

# Chair Yoga in the Online Classroom

Minimize stress and increase body-mind energy

Murali Nair & Katherine A. Segal

*In this chapter, we share a simple chair yoga routine that can be used during online classes in Adobe Connect.*

## Teaching and Learning Goal

The benefits of using chair yoga during class include:

- Improving student concentration and focusing throughout the class session;
- Reducing student stress;
- Providing a tangible mind-body activity that students can take with them following the semester; and
- Increasing instructor presence during the class session

## Activity and results

All of us go through happy days and not-so-happy days. It is common to feel that we have too much to do in too little time. But, the inclination to buckle down, and work harder and longer is not the answer. It is easy to get caught up in the “activity trap”, where our time is filled with busy work that is focused on generating quantity over quality and where taking breaks, regenerating, and returning to the task refreshed are not valued.

A little stress can be helpful. For example, some of us have felt slightly motivated to complete a task when we have a deadline. However, too much stress and chronic stress can easily shift that sense of motivation into overwhelm. Where a little stress can actually help heighten our senses and improve our ability to learn new information, overwhelm can block our ability to focus, store new information, and engage in logic, reason, and creativity.

Therefore it is absolutely essential to learn and practice skills that help us reduce, release, and feel respite from stress, especially prolonged and intense stress. Given all of the stressful aspects our students live through daily - and bring with them into the classroom - it is important to engage in stress reducing activities during class.

Chair yoga is one of the techniques we have used in our online classes to improve student concentration, reduce student stress, and improve student mind-body connection. Chair yoga is easily led during online classes, as most of our students are already in quiet areas and sitting in chairs facing the computer screen. Therefore, no other equipment or space is needed to complete the practice. Chair yoga, and the steps described below, is also generally more accessible compared to other physical/asana based yoga practices. Having the support of the chair along with the gentle prompts addresses the needs of many who otherwise would not be able to engage in a standing or more strenuous yoga flow. That said, some students may still be unable to follow the described practice, so we like to include the prompt "if there are any movements that you are unable to perform for any reason, we invite you to imagine yourself following the prompts". Remember, the goal of yoga is not speed or flexibility. We encourage everyone to go at their own pace and remain within their range of motion.

## Technical Details and Steps

Let us practice a few chair yoga poses. We recommend the instructor, or a designated student, lead the practice by providing verbal prompts and if possible, also engage in the activity on camera.

### Get into position

- Begin by sitting on an armless chair
- Sit toward the middle or front of the chair (don't lean into the back of the chair)
- Sit tall with both feet flat on the floor, back straight, and legs hip-width apart.

### Breathing

- Close your eyes, breathe at a natural pace, exhaling and inhaling through your nostrils
- Bring your right hand to your face, position your thumb on the right nostril and ring finger on your left (the middle and index fingers can rest on the forehead, or be curved down toward the palm); **See image 1**
- Inhale through both nostrils, then gently block the right nostril as you exhale through the left
- Staying in this position, inhale through the left nostril, then gently block the left nostril, release the pressure on the right, and exhale through the right nostril
- Inhale on the right side, then switch and block the right nostril and exhale through the left. Inhale left.
- Repeat this pattern of breathing in from one nostril and exhaling through the opposite nostril approximately 11 times.
- After inhaling through the right nostril for the 12th (or so) time, block both nostrils and hold the breath in for a few seconds.
- Finally, release your hand and exhale through both nostrils.
- Take a few more slow deep breaths and open your eyes.

### Arm movements

- Continuing to sit upright in your chair, pair your movements with your breath. In general, breathe in as you move to take up more space (stretching your arms out) and breathe out as you move to take up less space (bringing your arms back toward your torso).

