

Mental Health Is A Library Issue

Kelly Jensen for Michigan Library Association, October 2024

Slide Deck: <https://tinyurl.com/MLA24-Mental-Health>

Hello!

I am Kelly Jensen

Editor at Book Riot

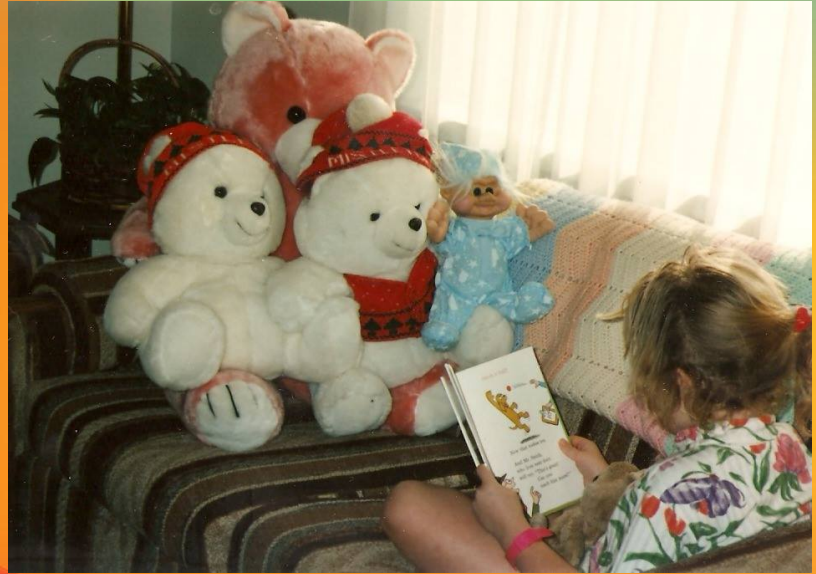
Author/Editor of 3 YA anthologies

Former Illinois + Wisconsin public librarian

Yoga teacher

2024 Library Journal Mover & Shaker

Chicagoan of the Year in 2022 and Publishers Weekly
Person of the Year in 2022 for anti-censorship work



What We'll Cover

1

Adult Mental Health Today

Exploring the mental health challenges in America, including normal experiences and those which are not.

2

Mental Health in the Library

A look at the contemporary challenges of working in libraries when it comes to mental well being

3

Accessible and Potent Self-Care and Wellness

We cannot self-care our way out of systemic issues. But yoga, meditation, mindfulness, and other tools have power to impact each of us as we fight for systemic change.

1. American Mental Health Right Now

Why don't we talk more frankly about our mental health when it's good or when it's not so good?

Common Mental Health Terms

Stress

- A reactionary feeling of emotional strain or pressure
- Common, normal, and can be beneficial
- Body/mind reaction to threat

Anxiety

- A reaction to stress but can occur without a trigger
- Persistent and excessive worry that does not end when stressor is gone

Depression

- Persistent low mood
- Loss of interest in everyday activities and pleasure
- Differs from low mood via symptoms and time frame

Some Statistics

19%

Of American adults are diagnosed with anxiety disorder

8%

Of American adults live with depression

American adults have a mental health disorder

1 in 5

Of Americans over the age of 12 have a substance use disorder

17.3%

Some More Statistics

35%

Of multiracial adults experience mental illness in a given year

ADHD/Autism

Diagnoses have *doubled* in adult women between 2020-2022

American adults live with a serious mental health disorder (bipolar, schizophrenia, etc.)

1 in 25

Significant increases since COVID-19

Suicide Rates & Drug Overdoses

And Also This

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

- It's not just relegated to those who've served in combat.
- PTSD is traumatic effects lingering more than one month (that's acute stress disorder).

Substance Use

- 94% of those who abuse alcohol are not being treated.
- Our assumptions about substance use matter. It's white women of childbearing age who are the group most likely to use illegal substances.

Grief

- Our culture stigmatizes grief, and despite common beliefs, there is no single grief model the process follows.
- COVID amplified the realities of where and how we fail to properly grieve.

Worth Noting

“Heavy drinking” for men is more than 4 drinks per day or 14 over a week

For women, it is 3 drinks per day or 7 over the course of a week

A standard bottle of wine is considered 5 drinks.



