

## Yoga For Domestic Violence Survivors: A Guide



The Yoga Foundation is a leading not-for-profit providing research-based programs to support the mental health of at risk groups.

Our mission is to create opportunities for people at risk to positively change their experience of life.

[www.theyogafoundation.org.au](http://www.theyogafoundation.org.au)

In this Guide we cover:

- How and why yoga supports domestic violence survivors
- Yoga's specific benefits for this population
- Teaching challenges and successes
- Class planning suggestions
- A survivor's perspective

#### **Contributors:**

**Jessica Hobson**, The Yoga Foundation CEO. Jessica discovered yoga in 1999 when living in HK and has practiced regularly ever since. Seeing participants' responses to yoga and experiencing first hand how it can support their mental health recovery is amazing and brings her great joy every week.

**Keely Oste**, Banksia Women's Program Coordinator. Keely counts it as a privilege and honour to hold space for, and support women, who have experienced domestic violence. She is trained as a social worker, and uses her training in a variety of ways at Banksia, from case management, to community engagement. Yoga has also been a part of her personal life, helping Keely to be more mindful, present and light.

**Sarah Brown**, program participant and domestic violence survivor. Sarah is a single mum to two gorgeous kids and has just started a 500 hour yoga teacher training diploma.

**Natalie Haider**. Natalie is a Registered Yoga Teacher (500 hours), and Yoga Therapist (650 hours). She is also Health At Every Size ® practitioner and a Registered Psychologist.

**Melissa Shadforth**. Melissa is a Yoga teacher (500+ hrs), Certified Child and Adolescent Trauma Professional, Accessible Yoga Teacher with further training in Neuroscience, Yoga, and Mindfulness for Mental Health and a Certified Counsellor

## **How and why yoga supports domestic violence survivors**

### **The research**

Yoga can serve as a healing agent after abusive, coercive or violent relationships. Three key themes are being repeatedly proven in the scientific literature:

#### **1. Yoga has proven mind *and* body improvements for abuse survivors**

- The practise of yoga enhances the mind and body connection: the impact of this is fundamental to women's recovery from trauma in either the mind or body.
- Survivors may have both psychological and physical injuries from the abuse. Talk-based therapies have a primary focus on the mind and may neglect the physical body that experiences or holds the trauma.
- Yoga actively enhances trauma survivors' connection with both their bodies and their minds, vital in any journey to recovery.
- Survivors can feel disconnected from their bodies, cannot detect how they feel or how to react to the emotions that they experience.
- Many women report the need to physically move their bodies to release the tension and trauma.

## 2. Yoga helps survivors regain a sense of control, and leads to better decision making

- When a survivor practices yoga, it is her choice to hold a pose, to stay in that pose, and to move away from the pose. This process helps the survivor to regain control of her life.
- Learning to be present through yoga has the power to help individuals become actively present in their situation and then begin to make powerful, positive changes.
- Survivors can have lower self-esteem or feel inadequate and may struggle to make small decisions: yoga enables them to start making choices and decisions that serve them.
- Practice can bring empowerment to the survivor in making her own decisions and understanding how she feels. Small goals, but after abuse and coercion, these small choices make a profound difference in the recovery process.

## 3. Being part of a community is very powerful in recovery

- The gathering and participation for the practice of yoga as a group creates a community of women with a shared lived experience. It's a powerful thing that happens when they come together, in a safe place, where their focus isn't on the trauma.
- This group interaction brings together survivors that have similar feelings about their own self worth that creates a bond of understanding and encouragement while reducing feelings of isolation.
- Practicing yoga can help ease the recovery process by giving the survivor something to focus on and a place to feel welcomed each week.