- Hold your arms straight, by your sides.
- As you breathe in, stretch your arms out as wide as you can, then as you exhale, bring your arms together in front of you, touching palms.
- Inhale, open your arms wide again,
- Exhale, place your fingertips on your shoulders, keeping your elbows out to the sides.
- Pause here as you take another inhale.
- On your next exhale, turn your torso to the right.
- Inhale, twist your torso back to center/ looking forward.
- On your next exhale, turn your torso to the left.
- Continue twisting center, right, center, left, center, a few more times, moving to the center as you inhale and twisting to a side when in exhale.
- Returning to center/looking forward, inhale and reach your arms overhead and slightly arch your back (don't hyperextend); **See image 2**
- Exhale, fold forward at the hips, bringing hands towards feet as far as is comfortable
- Inhale, slightly raise your torso - if your hands were on the floor or your feet they should now be touching your shins, if your hands were at your shins or knees, they should now be touching your thighs - slightly lift your head and chest to lengthen through the spine
- Exhale, fold forward again
- Inhale, sit all the way up, raising the arms back over your head
- Exhale, bring hands to your heart; **See image 3**
- Pause here to inhale and exhale a few times.
- Inhale, raise your hands, looking up at the ceiling
- Exhale, fold forward at the hips, bringing hands towards feet as far as is comfortable,
- Inhale, place the left hand on or as close to the floor on the outside of the left foot while also raising the right arm toward the ceiling, opening the chest as you twist to the right,
- Gaze up towards the ceiling, exhaling and inhaling
- Exhale, bring the right hand down to or toward the floor
- Inhale, place the right hand on or as close to the floor on the outside of the right foot while also raising the left arm toward the ceiling, opening the chest as you twist to the left,
- Gaze up towards the ceiling, exhaling and inhaling
- Exhale, bring the left hand down to or toward the floor
- Repeat on both sides one more time
- Inhale as you sit up
- Sitting tall with both feet flat on the floor
- Inhale, reach your arms overhead
- Exhale, bring your arms down, crossing your right arm under your left
- Bend your elbows and wrap your arms around each other, bringing your palms together
- Pull your elbows into your chest and look over your fingertips
- Cross your right leg over your left and wrap your right foot behind and around your left leg
- Stay in this position for 3-4 breaths
- Then, with arms still wrapped around each other, raise your hands up and drop your chin towards your chest.
- Stay in this position for 3-4 breaths.
- Repeat on the other side.

## Chair Hamstring Stretch

- Sit tall facing forward with both feet flat on the floor
- Extend your right leg, straightening your knee and placing your heel on the floor with your toes flexed up towards the ceiling
- Inhale, sit up tall with your hands placed on your thighs
- Exhale, reach your chest forward and press back through your sitting bones as you hinge forward at your hips.
- Relax your head and neck
- Slowly come back up to sitting.
- Repeat on the other side.

## Chair Leg Lift

- Sit tall facing forward with both feet flat on the floor
- Extend your right leg, straightening your knee and placing your heel on the floor with your toes flexed up towards the ceiling
- Inhale, sit up tall with your hands placed on your thighs
- Exhale, lift your right leg off the floor.
- Repeat on the other side.

## Oblique stretch

- Sit tall facing forward with both feet flat on the floor
- Inhale while raising your right arm toward the ceiling with your palm facing in.
- Point your fingertips to the ceiling.
- Slowly exhale and bend to the left; **See image 4**
- Hold this pose, breathing slowly several times, before exhaling and bringing your right arm down to your side.
- Repeat with your left arm.
- Slowly inhale while raising your left arm toward the ceiling with your palm facing in. Point your fingertips to the ceiling.
- Slowly exhale and bend to the right.

## Head roll

- Sit with your back straight and both feet flat on the floor. Inhale deeply.
- As you exhale, slowly roll your left ear towards your left shoulder.
- Inhale deeply and exhale slowly, rolling your chin down into your chest.
- Inhale deeply and exhale slowly, rolling your right ear to your right shoulder.
- Inhale deeply and exhale slowly, rolling your chin back to your chest.
- Repeat a few times, right shoulder, chest, left shoulder, chest. Finish the sequence with chin to chest and inhale as you raise your head to look forward.

## Back extension

- Sitting up tall on the front of a chair
- Place your hands on the middle of your thighs.
- Keep your elbows in by your sides, push your chest out, squeeze your shoulder blades and look up.

