



## Interview with Elizabeth Plapinger: Lawyer, Professor, Yoga for Mental Wellness

Teacher ([www.myembodiment.com/interviews](http://www.myembodiment.com/interviews))

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*Elizabeth Plapinger is the co-director of Yoga for Mental Wellness (YMW) at The Breathing Project, which has provided low-cost or free therapeutic yoga classes for those living with mental illness in NYC since 2004. Elizabeth and her colleagues, Bess Abrahams, RYT, IMT and L. Ruth Kalvert, RYT, CMT, MA, administer and teach the YMW program and provide yoga to various hospitals and community mental health programs in and around NYC. Elizabeth and her colleagues also assist yoga and mental health professionals interested in exploring yoga's complementary role in mental health and wellness.*

*Elizabeth is a certified yoga teacher, with a background in vinyasa, restorative, Iyengar, breath-centered and embodied yoga. A graduate of the Advanced Studies in Yoga Anatomy at The Breathing Project, Elizabeth has studied with master yoga teachers and yoga therapists Jillian Pransky, Leslie Kaminoff, Amy Matthews, Roxlyn Moret, and Bess Abrahams. She currently studies embodied yoga and Body-Mind Centering with Amy Matthews and Roxlyn Moret, and Iyengar Yoga with Michelle LaRue.*

*In addition to her yoga teaching and studies, Elizabeth, who is a lawyer, was an adjunct professor at Columbia Law School from 2000-2008, where she taught conflict resolution and problem-solving. Elizabeth is the former director of the Public Policy Projects at the CPR Institute for Dispute Resolution, a nonprofit research and education organization in New York City. Elizabeth is the author of numerous policy and research studies, books and articles regarding ethics, mediation and other methods of conflict resolution. She is a graduate of Carleton College (magna cum laude) and the School of Law at the University of California, Berkeley (Order of the Coif), and a fellow of the American Bar Foundation.*

**Q: What is your yoga background? Where did you get your yoga teacher training? What types of yoga do you practice and teach?**

I began my yoga studies in 1999, exploring a combination of vinyasa and Iyengar yoga. I added breath-centered, restorative and embodied yoga and anatomy along the way. I am a graduate of the Bright Spirit Yoga 200-hour Training Program (2004) and the Advanced Studies Training Program in Yoga Anatomy at The Breathing Project (2006), and currently study with Leslie Kaminoff, Amy Matthews, Roxlyn Moret, Jillian Pransky, and Michelle LaRue.

Integrating alignment, breath, mindfulness, embodiment and delight in movement and self-discovery, I teach yoga to people living with mental illness. My specific teaching approach, which I call for shorthand, the ABC's of Yoga for Mental Wellness, is described below.

**Q: What interested you in yoga initially?**

I came to yoga at a time of great change and disruption in my life. Some inchoate desire and knowledge seems to have led me to my first yoga class, at age 45, where I met my first and continuing teacher, Jillian Pransky. Once on the mat, I had an immediate sensation of ease and discovery. Coming to yoga and following my strong instincts to explore it deeply was the first time in my life that I had heeded the information my body and heart was giving me, rather than overriding it.

**Q: What work do you do right now?**

I am co-director of and primary yoga teacher at Yoga for Mental Wellness (YMW) at The Breathing Project, a nonprofit yoga center in NYC ([www.breathingproject.org](http://www.breathingproject.org)). YMW provides free and low-cost community yoga classes for people living with mental illness. Since many of our students are under-employed, jobless or homeless because of their illnesses, we offer our twice-weekly community classes in New York City at no charge or by small donation for those who can contribute. We also regularly teach yoga classes in various NYC hospitals, community mental health centers, and wellness fairs. In addition, we advise yoga and mental health professionals interested in exploring yoga's complementary role in mental health and wellness.

In our hospital classes, interested students are referred during out-patient treatment or after hospitalization to the free YMW community classes. One of my mental health colleagues explains the usefulness of YMW's hospital-to-community continuum, noting: "The fact that YMW has a role in so many branches of the mental health system promot[es] compliance and follow up with elements of the after-care plan."

We serve hundreds of people annually and fund our work through individual contributors and foundations. In 2009-2010, our principal funding came from Corcoran Cares, a local charitable giving program funded by staff and agents from the Soho office of the prominent NYC real estate company, The Corcoran Group. [www.corcoran.com](http://www.corcoran.com).

