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Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Information Professions  
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# How to Be Mindful When Bringing Yoga to the Library



## Introduction

These days, libraries offer a whole host of services and programs beyond the stacks, including yoga, meditation, and other mindfulness classes. With the ever-growing popularity of yoga, librarians must be trusted to meet the needs of their patrons while still respecting the roots of the ancient practice of yoga. When starting up a yoga class, library professionals should consider who the class is for, the needs of those community members, the person leading the class, and how to appropriately introduce a 2,000+ year-old practice to patrons. In other words, librarians must learn to be mindful when bringing yoga into a library setting. This zine offers specific practices for librarians and information professionals to respectfully and mindfully bring the ancient practice of yoga into a modern library, all the while balancing the needs of the patrons themselves. Librarians should not only have some basic knowledge about the history of yoga, but they must be cognizant of the ever-changing needs of their community. Each patron will identify in different ways in each of the following categories: gender, age, sexual orientation, ability, race, and socioeconomic status, and it is the duty of the library professionals to mindfully honor the unique identity of each individual who walks through the library's doors.

This zine fuses together three of my passions: social justice, teaching yoga, and library and information science. Taking a step back and looking at the full picture, these three passions are not so unlike. By looking at the cross-sections between these three fields, we can uncover new ways to be empathetic, culturally responsive and sustainable, and mindful professionals who make their libraries communities of inclusion and acceptance.



# Why Bring Yoga to the Library?

Yoga has long been touted for its health benefits. Yoga asana (the physical postures) linked with pranayama (breathing exercises) help bring ease to the mind and body. According to Yoga Journal, the 36 million practitioners in the U.S. would likely agree—so why bring yoga into a library?

Patrons get to:

- relieve stress
- feel like part of a community
- reconnect their mind to their body
- reclaim their identity
- build self-confidence
- learn about new philosophies and practice new ways of thinking
- establish a healthy relationship with their bodies

Libraries have always served their communities by providing information, and when it comes to health, patrons seek out information at their local libraries. In a study on yoga programming in libraries, Lenstra reveals that "In some cases, providing health information has morphed into actually providing opportunities to engage in exercise and movement at the library." (759)

Besides benefiting the patrons, libraries have a lot to gain by providing yoga classes to their community. By offering a valuable resource to people who might have difficulty accessing them elsewhere, libraries can use yoga classes to draw in a bigger community. In Lenstra's survey of 851 librarians who offered yoga programs, "60% said yoga programs had indeed brought new users into the library." (770) Those numbers are encouraging for any library interested in offering mind-body movement classes.

Beyond that, hosting yoga classes communicates to the patrons and surrounding community that the library **cares** for their health and well-being.

# Getting Started

Great, so you've decided to bring yoga to the library—it'll be great for the patrons, it'll build community, it'll bring bodies and minds to a space of peace and ease. So... what comes next? How do we begin? Let's explore six ways to get started.

**One: the yoga of accessibility**

Think about the library patrons or community members who would benefit from having accessible yoga classes. In reality, your library community is made up of all sorts of people with varying needs. There is no "one size fits all" yoga class, which is why it is important to understand the needs of your community. J.J. Pionke points out that “the use of mindfulness as a way to build empathy and compassion within library employees toward people with disabilities” (49) is just one of the ways in which to address accessibility concerns raised by patrons.

Note:  
These are just some accessible styles of yoga. In reality, yoga classes should always be modified to fit the students' needs.

## Ask yourself: Would anyone benefit from these types of yoga?

**Trauma-sensitive yoga:** helpful in reconnecting people to their bodies, especially refugees, veterans, survivors of abuse, or anyone suffering PTSD.

**Body positive yoga:** for anyone who struggles with body image and self esteem.

**Gentle yoga:** great for people experiencing stiffness in joints and for people looking for a less strenuous, more meditative practice.

**Prenatal yoga:** moms-to-be have bodies that change quickly, which means they need a practice that responds to their changing needs.

**Chair yoga:** beneficial for people with wheelchairs or use assisted mobility devices. Also great for those with blood pressure issues.

**Bilingual or language-supported yoga:** not all patrons will be fluent in English, and may require a translator. Some may be hearing or visually impaired and would benefit from an instructor well-trained on different modes of nonverbal communication.