A Few More Data Points

- 50% of LGBTQ+ adults experience mental illness in a given year
- COVID-19 Led To 25% Increase of Anxiety and Depression Worldwide
- In 2020, governments worldwide spent on average just over 2% of their health budgets on mental health

Diagnosis is a deeply imperfect art + does not capture scope of mental health

Who Is—and Is Not—Being Treated?

- 55% of adults with a mental illness do not seek treatment.
- 28% were unable to get the treatment they needed
- 42% of adults with any mental illness (behavior, cognitive, emotional) could not afford to get help

Trauma

An emotional response to events outside of a “normal” experience.

Trauma

Your body recognizes a threat,
so:

- A natural response kicks in
- Fight-Flight-Freeze

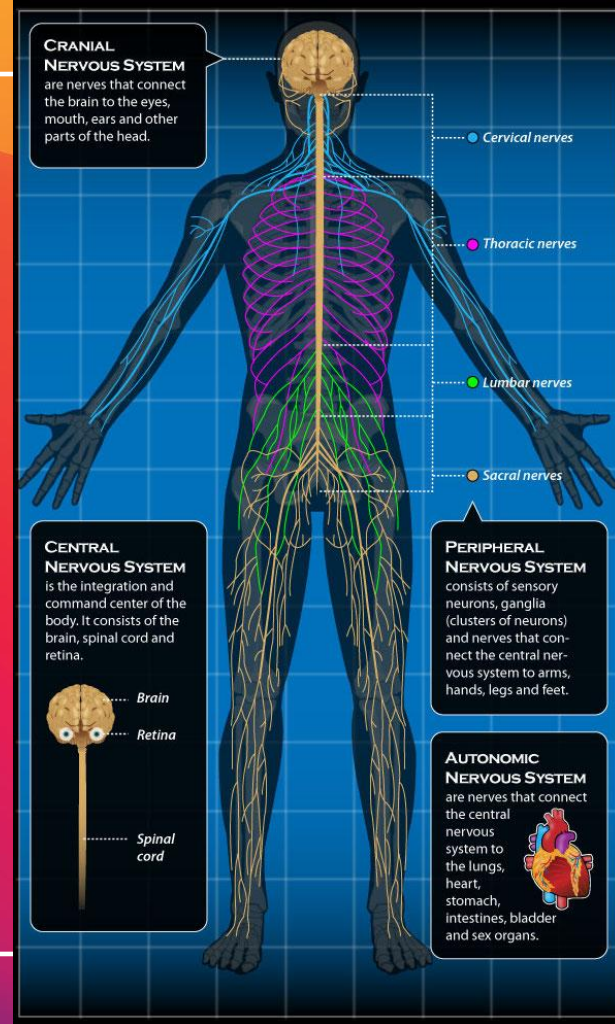
Physically:

- Brain + Autonomic Nervous System begin producing hormones
- Your body prepares to address the threat

Some people have much more active trauma responses due to experience

The Human Nervous System

- Central Nervous System: brain and spinal cord--message creator
- Peripheral Nervous System--message sender
 - Somatic: voluntary actions like walking and eating
 - Autonomic: involuntary actions like digestion, swallowing, sweating, and breathing*