### Considerations when starting a yoga program at an organisation supporting women

#### Program success factors

- **Organisational alignment** in mission objectives, values, priorities and approach. If you are partnering with an organization supporting this population do you share the same objectives, methodology? Will they give the yoga program a 'good home' and work to promote it (usually via word of mouth to their clients) and ensure there is a suitable, clean room for yoga. Can they provide childcare (very important) or refreshments after the class?
- **Yoga 'champion'** to help promote and nurture the program and support attendance (ie childcare, morning tea, aftercare). Having one or two people who you can communicate regularly with is crucial: they will support and encourage women to attend, participate in the classes too, follow up with the women and pass on feedback, keep the yoga teacher informed about triggers, personal challenges that may impact a woman's attendance or are helpful for the teacher to be aware of.
- **Highly skilled, experienced teacher.** The Yoga Foundation sees the most success for program participants when teachers have 500+ hours training and teaching, as well as further training in yoga therapy, psychology, trauma, mental health, social work etc.
- **Women are ready and able to attend** a program ie can be hard when in absolute crisis. The organization and yoga 'champion' will invite women who they feel are ready and able to attend a yoga program – they are your filter and help ensure participants attend who can derive the most benefits from yoga.
- **Creation of a safe container.** Yoga may take place in a safe house with a confidential address to protect the women and ensure their safety. Beyond that

the room needs to feel safe so they can truly relax. This refers to the room set up, size, temperature, noise level, smells etc. See below for more details.

## **A Social Worker's perspective and insights**

**Keely Oste**, social worker and Banksia Women's Program Coordinator, St John's Community Services.

### **What is Domestic Violence?**

Domestic and family violence is a repetitive pattern of behaviour used to control and exert power over another person, causing that person to feel fear. Abuse and violence tends to increase in frequency and severity over time, and is rarely an isolated event.

### **Perpetrator behaviours**



### **Myths and misconceptions**

- DFV predominantly happens to poor/ uneducated people
- DFV is just about physical violence
- Women who experience DFV have done something to deserve it
- It is easy for someone experiencing DFV to leave that relationship
- Once someone has left a violent or abusive relationship, things are 'easy' and 'back to normal' for them
- DFV doesn't affect children

## EFFECTS OF DFV ON VICTIM/SURVIVORS



- **ECONOMIC**

Financial stability, ongoing court costs, moving houses

- **POST SEPARATION VIOLENCE**

Co-parenting, ongoing manipulation through Family Law, ongoing surveillance

- **IDENTITY, SELF WORTH AND CONFIDENCE**

Regaining control over own life

- **CONNECTION TO OTHERS**

Isolation, fear of stigma

- **TRAUMA**

Flashbacks, coping mechanisms, mental health, memory loss, psychosomatic

## Teachers' Perspective

### **Natalie Haider**

Natalie is a Registered Yoga Teacher (500 hours), and Yoga Therapist (650 hours). She is also Health At Every Size ® practitioner and a Registered Psychologist.

Natalie's practices are gentle breath-centred yoga, aimed at helping individuals find acceptance and compassion for their mind, body and whole being. Her special interest lies in helping women to develop a positive relationship with their mind, body, and movement. Natalie's teaching is trauma-sensitive, body positive and accessible.

### **Natalie's perspective - specific considerations**

- **Trauma-informed yoga as a baseline:** Invitational language, don't suggest people close their eyes; no adjustments or hands on assistance provided; avoid overly activating pranayama like kapalabhati.
- **Trust and safety:** e.g. give people a road map of where you are going so it minimises surprises & anxiety e.g. we will start with a heart-centred breath practise; we will move into postures which focus on opening the chest and rib cage and creating back bends; at the end of our practice today, I will invite you to join me for a guided self-compassion relaxation practice, or you can choose to do your own version of relaxation.
- **Calm atmosphere:** consider relaxing music in background, lamps instead of fluorescent lights, set the room up beforehand if possible with mats laid out.
- **Awareness of power imbalance:** actively work to minimize hierarchy. I do this by encouraging commonality rather than differences amongst all students, volunteers and teacher, rather than creating impression of power differential/hierarchy. I'm very laid back and casual in my style. I don't ever demonstrate a "perfect pose" whatever that is!
- **Room set up:** Lights stay on, Music in background, close internal door for privacy, allow enough room for people to take up space rather than minimizing / shrinking bodies away – can be a reflection on not feeling entitled to take up space.
- **Start and end of each class:** helpful to have a starting and closing ritual – eg verbal check ins and conversation at start, closing ritual of reflecting on practice and taking one thing into rest of day or week.
- **Normalising all responses and reactions:** it's completely understandable that some days you might feel like staying in savasana for the hour; it's not uncommon to be overwhelmed by emotions and crying in this space indicates you feel safe enough to be vulnerable with us so thanks for trusting us.
- **Welcome individuality:** Express an attitude where diversity is the norm rather than singling out a person for what their body may not be able to do; offer more accessible option first with asana.