## Two: check your privilege

**Remember: we all have characteristics that make us unique.**

Librarians must first and foremost understand the importance of honoring each individual's intersectional experience. DiAngelo points out that white people often reason and trivialize problems of racism, which ultimately invalidates the experiences of people of color. "Reaching for racial humility" (56) is the key to interrupting internalized dominance. Yes, this internalized dominance can even show up when you are choosing the details of a yoga class at a community library. In your library, you will encounter patrons of differing gender, age, sexual orientation, ability, race, and socioeconomic status. As an information professional, it is your job to understand your own privilege in order to be fully mindful and empathetic toward your patrons. Diane Goodman states that people from privileged groups "tend to have little awareness of their of dominant identity, of the privileges it affords them, of the oppression suffered by the corresponding disadvantaged group, and of how they perpetuate it." (22) This means that you may fail to see the ways in which a yoga class could be seen as an exclusive experience.

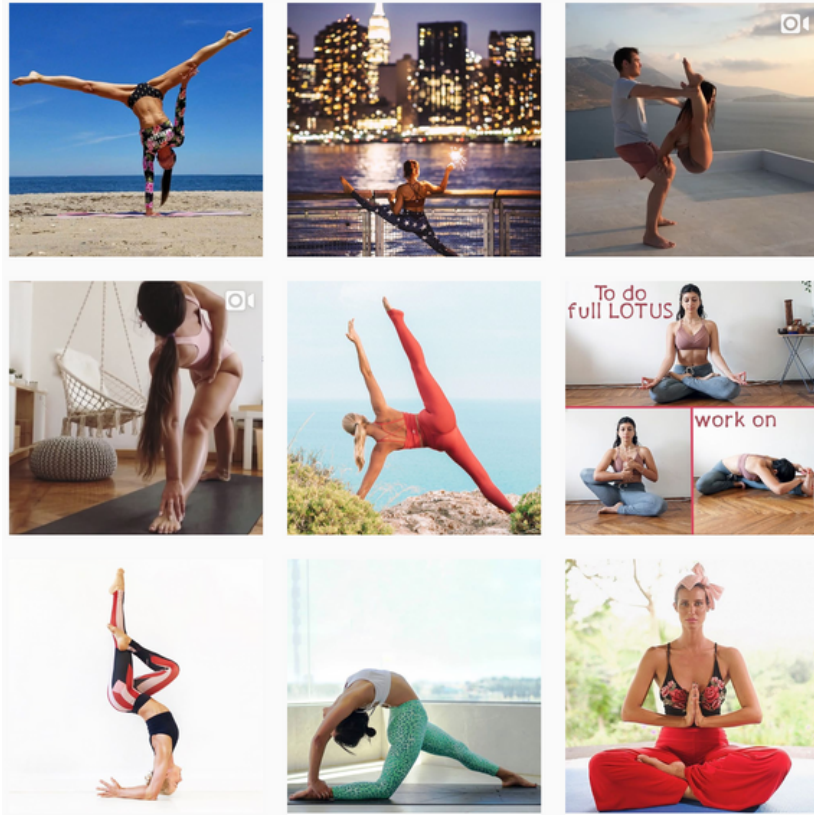
Intersectionality should be the first thing to consider once you have decided to bring yoga to your library. Each person who enters the doors of the library should feel welcomed, supported, and represented in the library's offerings. When considering a yoga program for the library, you must contemplate the full needs of your community, even those people who have yet to enter the doors of the library. Approach the creation of the class mindfully, holding all community members and all of their intersectional differences at the forefront of your intention.

Furthermore, yoga holds some dangerous stereotypes in modern society. Due to the commercialization of the practice and its Instagrammable poses, yoga has developed several harmful, and even racist, stereotypes that you should be made aware of so as not to fall into the same trap.

## Intersectionality

Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw: the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups.

## Yoga Stereotypes



- white females
- upper-middle class
- only for those who can afford \$100+ name brand leggings
- only for the able-bodied and extremely flexible
- fast-paced “flow” practiced in a hot room with half-naked people
- must be photographed by a professional photographer and shared on social media

## In Reality

- can benefit people of all cultures and race
- can be done by people of all socioeconomic backgrounds
- no mat, special equipment, or expensive clothing required
- always modified to fit the needs of the student
- the practice looks different for everyone because every single human body is different



*If you have a body and you do yoga, you have a yoga body.*

### Three: find a qualified instructor

Reach out to a local yoga studio or instructor and let them know the type of yoga you are interested in offering and any goals you have for the class. Make sure that the teacher you select has proper training (request a teacher who is registered through Yoga Alliance) in the type of yoga you will offer. For example, if you have a population of veterans, make sure the instructor is trained in trauma-sensitive yoga as they will be able to respond to PTSD.

