

Creating Sound Healing Experiences for Every Body



Building in Accessibility and Inclusion from the Ground Up

Maia Scott

Creating accessible and inclusive content, programs and services remains a perpetually changing alignment of rules, mindfulness and expectations. Opening potential for Every Body to benefit from your sound healing practice offers its own set of options to seed and grow a framework of inclusion. To get you started or inspire you further, here are some suggestions for inviting people of all abilities to feel welcome, safe, fulfilled and heard before, during and after you work your magic.

Ability and Disability

Disability has many faces and body types. Right now, one billion people are living with some sort of disability, be it congenital, acquired, permanent or temporary. Some disabilities are noticeable as you encounter people with guide dogs in wheelchairs, limping or displaying ticks. Yet many others are invisible. A deaf person walking down the street doesn't hear you say excuse me to pass by. A visually impaired person who chooses not to use a cane for mobility needs help reading the menu. A finely dressed woman gets out of her sports car in the handicapped parking spot because her degenerative back pain allows her exactly one block of walking before she loses her poise walking into that interview. And that happy guy next door may require medical attention to manage symptoms of chronic depression.

Case and point, you just don't know what a body's story may be. So, a strong approach for inviting every body to the table so to speak is to seed elements of accessibility and inclusion into the roots of the business, practice or protocol you are growing and nurturing. As a healing arts practitioner, an open heart, ready mind and listening ear triangulate to manifest safe and welcoming experiences that leave clients wanting to come back for more.

Let's look at two models defining disability: For many years, our society looked at disability from a medical model perspective. Disability is something that has a diagnosis and should be fixed or managed so that the individual can best fit into society. Some still perceive disability in this manner today. However, the disability rights movement are leaning the masses toward a very different perspective. Namely, it's a Social model of disability. In this context, disability occurs when society isn't built in a manner that allows an individual with a disability to function as fully as the average person. Notice what model you lean toward as you plan and implement your programs and services.

Building accessibility and inclusion into your work may feel like a lot of extra effort for that couple of people who may wander through. Consider the delivery guy running his cart up a curb cut, the executive dictating an email from her car or the buzz of the electric toothbrush sounding from behind the bathroom door. These and more advancements were originally designed with people with disabilities in mind. Now they are commonly used by people of all abilities. Your creative ideas, adaptations and inclusive minded approach to sound healing experiences could be the start of something universally appreciated by many of those you serve.

**Meet every body where they are.
See every body with gentle eyes.
Hear every body's story with fearless curiosity.
Mirror every body's truths with deep compassion.
Know every body and your own through a vibration of love.
And amplify that which is "Right" to empower healing.**

Websites and Materials

Building accessible and inclusive online and print materials offers you an opportunity to partner your aesthetic sensibilities, design desires and captivating language with properties and tools that will enable the most people possible to access the valuable information and services you offer.

Contrast: Be sure to use color contrasts and fonts that are easily readable and have at least a fifty percent contrast value. If you have any doubts, many web building tools offer accessibility checkers. Even if you feel confident, please use them to double check. This simple effort will mean the difference in readability for those who are visually impaired, color blind, have dyslexia or other print disabilities.

Alt Text: When you insert an image onto your website, notice that many web design tools have a spot to add Alt Text. This line invites you to input a simple description of your image, such as “An assortment of singing bowls” or “A head shot of Maia Scott”. When a blind person using a screen-reader comes across your image, it won’t read as something like, “6298347vbgfq0837vyneuqyhwe87tv43b780ty2578v2yt78t97v.jpg”. And your site may well be the go-to source for this person and friends to learn more about sound healing and seek services.

Headlines and Links: Clearly delineating and labeling headlines from body text will allow a person navigating your site using a screen reader to skip from one section to another in order to seek the information they are looking for without having to read through everything to reach the part they want. Likewise, by labeling your links as with a description of where it leads, “Sound baths” or “Testimonials” for example will allow a screen reader user to tab through your links to find the right one to follow. If you put things like, “For more information about sound baths, [click here](#). To read testimonials, [click here](#).”, the screen reader will hear, “Click here. Click here...”

Documents and Forms: If you offer downloadable materials on your website or via email such as fact sheets, intake forms or other resources, consider your font choice and size for optimal readability. Many word-processing programs and form makers now have accessibility tools built in to help you create the most user-friendly materials. As you build your hand-outs, document files and online forms, consider performing an occasional check along the way to minimize the need for suggested changes.

“Open” for Business

As the saying goes, “If you build it, they will come.” Building in the space, language and welcome for people of all abilities to benefit equally from your offerings and services may advance or affect your target population and the people who seek you out. There’s nothing wrong with catering to the Yoga Moms or Tree Huggers of the world. Plenty of them have disabilities, too. Just consider the far reach of your abilities and the potential you may have to make a difference in the life of someone who hasn’t found the gentle and nonjudgmental vibes of a great sound healing professional such as yourself.