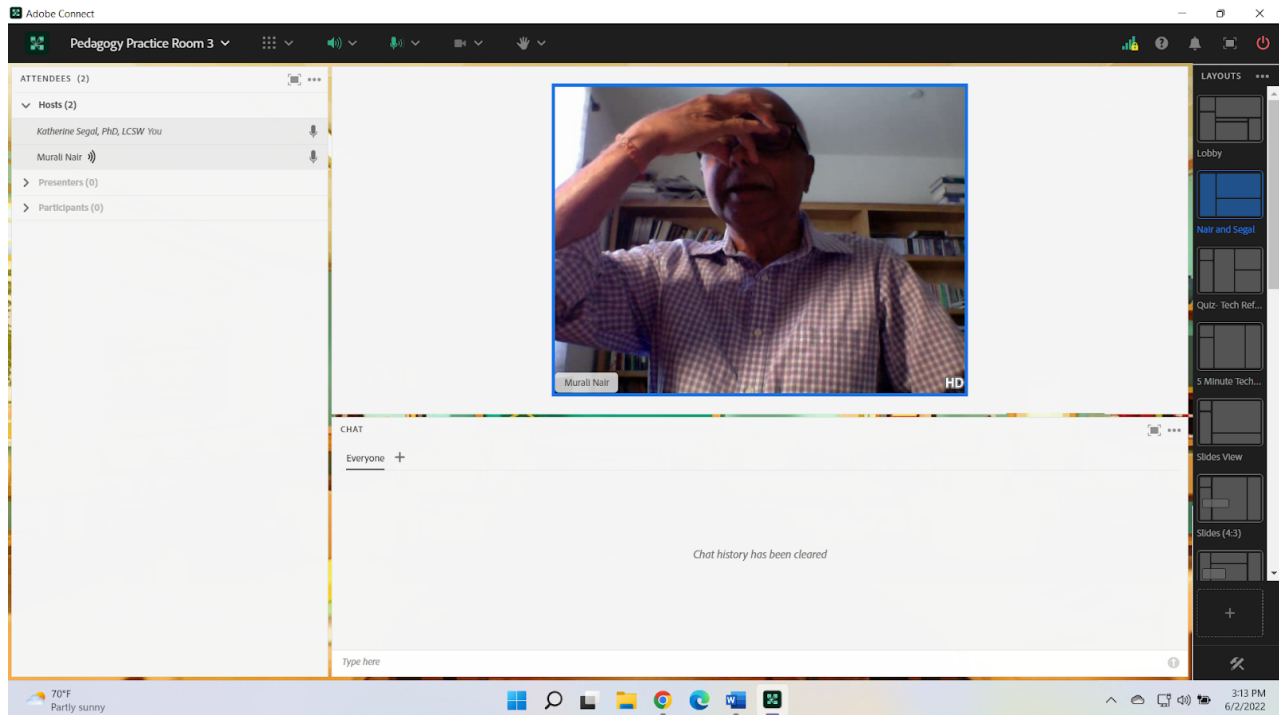
Keep in mind that it may be difficult to do all of these poses in one sitting. Experiment and try to do it on an incremental basis.

- The information here is derived from thousands of years of yoga practices. It is not the intent of the author to recommend or prescribe any substance to cure, mitigate, treat, or prevent any disease.

# What this looked like in Adobe Connect

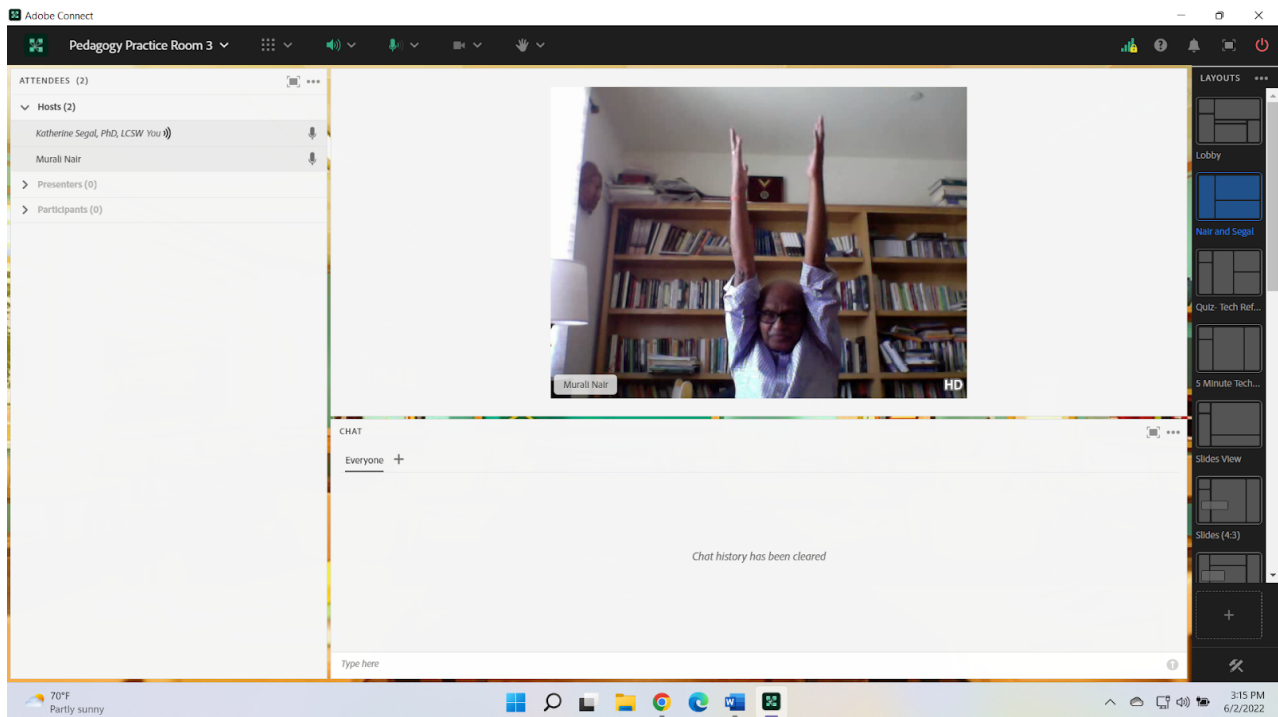
**Image 1:** Adobe Connect classroom with a picture demonstrating the hand position for the breathing practice. Adobe product screenshot(s) reprinted with permission from Adobe.