- **Sensitivity to level of disclosure each individual is comfortable with** – some are open to discussing with teacher specifics of their stories and reality, whereas others are quite closed. Be sensitive to things like group shares – keep it simple and present focused and keep more details sharing to before and after class in more private settings.

## Languageing

Invitational, choice emphasized throughout, provide permission to experiment. Avoid telling people what they should be feeling.

Instead of...	Try...
Notice how <i>comfortable</i> this forward fold is	<i>Welcome</i> all sensations just as they are
<i>Enjoy</i> the relaxation	<i>Become curious</i> about any thoughts that arise during your relaxation practice
Be grateful for how <i>hard</i> your body is working right now	<i>Observe</i> if there is a difference between your left side and right side in this posture
You <i>should</i> feel this in the lower back	<i>Tune in</i> to discover where sensations are most prominent

(inspired by "Connecting", Lucy Karnani & Jill Danks, 2018)

## Disempowering vs. empowering

Instead of...	Try...
I <i>need</i> you to all meet me in tadasana now	<i>Tune into</i> the innate wisdom of your body and release when ready
See if you can do another 3 repetitions	You are the <i>expert</i> of your own body
Come into down dog and <i>maybe</i> your heels reach the floor behind you	Make a <i>choice</i> that <i>honours</i> where you are at today
<i>Aim</i> to reach your toes	Move within your range of <i>comfort</i>
<i>Stay</i> for 10 breaths	Come out of the posture whenever your body asks you to
We're going to flow down to the floor now	<i>Choose</i> a way to come down to the floor

(inspired by "Connecting", Lucy Karnani & Jill Danks, 2018)

## Asana modifications

Instead of...	Try...
If you can't reach the floor	<i>To bring the floor closer to you</i>
<i>If you have bad knees</i>	To add extra support for your knees
If you want an easier option	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To reduce tension in shoulders, bring your arms down into cactus arms</li> <li>• If you are working on X today, then you might like to try Y</li> <li>• If you are seeking a calming rather than strengthening effect...</li> </ul>
<i>If you want a more advanced option</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For more heat...</li> <li>• For a different sensation...</li> <li>• If you are feeling stable and would like to explore a different option...</li> </ul>

(inspired by "Connecting", Lucy Karnani & Jill Danks, 2018)

## Class content ideas

- **Breath-centred practice** - pace of practice is guided by each individual's own breath.
- **Mindfulness to present moment**, whatever that looks and feels like - encouraging students to be present with what is, even if it's unpleasant, instead of a "focus on the positive" approach.
- **Accessible postures** - provide many variations and encourage self-exploration eg sun salutations against a wall, modified to remain standing throughout, half sun salutations, seated sun salutations. Be mindful of postures that may feel vulnerable to people eg supta badha konasana, wheel.
- **Facilitate autonomy and control** - provide lots of choices about how long to stay in postures for, how many repetitions, what posture to begin with. Particularly important as the legal systems etc can often disempower people.
- **Inform about purpose of specific yoga tools used** - eg focus on exhale helps soothe the nervous system.
- **Gradually build upon previous weeks** - Gradually adding to the sequences to inspire a sense of achievement over the course of the program ie 8 weeks.
- **Checking in with people during class** - open discussion, chats, laughs, Q&A throughout.
- **Tone:** no judgment, all bodies are yoga bodies, harness curiosity – encourage curious sensing rather than projecting your own experience in a posture
- **Themes:** self-compassion, polyvagal theory, resilience, self-soothing.

