

Embracing Awkward

Seek experiences that encourage you to grow in your practice and your teaching. **By Bo Forbes**



In the midst of a lively discussion recently about what makes a yoga practice more therapeutic, my workshop group and I experienced a pivotal moment. I'd just asked the nearly 90 participants, "How many of you feel better after practicing yoga?" Nearly everyone raised their hand except Mary, a woman in her early 50s. "Yoga doesn't help me feel better," she said. "In fact, sometimes I feel worse afterwards." Her remark surprised me; as yoga teachers, we often forget what it feels like to be a new student. "I look around at everyone else," said Mary, "and my downward dog isn't like theirs. My body just doesn't get it." I could see others nodding in sympathy. "I think yoga is only for the very fit, so it's obviously not for me."

"My guess," I said to Mary, "is that you haven't been taught how to be in your body," and she nodded. "So here you are later in life, coming to yoga. And what does yoga do? It asks us to be in our body in a very deep way, which is difficult and awkward. To make matters worse," I said, "you have to feel this way in front of everyone else, while they appear to have an easier time. That's *hard*." Mary lowered her head and nodded again. When I asked the others if

they had ever felt the same way, the majority nodded in agreement.

Moving from Failure to Growth

Mary's willingness to share her discomfort catalyzed one of the richest dialogues of our weekend. Although feeling awkward is indeed difficult, it is also a sign that we're learning something new. Awkwardness is a precursor to neuroplasticity: brain change on both neural and emotional levels. Yet our nervous system prefers the status quo. It compels us to act according to how we're wired, no matter how destructive those patterns might be. And when it senses something different, it encodes that difference as "danger." So the very first time (or the first 100 times) we practice something new, our nervous system feels unmoored. It naturally resists this experience of awkwardness and attempts to restore us to familiar ground, to cement our old patterns in place.

Just as we're neurally wired to avoid awkwardness and vulnerability, we're socially programmed to do so as well. Even our current paradigms of learning and healing don't encourage newness and change. Our early experiences in school (and often at home) teach us to focus on getting the right answer, on *not*

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being wrong. So, instead of exploring the unknown, we play it safe. We avoid the experience of *not knowing* and emulate the actions or voices of others. We may learn not to question authority, to surrender our power and intuition to our teachers and doctors. By giving them the responsibility for our learning and healing, we co-create a paradigm for change that favors prescriptive knowledge and discourages us from taking a more inquisitive and often circuitous path.

And how does all of this affect the physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of yoga practice? In classes and workshops, students often assume that the teacher has the wisdom to know exactly what works for a particular challenge—and what’s more, that the same formula works equally well for everyone who shares that challenge. For example, as a yoga teacher and a psychologist, I’m often asked what three poses will heal

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depression, or what five yoga exercises will relieve anxiety. When I respond that research shows it’s not the poses themselves that matter but the way we practice, people resist. “That’s too esoteric,” they say. It’s no wonder we feel bad about ourselves when prescribed remedies don’t seem to work.

Here’s the dilemma: this old learning and healing paradigm is seductive. It gives us a false sense of comfort and success, but at the same time it keeps us from challenging ourselves to grow. And it short-circuits our creativity and the *aha* experiences that can transform our lives. So, as much as we may want to quell it, the discomfort that we feel in

unfamiliar terrain is actually the foundation for learning and growing. The awkwardness and vulnerability we experience when we try something new may feel like failure to us, but in reality they signal growth.

Keeping a Beginner’s Mind

We know that yoga holds tremendous potential for transformation. But what transforms us is not the sequence we practice, the poses themselves, or even the teacher we choose. We hold the key to our own healing. The yoga teacher and student—or yoga therapist and client—are co-collaborators along the path to change. Growth requires

Yoga Practice Laboratory

To experience yoga's tremendous potential for healing, you must be willing to engage in *svadhyaya*, the yoga of self-discovery or self-inquiry. One way to do this is to create and participate in a yoga practice lab. Much like in a scientist's lab, you would first take a baseline for how you're feeling; then you would participate in a selection of yoga and mindfulness practices; and finally, you would assess the different effects these practices have on your mind and body.

Let's take what I call blockasana—*balasana* (child's pose) with a block under your forehead—as an example. Settle into the pose and then ask yourself these questions:

- 1 How did this pose affect my physical energy?
- 2 Did the pose quiet my mind or accelerate it?
- 3 Is my breath deeper or does it feel shallow and jagged?
- 4 Do I feel more connected to my center?

Your answers might surprise you, or you may wonder if you felt anything different at all—which could make you feel uncomfortable. Try not to get caught up in wondering, “Did I get this right?” or “What am I supposed to be feeling?” Even in the midst of uncertainty, change is happening on a cellular level; you just may not feel it yet.

The more we experiment in the yoga practice lab, the more we can embrace awkward and the more we can discover about ourselves.

the active engagement of teacher and student, of therapist and client. And, in turn, this engagement generates a living, breathing dialogue. It acts as an alchemical vessel for the rebirth and nourishing of awareness. It can also be awkward.

The more we experiment and the more deeply we inhabit our bodies and minds, the more awkward we're likely to feel. As one participant commented, “It's like that dream where you're naked in front of everyone and totally exposed!” Our discomfort may be physical. Tight hamstrings, for

example, may prevent us from accessing downward-facing dog or forward bends the way we think we should.

We may discover our core body asleep from many years of neglect and begin to connect this with our struggles with back pain or even interpersonal boundaries. Like Mary, we might encounter a pervasive sense of estrangement from our body that forces us to acknowledge that we don't feel rooted in our physical existence.

Our awkwardness can also be emotional. We may acknowledge a new vulnerability in our intimate relationships,

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which carries with it the risk of getting hurt. Or we may learn that we exhibit an unsettling lack of self-care or self-compassion that costs us dearly.

We can regard this sense of awkwardness as alarming, as a sign that something is wrong with us. Or we can see it as a gift—a signal that we’ve emerged from a sleeping space and catapulted ourselves into the alive, intimidating space of transition and change. Feeling vulnerable is our cue not to run but to stay the course, brave the elements, and settle in for the longer journey of transformation.

Reclaiming Creativity

When I teach, I often ask my students to abandon their comforting ideas of how healing happens—*Bo will give us the keys to end our lifelong experience of depression in this workshop*—and take a step forward into something much less defined or certain. This forces me to shed the blanket of authority I can rely on as a psychologist and a yoga therapist, and surrender the power for healing to the workshop participants themselves. As a result, I often feel awkward and vulnerable myself.

Embracing awkward requires a large dose of fearlessness. Yet when we realize how authentic “awkward” really is, we gain the courage to choose it, and even to seek it out, again and again. Eventually, the experience of awkward becomes familiar territory. And with persistence, we can reclaim the playful, creative energy that lies beneath it. This vulnerability confirms that we’re alive, that we’re engaged in the greatest experiment of all—the direct experience of life. ■

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