Why We Need Internship Programs:
The Essential Complement to Yoga Therapy Training

In order to be safe and well educated, yoga therapists need a year of supervised clinical pre-professional experience. As a practicing physical therapist since my own internship 38 years ago, and having taught in a highly respected yoga therapy certification program for five years, I am convinced that long-term supervised experience is the most effective way to raise the standard and safety of yoga therapy. For this reason, I felt compelled to develop a post-graduate internship program, currently in its fourth year. What I have witnessed in my interns and graduates has convinced me that we must provide this supervision for all newly certified therapists and ensure that there is a cohesive “collaboration program” that is advantageous for clients, interns, supervisors, and schools.

Yoga Therapy Meets other Healing Arts

If “yoga therapy is to become the first new healthcare profession in the twenty-first century”—to quote Matthew Taylor at IAYT’s Symposium on Yoga Therapy and Research (SYTAR) 2011—it is essential for us to have the language and skills to interface with currently acknowledged medical communities. For that, we will need to meet their standards in the training process, and more importantly, new yoga therapists will want to feel qualified and prepared.

All of the current (established) governing associations for healing arts require lengthy internship programs, including physical therapy, occupational therapy, psychology, chiropractic, acupuncture, manual therapies, music therapy, osteopathy, and of course every field of medicine. The internship is a licensing requirement, as it was for me by the American Physical Therapy Association way back in 1973. You could not take state boards or CEU classes until you had completed this requirement. Even the relatively new complementary and alternative medicines are being implemented using fellowships, which are internship-like programs, so that doctors who want to move toward integrative medicine must be supervised before taking this piece of education into their current practice.

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What Physical Therapy School Gave Me

In the school years preceding my internship for physical therapy, we studied the systems of the body from the perspectives of anatomy, physiology, neurology, biochemistry, and physics and took classes in various psychologies and sociologies.

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There were many lab sessions and we had ample time to work on each other using an array of hands-on techniques (which mostly resulted in stiff necks). We did have regular brief encounters with real patients, albeit not nearly enough, and we had some work in clinics that gave us an idea of what to imagine upon completion. Although this was a brilliant education, the pressure of grasping the vast amount of material during school distracted from our capacity to feel, think on our feet, and make appropriate multifaceted decisions as professionals.

What My First Internship Gave Me

Although crucial, the undergrad experience was merely a jumping-off point for my post-graduate encounters, a.k.a. clinical internships. We finally had the pure and practical advantage of time simply for observation, thought, and daily open dialogue with supervisors, which gave us the opportunity to integrate this huge palette. In addition, we were able to choose a few specialties such as pediatrics, long-term rehabilitation, or cardiac rehab to more accurately determine where we truly wanted to begin. Over the course of my internship, as I witnessed and practiced evaluation and treatment processes again and again, with varied populations and varying results, I was clearly developing an ease for observing bodies and a decision-making prowess.

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Graduated Interns Find Niches and Jobs

I have observed that there is a growing interest in internships/apprenticeships here in the United States and abroad. To be sustainable, our employers—students, studios, hospitals, gyms, government agencies, schools, and corporations—are going to hire people who are not just qualified but who are “at the ready.” Research shows that interns, in general, get more jobs. Their advantageous position is obvious: they have had the necessary “on-the-job” effective supervision.

Through internships, yoga therapists gain the advantages of long-term assignments and can develop a depth of understanding regarding client complexities. They learn to evaluate clients under a variety of circumstances, observing if their initial strategies pan out. Ideally, they are surprised and humbled by how much each client brings to the process, learning that they, the yoga therapists, are not—or are required to be—the all-knowing authorities. They observe their supervisors making and correcting their own errors and being open and transparent about their own mistakes, which is humanizing and confidence-boosting for the interns. This is a part of the ongoing learning process. The way the supervisor handles errors with the client (I feel that we need to acknowledge our mistakes) and with interns (let them see us fumble and recover), will help interns handle inevitable errors and learn compassion toward themselves and others.

The Frame of My Current Internship Program

The year comprises a stand-alone 300-hour program. Since every question, homework assignment, meeting, and workshop is based on constant live experience with real clients who come here for yoga therapy classes, the program is hands-on for its entirety. Interns follow the same clients, sometimes for months and often for their full internship year. Our yoga therapy classes are small, with two to six clients in each, grouped by level of proficiency rather than diagnoses. This helps prevent the supervisors, interns, and clients from falling into the trap of making specific anatomy or physiology the focus of treatment.

