



Healing Trauma & PTSD

Description

Questions Answered Here

1. What are some examples of oft-used therapies that are usually **not** successful in healing trauma?
2. What is a key difference with traumatic memories once healing has occurred?
3. What is the meaning of "somatic" and "Somatic Experiencing"?
4. In what three specific ways does yoga help to heal trauma?
5. Cite multiple research studies that demonstrate yoga's impact on trauma.

Inspiration



Even the “simple things” that yoga can help with have a tremendous impact on people, particularly those suffering from trauma effects:

The Incredible Impact of Trauma Relief

The Veterans Yoga Project did one more thing for me. It gave me a full night sleep. That may not seem like much to most people but for someone who had not slept more than an hour or two at a time for over 5 years it was huge. Dan Libby led a Yoga program just before we went to bed the first night. I found a way to quiet my mind, let things go without holding on and allow myself to actually sleep. I slept a full 8 hours that night. “ L/Cpl USMC

Trauma expert and yoga teacher Susan Pease Banitt offers this beautiful invitation to those who may feel lost in the grips of trauma:

The Resilience of the Human Spirit

The blooming desert struck me as a perfect metaphor for the resilience of the human spirit. It is possible to go from the scorched earth condition of trauma to rainbows of flowers. It is inevitable. Even when it feels like we have nothing left, there is never nothing there. There are always seeds. Seeds of happiness, seeds of love, seeds of passion, seeds of creativity, of joy, connection, of LIFE. â?? Susan Pease Banitt

Expert Shawn Ginwright was explaining the impact of stress and trauma on brain development and emotional health to a group of trauma survivors when a young man abruptly interjected, â??I am more than what happened to me, Iâ??m not just my trauma.â?• From this experience, Ginwright realized that even the term â??trauma informed careâ?• focuses only on harm and is â??akin to saying, you are the worst thing that ever happened to you.â?• He explains:

Acting as an Agent of Oneâ??s Own Well-Being

A healing centered approach to addressing trauma requires a different question that moves beyond â??what happened to youâ?• to â??whatâ??s right with youâ?• and views those exposed to trauma as agents in the creation of their own well-being rather than victims of traumatic eventsâ?|. A shift from trauma informed care to healing centered engagement (HCE) is more than a semantic play with words, but rather a tectonic shift in how we view trauma, its causes and its intervention. HCE is strength basedâ?| the young men I worked with offered me a way to reframe trauma with language that humanized them, and holistically captured their life experiences. â?? Shawn Ginwright PhD

The following quote is very consistent with the yogic perspective in general:

Unbreakable

You do not heal from trauma, and nobody heals you either. You simply reconnect with that sacred place in yourself that was never traumatized, never broken, never damaged in the first place; your true Self, absolute and ever-present, innocent and free. It is not a destination; it is You, alive and awake in the moment. Know yourself as the Absolute, and let all thoughts and feelings move through you, however intense or uncomfortable. The forms pass, they always pass, and You remain. You are not broken; you are Unbreakable. â?? Jeff Foster

A yoga teacher in prisons shares her experience:

Iâ??m not going to make it sound like it was all like some magical carpet ride, because it wasnâ??t. This is a class in a prison. The amount of stress, suffering, and pain feels daunting on a good day, and overwhelming on a bad oneâ?|. My students are survivors. I am in awe of their strength and resilience. Trauma can make your body feel unsafe, even like an enemy. Itâ??s scary to be in your body and feel anything, because it will hurtâ?|a lot. It might also mean that you have a lot of protective armor on, all the time, and being in a yoga class makes you feel vulnerableâ?|. Gradually there was more openness and sharing. As people learned more about themselves and what shapes and modifications worked for them, Iâ??d see more variations in movement and in stillness. Iâ??d hear from some of the students how they were applying things from class into their livesâ??it would almost make my heart explode. â?? Rosa Vissers

Introduction



Different Modalities Work for Different People

- Based on 30 years of clinical practice and dedicated research, Bessel van der Kolk, MD provides incredibly clear information on how the brain responds to trauma. And he is very clear that different people with different situations respond to different therapies. He provides extensive, inspirational research and case studies that demonstrate how the Trauma Center has succeeded with multiple healing modalities, many of which we have described below.

