your students to do there is a really great time for creating a demo. Make sure that you're not over demoing your class and that your students are getting the opportunity to actually practice as opposed to watch you do demos.

Say what you mean and mean what you say. This is so important. You don't want to be constantly talking in your classes. You want to give your students the opportunity to have their own experience. You want to use clear concise language. Once you've got your

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student into the pose and they feel comfortable then you want to just be quiet or even just offer a moment to have a quiet reflection for your students.

Move and teach slowly. I've found that one of the biggest benefits to creating a yoga-for-all class is that you can actually slow the practice down to make room for everybody to be involved. Fast, hot vinyasa, I know, is what is popular today, but that doesn't work in a yoga-for-all class. People need time to move their bodies and get into the poses. If you don't give them the time to get there they often feel left out.

I tell my students, "If you can successfully do 80-90 percent of the class then you're absolutely doing the right thing. You're in the right place. This is the class for you."

If you are struggling to keep up with a class or you don't understand what's going on in a class – I ask my students to seek out different classes. Not everybody wants to teach yoga-for-all, but one of those principles is to move and to teach slowly. Give people time to get into the poses.

Breathe. Believe it or not, that's one that we constantly have to remind our students. They get caught up in whatever is going on around them and then they hold their breath. Invite your students to take a moment and just breathe. You do the same.

Avoiding triggers. We spoke about this in another module but it bears repeating in this one. Avoiding triggers can be an incredible difficult task. You never know what a trigger will be for your student. You also want to be aware of using positive and inclusive language to minimize your chance of creating a trigger.

Some of the most common triggers for people in bigger bodies involves putting a focus and emphasize on their size. I've had yoga teachers tell students they need to lose weight, that these poses aren't available to them because of their size. I've had yoga teachers focus on physical ability as opposed to what they're feeling emotionally or physically. Those are things that are very triggering.

We want to really use positive inclusive language, not point people out, and not create cheerleader moments congratulating a student for getting into a pose in front of the class. Not everybody is open to being centered out. If you want to do that you can quietly come close to your student and tell them what a great job they're doing. Give your students a chance to have their own experience.

Amber: We're going to talk about teaching to who is in the room. This is a huge thing for lots of us when we're new teachers and even as we go on and become more

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experienced teachers. Teaching to who is in the room is extremely important. We always like to plan our classes, we come up with the perfect sequence, and we just know that this is going to be empowering and strength-building. We spend time crafting it and maybe we even practice it.

Then we walk into class and the people that show up, you just know – you’ve got this gut sense – that this is not the right sequence. It’s good to come with a plan but you need to be prepared to toss it. One thing we like to really encourage you to do is to have your yoga-for-all go-to, back pocket classes memorized and ready.

I have probably three to five classes that I teach over and over again that are pretty universally going to be able to accommodate almost anyone. If I walk into a room and I’ve got this sequence planned and I really want to go forward with it because I think it’s going to be great for my students but then I have people show up that can’t do it, I’m just going to pull one of these canned classes out of my back pocket. I’m going to throw a theme together with it and it’s going to be great. Most students won’t even remember one sequence verses another. It’s not like you have to go in each and every time with a completely unique class.

Of course, we want to be creative and we don’t want to become stale as a teacher. It’s good to have this back-up plan. It’s good to have a Plan B just in case the people who show up to your class are not going to be able to fit the sequence that you’ve planned. What is the point of the pose or the sequence that you wanted to teach? Figure out another way.

If you wanted to teach something like side plank, what’s another way that you can build strength? What’s another way that you can challenge balance without maybe bearing weight on the arms if that’s going to be the problem, if you’ve got somebody that walks in that’s recovering from shoulder surgery? You want to do sun salutations at the beginning of class but you’ve got people that can’t be on their hands and knees. That’s going to be a problem so what’s a different way? Can we do warm-ups that are going to accommodate these people?