## What I learnt as a teacher

### Key learnings

- **Importance of spending time creating connection amongst survivors** – can feel very isolated. Did this by introductions each week & for those regular attendees sharing how yoga has helped them, light conversation during practise, staying for a cuppa tea at the end of class.
- **Offer an element of predictability through class structure** - eg start with check in, move to warm up, include some flows, progress/build from previous week, end with a guided relaxation, closing ritual of hands in Anjali mudra and sending gratitude to self for making time to be with self.
- **Idiosyncratic triggers may be difficult to predict, control and manage** - eg motorbike sound. Triggers can be very personal and you may not be able to predict them. Stay open minded.
- **Lengthy silent savasanas may be overwhelming.**
- **Volunteers outnumbering students can be daunting.**
- **Bringing together women with a shared experience = powerful.**
- **Encouraging women to make decisions every step of the way can help reignite a sense of control over self and life**, eg which posture to start in, when to rest, which option to take in different postures, how many breaths to stay for. This helps women feel more in control of their mind, body etc and applies to other aspects of life.
- **Creating an environment where women feel empowered, validated and heard can lead to rebuilding self-trust.**



## How you may be challenged as a teacher:

- **Some students remain reserved throughout** the program and may not want to engage in social activities beforehand and afterwards. It's about checking my own expectations and allowing people to take what they need from each week.
- **Be comfortable with distractions.** Whilst every attempt is made to minimize distractions, these inevitably arise. Be comfortable with distractions and incorporate them into the practice – phones dinging, people arriving after class has started and needing to leave early, children coming into the room, via zoom people being unable to connect.
- **Benefits may be different to your expectations** – eg one woman was unable to participate in the class but attended to be with the group for before and after class conversation and connection.
- **Barriers to consistent attendance are vast** - anxiety, depression, PTSD, poor sleep, legal battles, homelessness.
- **Be flexible to requirements of women on the day** – I design a class plan and often on the day I veer away from what that looks like eg some weeks people needed more time to chat before class, or time to arrive to class.
  - Patanjali's Yoga Sutra 3.6 – *tasya bhumi su viniyogah*. The 8 limbs of Yoga are intended to be practiced according to this principle of viniyoga – with specific consideration of the individual and to be continuously linked as changes occur. Application of yoga tools and techniques according to the unique needs and circumstances of the individual'
- **Working with survivors can be confronting** –self-care strategies are paramount. I have my own personal practice and receive mentoring.

## Feedback from women impacted by domestic violence:

- “Yoga has helped with my chronic pain”
- “Yoga has made me realise everything will be ok”
- “This Program has inspired me to start Yoga Teacher Training”
- “I like that the teacher is in a regular body and is strong and fit and healthy. It makes me think I can also be like that in my body”
- “My mum breathes a sigh of relief when she knows I'm coming to yoga”
- “I'm going to feel so proud carrying a rolled yoga mat under my arm as I walk home today”
- “Yoga has had a ripple effect on my life”
- “I grumble to get here but once I'm here I absolutely love it!”
- “I've felt very welcomed in this class compared to other places where if you can't move in a certain way you are looked at like a leper”
- “Yoga helps my back, helps me to let go of stress, and helps my mind”
- “Yoga is my lifeline”



## **A teacher's perspective**

### **Melissa Shadforth**

Melissa is a Yoga teacher (500+ hrs), Certified Child and Adolescent Trauma Professional, Accessible Yoga Teacher with further training in Neuroscience, Yoga, and Mindfulness for Mental Health and a Certified Counsellor.

Melissa teaches The Yoga Foundation's program for domestic violence survivors at The Benevolent Society and previously taught women on remand at a maximum security prison, foreign domestic workers, and refugees in Hong Kong.