Some Therapies Have Proven to NOT be Effective

- Beginning on page 203 of *The Body Keeps the Score*, van der Kolk describes not only successful therapies but also many oft-used therapies that are usually **not** successful. These include cognitive behavioral therapy, desensitization, and drugs when not used in conjunction with other modalities.

There is a Difference Between Mental Illness & Mental Wounds

The pathologizing of the mind has been a real obstacle to trauma survivors seeking and getting treatment. In the field of mental health, we have not yet made any real distinctions between mental illness and mental wounds. At a visceral level, many people resist psychotherapy and counseling for traumatic stress due to their indignation over being treated as ill, when they are, in fact, injured. Being treated as though one is sick, crazy, or "other" when one has been injured (often by a sick and/or crazy person) just adds insult to injury. " Susan Pease Banitt

Creating Safety for Healing

- A person may not be ready to seek healing because she does not feel safe, thus creating safety can be a good step toward healing.
- Feelings on the surface may be different from those deeper inside. That is, a person may express and even think she feels safe in a general sense while some signs may indicate otherwise.
- Some thoughts and feelings that may point to a need for a greater feeling of safety include feelings of threat or fear, feeling concerned that someone will take advantage of you, being afraid of other people's opinions of you, finding that opportunities feel overly risky or that you are "shrinking down" in communication. (Jennifer Partridge)
- Yoga, particularly trauma-sensitive yoga, can be an excellent tool for helping people to experience feelings of safety.

How Yoga & Somatic Experiencing Help

Trauma is really a somatic issue. It's in your body and, because of that, yoga has great relevance; the most important part [of trauma treatment] is starting to regain ownership of your body and be comfortable in your own skin. " Dr. Bessel van der Kolk

- The word "somatic" means "relating to the body."
- The term "Somatic Experiencing" refers to a particular technique developed by expert trauma therapist Dr. Peter Levine that involves focusing on body sensations to relieve trauma symptoms.
- Hatha yoga is a powerful tool in trauma treatment due in part to its ability to help with the following issues.

Learning to Inhabit the Body

Body-based work, such as yoga, may act as a treatment bridge, increasing a sense of awareness, safety and mastery over one's body while building skills to effectively interpret and tolerate physiological and affective states. " The Trauma Center Research Abstract: Yoga as an Adjunctive Treatment for PTSD

- Learning to inhabit the body is perhaps the key in the trauma recovery journey. There is a distinct difference between being aware of the body and living within it. (Judith Blackstone)
- In *The Body Keeps the Score*, van der Kolk devotes a chapter to yoga as trauma therapy. In that chapter, he discusses heart rate variability, interoception, self-awareness and communication.

- As a result of van der Kolk's work, a yoga program was developed at the Trauma Center, a leader in research and offering a trauma-sensitive yoga protocol.

Correcting Energy Issues

- Susan Pease Banitt (a Kripalu-trained yoga teacher and author of the excellent book, *The Trauma Tool Kit*) includes *asana* and *pranayama* in her list of healing modalities for correcting the energy issues that result from trauma. (See also: [Trauma Effects](#).)

Releasing Stored Emotions & Tensions in the Body

- Banitt is clear that trauma healing includes letting the body go through the necessary releases. She uses the apt term, "Unwinding the Body" to refer to the release of stored emotions and tensions through body therapies such as yoga therapy or Somatic Experiencing.
- Somatic Experiencing focuses on the physiological responses in the body in order to restore the nervous system's normal balance. It is designed to discharge "trapped sensory memory" and to gradually integrate this energy without reliving or thinking about the traumatic experience. (B. Grace Bullock PhD)
- As a result of letting the body go through these releases, "you can never be traumatized by that memory again. It becomes just another memory." (The Trauma Tool Kit)

We can get a sense for this point about trauma and memory by considering even mildly disturbing memories. Everyone has experienced a moment of failure, embarrassment, pain or fear that, when remembered, causes a sickening of the stomach or agitation, for example. In such a case, there is a tremendous difference in quality of life when that memory becomes "just another memory" with no emotional charge. In the cases of traumatic memories, the intensity is exponentially greater before and after healing.

