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Scope of Practice for Yoga Therapy

Background

This Scope of Practice (Scope) is the latest pillar of the comprehensive self-regulatory initiative that IAYT began in 2007. This initiative has included developing educational standards for the training of yoga therapists, an accreditation process for recognizing training programs that meet these standards, a certification process for credentialing individual yoga therapists who meet IAYT's standards, and a code of ethics with detailed enforcement provisions to promote responsible practice. All of this work has been accomplished by committees of leaders in the yoga therapy field representing diverse lineages and methodologies, and IAYT has provided extensive opportunities for review and comment on each aspect of this work by our membership and other stakeholders in the yoga therapy community.

Introduction

IAYT accredits yoga therapist training programs and certifies yoga therapists internationally. This Scope document was developed by IAYT primarily to inform IAYT-Certified Yoga Therapists (i.e., yoga therapists who have been granted the C-IAYT credential) about the activities, practices, skills, and knowledge that IAYT believes every yoga therapist with the C-IAYT credential should be able to utilize and responsibly apply in professional practice. Because IAYT is not a licensing body for yoga therapists, the Scope is not a legally binding document. Rather, it serves as a set of guidelines and parameters for IAYT-Certified Yoga Therapists and the yoga therapy community. Additionally, the Scope is intended to be an information resource for healthcare practitioners, clients, healthcare insurers, and other individuals and entities that may be interested in learning what yoga therapy is and how it is practiced. IAYT acknowledges that there are varying approaches to and styles of yoga therapy, so the Scope is not meant to prescribe or standardize the practice. Yoga therapy may adapt to diverse cultural and social environments and takes into account modern medical research and practice innovations. As such, each IAYT-Certified Yoga Therapist may apply skills and knowledge according to his/her training in an appropriate and adaptive way, consistent with the therapeutic principles and accepted conventions of yoga therapy.

It is important to note that this Scope is not meant to imply in any way that yoga therapists are physicians or practitioners of other licensed healthcare fields who are capable of diagnosing and treating conditions from the perspectives of these professions. Yoga therapists may, however, hold additional qualifications in other healthcare fields that enable them to utilize practices that fall outside of the Scope set forth in this document. In such instances, this Scope is not intended to limit in any way practices that may fall under the scope of practice of the concurrent healthcare qualification, or otherwise impede or prevent a licensed healthcare practitioner from practicing according to their scope of practice.

It is recommended that all yoga therapists provide a client information document to ensure that clients understand the nature and extent of the services being provided; the practitioner's education, training, experience, and other qualifications; and the fact that yoga therapy is not a licensed healthcare profession in the state or other jurisdiction in which they practice (unless this does not apply). As with any other healthcare provider, it is the responsibility of a yoga therapist to ensure the safety of a client at all times and to refer to a more appropriate therapist or medical practitioner when a client seeks care for conditions that cannot be appropriately addressed within the Scope.

Framework

Yoga therapy is the professional application of the principles and practices of yoga to promote health and well-being within a therapeutic relationship that includes personalized assessment, goal setting, lifestyle management, and yoga practices for individuals or small groups. The yoga tradition views each human being as a multidimensional system that includes numerous aspects—including body, breath, and mind (intellect and emotions)—and their mutual interaction. Yoga therapy is founded on the basic principle that intelligent practice can positively influence the direction of change within these human dimensions, which are distinct from an individual's unchanging nature or spirit. The goals of yoga therapy include eliminating, reducing, and/or managing symptoms that cause suffering; improving function; helping to prevent the occurrence or re-occurrence of underlying causes of illness; and moving toward improved health and well-being.¹

Yoga therapists draw from the principles of yoga and the full range of yogic practices and assessment skills, as well as familiarity with biomedical and psychological foundational knowledge. Yoga therapists work with the client to develop and implement a self-empowering therapeutic plan² appropriate to the client's needs and oriented around prevention and health promotion.

An IAYT-Certified Yoga Therapist (C-IAYT) has undertaken specialized training beyond that of a yoga teacher, in accordance with the IAYT's [Educational Standards for the Training of Yoga Therapists](#) or has met IAYT's requirements for [certification under alternate pathways](#). IAYT-Certified Yoga Therapists adhere to the professional ethics, guidelines, and codes relating to the practice of yoga therapy as defined by the IAYT and commit to not making false or inaccurate claims about yoga's therapeutic and healing capacities.

Yoga therapy may occur in the following settings:

- Individualized one-on-one yoga therapy sessions. (If the client is a child/minor, the state or other local jurisdiction laws governing the safety of children/minors are to be adhered to.)
- Group Yoga Therapy:

Group Yoga Therapy is a session(s) in which a yoga therapist works with a small group of clients who have a similar condition or symptom(s), or with clients who have a variety of health or health-related conditions. A hallmark that differentiates group yoga therapy from group yoga teaching is the presence of an individual intake and assessment³ for each client in the group prior to commencing the class, personalization of the practice(s) based on the individual assessment, and reassessment at regular intervals throughout a series of classes.

1. A yoga therapist is qualified to:

- Practice in a way that responsibly reflects his/her yoga therapy education, training, and experience.
- Assess each individual client using qualitative and/or quantitative yoga therapy assessment tools and maintain records according to any applicable statutory requirements.
- Use the assessment process to identify any risk factors or contraindications to ensure the safety and appropriateness of the yoga therapy intervention and to develop an appropriate therapeutic plan.²
- Develop a therapeutic plan and/or provide advice within the yoga therapy framework in accordance with the individual client's needs, goals, learning style, life circumstances, and access to resources such as time and equipment.
- Guide clients in implementing the therapeutic plan, aimed at prevention and health promotion.
- Teach an integrated set of practices aligned with the needs and goals of the individual and consistent with the yoga therapy framework.
- Include yoga practices such as asana (postures), pranayama (breathwork), relaxation, meditation, mudra (energetic gestures and seals), bandha (energy locks), mantra (sacred sounds), mindfulness, bhavana (imagery), sankalpa (affirmation/intention), yogic lifestyle, and dietary advice⁴ according to the yoga therapy framework, education in yoga philosophy, and other practices in the yoga tradition and for which the therapist has received appropriate education and training.