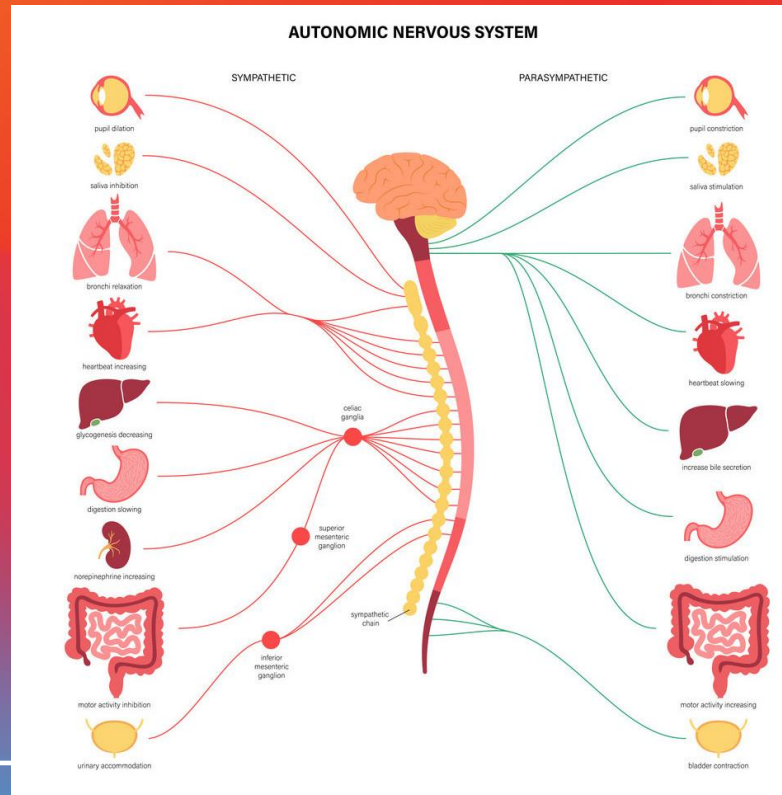
The Autonomic Nervous System

Sympathetic

- Fight-Flight-Freeze

- The way the body prepares for activity and responds to external stimuli

- Short term, though you can get stuck in it (see: trauma!)



Parasympathetic

- Rest & Digest

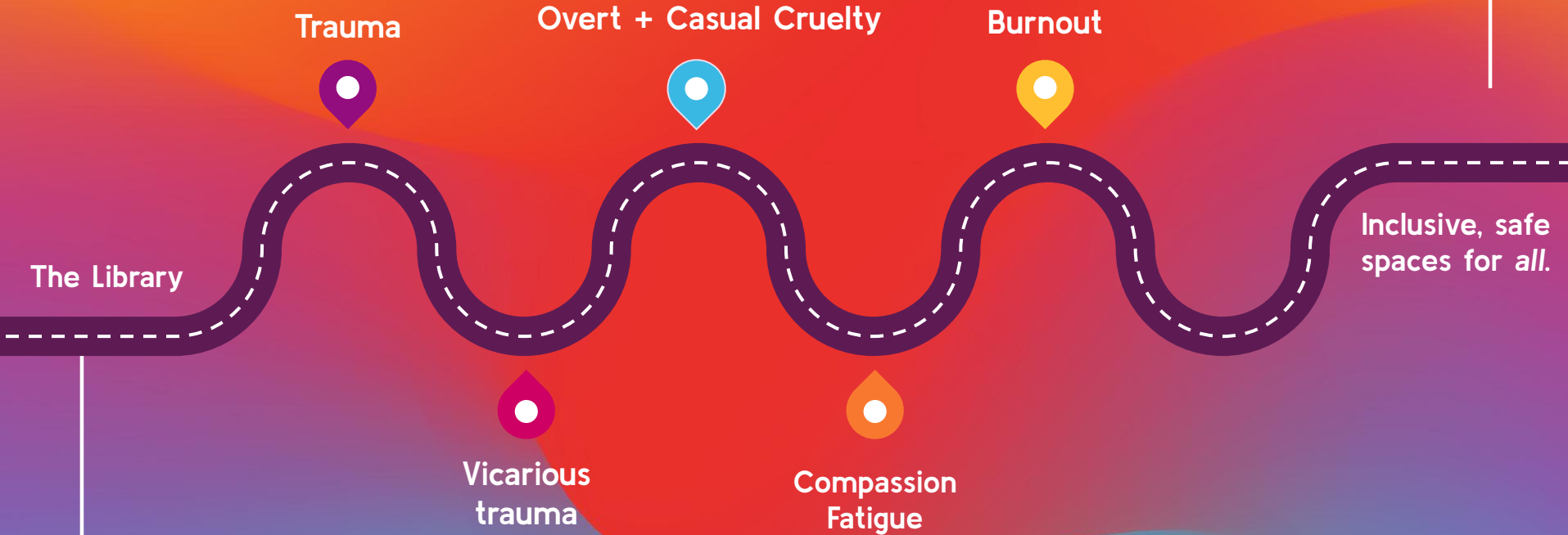
- The way the body slows down and recalibrates

