

YogaTherapyinPractice

Yoga Therapy Online: Incorporating Technology into Practice

We have a growing opportunity to reach more people who could benefit from yoga therapy, and it is vital for the field to embrace these technologies to stay relevant and accessible.

By Ann Swanson

I have been incorporating technology, particularly video, into my yoga therapy business since the beginning. I started doing yoga videos by simply posting them on YouTube, with the main intention of sharing with my students. Then, one of my YouTube videos led to filming a video series through a yoga subscription website. Alongside my own advances online, yoga subscription sites like Gaia, YogaGlo, and DOYOUYOGA have steadily gained in popularity. Although these offerings have value for many people, from a therapeutic perspective prerecorded videos like these are not appropriate for everybody. They do not offer the individualized attention or the energy of a one-on-one connection in real time. Online live video yoga therapy can be a safe and effective option.

Many students are resistant to going to in-person small group or one-on-one yoga therapy for reasons of inconvenience, inaccessibility, or even embarrassment. Online sessions offer solutions to these barriers. For busy people, there is no need to drive (or arrange a ride), find parking, or factor in the weather to get to a session. For those with physical disabilities, there are no stairs to climb or crowds to navigate. Chase Bossart, MA, C-IAYT, E-RYT 500, now does live video sessions with about a third of his yoga therapy clients and is one of several experienced yoga therapists I interviewed for this article. He told me, “If people are really sick, just getting out and coming to see you may be a big energy drain. It has been lovely to offer an online option.”

The time commitment needed—in addition to the session itself—is often just 10–15 minutes, which is the time it usually takes to set up the computer or tablet and troubleshoot any difficulties. I have even had a caregiver set up the computer for a 90-year-old client. Once both student (or caregiver) and teacher have adjusted to this small added energy commitment, yoga therapy becomes exceptionally accessible and convenient by creating a safe place at home to practice. Students use the furniture and props they have available, thereby making a sustainable home practice that they are more likely to continue. Those who, as mentioned above, may normally be hesitant to join a class due to their limitations have another workable option to get the personalized attention they need.

For many populations, online yoga therapy may be just as effective as traditional in-person sessions. A recent study that compared yoga for veterans via telehealth (online video) with in-person yoga concluded: “Those who participated via telehealth did not differ from those who participated in-person in any measure of satisfaction, overall improvement..., or improvement in any of 16 specific health problems.”¹ Yoga therapy delivered remotely may also be of use in particular clinical situations, such as for immunocompromised patients undergoing radiation, or simply for increasing practice adherence even among populations who *could* readily leave their homes.

Other fields have embraced online sessions, including traditional psychotherapy, consulting, and health coaching. However, I found that at this time few yoga therapists do this work. We have a growing opportunity to reach more people who could benefit from yoga therapy, and it is vital for the field to embrace these technologies to stay relevant and accessible.

The Challenges of Therapy Online

I was resistant to doing yoga therapy online at first. I remember asking myself: With online video, can I offer an experience that is truly valuable and achieves the positive benefits of yoga therapy? I had to weigh the pros and cons for myself.

Undeniable challenges may explain why talk therapy and coaching have taken to online platforms more readily than yoga therapy. Steffany Moonaz, PhD, C-IAYT, leads a health-coaching program that includes significant online communication. She comments that yoga therapy often incorporates more nuances than coaching, like observation of breath, energy, and physical alignment. “These are three-dimensional issues that don’t necessarily translate on a screen.... It is harder to ensure safety, to see someone from all angles, to observe subtleties of muscle engagement, tightness, weakness, etc.,” she says.

As a practitioner who often incorporates a physical assessment in my yoga therapy sessions, I also had my doubts about working online. However, I have learned to adapt my intake protocol to rely more on visual assessment of asana rather than hands-on musculoskeletal assessment. Now, my sessions focus more on meditative inquiry, pranayama, and simpler asanas to stay safe. Soleil Hepner, C-IAYT, explains that after starting to offer one-on-one video Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy sessions, she became a lot clearer about articulating the dialogue component of the work and has since been enhancing her skills to develop an even stronger connection. Your offerings will also have to adapt and evolve with this new format.

