

Teaching Manual

Centering Youth, Inc.

Version 2.0 - July 2014

Centering Youth, Inc., is a non-profit, tax-exempt 501(c)(3) yoga service initiative,
Empowering Youth with Yoga and Mindfulness

Index

The Centering Youth Philosophy.....	Page 1
Class Guidelines and Agreements.....	Page 2
The Language We Use.....	Page 3
Class Components.....	Page 3
Message and Theme.....	Page 4
Opening Remarks - Moving into the Practice.....	Page 4
Check-in and Check-out.....	Page 5
Breath Work.....	Page 6
Mindfulness.....	Page 7
Asana/Postures.....	Page 7
Meditation and Savasana.....	Page 8
Conclusion and Check-out.....	Page 9
General Consideration.....	Page 9
Before You Get To and Begin the Class.....	Page 9
Liability Releases for Parents and Those Over 18.....	Page 10
Attire.....	Page 10
Avoiding Triggering Postures.....	Page 10
No Physical Assists.....	Page 11
Avoid Sanskrit Words and Religious References.....	Page 11
Use Name Tags and Gold Stars.....	Page 11
Substitutes.....	Page 12
Post-Class Report.....	Page 12

Teaching Manual

Centering Youth¹

The Centering Youth Philosophy

The goal of Centering Youth is to create a yoga and mindfulness experience in which we share tools with class participants that allow them to calm, focus and get in touch with their physical and mental selves, thus allowing each participant to turn down internal alarms, reduce mindless reaction to difficult circumstances, gain control of their decision making processes and allow them to make better decisions about themselves, their conduct and their futures.

Centering Youth classes are different than other yoga classes, in the same way a vinyasa class is different from a Bikram sequence. Our classes are “trauma-informed,” which means that they respect the circumstances the participants may have faced and the likelihood that trauma, abuse, homelessness, drugs or other life circumstances have caused them to be overwhelmed by hyper-vigilance, with their “alarms” on to an extent that makes it difficult for them to live outside their hyper-vigilance and achieve their positive goals. In addition, trauma survivors often have difficulty connecting with their physical selves (the mind-body connection) as a result of human protective mechanisms.

Thus, Centering Youth classes include a large measure of breath work and mindfulness, giving the participants tools for calming and focusing, while including a physical practice geared towards finding strength and balance in their lives.

James Fox, founder of the Prison Yoga Project, who has been leading yoga and mindfulness classes at San Quentin and other prisons for over 10 years, has made the following comments about the connection between mindfulness and the physical practice:

It's important to take a mindfulness approach—training students to discipline their minds to observe what's happening in the present moment and stay with the sensations in the body and the breath without drifting off and disconnecting. This kind of awareness needs to be practically reinforced, not just in sitting meditation, but by modeling and leading students into moments of silence to deeply reflect. For instance, I may take a full minute in surya namaskar [sun salutation] to do a mindfulness

¹ This Teacher Manual is Copyright © 2014 by Centering Youth, Inc. and may not be copied or otherwise reproduced without the written permission of Centering Youth, Inc. Such permission can be obtained by contacting Centering Youth at info@centeringyouth.org.

practice while the students stay in tadasana [mountain pose]. They're flowing and then I purposely interrupt and encourage them to reconnect with what we're really practicing—integration of mind, heart, and body. This inner strength is what they can nurture and apply to those frequent moments of unpredictability and chaos in their daily lives. I remind them that they are developing the ability to stay present and aware in the moment, so they can consciously respond to situations rather than react.

We practice yoga to calm our minds. The postures strengthen our bodies, and make us more flexible, but if we pay attention to our breath and to the sensations in the body we begin to build strength within the mind. By not just doing the postures, but by being aware while going in, being in and coming out of the postures, we connect back to our sense of self. As we practice this way we learn how to break the cycle of the looping hijacking of thoughts. When we can learn how to steady our minds, and come into a place of being and not doing, we are in the present moment and in charge of ourselves, our thoughts and our conduct.

Class Guidelines and Agreements

We recognize that each class is different, and each class develops its own personality and rhythm over time. Teaching those who are incarcerated, for example, is different than teaching a wholly voluntary class and teaching boys is different than teaching girls. Yet there are some policies and procedures which, for the most part, apply across the class spectrum.