**Image 1 Alt-Text:** This is a screengrab of an Adobe Connect classroom. The Attendees pod is on the far left side of the screen and stretches from top to bottom. To the right of the Attendees pod, the screen is split between a Video pod taking up the top half of the viewing area and a Chat pod below that taking up the bottom half of the viewing area. The video pod shows chapter author, Murali Nair, demonstrating the hand position for the breathing practice.



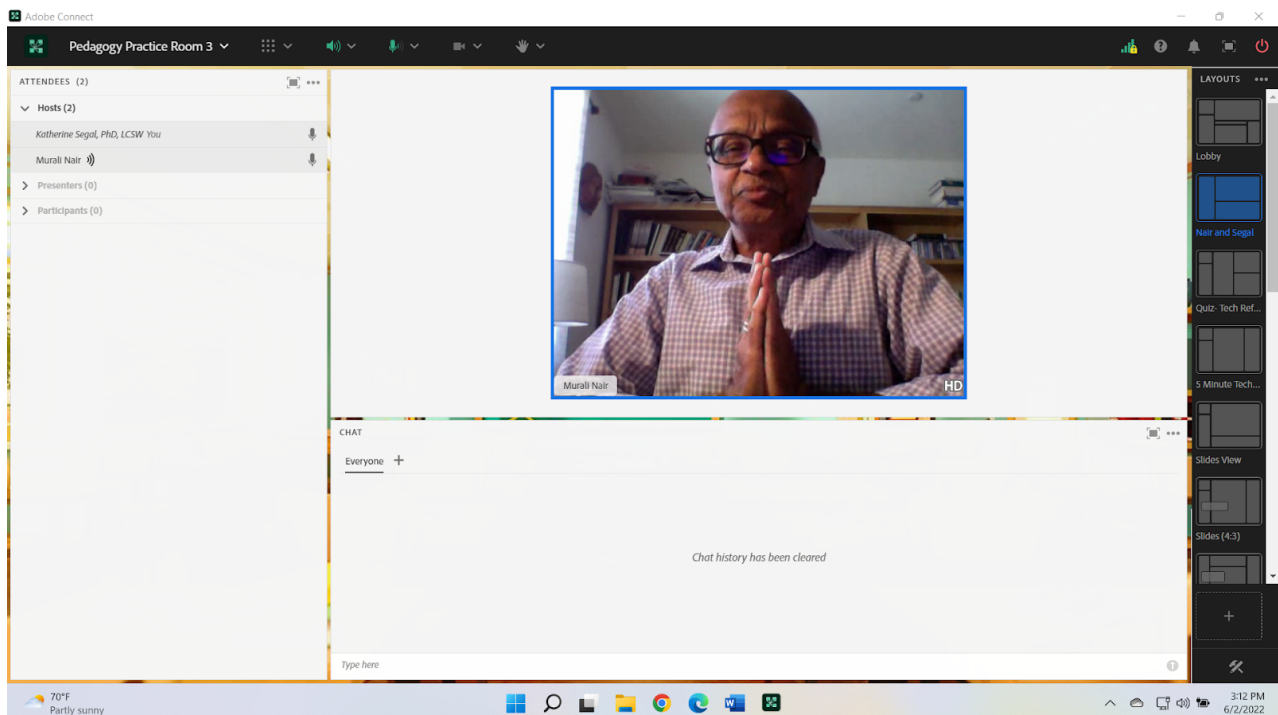
**Image 2:** Adobe Connect classroom with a picture demonstrating sitting with arms raised. Adobe product screenshot(s) reprinted with permission from Adobe.

