

# Growing Awareness, Growing Opportunity: Qualified Healthcare Professionals and Yoga Therapy

By Heidi Crocker and Laurie Hyland Robertson



**A**s awareness of yoga grows and yoga therapy continues to expand into formal clinical settings, people are naturally interested in offering these transformational practices as widely as possible. IAYT recognizes the need for educational opportunities for qualified healthcare professionals (QHP) to learn the foundations of yoga principles and how to apply them in the context of a whole-person approach to patient care. Read on to learn about a pilot program that represents the next step in the evolution of professional yoga therapy in the West. The more QHPs experience the benefits of yoga—within *their* scope of practice—the more they will support including yoga therapists as part of interprofessional healthcare teams.

## Rapid Evolution—Really!

IAYT has long said that membership is open to all who are aligned with the organization's mission, which has evolved to reflect where the field is now: advancing yoga therapy as a recognized health profession. This invitation extends to yoga therapists, researchers, and teachers—as well as healthcare providers who use yoga in their practices.

Since IAYT started keeping track in 2016, roughly a quarter of the membership has consisted of QHPs. (Like everything else, language evolves—we called them licensed healthcare practitioners, or LHCPs, back then.) These individuals were and are important standard-bearers for yoga therapy in contemporary healthcare environments. As in any developing profession, someone must raise the flag from the inside.

Imagine if people could learn about yoga therapy through direct experience with their trusted QHP. Imagine, for example, a 16-year-old girl going to her pediatrician for a high school sports physical, and telling the doctor that she has been experiencing some anxious feelings and crying more than usual. She shares with the doctor that she had what she thinks was a panic attack at soccer tryouts last week. Wouldn't it be wonderful if the pediatrician could share with this girl a breathing technique and possibly a mudra to help calm herself and regulate her thoughts and breath when she has those feelings? The doctor could also explain that if she needs some support as the sports season gets going, she could refer her to a yoga

therapist—just like she might refer to a physical therapist after she’s provided initial care for a serious ankle sprain.

From IAYT’s founding in 1989, to the first Member Directory in 1991 (it listed 185 people from 10 countries) to the very first—very enthusiastically received—Symposium on Yoga Therapy and Research in Los Angeles in 2007, to the first formal published definition of yoga therapy that same year, yoga therapy has evolved at lightning speed for a healthcare profession. In 2023, IAYT consisted of 5,300 members in more than 50 countries, 3,900 individual C-IAYTs, 70 accredited yoga therapy training programs, and 150 member schools.

During the past 30-plus years the organization’s focus naturally shifted to embrace what is required of an emerging healthcare profession, and we have met several benchmarks of those requirements. Our community developed educational competencies and accreditation standards for yoga therapy training programs. Next, we determined the competencies an individual yoga therapist should demonstrate to ensure the appropriate application of the practices. In addition, IAYT created—with much care and deliberation—a scope of practice and a code of ethics that those certified individual yoga therapists would agree to abide by. We also built pathways to inclusion in the C-IAYT community for well-experienced individuals who may not have had formal training. Now we are implementing a Certification Exam to continue to solidify the field’s standing, working from revised educational standards and other directives that reflect changes such as the rise of distance learning, and looking toward the next round of updates to our Code of Ethics and Professional Responsibilities and Scope of Practice for Yoga Therapy.

### Strategic New Directions

IAYT is also participating in strategic initiatives to solidify the inclusion of yoga therapy in integrative healthcare spaces. Thomas Edison once predicted, “The physician of the future will give no medicine, but

will interest his patients in the care of the human frame, in diet and in the cause and prevention of disease.” Although Edison’s vision has not yet materialized, recent healthcare trends indicate a shift in that direction. Most healthcare providers continue to “give medicine” as well as prescribe other forms of high-tech care, yet the U.S. Veterans Administration and other large health systems are keenly interested in promoting a move toward whole-person health, a patient-centered, integrative approach focused on health creation and well-being. Care oriented to salutogenesis rather than pathogenesis!

Many QHPs are eager to learn the principles of yoga practices and to establish interprofessional collaboration with yoga therapists. So now it’s time to continue to consciously evolve the profession and carve another path, not to the C-IAYT credential, but to recognize QHPs who advance their training in the application of yoga principles in therapeutic settings. Importantly, those on this pathway can advocate for yoga therapists to deliver services in a variety of healthcare systems.