- Ensures long term health and well-being

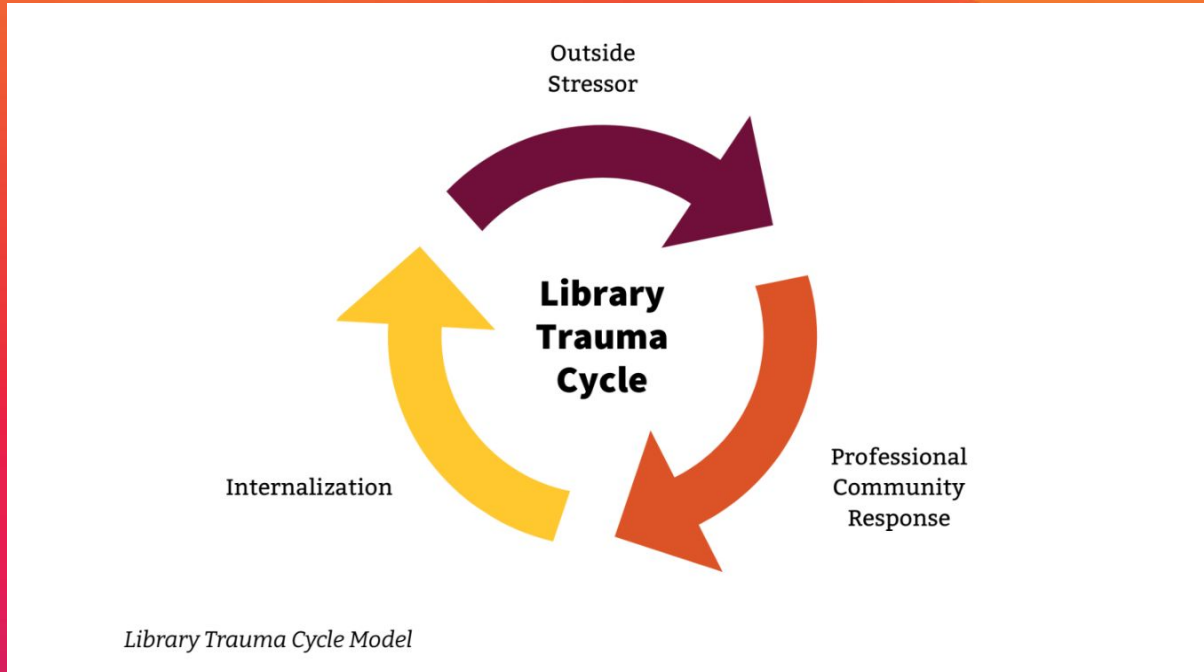
2. Mental Health in the Library Level

Contributions to Mental Health Challenges in Libraries & Systems-Level Solutions

Libraries Before 2019



The Library Trauma Cycle



From the [Urban Library Trauma Study, 2022](#)

Libraries In The Last Five Years

COVID

Lockdowns to becoming essential services, mask debates to vax debates. At times you were “no one.”

Funding

Post-COVID economics have directly impacted libraries.

Book Bans

It is your backyard whether it's your house or not. Attacks on your profession are nonstop.

Technology

Is AI a real threat or is it like the Metaverse and mostly a distraction right now? (Maybe both!)

Politics

Rising fascism, international wars, an election repeat of 2016, further mis- and dis- information

An Eclipse

Libraries may be a great distribution spot but eclipse glasses were more brutal than tax forms.

A High-Stakes Information Landscape

Misinformation

Incorrect, misleading,
not intentional

Disinformation

Purposefully incorrect
or misleading

Malinformation

Close enough to feel
true but meant to do
harm

The New Library Trauma Cycle

Potential for Trauma in Public Libraries Experiencing Book Banning and Material Challenges

Jieun Yeon & Leah Therese Dudak
School of Information Studies
Syracuse University

What do we mean by “censorship”?

Banning

Restricting

Relocating

Avoiding

Then what is “trauma”?

“When something happens to the body that is too fast, or too soon, it overwhelms the body and can create trauma” (Menakem 2017, 7).



