

Trauma-Sensitive Yoga

bringing together the knowledge of trauma and the benefits of yoga practice

by Pippa Matthews

As Yoga has grown in popularity, it is now making waves in the scientific community thanks to compelling evidence-based research on its effectiveness in treating trauma. Trauma may be a single event or repeated over a prolonged period of time, as with war veterans and survivors of domestic violence and childhood sexual abuse. This article provides an overview of the impact of trauma, and outlines the basic principles of Trauma-Sensitive Yoga (TSY) and how it differs from a regular yoga class.

The Effects of Trauma

The widespread effects of trauma on a person's physical, emotional and psychological wellbeing have been widely documented over the last 25 years. Its complexity and relevant treatment needs are supported by growing neuroscience research confirming the inter-relatedness of body and mind.

The following list is not exhaustive. It identifies some areas of a person's life which may be impacted by trauma and which have been shown to abate through the regular practice of TSY led by qualified instructors:

- Loss of a sense of safety in the world
- Disrupted sense of safety in one's body
- An overwhelming sense of powerlessness and helplessness
- An adaptive disconnect from one's body in an attempt to avoid uncomfortable sensations and feelings which leads to an inability to nurture and care for one's self
- Difficulty managing feelings effectively when they arise, especially anger and fear
- Low self-worth and shame
- Loss of trust in relationships/avoidance of closeness with others
- Loss of a sense of control and the ability to influence one's environment
- Intrusive thoughts, memories, nightmares associated with the trauma
- Overactive startle response

From the above, it's not surprising that many people struggling with the long-term effects of trauma are alienated from their body, if not view their body as the 'enemy'. Dr Bessel van der Kolk, psychiatrist and leading researcher in the trauma field captures the essence of trauma's capacity to persist in the present, despite having occurred long in the past, when he says 'the body keeps the score.'

The primary genius of yoga lies in its recognition of the critical role of the body in the development and transformation of self. Most spiritual paths begin with what yogis call the 'mental bodies' – thoughts and feelings – moving us directly to meditation, contemplation, scriptural study or prayer. The yogic traditions therefore bring our attention directly to the physical body, understanding it

to be the doorway to the more subtle interior worlds. And this focus on physicality lies at the heart of its effectiveness in the treatment of trauma. It's not a stand-alone treatment but rather a proven critical adjunct to talk therapy.

Yoga as Trauma Treatment

Given that trauma affects the body's physiology, chemistry and nervous system, and because traumatic memory is often stored in the body, leading research suggests that trauma treatment must include a focus on the body. Body-oriented therapies such as Trauma-Sensitive Yoga prioritise making connections at the physical level, and then moving from this entry point to addressing feelings, thoughts and memories.

TSY uses a series of postures and breathing techniques to promote a sense of connection to the self. The person is able to cultivate the ability to remain present, to notice and tolerate inner experience, and to develop a new relationship with their body. This body-based practice then has a ripple effect on the person's emotional and mental health and ultimately their experience of living in the world.

THEMES IN TRAUMA-SENSITIVE YOGA

TSY makes body-based activity accessible and tolerable when the body has become the enemy. It is a proven effective way for the trauma survivor to first reconnect with, and then befriend their body.

Experiencing the present moment

Various triggers in the environment can catapult a trauma survivor from the present to feeling and behaving according to demands belonging to the past, and so the body remains constantly braced for the worst. It can be terrifying for the person to let their guard down and relax. TSY can safely guide people to increase their awareness of their body, the breath, or release places of tightness and tension in the body.

Making Choices

Trauma is an experience of having no choice. TSY offers a structured, supportive and self-paced medium for the person to make choices in relation to their body and their experience which are kind, gentle and caring. Being given the freedom to practise poses in different ways, or being told there's a choice to stop/come out of a pose if the sensation is uncomfortable/intolerable is empowering. Learning to listen to one's body, and making healthy choices in relation to signals from one's body, helps to develop a felt sense of control to counter fear and helplessness.

Taking effective action

Long after the traumatic event has passed many people repeatedly find themselves in

frozen states in which they're unable to engage their bodies and minds to confront threatening or stressful situations. Taking effective action might begin with small, manageable steps in the context of a single yoga pose or it might involve the student asking for a window to be closed if the temperature is too cold, or standing up and walking across the room to take a blanket or a block if this is needed. The TSY instructor cultivates opportunities for students to make themselves comfortable.

Creating rhythms

Trauma can result in a sense of being separate from the world and others so that the normal exchange which characterises human relationships is not experienced. It can chronically disrupt biorhythms (including sleep, diet, energy) so that the person feels constantly exhausted, keyed up or tense. TSY provides opportunities to safely explore rhythms of the breath, movement, flow and timing, e.g. matching one's own breath with movement, or moving in synchrony with others in the class.

HOW TRAUMA-SENSITIVE YOGA DIFFERS TO OTHER CLASSES

Language

TSY aims to assist students to move away from self-judgement and toward an attitude of curiosity and interest in the experience of their body. TSY language is concrete rather than metaphorical and gently brings attention to physical experiences in the moment. A language of enquiry is used by the instructor to promote mindfulness and experimentation in which there is no right or wrong. Cues such as "allow", "notice" and "experiment" are used repeatedly by the instructor. Invitational Language is used to promote choice and control. Use of commands is avoided by the instructor, however where safety in poses is a priority simple, clear instructions are given. Single cues are preferred over multiple cues.