Mention Accessibility: In your web content and promotional materials, mention any accessibility features available at your site. Is the space wheelchair accessible? Is there blue zone or plenty of parking nearby? This knowledge may well benefit someone who is currently managing pain but doesn’t identify as disabled.

Person-Centered Language – or Not? There is currently a lot of discussion within Disability culture about whether it is best to say “People with Disabilities” or “Disabled People”. It’s not clear. Person first language came out in disability culture in order to deobjectify those with disabilities. Now, there are factions that say that disability is only one small aspect of identity. It fits in along side sister, lover, dog owner, gamer, geek, oh, and even sound healer. Person first language is safe when writing content... for now...

Triggers: If you incorporate flashing lights into your sound baths, this is worth noting to alert those prone to seizures or PTS who may be triggered by strobing light. Cacophony and loud gongs can also cause trigger responses such as racing heart rate. These may well be great, signature pieces of your powerful group sound bath experiences. You need not change. Just let people know these things will happen. During individual treatments, you can specialize your session as you do with any other client.

Optional Disclosure: Along with your options to set up an appointment or join a sound bath, consider adding an invitation to call or email with any accessibility requirements or ADA concerns. This could be as simple as a link to your email titled “Accessibility accommodations available upon request.” Or, “Please arrive fifteen minutes early to the sound bath in order to claim the best spot for you or to address any accessibility adjustments.” Note that this doesn’t guarantee or require that everyone with a disability will alert you ahead of time.

Communication and Language

Accessibility is a messy process full of good intentions, iffy language and an ever-shifting idea of best practices. There is one quote that stands strong, “Not about us without us.” Communication is key to a mutual learning and receiving pattern between you and your client. Who may or may not identify as disabled or something else. Here are some suggestions for successful connection with your clients with disabilities.

Speak to the Person: Whether your client with a disability is hard to understand, is accompanied by a sign language interpreter, doesn't offer eye contact, uses a communication board, or speaks with perfect diction, speak and ask questions directly to the person who is addressing you, not a nearby friend or the interpreter. If it's easier and faster for both parties to communicate via text, agree on that and remain consciously connected with the person you are working with. For one, the friend or interpreter doesn't have all the answers you likely want and need. Consider the same act of respect when communication with someone who has a friend or family member interpreting another language.

Meet them where they are: Every body tells a different story and disability can play very different roles within it. There are some who may have been disabled since birth. And you may find those newly facing disability, grieving the loss of past abilities and privileges and seeking your service for healing and solace. Of course, there's a whole rainbow of story arcing in between. Some people may assertively advocate for themselves, describing exactly what works for them. You may find others who don't know what to expect or what adaptations may be possible. They will be friendly, angry, determined, frustrated, eager, done with it all... and “it all” may not even be directly related to disability.

Ask Open Ended Questions: Questions give you and your client power. Ask your client questions that will lead you to offering the best service and session to your ability. Your questions may serve to protect you as they do to assist them. Open ended questions are the best because they don't assume anything from the start. Assumptions can build obstacles and some pretty awkward vibes. So long as you ask questions out of genuine curiosity while seeing the person through a lens of love and remain open to suggestions for change, you can stand assured that you did your best no matter the client's responsiveness. Here are some questions and comments to consider, try on and change to your liking:

Please let me know if there is anything I can do to assist.

Is there anything I can do to support your having a great experience tonight?

Is there anything about your body I need to know that may affect our session plan today?

How do you vision yourself best experiencing your sound healing session this coming hour?

Aids and Equipment

People will show up wearing and baring aids and equipment of all manner, from glasses and orthotics to power chairs and service dogs. They will show up with healing magnet back supports, copper bracelets, crystals and favorite blankets. Come what may, each implement offers some sense of safety, empowerment, support and ability. Please open and adapt your pace and offerings to welcome each individual with their varied aids and tools.

Ask Permission: Whether someone has all their favorite crystals taking up space for two, someone's crutches fall over or someone in a wheelchair seems to be struggling over a door jam, definitely ask permission before handling another person's tools. For instance, the wheelchair user may well consider the chair an extension of his body. Likewise, it is very important to ask permission before handling a person in an effort to support or guide, acting as a mobility aid yourself. With the onset of the "MeToo" movement, people with disabilities spoke out widely asking not to be handled without asking first in an effort to break patterns of people feeling the right or obligation to "help" people without disabilities on a whim.