Fight

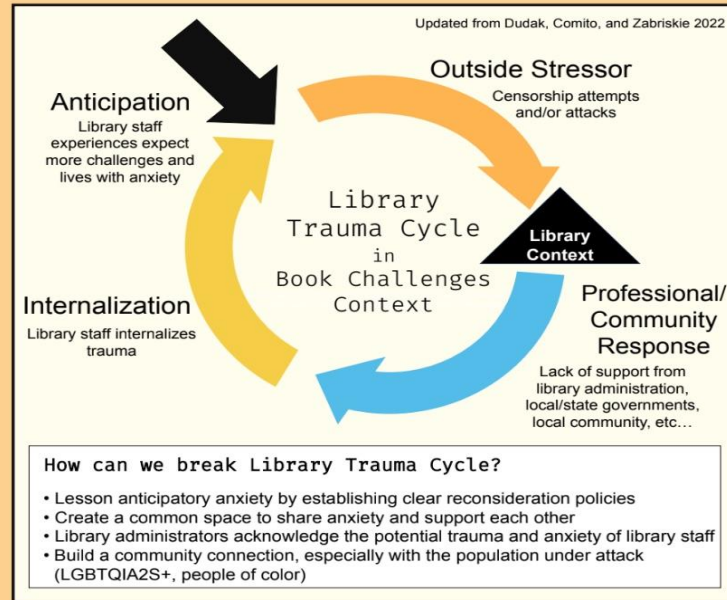


Freeze



Flight

Overwhelming incidents at public libraries cause trauma to library staff (e.g., violent behaviors, threats...and **censorship attempts!**)



Menakem, R. 2017. *My grandmother's hands: Racialized trauma and the pathway to mending our hearts and bodies*. Central Recovery Press.

Dudak, E. T., L. Comito, and C. Zabriskie. 2022. "You can't self-care your way out of a broken system": The 2022 Urban Libraries Trauma Forum. *Public Library Quarterly* 42(6): 650-664. doi: 10.1080/01616846.2022.2145526

Beyond The Library

Home Life

We all have our own unique lives. What happens at home or in our personal lives impacts us at work. What mental health challenges do we live with daily?

Digital Life

We can never log off, even if we want to. We may find ourselves becoming digital targets, too, for no discernable reason.

Broken Boundaries

How often do you bring work home? If you're doing it, then that means there's too much work on your plate to get done in your allotted hours.

But I'm Okay, Actually

Resilience

Increased capacity to bounce back or recover from tough situations makes a difference.

Nature, nurture, and epigenetics play a role in why people have different experiences.

Human Differences

Access & Privilege

Where do you benefit from systems and structures? Build awareness, not shame.

Some things we simply need to chalk up to being lucky—no shame in that!

Luck

Research indicates that for those 40 and older, the mental health impacts of COVID-19 are significantly less than for younger people. This is especially true for white, upper middle class people (\$100K+ annual incomes) who own their homes.

Two Things About Solutions

We Know Many Solutions

Systemic change is crucial for the well-being of everybody. Many of our biggest mental health issues are tied to racism, poverty, sexism, capitalism, and other structures.

Individuals Can Only Do So Much

Self-care is important, as is providing as many resources and opportunities to have these mental health realities discussed and explored. But until the systems change, the underlying cause will never go away.

The Internal Work

- **Acknowledge Your Limits**

- If you're not trained or licensed mental health professionals, then don't take on that role.

- **Trauma-Informed Policies**

- Do you have policies that take into account trauma? That permit employees to engage in self-care when the need arises? Do you offer mental health care for staff?

- **Create From a Space of Inclusivity**

- Accessibility is not just for those with a disability. It positively impacts each of us. Let's bring that spirit to the library.

The Self-Care Parachute

Employee Support - Self-Care Parachute

RNMG supports employees in being able to step away from work during moments of crisis, collective trauma, or attack on marginalized communities. We recognize the importance of removing responsibility for that process from affected employees and have created the flowchart below to guide proactive conversations between managers and employees.