**Q: What is your professional and education background?**

I began my career as a lawyer, more interested in resolving disputes and preserving relationships than in filing lawsuits. For 15 years, I worked at the CPR International Institute for Conflict Prevention and Resolution in NYC, where I conducted research, wrote books and articles, and worked with other lawyers, law professors, public policy makers and consumers of legal services, to integrate mediation and other forms of conflict resolution into the contemporary practice of law. From 2000-2008, I taught conflict resolution and problem-solving at Columbia Law School. I am a graduate of the School of Law at the University of California, Berkeley, and Carleton College, and am a fellow of the American Bar Foundation.

In many ways, my former work in law—exploring different ways to resolve conflict and encouraging change in contemporary legal institutions—parallels my current work in yoga and mental health, where I am working with mental health workers and clients to integrate yogic tools to contemporary mental health approaches.

**Q: You taught Conflict Resolution at Columbia Law School—how did you integrate yoga into your classroom teaching?**

I often say that, "I taught yoga to my conflict resolution students and problem-solving to my yoga students." Indeed the fundamentals are the same in both classes. They include coming into the present moment, grounding oneself, and pausing meaningfully before acting. By centering oneself and then pausing, one begins to understand the current situation more accurately and to make better choices about how to proceed. That is the stance of the problem-solving negotiator as well as the yogi.

As a yogi, I tried to reduce the inherent stress of the classroom at Columbia Law School by encouraging my students to find and remember their inner, intuitive wisdom and move from there. With my yoga students, many of whom have lost some feeling of their own power, wisdom and autonomy, I also begin from the traditional yogic place that we are all already whole, regardless what illness or dilemmas we currently face.

**Q: What is THE BREATHING PROJECT? How did you get involved with this program?**

The Breathing Project is a non-profit therapeutic yoga education center, which provides advanced studies in anatomy, breath-centered, individualized and embodied yoga for teachers of various movement disciplines. In addition, it offers specialized community yoga classes for under-served groups, such as people with mental illness, MS, and other conditions. It was founded in 2003 by yoga educator and anatomy teacher, Leslie Kaminoff, and is currently directed by Leslie and Amy Matthews, another extraordinary teacher and anatomist. For more information about the Breathing Project, see [www.breathingproject.org](http://www.breathingproject.org).

I came to the Breathing Project in 2004 to continue my studies in yoga anatomy with Leslie and Amy, after competing my 200-hour yoga teacher training. Having personally experienced how yoga practice had lifted

my moods and enriched my life, I wanted to learn more about Yoga for Depression, a small pilot program at the Breathing Project. Founded by yoga therapist Bess Abrahams in 2004, the program was designed to explore whether consistent yoga practice would enhance the lives of people living with persistent mental illness. Bess and I began to co-teach and administer the program, which eventually became Yoga for Mental Wellness (YMW). I took on the day-to-day teaching and administration of the program in 2005, and I continue that work today with the assistance of my two co-directors, Bess, and L. Ruth Kalvert, a talented yoga and massage therapist, who joined YMW in 2008.

**Q: You co-direct a program at THE BREATHING PROJECT called “Yoga for Mental Wellness (YMW).” What does this yoga practice entail and what is the philosophy and methodology behind it?**

YMW is grounded in the 3-fold philosophy of The Samarya Center’s Integrated Movement Therapy (IMT), where our founder Bess Abrahams trained. Those concepts are: (1) Each of us is perfect and whole right now; (2) Each of us is unlimited in our potential and abilities to heal; and (3) No part of our body/mind/spirit, and no part of the brain, works alone. [www.samaryacenter.org](http://www.samaryacenter.org).

Within that framework, I have developed a three-part methodology for teaching how to access the enormous resources we carry with us in our bodies. Sometimes I call my approach the ABCs of YMW: **A** for alignment, awareness, acceptance and aliveness; **B** for breath, balance and being where you are; and **C** for approaching ourselves with curiosity, compassion, clarity and courage. (**C** is also for consistent practice, an essential ingredient to healing and growth, as I often remind my students!)

In Yoga for Mental Wellness classes, the students are repeatedly reminded that we are our own best teachers and our bodies are laboratories for us to explore and discover wisdom and information for healing and living fully. A typical class involves the slow, careful movement of yoga postures, focused breathing coordinated with movement, attention to the present moment, exploration of the body and embodiment, compassionate self-care and deep relaxation. Class size is limited to 10 students to allow individualized teaching, connections between student, teacher and classmates, and the growth of a healing community.

