Facilitating safe and supportive yoga for people experiencing an eating disorder: A Yoga Instructor's Guide



Introduction

Key features of yoga such as grounding, mindful movement and breath awareness and regulation may be particularly supportive for individuals experiencing an eating disorder. When shared in a way that is responsive to participants' emotional and physical needs, yoga can lead to many positive benefits including improved body awareness and embodiment, emotional regulation, increased mindfulness, and enhanced self-compassion. These benefits may also contribute to reduced distress associated with eating disorders such as preoccupation with food, fear of weight gain, and negative body image experiences.

Recent studies have described yoga as a safe and suitable transdiagnostic adjunct therapy, with potential benefits for individuals with anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge-eating disorder. With the right safeguards in place, yoga may be safely incorporated at various stages of treatment to support therapeutic goals when medical stability is established and the practice is delivered gently, adaptively, and alongside ongoing eating disorder treatment.

Yoga instructors can play an important role in facilitating yoga experiences that feel supportive, grounding, and accessible. Therefore, this guide has been developed to support yoga instructors with delivering yoga programs and classes that are safe, inclusive and responsive to the unique needs of individuals experiencing an eating disorder.

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Purpose

The purpose of this guide is to provide yoga instructors with practical guidance and important considerations to safely and effectively deliver yoga programs to individuals experiencing an eating disorder including individuals with anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge-eating disorder.

Informed by expert consensus from Trethewey et.al. (2025), this guide outlines key considerations that contribute to safe and trauma-informed yoga practice.

This guide is organised to provide recommendations across the following areas:

- Instructor responsibilities and collaborative care
- Safe and supportive practice
- Environment and equipment
- Supportive class delivery and facilitation
- Language and expression
- Techniques and practices.

Instructor responsibilities and collaborative care

Yoga instructors who work with individuals experiencing eating disorders play an important role in creating a safe and supportive environment. The following outlines important considerations and requirements to help ensure that yoga is delivered safely and in partnership with participants' broader treatment plan.

It is important that instructors:

- Hold training and have experience in **trauma-informed practice**.
- **Hold training and have experience** specific to safe and effective yoga classes for individuals with eating disorders.
- Receive **on-going supervision or mentoring** from an eating disorder clinician.
- Offer yoga only to participants who are **medically safe and stable**, and who have been **cleared for gentle movement** by their treating doctor.
- Where consent is given, **maintain open and collaborative communication** with the participant's treatment team to ensure the yoga program aligns with and supports participant's treatment goals.
- Have **knowledge of potential medical and trauma comorbidities** and respond appropriately to signs of distress.
- Support participants by **following the maximum frequency, class duration, and total number of sessions** recommended by their treatment team.
- **Work within an appropriate scope of practice**, gently redirecting any clinical, nutritional or psychological questions or concerns to the participant's treatment team.
- Be mindful of scheduling considerations, ensuring **classes do not conflict with scheduled meals**.

Safe and supportive yoga practice

When designing, planning or modifying yoga programs and sequencing yoga classes, it is important that the following principles are considered:

- It is important to **be aware that eating disorders occur right across the weight spectrum**: body size or weight alone do not tell you whether someone has an eating disorder, nor what eating disorder they may have. Yoga instructors should take care not to make recommendations or assumptions based on appearance (with the exception of natural adjustments which would be made to accommodate body shape and capacity).
- Use **slow and gentle practices**, with predictable pacing and **avoiding Hot or Bikram-style classes**.
- Use **trauma-informed approaches** that emphasise safety, choice and internal awareness.
- **Offer poses in their simplest form** and **suitable modifications** that accommodate different capacities, and individual needs.
- Take time to **understand each participant's circumstances** including injuries, physical limitations, concerns, and relevant factors related to their journey.
- Offer opportunities for participants to **rest between or after postures**.





Environment and equipment

A supportive environment to practice yoga is important for ensuring yoga feels safe and comfortable. It is recommended that instructors offer appropriate spaces that promote emotional and physical ease and are supportive of individuals experiencing an eating disorder.

Environment

Instructors are encouraged to choose settings and spaces that:

- Are **accessible, well-ventilated**, and provide **access to drinking water**.
- Are **not within competitive environments** such as some gym settings, to minimise exposure to performance- or weight-focused messages.
- **Do not contain mirrors, reflective surfaces, or visible medical equipment**, particularly in the practice room, to reduce body- or clinically oriented concerns and triggers.
- Room heating should **remain between 21°C and 24°C**.
- The **lighting should not be harsh**, but bright enough for participants to see the instructor.



Social environment considerations

Where possible and appropriate, instructors may consider:

- Offering **smaller group sizes** to increase participants' ease and support the development of group cohesion.
- Including **a range of participants such as carers and consumers** as this may help model inclusivity and offer comfort to participants.
- **Involving eating disorder clinicians to support the integration of yoga** with other eating disorder treatments, particularly when yoga programs are provided within eating disorder treatment settings or contexts.

Equipment

To enhance comfort and accessibility, instructors are encouraged to:

- **Provide supportive prop options** such as blocks, bolsters, blankets and thicker mats to enhance comfort and accessibility. *(Hint: participants may find it helpful and welcoming if props and mats are assembled before they arrive).*
- **Provide advice about any additional props** the participant may wish to bring for supportive cushioning.
- Reassure participants that wearing **comfortable, non-restrictive clothing** is appropriate and encouraged.

Condition specific notes

Anorexia nervosa:

- Yoga programs should be **held within a treatment facility or be aligned with a treatment service**.

