

YogaTherapyinPractice

Self-Care: Because Healing Begins with the Health of Your Self

By Olga Kabel

Does your yoga therapy practice still energize you, inspire you, and give you a sense of fulfillment—or are you just going through the motions? Burnout is a serious and common issue with all health professionals. According to the Mayo Clinic, recent rates of physician burnout in the United States average about 50%, and healthaffairs.org reports that burnout for nurses ranges between 34% and 70% depending on their place of employment.

Yoga therapists are not immune to burnout. As we take on more and more clients, cope with the logistics of running our practices, and spend time planning and keeping records of our sessions, it can be easy to lose track of our own needs.



In his book *Yoga for Transformation: Ancient Teachings and Practices for Healing the Body, Mind, and Heart*, Gary Kraftsow, MA, C-IAYT, E-RYT 500, expands on the analogy of an “imperfect vessel” to represent our ability to receive, absorb, and contain spiritual teachings. I believe that the same image could be applied to yoga therapists. As yoga therapists, we need to *have our own vessels full* to maintain presence, vitality, and confidence in our skills to be able to show up for clients, hold space for them, and guide them on their journeys. If our vessels are empty, whatever we teach will ring hollow.

In addition, the yoga tradition recognizes that if we are planning to be vibrant, healthy human beings, we need to consider all the components that make up our systems: physical structure, physiological processes, the content of our minds, our ideas and attitudes toward our surroundings, and our sense of longing for connection to something greater than ourselves. The *panchamaya kosha* (five sheaths) model is a way to organize our thinking when it comes to different layers of our systems and to understand our needs on each one of those levels. Let’s use both the metaphor of imperfect vessels and the *panchamaya kosha* model to gain a better understanding about the types of burnout we might experience and how we can address it on each level of our systems.

Imperfect Vessels

There are several ways in which we can start losing our connection to yogic tradition and experience teaching burnout.

The upside-down vessel represents fundamental disorientation. This happens when we ignore our own needs, keep pushing forward, and wind up in complete denial about our burnout. Yoga therapists who are represented by the image of an upended vessel are unaware of their own depletion, refuse to accept it, or are unable to envision that things could be different. Unfortunately, in situations like that, a yoga therapist might have to hit the wall to realize that something is not right. The traditional view is that you cannot turn over the upside-down vessel until you wake up to the reality of it.

The dirty vessel represents a yoga therapist whose vision has been clouded by something else. They might be dealing with serious physical, spiritual, or mental-emotional issues that cloud their judgment and make them transfer their own woes and worries onto clients. Although none of us can be completely impartial and objective and we all view the world through the lens of our past and present experiences, we also need to keep our eyes and minds open to different possibilities, avoid transference and countertransference as best we can, and hold space for clients to go through their own process. In cases like this, we need to purify the vessel; this could be accomplished by proactively dealing with our own issues, keeping our unrelated opinions to ourselves; emphasizing *svadhyaya* (self-study) in our personal yoga practices; and/or going on a retreat, self-guided or otherwise.

The leaky vessel represents a yoga therapist who is unable to maintain their practice while building and sustaining energy in their own system. This type of leakage might be happening because of internal and external distractions, lifestyle choices, taking on more than can be handled, or neglecting self-care. Yoga therapists who find themselves in this situation need to honestly examine their choices (the amount of sleep they get and why, the number of clients taken on and why, etc.), make necessary adjustments (seal the leaks), and use their personal yoga practices to replenish their energy and improve focus.

The tilted vessel represents a yoga therapist who is able to maintain steady energy levels and provide necessary help and support to clients but falls short of achieving their full potential. This can happen when we get stuck in a rut and persist in interpreting and applying the teachings the same way over and over. This type of approach indicates that we got comfortable and stopped growing. We no longer seek out new information, either from external sources or our own practices, and we keep doing the same thing the same way because it worked in the past. In situations like this, we need to right the vessel by encouraging our inspiration and curiosity through new experiences, information, and perspectives. Those could be found in books, blogs, studies, continuing education courses, and regular communications with other yoga professionals.