### **Physical space considerations**

- Sense of community and connection through a circle or two rows forming a rectangle
- Ideally, the door, windows, any entry and exit points are visible to participants
- Space around mats, proximity to furniture, overhanging tables/benches/shelves
- Comforts such as blankets, pillows (consider BYO props which gives control over the decision to the student)
- Caution on straps etc
- Teacher as co-participant, not performer, this also helps to provide visual cues for practice

### **Sensory considerations**

*Sight* : calming, remove chaos where possible, confirm preference for lights (on, dimmed, off) and windows, doors

*Sound* : music, invitational languaging

*Smell* : essential oils, environmental (mould, smoke, food, etc)

*Touch* : adjustments (no touch, with compassionate words if required), space between mats, check temperature is comfortable

*Breath* : some practices can trigger trauma in the body, consider whether you are up regulating (e.g., depression) down regulating (e.g., anxiety) the nervous system through the selected practice, provide options for pranayama and err on the side of caution, for some groups you may simply invite them to observe their breath, nothing more

### **Invitation to connect**

- Check in pre and post practice
- Create connection through sharing (e.g. invitation for morning/afternoon tea after the practice)
- Safe place to be vulnerable without judgement
- Assess energy levels, desires for/from the practice
- Feedback from previous practices - provide as much autonomy/choice/control as possible
- Do not tell someone how they will or should feel during or after a practice
- Invite the student to notice what is happening with their body, breath, mind throughout the practice with no expectation, if they are not yet able to sense what is happening that's OK, this can be developed over time
- Explore through the checkins how the lessons from the practice can be integrated in

their human experience off the mat, perhaps include themes for each practice

### **Embodiment**

- Language, emotions, physiology
- Appropriate self-disclosure (be mindful of the fine line between teacher and therapist)
- Through therapy or mentorship teachers can develop insight, awareness, and understanding of our human experience and the light/shadow in our way of being - adapt, adjust, accommodate
- Not seeking perfection, simply being curious
- We cannot change the system or control what others say and do - although our energy does have an influence on others - how are you feeling when you show up for your students?
- DV survivors benefit from teachers who are grounded, able to self regulate and create a sense of safety and belonging for the group.

### **Continuous learning**

- Accessible yoga training
- Courses on trauma, neuroscience, etc
- Podcasts
- CPE/CE
- Counselling/psychotherapy/psychology/social work further studies
- Sadhana - self practice to deepen self-awareness, walk the talk
- Be prepared to learn as much as the students do from these practices - be warm, graceful, and humble

Note: We cannot be aware of all sensitivities or triggers for a person or a group. Tune in, be responsive, adapt, adjust, accommodate. Bring humour and warmth where appropriate. Be kind to yourself.

## **Sarah Brown – a survivor’s perspective**

My name is Sarah Brown, I am a 35 year old single mother to two children. My boy is Rory and he is 9, my daughter is Evie and she is 3. Both children have the same father and both were healthy full term babies. The place that my children and I call home is a small 2 bedroom unit, and we survive predominately on a single parenting pension.

These are my basic “stats” if you will. They are perhaps a little worse than some, but mainly far better than most. But it does beg the question, how did we come to defining what is better or worse? Or even more to the point; who has a greater need for support and what should that support look like?

You see I’ve painstakingly and at times unwillingly gained the knowledge that I, my individual self as a woman, am vastly more than these basic “stats”.

However, I am very much aware that the profiling and stereotyping that occurs when people are supplied with these “stats” can achieve an almost tandem effect of positive and negative outcomes.

For instance, due to the limitations caused my situation, gaining and securing employment has proved to be a hardship. My current qualifications are almost exclusively applicable to weekend and sometimes late night work. This has proved to be a difficult barrier to overcome, especially with little to zero support or childcare at these times. It also has also painfully highlighted to me the value and importance of higher education and career orientated study.

To borrow the old adages, if “knowledge is power” and “the pen is mightier than the sword”, I along with thousands of women, have unfortunately come terribly unprepared for the fight of our lives so to speak.

So what is it going to take to prepare us? How are we going to rearm women that have lost and endured so much? I know from my experience, the path to power is paved by opportunities and tools, and betterment means grasping onto these and embracing them wholeheartedly.