We have found that it is important to establish an agreement with class participants and facility staff as to basic guidelines for the Yoga and Mindfulness classes. This should be communicated and discussed with facility staff before classes are initiated, with new facility staff members as the classes continue and mature, and with class participants on an ongoing basis. Basic class guidelines might include:

1. Please silence and put away all cell phones and electronics;
2. Let us know if you have any injury or are pregnant;
3. Please use the restroom before class starts;
4. Please stay in the class until the end of Savasana and the mats are put away;
5. Where appropriate, we welcome staff, parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters to participate, but there are no observers. Everyone has to be on a mat or in a place that is not clearly visible to the participants; and
6. There are some classes where participation is “voluntary,” but some people don’t want to be there, and don’t have to be there. In such cases we might find it appropriate to say, “If you do not want to do yoga, please leave now.

If you decide to stay, then we expect that you will stay on your mat through the entire class.”

Different classes may call for different agreements. Oftentimes it is important or necessary to talk about respect and gain agreement that respect includes these guidelines and keeping conversation to a minimum.

The Language We Use

As much as possible we try to remember our connection as equal human beings, and that we as teachers share the challenges our students face. We work hard to prevent an “us and them” atmosphere, which is so easy to lapse into given the obvious demographic differences between many of us and many of the participants. Bearing this mind, we try to use the terms “we” and “us” as much as possible, and avoid separating ourselves from participants by using “you” or “your problems.”

A simple example is to say, “We all face difficult situations,” rather than “You face difficult situations.” This goes a long way toward making a real human connection with the class participants.

We avoid referring to class participants as “at-risk,” and other such terms. How would *you* like to be called “at-risk.” Who is making that judgment? We are all at-risk and once we make that judgment about someone else, a division occurs.

Also, be very mindful that many words you might use may not be understood by the class participants. Keep it simple. For example, we do not tell participants to put their feet in a “parallel” position. Participants may not know what “parallel” means. We tell participants to make their feet point in the same direction (while demonstrating and looking down at our feet), or to make their feet like an “eleven.” Keep it simple.

Class Components

Once the class has begun, there are certain components that should be present in each class. These are:

- Message and Theme
- Opening Remarks - Moving into the Practice
- Check-in (Optional)
- Breath Work and Mindfulness
- Asana
- Meditation

Savasana
Check-out (Optional)

How these components are brought into the class is up to the creativity of the teachers, but each component should be employed in a manner consistent with our philosophy and teaching technique.

Message and Theme

Our over-riding message is that each of us is filled with strength and goodness and that we are each enriched by strengthening the mind-body connection, and finding calm, focus, strength and balance in our lives.

We want to communicate that, "Mindfulness means becoming more conscious of what you're feeling, more intentional about our behaviors and more attentive to our impact on others," and that through mindfulness we can get in touch with our mental and physical selves, stop reacting mindlessly to situations and challenges, move away from hyper-vigilance and become calmer, more focused and more reasoned in our decision making.

Using a class theme is a good way to focus on one aspect of this broad, positive message. Examples of class themes include: "Finding balance in our lives," "Moving beyond our comfort zones," "Can we feel our strength," "Using our breath to find calmness and focus," and "Facing challenges is like holding a pose." The possibilities are limitless and can often be found by looking inward and seeing what we, as the teachers, are faced with in our own lives. Notice how simple it is to turn a "you" problem into an "our," problem since, in reality, we all face these same issues.

Other theme ideas include the theme of, "Respect- what does that mean to each of us? How does that feel? How can this practice be about respecting ourselves and others? That is what we will work with today." Or a theme of realizing when we are not being aware of what is going on around us and within us, and how this practice asks us to be aware- to notice thoughts, feeling, physical sensation and how to work with that.

Opening Remarks - Moving into the Practice

In addition to Class Guidelines and Agreements, is there something you can start your class with that helps move away from the stress and chaos of the day and into the calm and focus that comes with our Yoga and Mindfulness class? How can we make a connection with the participants and move away from all of the static, adversity, and challenges that each of us faces on a daily basis?

One way to do that is to do a “check-in,” as described below.

Another way is to go straight into your theme. “I was thinking about the idea of, ‘Going beyond our comfort zones’ today. This class can help us work with our comfort zone, what is and is not comfortable for us and how we can use the lessons in Yoga and Mindfulness to open doors we thought might have been closed to us.”

In a recent class a young participant began looking at her phone as the class was about to begin, the teacher, pointed this out and asked, “Why do we feel so compelled to look at our phones all the time? Why do we find it so difficult to focus on what is happening here and now?”