Practice saying “no” to nonessential tasks, to projects that don’t fit with your current vision, and even to clients who are not a good match.

Did you recognize yourself in one of those images? Do you feel like you need to purify your vessel, seal the leaks, or right the vessel? We need to remember to take care of ourselves as humans and as yoga professionals to overcome or prevent teaching burnout. And because each of us is a multidimensional human being who has all sorts of needs beyond the strictly physical, let’s use the koshas to reflect on what kind of strategies we can use to attend to each level of our systems.

Entry Points to Wellness

The balance at the *annamaya* level (the physical body) is traditionally defined by how well we manage our aches and pains, the feeling of lightness in the body, our ability to withstand change, and an overall sense of stability and ease. Here are some suggestions that will help keep your annamaya kosha in balance.

- Remember that you have a body. This is particularly important if you sit a lot in funky positions during the day (e.g., sideways on the floor) or are in a habit of demonstrating different movements for clients. Taking care of your body with an asana practice or any other physical activity needs to be a priority in your self-care routine.
- Get outside. Shuttling between your home and your therapy office might become your only opportunity to step foot outside during the day. If you conduct your sessions virtually, you might end up spending the entire day in front of your screen. If it’s difficult for you to just take a break and get out, you may have to invent reasons to go places to give your walks some purpose. I find that spending at least 30 minutes outside every day helps keep me energized and grounded.
- Leave room for change. Having a strict schedule for every day might be useful, but we also need to allow for things that don’t go according to plan. Weather might get bad, you might get a pain in the neck, clients might cancel sessions, other clients might need more time and support—unexpected and unplanned things happen all the time. Instead of getting frustrated about the change of plans, you might use the opportunity to flex your resilience muscles and practice adapting to circumstances. Then someday, when dramatic change comes your way, it will be easier to roll with it.
- Give yourself enough rest, breaks, and free time. We all need the time and space to gain clarity about what we want and need. Time and space to think, to read, to breathe. Most of us do not get this by default; we need to build it into our lives intentionally. As yoga therapists, we know how important creating space is for mental clarity, yet we can be as guilty as anybody else of overstuffing our calendars. The best way to protect that precious me-time is to insert it into your days as a reliable habit: Set it up as

a regular morning walk, or a breathing practice after teaching, or journaling after lunch, or meditation before dinner, or reading before bed—whatever appeals to you and helps you slow down and reconnect to your own needs.

The balance at the *pranamaya* level (the physiological and energetic body) is defined by proper organ function, sustainable sleep patterns, ongoing stress management, steady energy, and a sense of vitality. Here are some suggestions that will help keep your pranamaya kosha in balance.

- Keep track of your energy and stress levels. It is very informative to take note of how our bodies respond to different tasks to understand our general energetic state. Do you get recharged by working with others, or do you feel depleted? Does it depend on the client? Does doing paperwork or answering emails drain your energy? Is there a way to arrange these tasks so that this doesn’t happen? Staying aware of the deposits and withdrawals from your energetic bank account via regular check-ins can help you better organize your days and balance out your energy.
- Give yourself enough sleep opportunities. Even when people believe that they function well when lacking sleep, objectively they do not perform optimally. The bottom line is that sleep is the single most important thing we can do to reset our brain and body health each day. Research shows time and again that we function best when we give ourselves at least an 8-hour sleep opportunity each night.
- Create space in which to thrive. This means setting up your life in a way that inspires you. This has nothing to do with living in a cave or denouncing all material possessions but has everything to do with figuring out what it takes every single day for you to feel re-energized and authentic in your yoga therapy work. It serves as a foundation and a jumping-off point for your teaching.

The balance at the *manomaya* level (the mental and emotional body) is defined by our ability to direct and maintain attention, to make educated choices, to continuously acquire knowledge (learning), and to retain information (memory). Here are some suggestions to keep your manomaya kosha clear and clean.