Wheelchairs: People utilizing wheelchairs range from those who can walk a little but need to go further than that to those who cannot bare weight or stand at all. This in mind, expect anything. You may have someone come in ready to ditch the chair and stretch out on a yoga mat along with everyone else at a sound bath or who cannot transfer to your treatment table without a transfer board or specialized lift. Is the person on the floor able to climb back into his chair after the session? Would it help to be near a wall for added support when returning to the wheelchair? Is there a certain spot in your private treatment room that you would like your client to position herself so you have best access to work in the space around her? Definitely ask, speak out.

Service Dogs: Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, service dogs must be allowed to enter your place of business. Religion, allergies, dog fears and other concerns are not suitable reasons for noncompliance. Take allergies, for instance. A person who is scent sensitive takes the risk every day to ride the bus with people wearing perfumes and even attending a sound healing session under a haze of Nag Champa. Considering today's incidences of service dog fraud, you have the right to ask a handler two questions, "Is this dog a service dog required because of a disability?" and, "What task is the dog trained to do for you?" Note that you have rights as well. If the dog is uncontrollable by the handler, disrupting your place of business by barking or acting out, you have the right to ask the handler to leave.

Props and Pillows: To hold and nurture bodies of all sorts, props and pillows can make a huge difference in the enjoyment and benefit of a sound healing session. In your individual treatment room, consider keeping on hand a bolster to slide under knees face up or under ankles face down for lower back relief. Keep rolled towels to place

under hands that don't lay flat on the table. There are foam wedges that allow a woman in early to mid pregnancy to lay face up in a reclined position. And how about a yoga strap loosely around bent knees to keep them from falling open. And many people welcome a neck roll to support neck and head. For seated work, a lumbar pillow could make a world of difference as may a cushion under short legs or a block bolster to extend the legs. Many of these tools found in bodywork treatment rooms or yoga studios that also fit into your accessibility toolkit can be strategically placed to put a body at ease.

Space and Location: Sometimes accessibility accommodation simply involves positioning in the room. Consider someone who may have balance issues who can benefit from occupying a space near the wall during your sound bath session so as to easily stand again afterward. Having a chair near that wall may help the person level up more easily. If you are using gongs, cacophony or other loud sounding, someone may wish to position himself near the back or side in order to step out discretely. Same goes for that person who requires the bathroom frequently. You may have a deaf person present who you want to offer a spot near the front for optimal physical vibrational experience. In your individual treatment room, is there space for someone with a mobility or support aid to navigate around the table, to easily get on or off with nominal struggle? As you meet your next client who is using a walker, it may make a world of difference to nudge your table over a few inches to allow for the width of the person's walker so the client can confidently navigate into the room without having to side step.

Seated, Supine or Dancing: Whether you are offering a group sound bath or one on one treatment, be mindful that people may be more comfortable in a different position than your "normal". For instance, a very pregnant woman may prefer to sit, recline slightly or lay on one side with a bolster under the top knee and arm. Likewise, someone with severe sleep apnea when totally relaxed may experience breathing challenges. Those experiencing trauma around trust or survival insecurity may also prefer a seated "ready" position. People dealing with back or knee pain may not feel safe or comfortable getting on and off the floor with everyone else. Offering seating and space to lay down invites group attendees to casually find the most comfortable way to enjoy your session without fuss. And if the space is ample enough, why not offer an open area that invites movement-driven people to dance and flow without guilt.

Relaxed Environments: For those with some forms of Autism, developmental disabilities, Turret's Syndrome and others who may display habits of overstimulation, ticks, sounding or verbal outbursts; having to sit still and be quiet excludes them from a lot of great experiences in life such as movies, performances and readings. Why not offer "Relaxed" sessions to invite individuals from your community to experience the joys and benefits of sound healing sessions. This may also be inviting to families with little ones who don't have the time to step away from being parents to attend a session, individual or public sound bath. Movie theaters are even now offering Relaxed showings with the lights up and the volume lowered.

Play Along: If you invite people into your sound healing space that you know will have trouble keeping hands off your tools of the trade, consider opening things up for participation. A simple one-time invitation (for each person if working with a group) to strike a gong and help set sacred space may be enough excitement to satisfy. Otherwise, if you have an individual that struggles to sit still or if you are serving a group of individuals who work better “hands-on”, consider having on hands some gentle, quiet egg shakers, rain stick or chiming medicine balls sewn deep into a soft pillow. Aim for sound makers that can’t be damaged if dropped and do not need to be struck to be played. Having others play a part in your composition of sound, time and space may well affect the subtle energies you expect to foster. However, these offerings may spare your precise set-up and save the life of a crystal bowl or two.

Adapt and Play: They don’t call it “Playing“ music for nothing. And it’s called a sound healing “Practice” for a reason. For every body you meet with or without disabilities, allow yourself to invigorate your tried and true signature strengths with a bit of risk taking and whim. This will empower you to fear no body because every body is an open invitation for you to push your envelope and theirs and explore the relational vibrations within.