Recently, I elected to do a bit of remodeling on our house. Things got off to a brilliant start, as I found a delightful master carpenter who was easy to work with. While opening the ceiling to install skylights, he found scorched areas of wiring, and it became clear that some electrical work was necessary. My carpenter recommended a buddy of his, someone he had known and worked with for years. A few painless weeks flew by, and I began to think that this remodeling thing was a breeze. But, as the job came to an end, I was asked to find a workman to close up the walls and ceiling with dry wall. Neither the carpenter nor electrician knew anyone they could recommend personally. Not expecting this additional step, I floundered about, asking friends with no success. Eventually, I simply called the number on a business card I found in a paint store. The results were disastrous. The workman was difficult to get hold of; he did not show up when promised; he used the cheapest and quickest means possible to finish the job; and worst of all, he didn’t communicate with my carpenter. In the end, the job was done so poorly that I had to hire someone else to correct his work.

This little story illustrates what I believe crucial to our growth as Yoga therapists and our ability to effectively meet the needs of our students: relationship building. Krishnamacharya clearly understood this when he said that only three things are required to be a Yoga teacher: a relationship with the practice, a relationship with a teacher, and compassion. However, I would expand this concept to include a fourth element: the need to cultivate meaningful, collaborative relationships with other healthcare professionals.

The reason for this is simple. No yoga therapist is an island, and it would be sheer bravado to think I (or any Yoga therapist) can heal everyone who walks through my door. My own experience in private practice has borne this out time and time again. What, for example, do I do when a 14-year-old girl walks in with 60 degrees of deviation in her lumbar vertebrae? What about the newly married man who tearfully confesses he is addicted to pornography, or the woman with multiple sclerosis I suspect could benefit from having her vitamin D levels checked? There is no shame in admitting when things are beyond our scope. Referrals are necessary in our field, and I imagine most of us do indeed refer out to others in instances such as these. However, to do ourselves, our practices, and our clients justice, we must still address two key questions—to whom do we refer, and what happens after the referral?

If I say to my student, “I think you need to see a chiropractor,” should I leave the task of finding that chiropractor up to him or her? Do I refer my student to the MD down the street just because the office is conveniently located? In my mind, these actions are akin to abandoning my student in one of her greatest times of need. If my student, with whom I have established a relationship of compassion and trust, could benefit from a referral, then I should have a relationship with the third party I send her to. The answer to those two questions, then, lies in networking and relationship-based collaboration.

Let me be clear. I am not talking about sending your students to the acupuncturist around the corner because you once stopped in and dropped off flyers for your workshop. How we connect and collaborate with other professionals helps determine not only how much we can assist our students, but how we as Yoga therapists grow and evolve as well. These connections and collaborations should be both meaningful and intimate. What could be more enriching than referring your students to the same osteopath who serves as your primary-care physician, or the naturopath who comes...
to your group class once a week? How about the bodyworker you meet with once a month to share ideas about stress and physiology? In this way, referral and collaboration become much more than “networking.” They allow us to create a family of healers—each with different tools in his or her toolbox—that shares a common goal.

Yoga therapists should not be concerned that what we have to offer will be drowned out by more traditional or esoteric modalities. Yoga does, and will always, stand out in the sea of healing methods because it empowers students to actively participate in the healing process. This awareness of Yoga’s strengths, however, should not make us hesitant to refer when appropriate. And when we do refer, it should be to individuals who are willing to establish the kind of relationships we forge with our students, who listen, share, and trust with an open heart and mind.

As a Yoga therapist, I have three tools hanging on my weathered belt like a carpenter: I can always listen with love, and without agenda; I can always teach someone how to lengthen his or her exhalation; and I can usually show someone a few tricks that will improve his or her quality of sleep. For some, these may be the most healing modalities they will ever experience. But when a student presents a condition that will require more than my training and experience have equipped me to handle, I want to know that the individual I am suggesting she invite into her circle of trust is one who is already a part of my own.

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