It is also good to inform the participants, or remind them, that in the yoga room they are safe. We are all equals during this hour of yoga and mindfulness, and there is no one to threaten them or their safety. There may be times when their eyes may be closed, but our eyes are open, so they can feel safe even if their eyes are closed.

Once you are ready to begin the class, you have to make a decision as to how to start. Use the check-in to evaluate how to begin the class. A class with a low energy check-in might begin more slowly with a centering and breathing, moving into postures and movement to build energy. A higher energy check-in might lead directly into movement, with the centering and breathing coming later in the class when everyone is better able to focus.

Check-in and Check-out

As noted above, we use the check-in and check-out process to help the participants and the teachers focus on the energy in the room and individual changes that takes place during the class. This is optional, but you may find it useful for the class and for yourself.

Everyone states their name (which helps us get to each participant and their names) and says one word reflecting how they are feeling, at the beginning of class, and again at the end after Savasana. Don’t ask if the participants feel “better,” because they might not. Allow them to have their experience. The noticing differences in feelings is the key. If someone says they feel bad, acknowledge and validate their feelings and thank him or her.

Survivors of trauma (and we can assume there are trauma survivors in the room) often have no clear sense of time. They live in a hyper-vigilant mode in the right now, where both the past and future can be vague or disassociated. Coming to realize they feel differently and were safe for an hour can change and support a person’s sense of time and rhythm.

We have seen many, repeated instances where participants will come into a class feeling “tired” or “stressed” and leave the class feeling “blessed,” “calm,” or “in heaven.”

Breath Work

Every class must have breath work, either simple focused breathing or pranayama. Of all the elements of our classes, a big takeaway for participants has consistently been the calming effect of deep breathing. We have had many, many participants, from every background, report that they used what they learned about breathing to calm themselves in difficult situations, with positive results that they noticed.

It can be useful to explain to participants of all ages (during breathing exercises or during Savasana) how, when we become stressed, angry or afraid, the autonomous nervous system jumps into action and causes our hearts to race, blood pressure to rise, body to sweat and breath to become short, as we go into a “fight or flight” mode that prevents us from thinking clearly. Of all of these nervous system reactions, the only one we can readily control is our breath, and by slowing and deepening the breath the rest of the autonomous nervous system will follow and we can move away from fight or flight into calm and focus, allowing us to move away from reaction to reasoned response.

If you are teaching your first class, keep it simple. It never hurts to use simple meditative breathing at the beginning of class in order to help the participants calm, focus, and practice what they have learned about the benefits of using deep breathing to calm themselves, focus inward and get in touch with themselves. Possibly ask the participants to think of a word, like “peace” as they breath in and out.

If teaching a pranayama, explain what it is and what it does physiologically/energetically. Even focused 3 part breath can effect a change in how someone feels. Be sure to cue them to notice and feel.

If teaching So Ham, or a similar mantra, teach how and when one can use it. Teach that it can help stop the chattering mind. If they get distracted at home, at school, at work, or if they are unable to sleep, they can go back to So Ham.

Please be very conscious of how you describe any breathing technique and make sure you have a way to describe the technique that is easily understood and followed

Mindfulness

Breath work leads into mindfulness. As we continuously emphasize, breath work and mindfulness are equally important as, and go hand-in-hand with, the asana aspect of a Centering Youth class.

We use the postures to emphasize mindfulness and the mind-body connection. By creating a mindfulness theme the teacher can guide the class into noticing a concept while using the posture. For example, feeling strength while in a challenging posture such as Warrior 1 or 2, and feeling softness after releasing. Additional mindfulness themes include sensing mind, identifying mind, witnessing mind, strength and balance, self compassion, ahimsa, opening oneself to possibility, calming the restless mind, greater ease in the body, and greater clarity in the mind. The possible themes that are consistent with our goals are endless.

Asana/Postures

It is critical that we remember that it is not the posture that is important. It is how we feel in the posture that is important. Forget about what a posture is supposed to look like and cue to how it feels. Release your need for alignment. When a posture is cued from feeling, people find their own stability. Any shape with feeling and mindfulness can be yoga. Try not to build asana - try to teach feeling the body.

The practice should start with poses to begin stimulating the body, move into more vigorous postures involving repetitive movement, the use of muscles (with continued focus on breathing), postures that strengthen the physical, mental and emotional core and call for physical and mental balance, postures that are held for a period of time, and finally, postures that cool down and lead into Savasana.

