



AUSTRALASIAN ASSOCIATION OF  
**YOGA THERAPISTS**  
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## Australasian Association of Yoga Therapists

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### A Touching Issue

I initially started thinking of this in relation to helping to create ethical guidelines for The Australasian Association of Yoga Therapists where the basic question is regarding physical touch and its appropriateness. In Australasia we have many schools of Yoga and Yoga therapy with different views on this. Many regard touching the student or client as not necessary, in fact not acceptable whereas others rely on touch as an important tool. I believe that there is no right or wrong here as long as ethical boundaries are maintained including permission to do so.

The issue of how and when we touch has taken on a new dimension even in the last year with the MeToo movement becoming stronger and the pandemic isolating us from our usual habits of touch and promoting another whole way of communicating through screens.

In our common vernacular we use touch in a broad sense. We say something is touching, that we are in or out of touch. We touchdown or touch someone up. We say someone is touchy or a bit touched. All these and many more indicate that we don't think of touch as just being in physical contact or being handled but that we think on a wider scale as being physical as well as emotional, that we can be touched by a look, a gesture or a comment. This wider concept of touch can also be nurturing or harmful. I believe that we are also to be mindful of this in the Code of Ethics following the premise of 'Do no harm'.

It seemed to me on reflection and after some reading that the issue is even larger than outlined above. That we can touch each other physically with gesture and body language, other than just physical touch, with a look and speech but we don't always acknowledge energetic responses, the knowledge that is unspoken, such as knowing someone is standing behind one, or a response of instant like or dislike when in proximity. A client often picks up a disturbance in teacher or therapist in this way.

In this pandemic we have and do use screens much more which creates a different dynamic. We also use objects such as props to create a sense of touch of adjustment.

Much of our touch in yoga is proprioceptive to give feedback, to aid adjustment. It is neuro-affective creating a physical sensation through the nerve endings in structures which encourages understanding of structure movement and alignment.

I am touched by many things other than the hand on my body. I am touched by someone's "energy" which can make me want to be close or not be there with them. A look touches as does the voice, resulting in pain or pleasure. When I hold my hand out it will be interpreted in many ways depending on the experience of the person I am gesturing to, either as a threat or a warm invitation. Our body language speaks deeply to the person we are dealing with, inviting trust, bringing up defenses or inviting control.

Quality of touch is also important in the way it is given and taken and is related to positive and negative prior experience. Touch can be deep, light, lingering or sharp or energetic if accepted. It is important to have awareness of the history of a client or student and always to ask for permission.

There are vast cultural differences relating to touch and space we need to feel comfortable. South American cultures need less space and more touch than most. Mediterranean Europeans also fall into this category particularly in contrast with Northern Europeans. Culturally we will express our needs in this way. Indian women cover their shoulders but not the midriff, whereas I understand naked yoga is a western phenomenon. Though this seems a little unpleasant to me I am totally comfortable with seeing a naked young child or baby. So it is that touch is also a cultural and generational variant.

Touch can harm or heal and that is where the conundrum lies, whether to and why we need always to do no harm, to maintain trust and ask rather than assume that we know what the position of the person is we are with. It is also important to point out that there is a power inequity with students and clients in relation to the teacher or therapist, which must always be taken into consideration.

Touch is important. It is a basic human need. Humans do not thrive without it. Babies deprived of it do not develop within the normal milestones. The elderly, the disabled and the mentally ill are often more deprived in this area and when so do not thrive either physically or mentally as a result.

Touch releases a stream of healing chemical responses which help to increase immunity decrease anxiety, depression, hyperactivity, stress and attention deficit syndromes. Touch is helpful and has shown to be so in the bodywork industries. Some studies show that 45% of therapeutic gain is just by the hands-on effect and the rest by the techniques employed.

Conversely all individuals need the right to decide whether they will accept physical and other touch. Many of us have a history of trauma whether large or minor which may make touch a painful experience. An overriding of any individual's integrity is abuse. I have seen this manifested physically, verbally and emotionally in yoga classes, particularly where there is a perfectionistic template involved. This can also be allied to the Guru Syndrome where the teacher begins to believe that he or she can do no wrong. There are many stories of abuse occurring here. It is well known that abuse is rife in our society and predators are amongst us. Both teachers and students need to be aware of this and protect themselves.

## **Considerations for touch**

Touch needs to be clinically appropriate to the situation. The intention needs to be pure and clear cut by both the touched and the person touching. Ask is it supportive or is it needy? It needs to be carried out, with consent, with respect, with professional values and ethics in mind. It needs to nurture and to inform. It needs to be sensitive to the needs of that individual. Ask would something else be enough, language or a visual cue?

Proprioceptive touch gives information to a person during a class or treatment. It is a light touch to specifically stimulate the proprioceptive receptors within the connective tissues and deeper in the joints. These nerve endings give information re positioning and reawaken somatic intelligence giving feedback to the neural pathways involved. Proprioceptive touch is an important means of activating this and therefore giving information to enhance or restore movement and positioning. Do the least invasive adjustments to obtain the maximum result.

When a client or student is hesitant just holding a hand away from the body and asking the person to move towards it stimulates his or her response rather than an overriding idea from the therapist or teacher. This is used in some cases where there may not be much body understanding. Remember though that when trauma is present that physical touch is often not a therapeutic option. In fact, many are sensitised long before any physical proximity occurs.

### **Guidelines for using touch.**

When dealing with physical touch never touch without asking permission first in a classroom or therapeutic situation. If the client is unable to give permission seek a second opinion from the family or carer. Check in regularly and be sensitive to the factors at the time.

Look at what is appropriate to the person, the situation they are in and what you wish to achieve. Consider is it necessary?

For therapy take a full history. Gain consent and document as needed for therapy. In classes include consent either in the registration form or use cards.

Be very careful with people with a mental health record of hostility, paranoia, aggression, sexualization as well as those who have experienced trauma, have eating disorders and intimacy issues as they do not accept touch easily and refrain in general.

Teachers and therapist also need to explore their own personal issues and seek education.

Be ethical taking the guidelines from the Code of Ethics and the Sutras.

### **Legal considerations**

Australia is not as a litigious country as others. However, there are cases here of teachers and therapists being accused of inappropriate behavior by their student/clients.

Be aware that you as a teacher or therapist can be in a vulnerable position when you are alone with a client regarding touch. What is said is your word against theirs if there is not a third person present. Clients or students often don't have clarity regarding the situation they are in and may regard any touch as being sexualised. It is also common for a student or client to believe they are enamoured of the teacher or therapist creating an even more unequal and difficult relationship.

We have many yoga tools. Touch is just one and one can be touched in many ways.

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*The above article is by Libbie Nelson, AAYT Committee Member, Yoga Therapist C-AAYT C-IAYT, Physiotherapist.*

### **References**

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APA Code of Conduct

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