

Feeling Tiny? Yoga and Creating More Space

By Alena Gerst, LMSW, RYT

Do you need more space?

When I'm working with my clients, whether it be from an office, a Yoga studio, or a hospital bed, I'm often looking and listening for signs and feelings of constriction, since **a need for space can be a root cause of physical and emotional discomfort and pain.**

In Yoga this often translates as taking a wider stance, because sometimes just like in life, when we feel uncomfortable on the mat, it means we need more space. And if ever there was a place where you're encouraged to take up more space, it's Yoga.

One of my patients, a former professional dancer who has chronic pain, reported feeling like she was stuck in a prison in her apartment. When her pain flared, she had trouble breathing and would hyperventilate. Even sitting in the chair in my office, she was fidgety and had trouble sitting still, obviously uncomfortable. Needless to say, her life in general felt very upsetting to her, especially with her dance background as someone who could direct her body to do just about anything for many years.

Over time, we explored steps she could take to make herself feel less imprisoned in her home and in her body. Eventually, she hired someone who could help her clean out her apartment and open the space up. In the office, we organized the way she sat on the chair with Yoga props so she could feel less constricted, more open. And we worked on breathing and relaxation techniques to help her capture a few moments of expansive peace in her mind.

In Yoga, there's a term called *dukha*, which translates as "suffering."

Amy Weintraub, Founder of the Life Force Yoga Healing Institute, distinguishes the term *dukha* from the actual concept, which literally means **"obstructed space."** Leslie Kaminoff, Yoga Educator and Founder of The Breathing Project, talks about *dukha* in his work with clients too. He is continually looking for areas in the body or in life where more space is needed when he says, "I'm assuming there is some place in the system that is obstructed."

Taking more space on the Yoga mat can be a good place to start exploring where you may be obstructed. It might feel a little weird at first if you don't have an established Yoga practice, but it's well worth the effort, even if it just means

standing or lying flat on your back and opening your arms and legs WIDE for a few breaths.

As Amy Weintraub teaches, your body is your *first* teacher, and it's a great way to start **getting in touch with yourself and finding sukha, or open space**. Asana (Yoga postures) and breathing exercises "expand the lungs, decompress areas of tension, and release dammed-up emotions, creating a freer space within the body and mind."

The Broader Perspective

We all know well how to make ourselves tiny, both physically and emotionally. We often need to put our emotional and physical needs away in order to accomplish our work and daily tasks. This increases the importance of recognizing the times when we need space (which is pretty much every day if you ask me!).

So as my Yoga teacher likes to say, **take an opportunity to learn something different. Try something another way**. Why spend more time doing something you already know when you can try something you don't? Many of us are taught from a young age to not take up too much space. But if you're feeling physically or emotionally uncomfortable, that may be just what you need.

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Alena Gerst's unique teaching style blends her experiences as a Yoga Teacher, Licensed Counselor, and certified LifeForce Yoga® Practitioner for anxiety and depression. She provides outpatient individual and group counseling at NYU Langone Medical Center, inpatient therapeutic yoga at Beth Israel Medical Center, and teaches Hatha Yoga inspired by the teachings of B.K.S. Iyengar. Alena is in private practice on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. An accomplished professional performing artist, she also conducts speaking engagements on mind-body wellness and healing. For more information, visit www.alenagerst.com, and www.IWDwellness.org