

LFYP Interview with Alena Gerst, LMSW, RYT, LFYP-1 by Ashley Lynn Caputo, RYT, LFYP-2,



1) Describe your background, and when you became a LFYP.

I grew up in Arizona and that's where I started dancing. I got my Bachelor's degree in psychology at Northern Arizona University, but I spent most of my time in the theater department studying acting, voice, and of course dance! So when I graduated, I made the move to NYC to pursue my career singing and dancing in musical theater, which I did professionally for 10 years. I practiced yoga regularly, and was always interested in a mind/body approach to health. I became aware of Amy Weintraub's LifeForce Yoga years before I thought I would become trained in it. It wasn't until I encountered a major illness in 2005, which took almost a year to recover from, that I actually accessed mind/body and complimentary modalities for my own healing.

2) What brought you from the world of performing arts to yoga and counseling?

Once I recovered from that illness, I signed a three-show contract at New York City Center with the NY Gilbert and Sullivan Players straight away. But something had changed in me. While performing had been my passion and fire for most of my life, I learned during that time at City Center that my passion, and my life's work, had taken a new direction into mind/body health and wellness. I knew firsthand that mind/body work, along with western medicine, of course, because it too has its place, can be incredibly powerful, and I became committed to learning as much as I could about it. So I enrolled in a Master's program in clinical social work at Columbia University and got my yoga teacher certification while I was in graduate school. I knew with certainty that mind/body was the way for me.



3) What made you choose LifeForce Yoga, and how did you hear about it?

While I was in graduate school, a psychiatrist and leader in the field of mind/body interventions for mental health, Dr. Richard Brown, came to guest lecture in one of my classes. I'd known for years about how important breath work is for mental health and how that's one of the ways yoga can be such an important component in wellness, but for the first time for me, Dr. Brown was presenting the science behind it. Now there was something I could really grab on to! I was totally riveted. I bought his book, [*How to Use Herbs, Nutrients, and Yoga in Mental Health Care*](#), and I devoured it. I noticed the Yoga section of his book referred to much of the work Amy Weintraub was doing with LifeForce Yoga for mood management. So I bought her book, [*Yoga for Depression*](#). By this time I had been working at the Initiative for Women with Disabilities, an outpatient mind/body wellness center at NYU Langone Medical Center, and I was teaching therapeutic yoga at another hospital inpatient unit to patients confined to hospital beds. I highlighted or underlined almost everything in Amy's book! It was all so relevant to the work I was doing. I felt certain my next step was to study with Amy.

4) How do you personally incorporate LifeForce Yoga in your life?

I use the breathing techniques I learned from Amy pretty much every day. My LifeForce Yoga training has also helped me to cultivate awareness of my own mood, so I can observe and determine whether I'm feeling like I'm on overdrive (my tendency) or sluggish, and then decide how my practice will go from there. It's a great way to look at how I'm feeling objectively.

5) What are the most common LifeForce Yoga techniques you use in yoga and therapy?

Would you please share any transformational moments you have had using these techniques with clients in both teaching and therapy?

I use LifeForce Yoga techniques mostly in therapy settings, in the hospital, and my private practice. One of my areas of specialization in my private practice is working with performing artists. For many performers, the demands on how they need to appear and behave can be quite overwhelming, and this is often our starting point. One of the key take-home messages I learned from Amy goes like this: Permission permission permission! I remember when I finally decided to retire from performing professionally; I cut off my hair and pierced my nose in an act of rebellion! The nose ring is long gone and my hair is long again, but it sure felt good to give myself that permission. I find bee-breath and stair-stepping breath to be invaluable for myself and my clients. I work with one client who has

many personality and attention issues. I gave him bee-breath as well as mantras and a mudra. It worked like a charm. Giving him something to “do” while focusing his attention, and using his voice with mantra, but not saying anything brought a real sense of calm and peace that he so desired, but was unable to tap into.

6) What is your best advice to teachers and therapists just beginning their LFYP journey?

Definitely less is more. When I came back from training, I wanted to use it ALL! Amy teaches so many tools and they are all very inspiring, but people can be quickly overwhelmed. When I introduce just one or two LFYP tools in a session, it can make more of a difference than using too many. Just like in Yoga...not to overdo.

7) Is there anything you would like to add?

If anyone wants to receive my monthly Yogalena Therapeutics newsletter, they can sign up through my website, www.alenagerst.com. I also want to encourage people to check out the wonderful work we're doing at the Initiative for Women with Disabilities (www.iwdwellness.org) at NYU Medical Center. As far as I know, we're the only game in town (and anywhere, I think!) providing the array of medical and wellness services that we do, and it's totally accessible for people who can walk, are blind, or are in wheelchairs or scooters, no matter what their physical disability is. I'm actually going to be teaching a winter breathing series for mood there based on LifeForce Yoga! I'm really proud of it all.