A yoga therapist is NOT qualified to:

- Work with clients presenting with issues outside the therapist's areas of competence/professional expertise.
- Advertise himself or herself as a licensed healthcare practitioner, unless he/she is also a licensed healthcare practitioner.
- Perform physical adjustments,⁵ manipulations, or massage, unless appropriately qualified to do so. ([Read more here.](#))
- Undertake individual or group psychological counseling, unless appropriately qualified to do so.
- Recommend specific lifestyle or nutrition changes outside of a yoga therapy framework, unless appropriately qualified to do so.

- Provide appropriate follow-up and review at regular intervals.
- Use and modify practices of yoga therapy to support the client and help the client manage their physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual health.
- Make modification to a practice by verbal instruction and/or consented touch⁵ as deemed competent to enact in training. (Read more [here](#).)
- Provide clear goals for each yoga therapy session.
- Provide clear instructions for any home practice that is recommended, with appropriate feedback mechanisms.
- Foster the client's own support networks, independent practice, and self-responsibility for his/her own well-being.
- Provide clear processes for client feedback.
- Provide guidance for lifestyle changes to create improved health and well-being according to the yoga therapy framework provided in yoga therapy training.

2. A yoga therapist is qualified by virtue of his/her knowledge of health and health systems to:

- Have a basic understanding of typical disease states and associated symptoms, the effects of medications, and associated contraindications. The therapist will use this understanding to inform what is recommended as a suitable practice for each individual.
- Understand and integrate information provided by diagnoses from other qualified healthcare professionals.

A yoga therapist is NOT qualified to:

- Diagnose a medical or psychological condition, unless qualified to do so as a licensed healthcare practitioner.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have a basic understanding of different treatments and procedures from a variety of sources, or be able to identify and source credible and relevant information on other healthcare modalities, as needed. • Have a basic understanding of health reports obtained from a variety of sources. • Have a basic understanding of how to manage interpersonal issues that may arise in therapeutic relationships. 	
<p>3. A yoga therapist is qualified to communicate with other health professionals to:</p>	<p>A yoga therapist is NOT qualified to:</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Receive and provide referrals from and to other appropriate healthcare providers. • Be part of a multi-disciplinary team when necessary or useful to optimize the care of the client. • Engage with medical or other healthcare professionals (when appropriate) and use best-practice referral/ feedback processes to optimize client health and well-being outcomes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advise about other health treatment modalities, other than referring clients to appropriate personnel or services, unless appropriately qualified to do so. • Order diagnostic tests or procedures outside their professional areas of expertise or qualifications. • Interpret raw medical or psychological diagnostic test results, unless qualified to do so as a licensed healthcare practitioner. • Prescribe medication, unless qualified to do so as a licensed healthcare practitioner. • Prescribe nutritional supplements or herbs from Western or traditional medical methods such as Chinese Medicine or Ayurveda, unless appropriately qualified to do so. • Advise clients about ceasing medication prescribed by another healthcare practitioner, unless qualified to do so as a licensed healthcare practitioner. • Perform any invasive procedures, unless qualified to do so as a licensed healthcare practitioner. • Make recommendations regarding the advice or treatment provided by another healthcare professional, unless appropriately qualified to do so.

Scope of Practice for Yoga Therapy

<p>4. As part of their professional practice, a yoga therapist is required to:</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Meet the requirements for certification as an IAYT-Certified Yoga Therapist, by way of either graduation from an IAYT-accredited program, or by having met IAYT's requirements for certification under alternate pathways.• Maintain all qualifications and ongoing continuing education requirements.• Maintain certification with IAYT.• Maintain confidentiality of client information, including health records.• Comply with the IAYT Code of Ethics and Professional Responsibilities.• Observe all applicable state or other local jurisdiction laws relating to the practice of healthcare.	
<p>5. As part of their professional practice, a yoga therapist is encouraged to:</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Acquire a basic understanding of current yoga evidence-based practices.• Maintain a network of healthcare practitioner peers for the purpose of referrals.	

1 The full IAYT definition of yoga therapy can be found [here](#).

2 The term therapeutic plan refers to the implementation of yoga therapy and does not imply providing any medical treatment.

3 Assessment refers to assessing a client's presenting condition(s) and underlying cause(s) according to the yoga therapy framework and determining the appropriate yoga therapy goals, priorities, and tools useful for improving the client's condition. It does not include any medical assessment, but may be informed by a medical assessment report provided by a referring healthcare practitioner.

4 Dietary advice refers to advice relating to foods that may support or hinder a client's progress toward well-being, according to the tradition in which the yoga therapist is trained. It does not include the prescribing of herbs or other nutritional supplements, nor imply that a yoga therapist is a nutritionist or Ayurvedic practitioner, unless he/she has other appropriate qualifications.

5 A yoga therapist may need to support and assist a client's proprioceptive and/or interoceptive awareness and/or alignment through appropriate use of touch. If clear consent has been provided by a client/student, yoga therapy sessions may be supported by the use of appropriate touch, the documentation for which is noted in client records. The full definition of consented touch can be found [here](#).