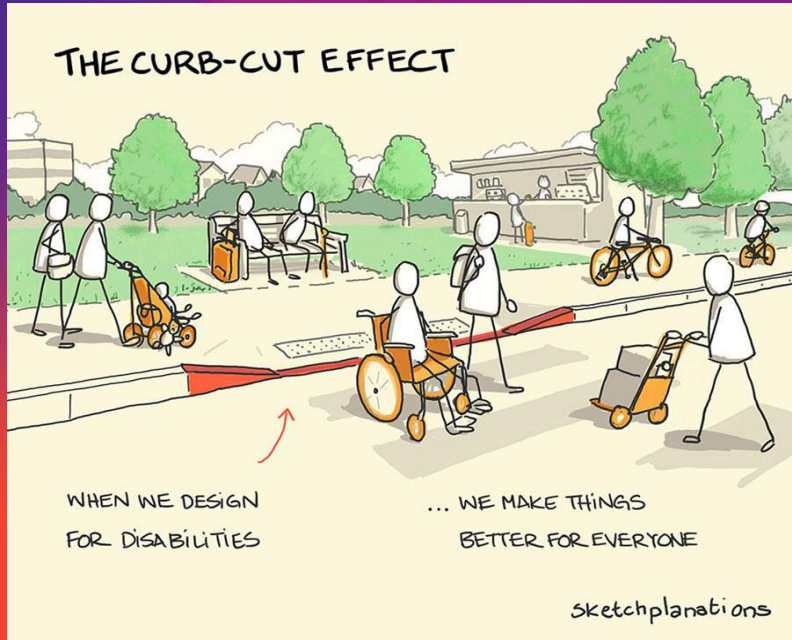
When an incident occurs, managers will reach out to employees in the affected community. If the employees elect to pull the self-care parachute, managers will be responsible for collecting a list of the tasks to be delegated for an agreed upon time period and will work with other staff to coordinate their completion. If the manager is also affected by the incident, they will notify the next available manager or member of the executive team, who will then be responsible for collecting and delegating tasks.

When an employee opts not pull the parachute, the manager will check back in the following day. Employees may change their minds and opt in at any time.

Employees affected by an incident may also contact their managers at any time to initiate this process. If your direct manager is not immediately available, please contact the next available manager or any member of the executive team. We want you to be able to step away as soon as possible.

The self-care parachute is intended for temporary delegation of time-sensitive responsibilities and in most instances will not require the use of PTO.

Accessible Design



Curb cut effect illustration by sketchplanations ([plus this article!](#))



Single use bathroom photo ([& article](#)) by Jonathan Paul Katz.

The External Work

- **Make Connections**

- Get to know your community mental health workers, public and private. What resources exist? How can the library work with them? How can they utilize the library?

- **Be a Safe, Affirming Space**

- A toxic work environment makes a toxic environment for patrons.

- **Staff Development & Programming**

- Where and how can mental health topics be brought into staff development and training?

The External Work

- **Combate Mis-, Dis-, Mal- Info**

- If it sounds fishy, it probably is. Don't share it without checking the sources +/or share with additional context.

- **Model Mental Wellness**

- Sometimes this means getting vulnerable—if it's not going to be good for your mental health, say that. Set up boundaries and respect them. Take your time off. Rest.

- **Be A Library Advocate and Activist**

- You cannot wait for others to advocate on your behalf. You have to do it yourself.

3. Accessible and Potent Self-Care and Wellness

We cannot self-care our way out of systemic issues. But yoga, meditation, mindfulness, and other tools have power to impact each of us as we work for change.

Demystifying Yoga



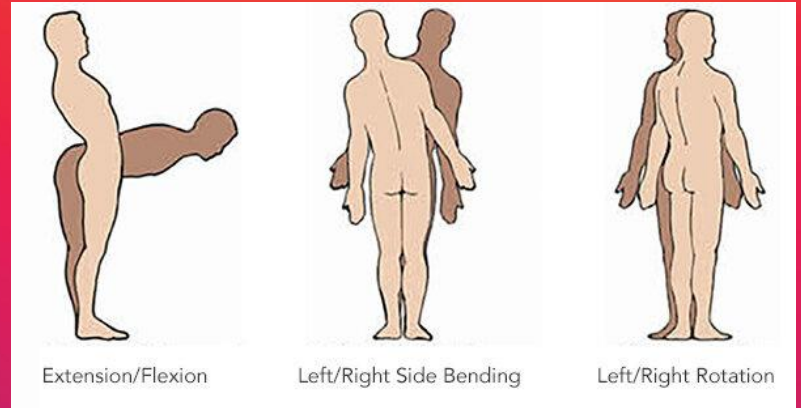
- Western yoga generally ignores its Eastern roots + is built on a capitalist system of exclusion and exclusivity
- Yoga works for every single body.
- The poses are one tiny component of yoga & what you choose to do isn't that important.