Although Hepner says she sometimes misses the opportunity to incorporate touch, she believes a better client experience is possible when working remotely with those with trauma, where safety is an issue. She comments: “It is very interesting to allow our clients to use self-touch, like putting their hand at their heart, to take ownership of their own body. This builds self-empowerment.”

Bossart says, “I am really stunned by the potential of technology. I used to think that too much would be compromised. Now, I think that, ease of physical observation and response aside, whatever may be compromised is not a key component.... I can feel that the energetics are not significantly lost through the computer.”

A way to minimize obstacles is to offer online sessions only to clients with whom you have already worked in person, including having obtained a full assessment and the development of a rapport. Ena Burrud, C-IAYT, and iRest certified teacher, offers live video sessions to her clients when they are traveling or just can’t manage to make it to her office in Fort Collins, Colorado. She says, “Frankly, I haven’t had any challenges. It has been a very smooth transition to FaceTime, having already established a relationship.” She comments that the format creates autonomy and the self-efficacy to integrate the tools she teaches because she is not in the room. Although Burrud

would prefer to be able to see her clients' whole bodies, she says she can pick up on a surprising amount of subtleties, including observation of breath changes, facial twitches, and shifts in posture to inform her delivery of the practice.

Both Hepner and Burrud fell into offering yoga therapy in this format when their beloved students asked for more options to connect. Students asked me for distance sessions, too, but I resisted even though I was already offering yoga teacher mentoring via FaceTime. In those sessions, I had begun to integrate opening meditations, embodied movement (as I learned from a Phoenix Rising Level I training), and other therapeutic tools. With many successful sessions, special moments, and encouraging feedback, I became more confident in the transformative power of offering one-on-one live video yoga therapy sessions. I, too, fell into this work when I moved from Virginia to Colorado and several of my long-term clients wanted to continue working with me. Now, I have more clients and have refined the process. I have learned a lot that I would like to share—from technology tips to practical considerations.

Simple Tech Tips

Can you imagine Krishnamacharya conducting live video classes on an iPad? I can! Krishnamacharya was an innovator with a lot of ingenuity; he adapted the practice of yoga to suit individuals and the times in which he lived. He was not afraid to try something new.

However, new can be scary. When I started, I was overwhelmed with questions like how to do the intake and which video service to use. Consider the following tech tips, but keep in mind that technology changes fast. Consider these as a starting point for doing your own research.

Set up Payment Methods

Some of my clients pay me via Stripe (a service used when people hit “purchase” on the website I made through Squarespace) and some pay through an invoice I send them via PayPal. I even have a long-term client who prefers to send me checks in the mail. (I would only use this method with someone I know and trust.) Of all the current available options, I prefer to integrate PayPal and Stripe as payment options on my scheduling service, Acuity.

Offer a Digital Intake

This step may not be relevant to you if you only plan on transitioning current clients to an option of distance sessions. However, if you do need to do an intake, consider convenience and privacy in the process.

You can attach your intake to an email or build an intake form on a service like Google Forms, Survey Monkey, or Wufoo. Acuity Scheduling also enables intake forms at the time of scheduling appointments. However, these methods may not be secure, particularly if you are attempting to be compliant with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) of 1996. Some platforms like Google will sign a Business Associate Agreement to be HIPAA compliant for covered entities when you subscribe to their paid service. Encryption software may be another option for email interactions. Consider HIPAA compliance and tell your clients what you are doing to keep their information as secure as possible. No matter which path you take, do your best to ensure privacy by building habits like changing your passwords often.



Swanson, top right, conducts an online yoga therapy session.

Use the Right Platform

Widely used live video platforms include Skype, FaceTime (free but only available for Apple users as of now), and Zoom (requires a monthly payment if your sessions are over 40 minutes). Hepner and the team at Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy use Zoom for its convenience and flexibility. She says she thought technology skills and age would be a barrier, but “it’s not an issue when you are able to send a link. Now, everyone has email and can just click the link I send, making it simple for even those who are not tech savvy.”