**Image 2 Alt-Text:** This is a screengrab of an Adobe Connect classroom. The Attendees pod is on the far left side of the screen and stretches from top to bottom. To the right of the Attendees pod, the screen is split between a Video pod taking up the top half of the viewing area and a Chat pod below that taking up the bottom half of the viewing area. The video pod shows chapter author, Murali Nair, demonstrating the position sitting with arms raised.



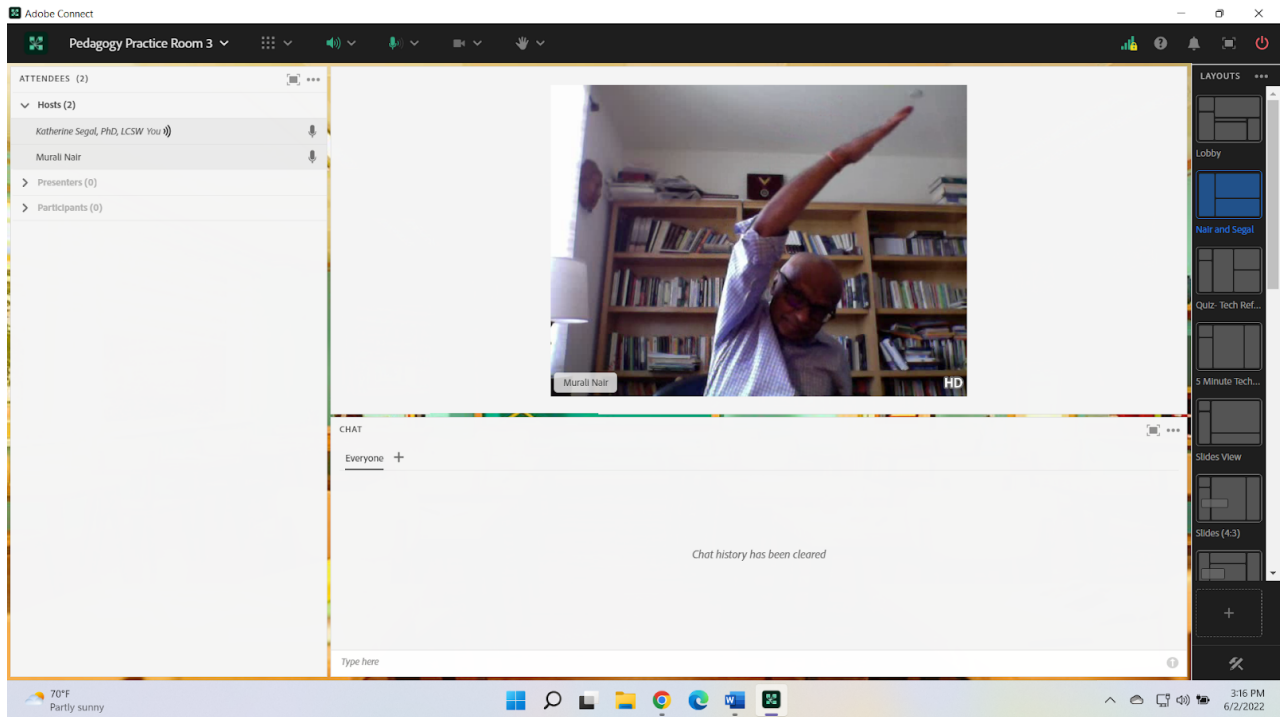
**Image 3:** Adobe Connect classroom with a picture demonstrating bringing hands together at the heart. Adobe product screenshot(s) reprinted with permission from Adobe.

**Image 3 Alt-Text:** This is a screengrab of an Adobe Connect classroom. The Attendees pod is on the far left side of the screen and stretches from top to bottom. To the right of the Attendees pod, the screen is split between a Video pod taking up the top half of the viewing area and a Chat pod below that taking up the bottom half of the viewing area. The video pod shows chapter author, Murali Nair, demonstrating the position of sitting with hands, palms together, pressed against the chest at approximately heart level.