The Secret to Yoga Movement

Choose any “poses” or movement in any position—seated, supine, standing, on a wall, in a chair, etc—and ensure you engage your spine in **6 ways**.

- Flexing
- Extending
- Lateral Bend (Both Sides)
- Twisting (Both Sides)

Literally, that’s all you need to do something super helpful and easy for your body and mind.



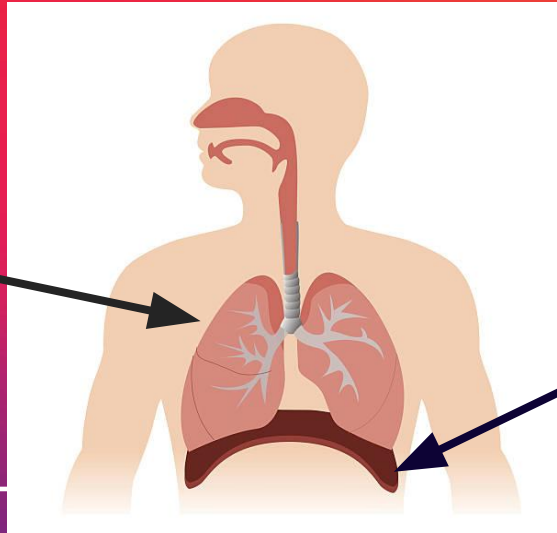
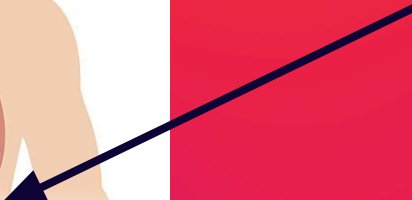
Breath Work

Breathing may be part of the autonomic nervous system, but we can consciously use it to activate the parasympathetic nervous system

Chest (Lungs)

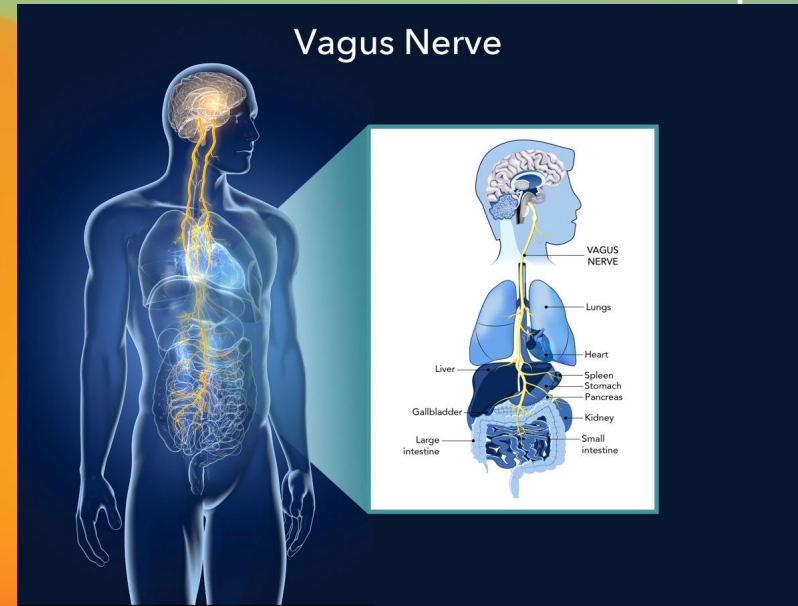


Diaphragm (Belly)



The Vagus Nerve

- Largest cranial nerve in the body
- Sensory and motor functions
- Connected to back of brain, neck, chest, and abdomen
- Breath work is a natural reset for the vagus nerve + sympathetic nervous system