Go with what you are comfortable with, but keep returning to noticing in the body. This is very important and might not be something you usually teach. Mindfulness comes from the internal cuing from us. "Press down into your feet and feel your feet, lift up through the top of your head, reach out through your finger tips. What do you feel in your arms, hands, in between your fingers?" We must ask them to feel, and ask them to consider, "What do they feel?"

Do not tell them what they feel, do not tell them that it feels good - because it might not. But we want them to come into their bodies and feel. And acknowledge that they feel, sense, know.

In the asana practice the participants can be brought into any position to hold, such as Warrior II or even a lunge. Ask the participants to hold the position, bring their focus back into their body and the posture, find their breath again, and notice what they are feeling and where they are feeling challenged in their bodies as they hold the pose. Hold the pose a little longer if they can, then move on, congratulating the participants for overcoming the physical and mental challenge, and using their breaths to focus and help overcome challenge. This process helps connect the mind and body, which is particularly important for those participants who have sustained physical trauma and have reacted by disassociating themselves from their bodies.

Start with the simplest variation of a posture and add with invitation. For example, for Warrior 1, start with everyone in a knee down lunge, adding arms, then perhaps if you want explore a bit more, curl your toes and lift the knee, noticing what happens in the back leg when you lift the knee, can you bend the front knee even more pressing back through the back heel, etc.

Every class should have strengthening postures. This is not a gentle class. A Centering Youth class promotes feeling strength, while in the postures and feeling release, sensation upon releasing the postures. Think meditative posture flow but with some standing; plank, side-plank, warriors, fire-hydrant, or crow.

Every class should have at least one balancing posture, or more. Always cue what we are doing; balancing settles/calms the mind. "Hold the pose, not your breath." Always ask them to find a focal point and breath. This is something they can take with them into the world. "When you feel overwhelmed, find a focal point, press down into the ground, feel your feet and breath."

What postures can build confidence? Think about these things when you plan.

Meditation and Savasana

Every class must have meditation at the end as a guide into Savasana. Guide the participants into internal focus. Ideas include guided contrasting feelings, feeling where clothing touches your skin, feel where air touches your skin, etc. This is also a good time to read some evocative or uplifting poem or prose to continue and conclude the theme you have chosen for the class.

It is also important to note that Savasana might provide traumatized, hyper-vigilant participants with an opportunity to close their eyes and relax. This may be the only such opportunity these participants have to close their eyes and feel safe in the regular course

of their lives. If they fall asleep, they may be experiencing the best sleep they have had in a long time.

At the same time, though, some people have great difficulty with Savasana. Recognize this and if you have participants who can't do it, allow them to sit or even help by doing something like helping to turn off the lights or distributing eye-pillows.

By using breath work, mindfulness, themes and the postures together we can bring the themes out of concept and into something the participants feel, keep and use again. Balanced, centered, strong, focused, calm, open. Ask them to remember these feelings. The next time they feel out of balance, stressed, un-centered, weak, closed, or angry - remember the feeling of being balanced, etc. and know that they will always have that inside of them and accessible through breathing and mindfulness.

Do not underestimate the power of this. Help them discover this. We need to make these tools accessible. Don't simply teach them, but strive to inspire. Teach them how they can use their thoughts, their breathing, their memory of strength to help them in everyday situations.

No matter what, make sure to have enough time to allow the participants at least 2 - 3 minutes of total silence before you begin to bring them out of Savasana.

Conclusion and Check-Out

Finally, at the end of Savasana, bring everyone to a seated position so they can come back into the world. Thank them for attending and either conclude the class (you can say namaste and maybe talk about what that means in another class), or move into a check-out, where they can notice how they feel now and whether the class has brought any change to how they feel.

General Considerations

Before You Get to and Begin a Class

Before you get to your class it is important to have your plan. These things might be important and should be considered:

1. Has anyone checked with the facility to make sure the class is on, that the participants will be there, and that there are no other problems you need to be aware of?