- Exercise your ability to choose. Yoga professionals can be particularly prone to taking on much more than they can comfortably manage, with or without financial incentives. Your time is a limited resource, so it’s up to you how you allocate it. In addition, when you give in to other people’s agendas, you lose your ability to choose your own priorities. If you do not choose for yourself, somebody else will choose for you. Practice saying “no” to nonessential tasks, to projects that don’t fit with your current vision, and even to clients who are not a good match.
- Pace your studies. Ongoing studies on yoga and health-related topics are essential to keep us educated, inspired, and up to date. However, the subjects of both yoga and healthcare are vast; they can encompass the entirety of our experience. There will never be a shortage of fascinating stuff to learn, but it’s easy to get overwhelmed and pulled in different directions. The best thing we can do when it

comes to learning is to pace ourselves. It also helps to choose the subject that is relevant to you right now. For example, you can seek out a quality continuing education course on the health condition that a client is dealing with, or you might take a course on business organization and client management to better organize your practice. Alternatively, you can read a book that simply arouses your curiosity and makes you feel inspired. Once you make your choice, “pick it and stick with it.” It makes much more sense to focus on one continuing education course or one book at a time so that you can give it your full attention and pause to connect it to your existing knowledge.

- Remember why you are doing what you do in the first place. It is essential to regularly remind yourself why you chose this path. Did the teachings have a profound effect on your own life? Did you choose to become a yoga therapist because you wanted to help people experience a similar transformation? Whatever got you interested in the subject of yoga therapy and kept you motivated as you went through years of training can be a motivation to keep you going. When things become hectic, it's useful to return to the basics and remind yourself of what matters most to YOU.

The balance at the *vijnanamaya* level (personality and conditioning, or the wisdom body) can be usefully mapped by the chakra model. As a yoga therapist, do you feel spiritual, intuitive, expressive, connected, powerful, creative, and secure?

Yoga therapists are not immune to burnout. As we take on more and more clients, cope with the logistics of running our practices, and spend time planning and keeping records of our sessions, it can be easy to lose track of our own needs.

Here are some suggestions to keep your *vijnanamaya* kosha in balance:

- Plug into your lineage or connect to a teacher you find inspirational. When you plug an electric appliance into an outlet and flip the switch, the rush of electricity brings it to life and enables it to do whatever it is supposed to do. When you are able to connect to the wisdom, insight, and depth of knowledge of your yoga lineage, you experience the same surge that brings new energy and inspiration. Use your yoga practice to regularly reconnect to the yogic teachings that inspire you and/or to a yoga teacher who embodies the teachings. There is nothing like being in the presence of a yoga teacher who is “plugged in,” meaning connected to their tradition and immersed in their practice. Regular contact with a teacher like that will elevate your teaching and support you on your path forward.
- Analyze your expectations of yourself. Those expectations will depend on the mental image you have of what an ideal yoga therapist should be. Often this involves stereotypical

strictures—for example, you “should” be vegetarian, wake up at sunrise, never get angry, practice yoga for hours every day, work with everybody who asks, never care about financial compensation, never feel tension, and so on. Such assumptions can burrow into our subconscious minds and cause us to feel chronically inadequate and that we can never measure up. These ideas need to be brought to the surface and examined in our personal practices.

- Find time to play. In addition to just being fun, play helps you to see possibilities and make connections that you wouldn't have noticed otherwise. Play also has a positive effect on the executive function of the brain because it stimulates the areas involved in both careful, logical reasoning and carefree, unbound exploration.



- Cultivate stability. If you are a practicing yoga therapist, you are probably in the “householder” stage of life. You are busy with responsibilities and trying to juggle your career, children, aging parents, and all the other concerns that come with adulthood. At this stage of life what we need most is stability at every level: structural stability to keep the body healthy; physiological immunity to keep us resilient; emotional balance to manage the challenges that come our way; and financial stability to provide for ourselves and our families. When it comes to your professional life, stability can be represented by having organizational systems in place that make your therapy practice run more smoothly, establishing additional revenue streams that do not require your presence, building a network of referrals that provides a steady stream of new clients, and so on. Figure out what helps you to feel stable and secure and then spend time intentionally building that foundation.