Choose Your Device

You don’t need the fanciest computer or camera (usually cameras are built in anyway), but you do need a big enough screen to see clearly. A larger tablet may work. Either way, make sure you put the video in full-screen mode and position the device to be secure. For example, I put my computer on a chair.

Set up Your Sound

Make sure you and your client can hear each other. If the platform you choose sometimes has a delay in the video/sound, prioritize the sound. For example, when I used Skype, I used my phone for the audio and muted the audio on Skype. If there is no delay (Zoom tends to have less delay), you only need to decide whether to use the speakers or headphones. I prefer to use wireless Bluetooth headphones to allow me to hear clearly, eliminate background noise, and still be able to walk away from the computer to demonstrate poses.

Be Prepared to Be Tech Support

This may be the most intimidating of all of these tips. Inevitably, there will be times when something goes wrong and your client will need help. You need to be calm and help them troubleshoot the issue.

When all else fails, remember my practical tip that has earned me the joking title of “tech guru” with many of my students: simply tell the student to restart the device. Then, be ready to hold space for any tech anxiety your client may feel. This presents an opportunity to integrate a relevant meditation to use in similar life situations.

Practical Considerations

Ensure Privacy

In addition to securing privacy to the best of your abilities digitally, it is vital to ensure privacy in other ways. If you happen to be sharing your space with others, you need to inform those people, close the door, and put up a sign to make sure no one forgets and comes in. I have even put a note on my front door to prevent anyone from ringing the doorbell. Likewise, when opening each session, Bossart asks his client if they are alone and free to talk openly.

Eliminate Digital Distractions

At the beginning of the session, put your phone away, turn off all social notifications, and close all other tabs.

Control Visibility

All you need is a well-lit room with enough space. Ideally, use natural light through windows in front of you or to the sides (not back lit) with artificial light to supplement. Test the lighting 10–15 minutes before you start.

Throughout the class you or your student may need to tilt the camera on the computer or turn the screen of the tablet, for instance, when going from the floor to standing. Expect to do this when necessary, but also consider letting it go and simplifying the session when it becomes inconvenient.

Try Homemade Props

Be creative by incorporating chairs, couch pillows, and other improvised props. For example, a bolster can be crafted with towels or blankets tightly wrapped and stuffed in a long pillow case.

Be Professional

As with in-person sessions, it’s important to have contracts and agreements on procedures such as cancellation and payment.

Keeping the Personal Connection

An essential component of my yoga therapy sessions has always been the personal connection—the fact that I care. To maintain that touch, I make and send personalized cards for holidays (usually Valentine’s Day, birthdays, and the anniversaries of when we started working together). I take note when there is an important interview or event in the lives of my clients and reach out with simple, timely comments like “Good luck.” As a part of my package, I send a follow-up email that includes a list of the new poses, practices, and realizations from the session.

Even with all the business and tech considerations in the endeavor of offering live video yoga therapy sessions, it is vital to find ways to make the experience as special and unique as your in-person offerings. I hope more yoga therapists will adapt these suggestions, making online options available and yoga therapy more accessible. **YTT**

Reference

1. Schulz-Heik, R. J., Meyer, H., Mahoney, L., Stanton, M. V., Cho, R. H., Moore-Downing, D. P., ... Bayley, P. J. (2017). Results from a clinical yoga program for veterans: Yoga via telehealth provides comparable satisfaction and health improvements to in-person yoga. *BMC Complementary and Alternative Medicine*, 17(1), 198. <http://doi.org/10.1186/s12906-017-1705-4>



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Ann Swanson, MS, C-IAYT, E-RYT 500, LMT, BCTMB (www.AnnSwansonWellness.com), makes yoga therapy accessible and helps people relieve pain through creative pose modifications, practical tools to use throughout the day, and technology like live video. Ann earned a master’s of science degree in yoga therapy at Maryland University of Inte-