Assists and Adjusts

Verbal and visible assists are favoured over physical assists and adjusts in TSY. Given that many forms of trauma involve physical violation and a lack of safe boundaries the issue of physical assists and adjusts in TSY is considered a clinical issue—the instructor needs to be very clear about what they are doing, and why, in order for it to be a healthy and empowering experience for the student, and most importantly the student's permission is essential before an assist is provided. Touch is a huge and long-debated issue in all modes of therapy from talk therapies to body therapies. While it can be disempowering, it

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what I've learned from Teaching Senior Yoga

by Gillian Pereira

I've had the privilege of teaching senior yoga to a small group of dedicated students in Murrumbateman over the past year. This chair-based yoga class is always a delight—the enthusiasm, dedication and friendship of the students is so rewarding, and I feel that all of my efforts are gratefully received.

I will detail four specific areas of emphasis that have arisen: Community, Warmth & acceptance, Safety, Communication.

Community

Yoga is normally about creating community, but in the context of older practitioners there are some key differences. One chief difference is the need for meaningful and intimate social interaction. Presumably this, in part, is due to the often relatively isolated lifestyles of older generations. The yoga class provides an opportunity to build local friendships and connections.

Warmth and acceptance

While a significant proportion of seniors are still richly embedded in family life and community, still receiving physical affection from children and grandkids, of course a huge part of the demographic is not. Now, as a yoga teacher I love giving hugs! I sometimes feel

that when an embrace is welcomed I am doing just as much good (if not more) than an asana practice or meditation session.

Be safe

Of course, in an older demographic the regular concerns for physical safety during asana are radically amplified. Compared to when I attend yoga classes as a student, and hear teachers challenging me to 'go to my edge'—right to the tip of falling or losing balance in order to develop balance and strength. I avoid any such extremes in the senior yoga class. Falling can have dire consequences, so to prevent this from occurring some of the things I consider include: checking that chairs are sturdy, with a flat seat and back rest; ideally several chairs with armrests are also available for those using canes; mats are in place beneath chairs to prevent sliding on wooden floors; all strength & balance work begins with at least one hand in contact with the chair; and the class has 'recovery' postures throughout (such as finger stretches, working towards holding a mudra) in order to prevent over-exertion.

Stay in touch

While many seniors are absolute computer

whizzes, I quickly learned not to assume that every student in my senior yoga class would have an email address, internet access and/or a mobile phone. Although MindBody is a great system, most of my class didn't want to use it. So, the good old phone call and snail-mail were found to be the most effective, and personal, way of staying in touch.

In summary, I really encourage anyone interested in starting to teach a senior class to go out into the community and start something wonderful. This part of the yoga community should be nurtured, as the benefits can have just as big an impact on quality of life as for any other age.

Gillian will be teaching a FREE Gentle Yoga class in Yass during Senior Week (14-22 March). For more information please visit www.murrumbateman yoga.com.

Gillian is a registered yoga teacher with Yoga Alliance. Since her initial training Gillian has studied 'Teaching Therapeutic Yoga to Seniors' with Yoga Lightness, and has completed the 'Silver Age Yoga' Teacher Certification and Trinity Core Yoga Instructor Certification.

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can also provide the possibility of safe, positive human contact, something which a trauma survivor may not have experienced. The TSY instructor understands these issues and knows not to impose their will on the student. Props are kept to a minimum (usually blankets and blocks) and belts are not used in TSY due to potential triggers.

Teacher Qualities

The TSY instructor invites student feedback, is willing to listen and makes appropriate changes according to the feedback. They do not consider themselves the expert and consistently demonstrate a respect for the student's experience. The TSY instructor is also careful in how they move around the room to avoid surprising students.

Postures

Developing a sense of connection with one's body is the aim with TSY rather than perfect alignment. It is understood that some postures may be triggering and, while not ruling them out altogether, the instructor assists students to progress safely towards them over a number of classes. The value of timing and pacing of postures and classes is also recognised eg. how

long postures are held can give the student the experience that things come to an end, even uncomfortable experiences.

Environment

An appreciation of lighting, temperature and privacy/minimal outside distractions, and their potential impact, is reflected in the setting up of the class space. The creation of a safe space is foremost in the mind of the TSY instructor. TSY classes are ideally held in community and health agencies where students can access other related support services, such as counselling, to help address any issues which may arise in classes. It is important to note that the TSY instructor doesn't assist students to process their trauma or their class experience, although they will be trained in helping contain the student's present moment experience where necessary.

TO CONCLUDE

Trauma Sensitive Yoga is an important adjunct to talk therapy in the treatment of trauma. It is sure to find its way to the foreground in therapeutic interventions as ongoing research reveals its undeniable benefits and transformational potential. Its

clinical value in western science has been discovered through scientific rigour, however its inherent healing power, like all forms of yoga, finds its origin in an ancient practice and philosophy which has for thousands of years known what western medical science is simply reinforcing.

May you all find your yoga and live to your fullest potential in body and mind.

Pippa is a registered Yoga teacher and qualified psychotherapist specialising in the area of Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. She has completed the TSY Teacher Training at the Kripalu Centre for Yoga and Health, Massachusetts, USA. Pippa currently teaches at Canberra Yoga Space.

Dr Bessel van der Kolk, MD, David Emerson, SW, and Jen Turner, Mental Health Practitioner, developed TSY at the Trauma Centre in Boston, Massachusetts, USA. David and Jen are registered yoga instructors. Their research may be accessed at www.traumacentre.org. This article is based on their book, Overcoming Trauma Through Yoga: Reclaiming Your Body.