**Remember: yoga is not just about the physical practice.** Yoga initiates some delicate mind-body work that can help individuals feel empowered, connected to their bodies, physically strong, mentally clear, etc. **The teacher you choose matters** because that individual will be the leading force in setting the tone of the class, making students feel welcome, and keeping them safe through smart sequencing, alignment, and cues.

Furthermore, you should speak with the instructor about the sensitivities around teacher-to-student physical adjustments. While physical adjustments are a traditional part of the practice, the teacher should ask each individual student whether or not

they would like to receive adjustments. Teachers should also make it known that students can opt out of an adjustment at any point in time simply by saying “no thank you.” Touching another’s body unexpectedly can be triggering, stressful, and lead to extreme discomfort in the class. Make sure that the teacher you choose always asks permission before giving adjustments.

### Four: free and easy access

Let patrons and community members know that the class is open, available, and free to the public. Very often the people enduring the most stress in life are the same people who do not have the extra money to pay for memberships to expensive yoga studios. Traditional studio classes charge anywhere from \$18-30 per class, making yoga an unsustainable mind-body practice. Furthermore, many people do not have access to or cannot afford a yoga mat. Ask the studio or instructor you are working with if they will be able to provide mats and props for the students. There are websites that offer cheap yoga mats and props in bulk if you plan to make yoga at the library a long-term program.



## Five: beware of cultural appropriation

There are ways to honor the 2,000+ year-old practice of yoga while still making it relevant to modern day practitioners. Some say that yoga has lost its roots due to the new commercialized varieties of yoga that have popped up in nearly every neighborhood of America: hot yoga, aerial yoga, yoga with goats, yoga with cats, beer yoga, etc. Remember that these varieties of yoga, while seemingly fun, often cross the line into disrespect. There are ways that yoga practitioners in the West can gain the mind-body benefits of the practice without losing the cultural significance of yoga's deep historical roots. A well-trained instructor will have knowledge of the history of yoga, as well as the different yogic philosophies, and can pass on those teachings to their students. Instructors will also be able to integrate Sanskrit, the language of yoga, into the practice and help students learn the correct pronunciation and meanings of the words.

Avoid using yogic imagery in a nonchalant or casual manner. In other words, avoid clothing that has sayings like “namaste as f\*ck” and avoid putting images or sacred statues of the Buddha,

Hindu gods and goddesses, and mala beads around the room as decoration.



**Jigme**  
@JigmeUgen

SICK: Using Buddhist & Hindu Gods on yoga pants. We pray to them not roll them in dirt. Remove & Apologize @noliyoga

## Six: representation matters

When you're promoting the yoga class, consider the imagery you use on the posters, flyers, newsletters, and online communications. Does the imagery reflect the people who will be attending the class? Does the class look approachable? Can patrons and community members see themselves represented in the yoga class? Consider gender, age, sexual orientation, ability, race, and socioeconomic status in all promotional materials.



# Breathe in...

# Breathe out...

Starting up a yoga program, especially when you are unfamiliar with the practice, can be challenging. Sometimes people won't show up. Sometimes more people will show up than expected. Sometimes you won't have enough mats. It's okay. Everything is a learning process, and you can be sure that you will make mistakes. Notice who shows up for the class and who does not.

Just because you don't have the means doesn't mean you don't deserve to participate.

Dianne Bondy

Ask the community for input on the class: what changes would they like to see going forward? Are they satisfied with the teacher, the room, the mats, and the props? Make it a point to regularly survey your patrons on the class to ensure that it meets their

needs. **Remember: every body is a yoga body.** Everyone deserves an accessible, safe, and inclusive yoga practice. *The thoughtful way you design the class will not go unnoticed by the community.* The very word "yoga" in Sanskrit means "to yoke."

Think about your library as the yoke that joins together each and every patron and their myriad intersectional human experiences. Honor their individuality, listen to their needs, and validate their experiences. Finally, reflect on how you are listening to your own needs. When you feel content with your own life, you will find ease in feeling content with everyone around you.