Research



Statistically significant decrease in PTSD (2013)

- A randomized, controlled clinical trial—the most definitive form of scientific evidence—was spearheaded by The Trauma Center.
- The study randomly assigned 64 women, 18-58 years old with chronic, treatment un-responsive PTSD to 10 weeks of Trauma-Informed Yoga classes or a Control Group of health education classes.
- The Yoga Group exhibited statistically significant decreases in PTSD symptoms compared to the Control Group. In the Yoga Group, 52% no longer met criteria for PTSD compared to 21% in the Control Group.

The supportive nature of the control group, which encouraged the sharing of food and maintenance of contact outside of formal sessions, may have significantly improved the mood of this group, but it did not produce a sustained reduction in PTSD symptoms. This suggests that the physical and interoceptive aspects of yoga, rather than the social dimensions of the groups, were the critical variable responsible for the change in PTSD symptomatology.

Improvements in women with PTSD symptoms (2014)

- “Yoga improved the lives of women with PTSD,” says a study in *The Journal of Traumatic Stress*.
- A variety of studies on participants with conditions including chronic depression, eating disorders and PTSD pointed to improved quality of life and reduction of symptoms after practicing yoga in combination with other therapies.
- Patients practiced Kripalu-based yoga for 12 sessions over six or twelve weeks.

Breathing & meditation decreased PTSD in veterans

- Research by Stanford scholar Emma Seppala at the Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education found that post-traumatic stress disorder decreased in veterans who participated in a week-long breathing, yoga and meditation workshop, and remained lower a year later.

iRest Yoga Nidra successful with veterans

- “The Walter Reed program was a huge success. It inspired similar research studies in Miami Brooke Army Medical Center as well as many other Veteran Affairs and Department of Defense sites. To date, there are iRest Yoga Nidra programs in 35 V.A. Centers and six D.o.D. sites. Both active duty military personnel and veterans have access to the services.”

Decreased PTSD in women who experienced sexual trauma (2014)

- In a pilot study conducted at Veterans Affairs Medical Center with women who had experienced sexual trauma, participants reported significant decreases in symptoms of PTSD, negative thoughts of self-blame, and depression.
- Participants also reported decreased body tension, improved quality of sleep, improved ability to handle intrusive thoughts, improved ability to manage stress, and an increased feeling of joy.

Breathing practice improved PTSD symptoms in vets (2014)

- The Center for Investigating Healthy Minds (CIHM) at the University of Wisconsin (UW) conducted a randomized control study of 21 soldiers to measure the effectiveness of Sudarshan Kriya Yoga to reduce hyper-arousal associated with PTSD.
- Sudarshan Kriya Yoga is a practice of controlled breathing that has proven to be effective in helping tsunami survivors with PTSD, prompting researchers to test it on vets.

- The veterans were randomly assigned to an active or control group. Laboratory measures of eyeblink startle and respiration rate were obtained before and after the intervention, as were self-report symptom measures. The self-reported symptoms were also obtained 1 month and 1 year later.
- The breathing group showed reductions in PTSD, anxiety symptoms, and respiration rate, but the control group did not.
- CBS News article [here](#)
- Badger Herald article [here](#)
- The Good Men Project article [here](#)
- Science Daily article [here](#)

Yoga helps females with PTSD

- I have been teaching Mindful Yoga Therapy in VA and CT, both in residential programs and in outpatient programs, for six years now! The results have been unbelievably positive. So much so that I began to train other yoga teachers to use this protocol nationwide.

For more study results, please see [Research on the Impact of Yoga](#).