Interns receive experience and guidance of varied aspects of yoga therapy in the following ways:

- Interns assist and practice in or observe ongoing classes every week.
- Technical and global questions are required and are answered by email following each class.
- Interns follow the same students for months or often their full year.
- With an extremely varied caseload, interns learn to create their own sequencing with ever-increasing depth throughout the year.
- We have regularly supervised meetings where interns present their current sequencing assignments to teachers and peers, while others practice or assist, so that we simulate real classes that give interns a safe way to progress in their live work.
- Interns hand in written work at each meeting, based on their reading assignments. These assignments are designed to provide insight into the more provocative questions about the many ways that anatomy and physiology interface. There are lively discussions at meetings to further assimilate this most important subject.
- Meetings also touch on business and career plans. Graduates have gone in many directions, combining their previous skill set and internship experiences with their personal interests. For example, research; yoga for fertility, for cancer survivors, for Spanish-speaking seniors; yoga in schools, corporations, substance abuse centers; many more. Some have used their internship as a jumping-off point to further their education, such as joining a yearlong program on the endocrine system, or opening their own studio. Every graduate has moved on to their next challenge, inspired by seeing how much they can give to clients who come to heal themselves.

Observing interns through these years, and in distinct stages throughout their year, it is also clear to me that the 300 hours, spanned out over twelve months, is what creates a safe point of departure into a professional career. These lessons can only soak in with time.

What the Internship Program Has Shown

During the four years that I have been offering internships here at my school, I have witnessed talented, but fledgling, yoga therapists learn from each other’s strengths and weaknesses. They grow individually even more because of the support they give and receive from each other, as well as the continuous mentoring they receive from the program faculty and the opportunity to watch the faculty on the job. Daily discussions regarding choices for sequencing all aspects of yoga therapy, incorporating asana, pranayama, and meditation with a real understanding of a client’s medical, family, job, and relationship histories are indispensable and build professional self-trust.
The internship, or supervised on-the-job training, allows time for self-composure. Crossing over from yoga teacher to yoga therapist and entering a healing arts profession is daunting. As much as compassion, openness, and a hunger to help draw you into the field, the same feelings will not let you escape the very true realization that you have real influence on people’s health. You cannot know everything, and you’re going to make mistakes. You also must come to terms with and trust that what you do know, along with your intuition, qualifies you to do the work, know when to refer out, and consistently empower your students. An internship affords the opportunity to learn much of this on a very deep level before beginning one’s professional practice.

The Business Sense of a Collaborative Program

The last, vital aspect of a well-run yoga therapy internship program is that it is sustainable for all three entities involved: (1) the school, including the supervising yoga therapist(s), (2) the interns, and (3) the clients.

The supervising school/therapist has already gained the distinction of being a registered supervising agency and meeting the standards of that registering body. Schools can manage more classes/sessions because of the intern’s assistance. They can offer their students/clients continuous healthcare with highly proficient interns assisting. In my experience, interns are passionate, and their eager hearts inspire clients—who return and trust that they are truly learning to heal themselves with the guidance of experts. The fees to interns are relatively minimal and therefore affordable for the time frame in which it must occur; that is, the completion of financial and time-expensive certification programs at a time when interns are often anxious to be at work and earning income.

Conclusion

Using yoga therapy internship programs will help to both elucidate and validate yoga therapy for the medical communities. Interns can observe how supervisors interact with medical communities and can use this knowledge in their own practice. Many interns may go on to work in clinics or hospitals. They will have clients who will report their experiences in those communities, which will serve to raise yoga therapy’s prominence and create more advantageous positions for graduating interns. In this model of a yoga therapy internship program, supervisors, interns, clients, the field of yoga therapy, and even neighboring yoga studios all succeed: Supervisors who are typically studio owners or practicing yoga therapists and/or teachers get valuable word-of-mouth press. Clients are healing and spreading the good word about yoga therapy and the therapist. Graduate interns are prepared, confident, and eager to go forth and find their own way to advance the field, working independently and more safely. Yoga therapy schools get more students because clients are self-empowered and excited to spread the word, and neighboring yoga studios receive students who not only broadcast their glowing success at yoga therapy but also now know how to keep themselves safe in regular yoga classes.

Reference


In her book, Walk Yourself Well, Sherry Brouman, PT, E-RYT, simplifies movement engineering for self-healing. She founded and directs Tensegrity Center for Yoga Therapy and its ongoing Yoga Therapy Internship Program. Sherry teaches yoga therapy and physical therapy seminars internationally.