I am an avid believer in metaphorically seeing the ying in every yang and the yang in every ying. Meaning, that yes I may be a survivor or trauma and abuse, and yes I may have a damaged or diseased self-worth or inner dialogue; however because I have endured this, and because I am a woman existing in the gloriously affluent country of Australia 2021, I have been provided with and afforded opportunities that my international counterparts would only hope to dream of.

It is my basic “stats” that are used as a means to an end in order to present me with a myriad of support. So instead of perpetuating a constant state of victimhood, I wear my “stats”, my traumas, my experiences as a badge of honour. I gaze back at the road that I walked to get to here, and I stare lovingly at the path that has taken me to the door of places like, The Leichhardt Womens Community Health Centre, Banksia Womens, Anglicare, St Vincent’s domestic violence services, The Yoga Institute Australia and The Yoga Foundation Australia...to name a few.

I could not possibly articulate the vast scope of what these centers and services provide, nor could I give accurate credence to the women that I have had the great fortune of encountering and working with.

However, what I can say with sincere certainty is that there are many dynamic and multi-faceted tools and weapons offered to the women that they closely work with. Tools that myself and several women I have come to know, and now use in their personal arsenal as they rearm themselves and step back into the world.

Therefore, I am not merely my “stats” and I never will be. However they have been my compass that has pointed to this path.

Finally, it is with reverence and gratitude that I embark on the exciting chapters that lay ahead.

I will forever be indebted to Banksia, The Yoga institute and The Yoga Foundation for providing me with the tools I need to forge ahead and ultimately, give back to the women who are on the same path just a few steps behind me.

Still surviving, one step closer to thriving.  
Sarah Brown.



Sarah Brown, Rory ad Evie

**To my kindred women that know who you are.**

The mothers, the daughters, the sisters, the aunts, the wives, the lovers and the friends. Know that you are never ever separated from the wondrous cosmos of human life. You may be an island in the ocean of your mind, but within your veins flows the blood of the warrior women that have gone before you. Therefore you are at this moment, and will eternally be enough!

You are loved, you are precious and your very existence is all the validation and comfort you will ever need. Everything else is nothing more than a glorious moment in time. Share your unique gifts only as you see fit and put up your shields to the rest. My love to you all, from here to eternity.

This is my poem for you so that you may give it to “Him” whoever he may be.

### **A message for 'Him'.**

*Will you wrap me in the velvety warmth of the night?  
Will you lavish me with ignorance and validation?  
I beg that you break every mirrored surface within my grasp,  
Or I may unwillingly be delivered into temptation.*

*Will you ever give your answers away?  
Or do I ask you just a little too much?  
If it's acceptance beyond condition that you seek,  
Why do you make you carry something that I cannot touch?*

*I think I do recall a gift that you gave to me once,  
But I'm afraid that too much time has passed.  
You've taken me the long way home  
And now I fear that my precious rations will not last.*

*You invited me in so lovingly and calm.  
Your constructed walls were so solid and soundproof.  
I got drunk on the thick wine you served  
I was sedated, I was blind, I was pleasantly aloof.*

*So if I promise to uphold the veneer will you be merciful?  
Does this seem fair to you?  
Then you can play your game till the cows are dust,  
And I will never again ask you why the sky is blue.*

*Wait! I do remember where I stowed your gift,  
But I think I'll give back to my former self instead.  
Then she can tell me again what you said right before you left.  
She'll say that whilst I was not living, I was never really dead.*

*A poem by Sarah Sheridan Brown*



**If you or someone you know is affected by sexual assault or family violence, call 1800RESPECT on 1800 737 732 or visit [www.1800RESPECT.org.au](http://www.1800RESPECT.org.au). In an emergency, call 000. Support is also available at Lifeline on 13 11 14 and Beyond Blue on 1300 224 636.**

[www.theyogafoundation.org.au](http://www.theyogafoundation.org.au)  
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***This Guide cannot take the place of professional training and is designed only as a Guide. Please seek professional training and support if you are teaching at risk groups.***