Supportive class delivery and facilitation

A clear, predictable and gently paced class structure can help participants feel grounded and supported throughout their yoga practice. Instructors are encouraged to guide classes in ways that reduce overwhelm and uncertainty, minimise performance pressure, and encourage internal awareness and embodiment. When facilitating yoga classes it can be helpful to consider the following:

- **Gain consent** from participants any time physical assistance is to be offered, prioritising participant autonomy and comfort.
- **Clarify and address participants' expectations of yoga**, providing reassurance that yoga will be restorative and gentle.
- Continue to offer **poses in their simplest form and include suitable modifications** and adaptations for people at different stages of their journey, capacity, and meets individual needs.
- Offer a slower approach to transitions (e.g., when moving from lying to standing positions).
- Where appropriate, offer **demonstrations that are clearly visible** to all participants. Verbal instructions during demonstrations should be clear and easy to follow. Where appropriate, it is recommended that demonstrations mirror participants to reduce left-right confusion.
- **Encourage participants to be curious** when they identify poses that feel good.
- If appropriate and safe, **encourage participants to return to poses that bring a sense of comfort**. *(Hint: consider including planned rest postures throughout the practice to give participants space to pause, rest, or take time out when needed.)*
- It may be helpful to **offer meaningful affirmations or intentions (samkalpa)** as part of the practice.
- At the end of each class, **offer grounding techniques and provide a debrief** to offer participants the opportunity to ask questions about the session or share how they found the class or particular pose/practice.



Language and expression

Communication plays an important role in creating a supportive yoga experience for individuals with eating disorders. Language should promote autonomy, inclusivity and a compassionate connection with the body and self. It is recommended that instructors consider the following:

- Use **gentle, invitational, and values-aligned language** that promotes positive attitudes and behaviours. Ensure language is **noncompetitive, non-discriminatory** and focused on **functionality rather than appearance**.
- Use **neutral, non-judgemental language** that is **considerate** when referring to the body, particularly parts of the body that may bring negative attention for individuals.
- **Reinforce autonomy and choice**, reminding participants they may pause, rest or modify at any time.
- Ensure **food-related topics are avoided** during sessions.

Techniques and practices

This section outlines the suitability of specific postures, breathing practices and meditation techniques for individuals with anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and bing-eating disorder as identified by peers with extensive professional experience in delivering yoga to individuals with eating disorders.

The following traffic-light system is intended to help instructors identify practices that are generally supportive and safe, practices that may require caution, and practices that are not recommended. Some modifications to certain postures may be required according to the student's body size and shape. Other modifications may be indicated due to the potential impacts of the illness, e.g., blood pressure, heart rate, poor bone density, low hydration, etc.

These recommendations should always be applied alongside clinical guidance and individual participant feedback.

POSTURES

The following table outlines the safety considerations related to postural practices used in yoga for individuals with anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge-eating disorder:

Safe **Use with caution, not recommended without modifications** **Not recommended, avoid**

Posture / Practice	Recommendation	Notes
Coordinating breath with the flow of movement		—
Restorative postures		—
Warrior pose		—
Star pose		—
Supine pigeon		—
Legs up the wall		—
Supine spinal twist		—
Chest/heart opening		—
Tree pose		—
Low cobra		Not recommended without modifications for AN
Mountain pose		Not recommended without modifications for AN
Bridge pose		Modifications may be required
Forward folds		Modifications may be required
Backbends		Modifications may be required

Posture / Practice	Recommendation	Notes
Goddess pose		Not recommended for AN & BN
Postures are mainly in a seated position		—
Sun salutations		Not recommended
Downward-facing dog		Not recommended
Inversions		Not recommended. Must be avoided in AN.
Long holding of postures		Not recommended. Must be avoided in AN
Arm balances		Not recommended. Must be avoided in AN & BN.

AN – anorexia nervosa; BN – bulimia nervosa; BED – binge-eating disorder.

MEDITATION TECHNIQUES

The following table outlines the safety considerations related to meditation techniques and practices used in yoga for individuals with anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge-eating disorder:

Safe **Use with caution, not recommended without modifications** **Not recommended, avoid**

Technique	Recommendation	Notes
Mindful awareness to the breath, thoughts, feelings, and sensations		—
Structured guided meditation		—
The repetition of meaningful words, phrases, or chanting (mantra)		—
Meditations have a calming and restorative effect		—
Meditation at the beginning and end of each class		—

BREATHING TECHNIQUES

The following table outlines the safety considerations related to breathing techniques used in yoga for individuals with anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge-eating disorder:

Safe **Use with caution, not recommended without modifications** **Not recommended, avoid**

Technique	Recommendation	Notes
Education in basic breath awareness		—
A focus on regulating the breath to be calm and steady		—
Deep breathing		—
Abdominal breathing		—
Focus on exhalation		—
“Humming bee” breath (bhramari)		—
Alternate nostril breathing (nadi suddhi)		—
Left-nostril breathing		—
Cooling breath (sitali)		—
Breath of Joy		Not recommended for AN & BED
A focus on inhalation		Not recommended for BED
A focus on holding the breath after inhalation		Not recommended for BED. Must be avoided for AN.
Right nostril breathing, especially on inhalation		Not recommended for BN & BED
A focus on holding the breath after exhalation		Not recommended
Breath of fire (kapalabhati)		Not recommended. Must be avoided for BN & BED
Three-part breath (deerga swasam)		Not recommended
Lion’s breath (simha)		Not recommended

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For more information please visit **https://lifespan.deakin.edu.au/our-resources/** or contact **mirthlab@deakin.edu.au**.

References:

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