2. Have you communicated with any co-teachers or assistants about the plan for the class, theme, and any anticipated or potential problems?
3. Are you sure that any assistants or volunteers are familiar with our Guidelines, including our “no touch” policy?
4. Do you have your class theme, breath work, asana practice, meditation and Savasana thought through;
5. Have you taken a moment to ground yourself and get focused before entering the facility and beginning the class?
6. When you get to the class do you have the mats set out, Liability Releases, names tags, gold stars and any other materials you might need ready to go?
7. Are you ready to greet and introduce yourself and your assistants to all participants and facility staff?
8. Do you need to go over any specific class agreements, such as turning off all electronics (See, Opening Remarks and Class Guidelines, below)?
9. From your discussion with staff, your own knowledge of the participants and your survey of the room, do you need to move the participants around to keep certain participants away from others, or otherwise try to achieve the right atmosphere in the room?

Liability Releases for Parents and Those over 18

It is the policy of Centering Youth that parents should sign Liability Release forms for themselves and their children and that all participants 18 and over must sign their own Liability Release form. When teaching in a facility for young people under 18, we try to get facility staff to help get Liability Releases signed. When working with people over 18, make sure everyone in the class has signed a Liability Release.

Attire

Our dress code is conservative. Both men and women should dress modestly for all positions.

Avoid Triggering Postures

It is critical that we are mindful of postures that might trigger the participants we are working with.

Avoid postures such as Happy Baby and any other postures that might create a sexual innuendo. Be careful. Depending on how the participants are aligned, even a forward fold, a squat or downward dog can expose an abused participant in a way that triggers a sexual trauma.

We cannot avoid every possible potential trigger, but we can be mindful of the obvious postures and positions that might trigger an abused person. Think about the postures you want to teach, consider why you are teaching them and then consider if they need to be modified. Nearly everything in yoga can be modified, taught sitting, etc.

No Physical Assists.

No physical assists. NEVER.

Mark Lilly, of Street Yoga, has said that the most disturbing event in his teaching was when he was teaching a class of veterans. He gently placed his hand on the back of a student in a posture. The student immediately stood up, said, “Don’t ever touch me again,” left the room and the studio and was never seen again.

Gentle verbal and visual assists are good. If a participant does not get it, it’s ok. We want safe alignment but other than that do not make them feel as if they are failing or do not know what they are doing. Be gentle, allow them to figure it out or not. They are not wrong. Even verbal assists can fall and be heard very differently than intended. So, think about why you are wishing to assist and if they are not going to hurt themselves, think about it again before guiding. Be very aware if you are paying too much attention to any one participant.

We generally prefer having a circle or, if that’s not possible, putting boys in the front row and girls in back, or other set-up that allows females to feel comfortable that they are not exposing themselves or being checked out by the males from behind. A downward dog is fine in a circle and not so good if boys are behind girls.

Avoid Sanskrit Words - Avoid Religious References

Savasana will always be Savasana. Namaste will always be Namaste. But we think it is best to avoid using Sanskrit if there is an English word for the pose. Triangle pose instead of Trikonasana. This is not a religious class of any kind and we want to avoid giving anyone any reason to attack our work by suggesting that we are espousing Hinduism, Buddhism, or any other religion.

Use Name Tags and Gold Stars

Although we don’t always use them, we have name tags for a reason. If you decide to use them, or are in a new class, make one for yourself and ask all participants to make a name-tag with what they want to be called. Use their names during class. Getting

to know people's names and using them is a sign of respect. If you want to assist verbally by using their names, make sure your tone does not sound like you are calling them out.

We also have gold stars that we place on name tags each time a participant comes to class. This is a good way to reward attendance and give the participants a sense of accomplishment.

Assisting in Class

Assistants in a class help by scattering about the room, help with name tags and set-up. Maybe someone needs a rolled up mat under their hips or a bolster. Assistants should do all of this. You are a visual cue, but pay attention, notice things and smile when you notice someone is trying hard. Be encouraging. You are not here to just take the class, assisting is helping to hold the room.

Within these guidelines, we want every teacher to be as creative as they like. We feel very strongly that these components are what will make our classes successful. So consider a Centering Youth class as a style of class with the components described here.

Substitutes

If a teacher is unable to teach a class s/he must obtain a substitute from the teachers who have been qualified to teach for Centering Youth and s/he must notify Holle Black (404-217-2647) or Bob Altman (678-938-3085).

Post-Class Report

After each class the lead teacher must make a written report to Centering Youth on the form provided, making sure to note any negative or positive developments that teachers of the next class should be aware of. Every teacher on the teaching schedule should read the reports and be knowledgeable of the report from the prior class when s/he is scheduled to teach.

Thank you for participating in this yoga service project.