**Q: What are your hopes for YOGA FOR MENTAL WELLNESS? What are the broader applications you see for this practice and where would you like the program to go?**

I look forward to continuing to fund, direct and teach YMW with my colleagues and students. Our mission is to assist people in crisis, their families and the mental health community in discovering the vast resources of the body and mind through yoga. Our ongoing work is to provide broader access to yoga practice for those living with mental health challenges. Today, too many of us are excluded because appropriate yoga classes are not readily available or cost too much.

Several of our students have spoken eloquently of their need for this program and their wishes for more classes. One wrote: “As a survivor of physical and sexual abuse, I am very sensitive regarding my body. Therapy is great and helps but does not encompass the physical aspects of my being. In the yoga class, the teachers reached my soul through my body.” Another explained: “Yoga has allowed me to better respect my body and the information it is giving me. I am someone who suffers from both psychiatric and physical illnesses so this attitude is important to . . . the quality of my life. A third student adds: “This class is an oasis that keeps me going through the week. . . . I wish the class was offered more often and that such classes were made available to all survivors of trauma.” And a fourth summed up hopes for the future: “I hope in my heart that [this kind of yoga class] will become more and more available and spread through the mental health community like wild fire.”

**Q: What would you like to see happen in the future of the field of complementary/integrative mental health and the infusion of yoga into the mental health and general health fields?**

I would like to see yoga and other somatic practices integrated in our society’s approach to education and wellness. How does that happen today and tomorrow? In my experience, one way is when innovative and courageous folks inside the mental health system reach out to bring complementary strategies into their workplaces. This process of change takes time, leadership, patience and persistence. At several hospitals where YMW is offered, gentle persistence on the part of the courageous insiders, along with equanimity and understanding on the part of the yoga teachers was necessary to clear hurdles and overcome resistance.

Secondly, when I work in the mental health system, I consider my co-workers in the mental health professions to be part of my mandate. They do the intense daily work in an over-loaded and understaffed health system. Not only is regular self-care essential to the health of the mental health providers, it also translates into better care. For example, one of my mental health co-workers recently commented about the effect of a yoga session I conducted for staff, “[one therapist said] that she was more open emotionally with her client right after your class. [This] comment captures the immediate benefit of mindful yoga practice: when we are centered in mind and body, we can be more available for our clients and help them more.”

**Q: What are some of the most important resources, references, books, articles, teachers you have come across on your path as a yoga teacher & a person integrating yoga for mental health?**

My most influential yoga teachers are Jillian Pransky, Bess Abrahams, L. Ruth Kalvert, Leslie Kaminoff, Amy Matthews, Roxlyn Moret and Michelle LaRue. My other essential guide and teacher in this work is NYC psychologist Dr. Dorothy L. Griffiths.

As a reader, many books have accompanied me on this journey. Several books and authors of particular importance have been: Health, Healing and Beyond, by T.K.V. Desikachar (Apperature Foundation 1998); Healing into Life and Death, by Stephen Levine (Anchor Books, 1987); Where the Roots Reach for Water: A Natural and Personal History of Melancholia, by Jeffrey Smith (Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1999); Start Where You Are: A Guide to Compassionate Living, by Pema Chodren (Shambhala Library 2004); and Faith: Trusting Your Deepest Experience, by Sharon Salzberg (Riverhead Books, 2002). A number of books have been published recently that explore mindfulness and somatic or body approaches to mental illness. Several of my favorites are: The Psychophysiology of Self-Awareness: Rediscovering the Lost Art of Body Sense by Alan Fogel (Norton, 2009); Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression: A New Approach for Preventing Relapse by Zindel V. Segal et al (The Guilford Press 2002); and Healing the Whole Person: Applications of Yoga Psychotherapy by Swami Ajaya (Himalayan Institute Press, 2008).

**Q: Any advice for mental health professionals, bodyworkers interested in learning more about the intersection of yoga and mental health?**

My colleagues and I at YMW are always happy to field questions and direct interested folks to resources. We are also honored to assist people in crisis, their families and the mental health community in discovering the vast resources of the body and mind through yoga. We can be reached at [Elizabeth@breathingproject.org](mailto:Elizabeth@breathingproject.org) and [www.breathingproject.org](http://www.breathingproject.org).