**Image 4:** Adobe Connect classroom with a picture demonstrating the position of sitting with one arm raised and leaning toward the opposite side. Adobe product screenshot(s) reprinted with permission from Adobe.

**Image 4 Alt-Text:** This is a screengrab of an Adobe Connect classroom. The Attendees pod is on the far left side of the screen and stretches from top to bottom. To the right of the Attendees pod, the screen is split between a Video pod taking up the top half of the viewing area and a Chat pod below that taking up the bottom half of the viewing area. The video pod shows chapter author, Murali Nair, demonstrating the position of sitting with one arm raised and leaning toward the opposite side.



## Acknowledgments

[Matthea Marquart](#), for her continued support and encouragement in bringing our passion for yoga and self-care to our students.

## Resources

The chapter authors, Katherine Segal and Murali Nair, along with their colleague, Elise Marie Collins, are currently writing a book to make this and other yogic practices an accessible addition to healthy living.





## Murali Nair

Columbia University School of Social Work

Murali D. Nair is an Adjunct Professor, School of Social Work, Columbia University. Nair teaches on line courses on “Corporate Social Responsibility”, “Social Welfare Policy” and “Mindfulness”. Also on a weekly basis, provides students and alumni “mentoring” and “self-care” sessions. As an authority on engaged learning, Murali Nair combines traditional cross national value systems with evidence based knowledge in the classroom setting. Over his 45-year academic career, Murali Nair has served as a BSW, MSW, and DSW professor and administrator at five universities in the United States and as a Distinguished Visiting Professor at three overseas universities. In his last positions, Nair was the Clinical Professor of Social Change and Innovation at University of Southern California (2012-2020) and a Professor and the Director of the School of Social Work at Cleveland State University (1992-2012). His areas of teaching expertise include macro practice, social enterprise, social responsibility, wellbeing innovation, harnessing technology for social good, advancing long and productive lives, and social responses to changing environments. Nair has published extensively in the area of social development, including 13 books, nine short documentaries, and over 100 journal articles and peer reviewed paper presentations at national and international conferences. His latest books include Engaged Learning, Leading and Managing Human Service Organizations (4th edition), and Evidence Based Macro Social Work Practice (2nd edition). He is a CSWE member of the Special Commission to Advance Macro Practice and an Associate Editor of the Oxford Encyclopedia of Macro Social Work. Some of Nair’s recent teaching-service awards include: - Distinguished Faculty Award for Excellence in Teaching, Service to the University, the School and the Community, University of Southern California (2019, 2015, 2014) - The Frances Feldman Excellence in Education Award, The California Social Welfare Archives (2017) - National Policy Fellow Lead Mentor Award: National Network for Social Work Management (2017) - Distinguished Mentoring Award: CSWE-APM conference in Denver (2018) - President’s (White House) Volunteer Action Award (2012) - Columbia University School of Social Work Alumni Hall of Fame Inductee (2011) - Distinguished Faculty Award for Service, Multi-culturalism and Teaching, Cleveland State University (2011, 2006, 2002) - Senior Fulbright Scholar Award (2010) - Certificate of Special United States Congressional Recognition for Outstanding Services to Community (2009) He holds an MSW from Loyola College of Social Sciences, an MS in Computer Science from the New York Institute of Technology, and a Ph.D. from the Columbia University School of Social Work.





### Katherine A. Segal

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Katherine A. Segal, Ph.D., LCSW is an integrative social worker, graduate-level educator, qualitative researcher, and wellness coach. Dr. Segal earned an MSW from Columbia University and a Ph.D. specializing in Integrative Mental Health along with the Integrative Wellness Coaching certificate from Saybrook University. Dr. Segal has practiced social work in a variety of settings including school, medical, forensic, residential, and community mental health. Dr. Segal has utilized their knowledge and skills in the delivery of direct practice, clinical supervision, providing professional trainings, and teaching. They have taught at Columbia University, Saybrook University, and the University of New Hampshire.

Throughout clinical and academic work Dr. Segal has cultivated an integrative theoretical perspective that guides their assessment and treatment of clients as well as the education of colleagues, aspiring social workers, and integrative practitioners. In addition to teaching, Dr. Segal operates a remote coaching private practice specializing in provider burnout prevention, Integrative Mental Health, holistic wellness, life goal attainment, and dissertation completion.



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