Readings

Body-Based Therapies Address the Trauma Imprints Left in the Body

According to van der Kolk, trauma is not the story we tell about the violence we endured or the horrible accident we witnessed; it's not even the event itself. Instead it's the stuff we can't let go of what van der Kolk calls the "residue of imprints" (and yogis call samskaras) that gets left behind in our neurophysiology (our sensory and hormonal systems). Van der Kolk says that traumatized people are "terrified of the sensations in their own bodies," so it's imperative that they get some sort of body-based therapy to feel safe again, he says, and learn to care for themselves.
Linda Sparrowe

Releasing the Body Defuses Trauma Memories

Although this phase [of "unwinding the body" to release emotion stored in the body] can be extremely intense, it doesn't have to be lengthy. What takes a really long time is not healing yourself; that feels like an eternity! When you truly let your entire experience unfreeze and let the body go through the necessary releases, you can never be traumatized by that memory again! It becomes just another memory. I, and many others, have lived this truth. That is not to say this process is easy or for the faint of heart, but your efforts will be well-rewarded.
Susan Pease Banitt

Somatic Experiencing Completes the Unfinished Process

We understand that these [trauma] symptoms merely indicate unresolved activation or energy "stuck" in the body! By noticing what happens and allowing those natural self-protective impulses to be felt, sometimes with awareness of the micro-movements that allow the body to sense

more fully the capacity to protect itself [somatic experiencing], we experience the actual reality that the danger is over and we can finally settle, bringing the entire cycle to completion. â?? Mark Banschick, MD

A Way to Process Intense Emotions in an Incremental & Healthy Way

â??The trick is not to deny, but not to get swept awayâ?• with anger or other intense emotions associated with trauma, Levine suggests. Feeling these emotions as â??physical sensations in the body,â?• and releasing these sensations incrementally, he notes, is an important way to safely free stored energy associated with the trauma, and re-channel this energy into pleasurable activities. Irrespective of whether you are dealing with a traumatic life event, or â??simplyâ?? high levels of stress, Somatic Experiencing offers important insights into how we can process intense emotions such as anger, grief, and fear in an incremental and healthy way. It recognizes that the experiences of our minds and our bodies are intertwined, allowing for healing at a deeper level. â?? B. Grace Bullock PhD

In *The Body Keeps the Score* chapter on Language, van der Kolk explains the importance of acknowledging and naming what happened. But he also explains the limitations of language:

Knowing Oneself vs Telling Your Story

Trauma stories lessen the isolation of trauma, and they provide an explanation for why people suffer the way they doâ?| But stories also obscure a more important issue, namely that trauma radically changes people: that in fact they no longer are â??themselves.â?• It is excruciatingly difficult to put that feeling of no longer being yourself into wordsâ?| We can get past the slipperiness of words by engaging the self-observing, body-based self system, which speaks through sensations, tone of voice, and body tensions. Being able to perceive visceral sensations is the very foundation of emotional awareness. If a patient tells me that he was eight when his father deserted the family, I am likely to stop and ask him to check in with himself. What happens inside when he tells me about that boy who never saw his father again? Where is it registered in his body? When you activate your gut feelings and listen to your heartbreakâ??when you follow the interoceptive pathways to your innermost recessesâ??things begin to change. â?? Bessel van der Kolk MD

Cautions: Diagnosis & Referral



1. As a reminder, yoga teachersâ??and even yoga therapistsâ??are not trained or licensed to diagnose injury, illness or disorder. You may wish to be very clear about this point, and to ask students if they have obtained a diagnosis.
2. Be prepared to refer students to an expert. Have contact information for qualified experts that you can provide, as needed. See more in [When to Refer Out](#) which includes how to respond to students, and questions for their medical provider.
3. Yoga is likely to be an excellent supplemental resource for students. But of course, teachers must be cautious and clear when responding to studentsâ?? individual needs so that yoga support is not construed as a diagnosis, a â??prescription,â?• or a recommendation for sole treatment.

Category

1. Uncategorized

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