Teaching with the bus stop method – Diane has talked about this in this course. Grouping similar poses together, that’s going to help you to teach who’s in the room. You might be inclined to teach downward-facing dog but there’s also other ways to teach that pose that can incorporate everybody that’s in the room. You introduce downward-facing dog but you also introduce wall dog, you introduce puppy pose and you introduce child’s pose. This is going to incorporate everyone and no yogi is going to be left behind.

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Yogi playtime is another technique that Diane has elaborated on that's going to give all your students agency and ownership over their practice. No matter who comes into your class, yogi playtime is going to help you reach those people that are maybe a little bit more Type A, a little bit more advanced, that if you end up having to drop your class down a couple levels to fit the lowest common denominator of somebody that might have really limited mobility or is recovering from an injury or is pregnant. Yogi playtime is going to be the time where you can say no holds barred. If you want to work on handstand or headstand or whatever you want to do, that's when you send those people off and you let them explore the things that they wanted to do.

Let's talk about some common problems for students who are in larger bodies. Sitting on the floor. This isn't exclusive to students who are in larger bodies. Lots of us have trouble sitting on the floor because we've grown up in an environment of sitting in chairs. Our hips are in that constant flexion, that 90 degrees. Lots of us have tight hips and sitting on the floor is difficult.

A way to mitigate this is to elevate the hips on folded blankets or bolsters. Getting the hips up higher so the hips are higher than the knees when you're sitting in a cross-legged position can really go a long way in helping the students to feel more comfortable. Using the wall for support, you can take the short edge of the mat to the wall and let a student sit with the wall supporting the back. That can help a lot.

You could also use a chair. I love using chairs in my classes. It's not just the students in bigger bodies that appreciate that. Sometimes we'll even do things like modified twist, like bharadvajasana, on a chair. Lots of students love the freedom that they can find in a pose using a piece of equipment that's familiar to them.

You can also find another way. For some folks sitting on the floor is just not comfortable at all, folks in older bodies or that have certain limitations or injuries. If you're doing seated warm-ups, let's find another way. Let's go do warm-ups on the back. Let's do standing warm-ups. If we're sitting on the floor to do a forward bend, can we do that forward bend in the chair? Can we get that same energetic action by doing a standing forward bend? Let's explore other ways. Ask, "What is the point of the pose?" test and figure out another way.

Transitions. Transitions for students in larger bodies are huge. They're a huge issue for lots of us. We have a whole video dedicated to transitions and getting bigger-bodied students more smoothly through transitions.

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This can be stuff like getting the hands to the floor in uttanasana and stepping the feet back into plank. This can be being in downward-facing dog and stepping the foot forward for a lunge. Things like that that in smaller bodies are no problem are not a big deal but in bigger bodies can be absolutely frustrating or just not possible. That's for a variety of reasons. Being mindful about transitions and giving your students time to find their way into poses safely and in a way that works for their body will go a long way in to making your class accessible to everyone.

Coming up and down off the floor. Diane has talked about the bus stop method. One of the reasons we really like that as a teaching method is because it groups similar poses together. We don't want to have folks on their back and then flipping over on their belly, then standing, then coming back down to hands and knees, then standing again, and then coming down into child's pose. This up and down, up and down, up and down is, first of all, not just a very good way to sequence your class because it feels disjointed and random.

For those of us in larger bodies it can really be uncomfortable or difficult or even take a lot of planning, a wall nearby, and support to make sure that we can get up and down off the floor safely. This goes for older folks as well. It's not just people in bigger bodies. Coming down off the floor – don't take it for granted that everyone in your class is going to just be able to easily and gracefully get up and down off the floor. For some folks, once they're down they're really going to stay down unless they have a lot of support to be able to get up.

We want to create a feeling of safety in the class. When you start to assess your student's movement and mobility at the beginning of class with warm-ups you can decide if you need to offer these students more support in the way of a chair nearby or maybe having them next to a wall so they can use the support to help them up and down.

We have stuff. We have bigger bellies, boobs, butt, and thighs. We've got bigger body parts. Our stuff sticks out more than it does in smaller bodies so for a lot of us our stuff runs into other stuff.