The balance at the *anandamaya* level (the blissful body, or one's sense of Awe) is defined by your relationship with your family, community, humanity, and the cosmos. This deepest layer of joy is meant to illuminate our physical bodies, energy and physiology, and thoughts and behavior. Here are some suggestions to keep your *anandamaya* in tune.

- Spend quality time with your loved ones. Your work schedule shouldn't interfere with your family time. As yoga therapists, we spend so much time listening to clients' stories that we might lack the energy and time to listen to the stories of the ones closest to us. This is unfair to them and detrimental to our relationships. It is essential to create opportunities for ourselves and for others to talk things through and to listen to our family members without judgment or impatience.
- Build your professional *sangha* or tribe. It always helps to hang out with people who are on the same journey as you. We all know that some people inspire us and others drain us. Be sure to spend more time with folks who bring out the best in you and help you look at your problems in a different light. Talking through your accomplishments and your challenges with somebody who is in the same boat is both liberating and inspiring.
- Find joy in everyday life. What do you enjoy doing? Engaging in hobbies and activities that we find enjoyable is surprisingly effective in shifting our perspective and making us feel better about ourselves and the world around us. Those joyful things don't need to be big, dramatic, or profound. Identify whatever it is that gives you joy and try to do it more often.
- Connect to something greater with ritual or prayer. A traditional way to tap into our inner bliss is by connecting to something larger than ourselves. It doesn't matter what spiritual or religious tradition you follow—if there is a prayer that fills your heart with joy, you can always reach for it when you need a reminder of what's truly important. And ritual is any action, no matter how mundane, that you infuse with meaning, even if this meaning is uniquely yours. Simple rituals related to yoga include lighting a candle, putting fresh flowers in your practice space, or simply rolling out the mat mindfully or bringing the palms together in *anjali mudra* (prayer gesture). Your ritual can be simple or elaborate, but whatever you choose to do, make sure that it means something to YOU.

A Sturdy Vessel Required

Many yoga therapists are faced with new challenges as we try to navigate a world that has changed seemingly overnight due to COVID-19. Some of us can no longer see clients in person and have had to



shift our work online, and others have scaled down or temporarily suspended our yoga therapy practices altogether. Dealing with a pandemic unprecedented in our lifetimes can turn anybody's world (or vessel) upside down and test our patience and commitment to the chosen path. Our vessels can become clouded with additional worry about managing health risks to ourselves, our families, and clients. We might leak our physical and mental energy while dealing with external and internal distractions and trying to juggle too many tasks. Or we might get our essential tasks under control but have let go of our dreams and plans for the future, becoming tilted vessels.

Whatever position we find ourselves in, we have to acknowledge that things are different now both for ourselves and for clients. Because of current uncertainty, the strategies described above are even more important. Now more than ever, we need balance at each level of our systems to maintain stability and resilience. And the most important thing we can do is to cut ourselves some slack and adjust our expectations. I read an article in *The New York Times* where a psychologist suggested that each one of us currently has an additional part-time job titled "COVID management." We cannot underestimate how much time and mental energy goes into making decisions about our health and well-being as well as the health and well-being of our families, friends, and students.

We cannot control what will happen with the virus in our communities, but we can control our responses to it. It is a perfect opportunity to practice *pratipaksha bhavana* (cognitive reframing). We can look at this time as an opportunity to reflect, readjust, reconnect, and plan ahead. **YTT**

Olga Kabel, E-RYT 500, C-IAYT, works with students individually, teaches therapeutic yoga series, and provides continuing education courses to yoga therapists. Olga is a founder of Sequence Wiz, an online yoga sequence builder and client-management system that assists yoga therapists in creating practices and keeping client records.



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