Three Types of Breath Work



Relaxing

Generally: lengthen exhales; decrease breath speed



Energizing

Generally: lengthen inhales, increase in-out speed

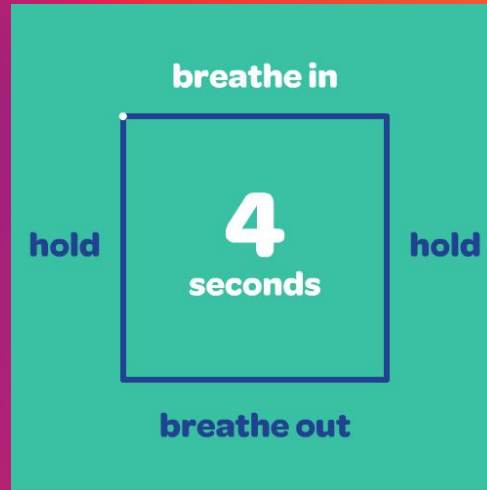


Centering

Generally: equal inhales and exhales

Box/Square Breathing

One of the easiest, most accessible, and most effective practices is square breathing. Your inhales, exhales, and the spaces between inhales and exhales are the same; you choose the length. This one is centering and can be done anywhere (try it at a red light!)



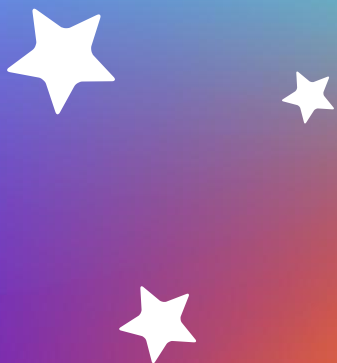
Let's Try These Together

Alternate Nostril Breathing (nadi shodhana)

- Relaxing and Centering
- Take 3-5 normal breaths before beginning
- Close left nostril & inhale through right; close right, exhale through left; inhale through left; close left, exhale right. Repeat 5-10+ times.
- You may like tissues with this one.
- Blocked nose? Imagining the sensation is powerful, too!

Bee Breath (Bhramari Pranayama)

- Relaxing
- Thumbs will close your ears and fingers will cover your eyes
- Take a deep inhale and hum loudly as you exhale
- Repeat 10 times, then relax your arms to your sides
- You may like meditating after this one!



The Biggest Secret

Meditation and mindfulness are **not about clearing or stopping your thoughts.**

They're about **acknowledging** them.

How to Meditate

- Close your eyes and breathe.
- Acknowledge when a thought comes up and let it continue on.
- Thoughts overwhelming? Narrate your inhales and exhales or imagine something peaceful, like rain outside a window or a flickering candle.

Guided meditations are not necessary for the benefits of the practice but there are tons out there that are great!

More Meditation Tips

- Can't close your eyes? Find a focal point and let your gaze soften (aka: "zone out")
- You can choose the length of meditation that works for you.
- It is normal to fall asleep sometimes. That's ok! Sleep during meditation is your body telling you what it needs and that it feels safe enough to rest.

Mindfulness

- The act of consciously attending to your senses. That's all!
- What do you notice? What do you feel? Is it surprising? Interesting? Scary? Worrying? Calming?
- Again: you're not getting rid of thoughts. You're tuning in.



Practicing Mindfulness

Enjoying a Food

- Next time you are hungry, sit down with whatever you're going to eat and tap into your senses.
- How does it feel? Smell? Look? Sound? Taste?
- What reactions does your body have to that food?

Body Scan

- Let's try this one together.
- Close your eyes and either choose a guided scan or do a self-directed scan.
- Begin at the top of your head, silently name the next body part going down the front body (i.e., crown of the head, forehead, right eyelid, left eyelid, nose); once you reach your feet, go up the back body (i.e., right calf, left calf, back of right knee, back of left knee)
- Observe the sensation of moving part to part.

Thanks!

Any questions?

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Nerd Out on Resources

Adult/Librarian Mental Health

- [Trauma, Book Bans, and Libraries: A Mental Health Resource Guide](#)
- [The Implications of COVID-19 for Mental Health and Substance Use](#)
- [WHO Facts on Depression and Anxiety During COVID-19](#)
- [CDC Mental Health Data](#)
- [COVID-19 and PTSD](#)
- [National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism 2023 Report](#)
- [Alcohol Consumption Surged During the Pandemic](#)
- [The Connection Between Substance Use Disorders and Mental Illness](#)
- [The State of Mental Health in America](#)
- [Diagnoses of ADHD/Autism since 2020](#)

Also...

- ***Eastern Body, Western Mind*** by Anodea Judith
- ***What The Fact?*** By Seema Yasmin for insight into the role of media, politics, and mis/dis/mal information