

PERSPECTIVE

Competencies for Yoga Therapists: What We Need to Know and Master

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On July 1, 2012, the International Association of Yoga Therapists (IAYT) published Educational Standards for the Training of Yoga Therapists. The next step in this process involved the recent publication of the Application for IAYT Accreditation of yoga therapy training programs. Accreditation recognizes that a yoga therapist training program meets IAYT's educational standards. These accomplishments represent a significant step toward establishing yoga as a recognized and respected therapy around the world.

The centerpiece of the Educational Standards document is the Competencies Profile. The word *competencies* is widely accepted in educational circles, but for some, the term remains obscure. Competencies are the skills and abilities that a person from a particular field or profession needs to know and master. Development of a list of competencies begins with the use of a Skills and Knowledge Profile to analyze the work being performed by individuals in the field or profession. Relative to the field of yoga therapy, this profiling and analysis process addresses the following questions:

- What does a yoga therapist do?
- What does she/he need to know to practice responsibly and effectively?
- What skills should she/he be able to demonstrate to conduct yoga therapy responsibly and effectively?

These questions guided the IAYT Educational Standards Committee through the 2-year process that resulted in the existing Competencies Profile within the Educational Standards for the Training of Yoga Therapists.

Competencies form the foundation for educational standards. A key feature of competencies is a set of well-defined assessments. These assessments are used to ascertain whether a student possesses the requisite skills and knowledge to competently perform the practices or procedures he or she is being evaluated for. Unlike many approaches to education in which a student's understanding of a content area is examined according to subject matter, assessment of competencies is based on a student's demonstration of an integrated compendium of skills and knowledge across a diverse array of content areas simultaneously, often mirroring the actual workplace (e.g., a yoga therapy session). Robin Rothenberg describes assessment as it relates to yoga therapist education and competencies in detail in the Perspective that follows.

What Do We Need to Know and Master?

The IAYT Competency Profile outlines a range of skills and knowledge essential to the practice of yoga therapy. They can be summarized as follows (with the categories in the Competency Profile shown for cross-reference):

- An understanding of yoga teachings, yoga philosophy, and their application to yoga therapy, including the

condition and functioning of the mind (Categories 1.1 and 1.2) and the understanding of health and disease (1.3). This knowledge is fundamental to distinguishing yoga therapy from other forms of treatment.

- Knowledge of the allopathic/biomedical and psychological conceptualization of anatomy, physiology, mental health, and related pathology, including basic knowledge of perspectives on health and disease and the contemporary health care environment (2.1 to 2.4). This knowledge is fundamental to working in modern health care.
- An understanding of the importance of body–mind connection and its integration in the practice of yoga therapy (2.5). This knowledge represents the synthesis of the previous categories in Section 2 and is fundamental to the practice of yoga therapy.
- Knowledge and skills related to therapeutic skill and client education at the individual consultation or group level (3.1 to 3.3). Therapeutic relationships can be complex and require skills and knowledge that either include or differ from those of a teacher. These relationships bring an added duty of care and the need for particular application of the *yamas* and *niyamas*.
- A deep understanding of the breadth of yoga practices and their application (4.1). This includes a well-developed ability to integrate the necessary knowledge with practice, to provide effective yoga therapy for clients, including all aspects of intake and assessment, design and instruction of practices, and providing ongoing support (4.2). The competencies in Category 4 are the core components of the provision of yoga therapy. It is in these areas that the particular approach or style of the school and its program will be reflected in the training. It is important to note, however, that the competencies in Category 4 can be effective only when they are strongly based upon or supported by all the other competencies.
- An understanding of the principles of professional practice. This includes understanding the regulatory environment, relationship with peers, professional ethics, and the role of ongoing personal development (5.1 to 5.4). As professional practitioners we represent not only ourselves, but the emerging field of yoga therapy. Through our grounding in the *yamas* and *niyamas* and an applied understanding of what it means to be professional, we can best serve those we aim to assist and function as ambassadors of our field.

As IAYT moves forward with the accrediting of yoga therapy programs and eventual credentialing of yoga therapists, the competencies and educational standards will be the bedrock that supports the field of yoga therapy as it becomes established as a recognized and respected profession.