The American Board of Integrative Medicine has secured a taxonomy code from the National Uniform Claim Committee for allopathic and osteopathic *integrative physicians*. (A taxonomy code is part of the application to receive a National Provider Identifier number in the United States.) We can expect that these QHPs will become the gatekeepers for patients seeking integrative therapies in the Western medical system. These physicians will be able to coordinate a broad range of practices, techniques, and services depending on the patient’s needs, such as acupuncture, reiki, and yoga therapy.\* How will they choose which services to offer themselves, through others in their offices, or by referral to independent practitioners? The more experience the integrative medicine practitioner has with a given discipline, the greater the chance they will offer that practice or service and want those practitioners as part of the patient-centered healthcare team.



These QHPs don't have the time or energy to actually practice as yoga therapists; more importantly, it's not their focus! Instead, they will likely orchestrate appropriate therapeutic plans that will include supporting interventions such as yoga therapy. It is our responsibility to educate the integrative medicine specialist on the value of yoga and the scope of practice of C-IAYTs, allow them to experience the benefits of incorporating yoga principles with patients, and provide them with yoga therapists to support the vision of whole-person care.

### Give the People What They Want: The QHP Pilot Program

In 2017, a distinguished group of yoga therapists, Matt Taylor, PhD, PT, C-IAYT; Amy Wheeler, PhD, C-IAYT; and Laura Schmalzl, PhD, C-IAYT, posed this question: "Shouldn't there be room for those individuals who don't want to be C-IAYTs yet use therapeutic yoga tools in their scope of practice?" (See Summer 2017 *Yoga Therapy Today*, "Licensed Healthcare and Yoga Therapy: Let's Talk.")

The reality is that this expanded application of yoga therapy tools is happening, and the time for IAYT to offer guidance is now. As a first step, the organization conducted a pilot study with YogaX Advanced Yoga Teacher Training at Stanford Psychiatry on a 300-hour therapeutic yoga program specifically designed for QHPs.

### Reaching out to Fill the Gap

IAYT has drafted accreditation standards and educational competencies to guide such programs in training QHPs in the foundations of yoga principles and how to integrate the principles into the therapeutic approaches within their respective scopes of practice. For providers considering adding yoga to their therapeutic armamentarium, the best place to start is to consider yoga therapy as a complement to patients' current medical treatment. When providers comprehend the benefits to patients, and patients, in turn, experience them, the role of the yoga therapist on interprofessional patient-centered teams becomes even more valuable.

The YogaX pilot study helped to define and refine the accreditation standards, educational competencies, and accreditation process for this new level of therapeutic education and establish a recognition for the providers who complete a training program. More details will be sent to members in early 2024, and the directors of IAYT-accredited yoga therapy programs will have the opportunity to comment on the draft accreditation standards for QHP programs. After that, the broader IAYT community will be able to provide feedback.

The 2017 article referenced above wondered, "Might it be possible to develop an LHCP yoga therapy curriculum . . . that would bring in LHCPs as affiliated with IAYT, recognize their professional experience, AND ensure their understanding of IAYT's scope of practice, standards, and so on?" More and more healthcare providers want to be able to offer more to patients in terms of personalized assessment, goal setting, and non-pharmaceutical approaches. They need a guiding framework that helps to convey the breadth and depth of yoga therapy practice and the relationship between general yoga

### IAYT-Q Is Here!

YogaX at Stanford Psychiatry, which participated in the pilot described in this article, is offering the first IAYT-accredited Foundations of Yoga Principles for Qualified Health Professionals program.



The 300-hour YogaX training, "Integrated Holistic Yoga Therapeutics in Healthcare," aims to prepare QHPs to bring yoga into their existing healthcare practices. As Christiane Brems, PhD, E-RYT 500, C-IAYT, director of YogaX, writes, "The integration of yoga's ancient wisdom and modern science can help create a more resilient healthcare ecosystem that emphasizes integrated and holistic well-being and lifestyles for patients and care providers alike."

Graduates of these accredited QHP programs will be able to register as an IAYT-Q. Watch your email throughout 2024 for additional details and dates for online informational sessions.

and yoga therapy, as well as the difference between applying yoga therapy tools and being a professional yoga therapist.

### A Natural Home

IAYT defines yoga therapy as "the professional application of the principles and practices of yoga to promote health and well-being within a therapeutic relationship that includes personalized assessment, goal setting, lifestyle management, and yoga practices for individuals or small groups." As noted above, healthcare providers increasingly want to offer these time-tested supports—and many just don't know what they don't know. The establishment of accreditation standards and educational competencies for programs focused on QHPs will help the broader healthcare community to fill those knowledge gaps. ●

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\*See, for example, <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/treatments/21683-integrative-medicine>