When we fold forward, our belly is going to hit our thighs. When we try to step the foot forward from downward-facing dog into a lunge, our belly is going to run into our thigh. When we lay on our backs in savasana, our butt is going to make our low-back arch away from the floor. It's going to feel really bad and terrible. There's lots of stuff like this that happens.

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Shoulder stand – have you ever tried to do shoulder stand? If you have big boobs it's really difficult. In plow pose you can even suffocate yourself so be careful. In larger bodies this is just a really common problem: our stuff gets in the way. You can mitigate this in lots of different ways.

We'll cover a lot of this incidentally going through our videos. You can encourage your students to just move stuff out of the way, widening the feet, in a low lunge if the belly is resting on the thigh crawl the foot toward the long side of the mat and make a space for the belly to come between the legs. If you are coming into a forward fold you can tuck the belly skin back toward the pelvis. Same goes for seated twists. You can tuck the belly out of the way. Encouraging the students to do this, to find more freedom in the pose, can really be liberating for a lot of students.

For some people, they're just not that comfortable in their body yet and this might be a trigger for them. It might be something that causes them to feel uncomfortable or singled out. This is definitely something you want to be sensitive about. Maybe address it in a private session or come to your student and quietly suggest it.

If you have lots of larger-bodied students in your class you can definitely announce this out loud. Something like, "If we're coming into a forward fold, if you're feeling crunched up here you could widen your feet to maybe even the width of your mat to make space for the belly to come between the legs instead of being crunched up on the front of the thighs. You could also tuck the belly skin back toward the pelvis." If you have more than two larger-bodied students in your class and you announce this, you're not singling them out. It's something that can be broadly applicable to a lot of folks.

This technique can be really transformational for a lot of students just to understand that they can move parts of their body out of the way. If you feel weird about introducing this, let's say you're in a smaller body and you just have no idea how you would ever say to a student, "Tuck your belly out of the way," you could send them a link. Diane and I and Anna Guest-Jelley at Curvy Yoga and lots of us have put videos online where we actually do this. We have bellies and we have butts and things that get in the way. We move them in the videos and it's not a big deal. When they see another person in a fat body doing this it can be really empowering for them to understand how to negotiate their own body.

Another issue is compression within the body – pinching, limiting, and things that are getting squished. In a seated forward fold the belly can feel very squished up. In child's pose the skin behind the backs of the knees when you try to take the hips to the heels can be quite painful for some folks, especially if you're not used to tuning in to those body sensations.

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Your nerves are on high-alert when you start practicing yoga. This is something that you might just want to be aware of in your students and do some things to mitigate that. In child's pose, put a rolled-up towel or blanket behind the knees. If you're coming into a forward fold encourage the students to maybe widen the legs a little bit to give the belly room. We want to mitigate these stress risers as much as we can.

Something in general to remember is that your student may be more flexible than their body will let them be. I know this is definitely true in my case. I can sit in Dandasana Staff Pose and then start to come forward into paschimottanasana and I might get six inches. My hands are never going to reach my feet even though my hamstrings are very flexible. My body is more flexible than what my body size is will actually let me express.

Just because someone isn't bending as far or something like that it doesn't necessarily denote their flexibility. It may be that their skin or their body flesh or whatever the size of their body is, is limiting them in their range of motion. That's just something to keep in mind.

Amber: Congratulations you have reached the end of this video lesson and now it's asana time. Please check out the rest of the videos within part 2 which includes the videos about sun salutations. Sun Salutations can pose a challenge for a lot of different body types, larger bodies, older bodies, stiffer bodies that can't reach the floor or be on hands and knees, so we have all different types of sun salutations to show you some more variations. We also have a whole lesson on other considerations when it comes to sun salutes, things like building strength for chatarunga or plank and upward facing dog pose and especially transitions which are a big part of teaching a Yoga for All class. We also have a video on standing poses and modifications for these. Be sure to check out the homework assignments on each page. We will see you in the next lesson.