

Trauma Sensitive Yoga: An Adjunctive Therapy for Treating Trauma

I remember very clearly the first yoga class I attended. A few months prior I had endured a very stressful time at work and I vowed to myself that I would find a path of better integration and deeper peace. My road to serenity came through a yoga class offered at my local hospital. I enrolled in a 6 week session and soon found myself on my mat with a group of people who were all about 30 years my senior, suffering from arthritic joints and heart conditions. I grew to love this sangha. I realized that they had a beautiful way of exploring postures, adjusting as necessary, laughing frequently and resting deeply in savasana. What a way to dip my toes into what was to become the beginning of my vedic education. My classmates taught me that yoga was not about alignment as much as it was about acceptance and remembering to breathe. I carry this lesson with me 10 years later as I move into teaching a much needed form of yoga.

I am currently immersed in learning how yoga can be used to heal trauma. Trauma is multi-faceted and complex. It can be the result of a single event or it can happen over years of psychological, physical and/or emotional abuse. Trauma can even result from witnessing a violent act. According to the CDC (Centers for Disease Control), 29% of women and 10% of men have experienced rape, physical violence and/or stalking by an intimate partner. The CDC also reported in 2012 that U.S. state and local child protective services received an estimated 3.4 million referrals of children being abused or neglected. Add to this the numbers of military personnel who have returned from active duty with a diagnosis of PTSD and you realize that many around us are suffering. Yoga offers the potential for deep and enduring healing to those in our world who are carrying heavy burdens.

Trauma Sensitive Yoga (TCTSY) as taught by the Trauma Center of Brookline, MA is an adjunctive treatment for complex trauma and PTSD that is based on aspects of trauma theory, neuroscience and attachment theory. The goal of TCTSY is to help victims of trauma to live in the present moment. This is done by asking the students to become aware of their bodies as they move and breathe. This practice is called interoception. Optimally students of a TCTSY class are prescreened and supported by a clinician or clinical facility. Teachers need to feel secure that each person on the mat is at an appropriate point in their healing to participate in a body focused practice. Because this form of yoga is not meant to engage the students in an intellectual manner, facilitators want to be certain that each student has resources to call upon to discuss what they are experiencing if they so desire. When a person has become disengaged from their body due to trauma, the return to wholeness can be frightening. Perhaps the most important aspect for facilitators to keep in mind is that they must do their best to not re-traumatize people who are carrying the imprints of trauma in their bodies. The teachings of TCTSY effectively provide the safety guidelines to prevent this occurrence.

There are certain domains of a Trauma Sensitive yoga class. Language plays a vital role. In TCTSY the facilitator uses language that is invitational and welcomes self-inquiry. You will hear phrases such as “in

your own time”, “as you are ready”, “perhaps you may want to”, “notice ... watch ... experiment ...focus on”. Students in TCTSY classes tell their teachers that they cannot hear these words enough. Remember that people who live in abusive situations feel as if they have no choice. They have learned how to deny their needs in order to placate the abuser. Offering choice and steering clear of commands has a profound effect on the students.

Another theme focuses on staying present in each moment. TCTSY teachers do not use metaphorical statements (Envision the sun shining down on your head Envision yourself lying on a beach Move into tree posture and feel your legs as roots of a tree, your arms as the branches). Using these types of phrases encourages people to take their attention away from their bodies and travel into their minds. This can be a scary and unstable place for trauma survivors. They already have a deeply ingrained skill of dissociating from the here and now; this is perhaps what allowed them to endure what they experienced in the past. The facilitator’s job is to use concrete, body focused words to direct the student home to their body.

As previously mentioned, TCTSY employs interoception as its hallmark. Teachers pair the phrases “notice” or “focus on” with muscles or sensations. They might say “notice the weight of your body on the floor and see if you can feel where you press into the ground” or “when you fold forward, focus on the large muscles in your thighs and experiment with the sensations in these muscles. “ Trauma survivors may not have feeling or sensation in their bodies. It is often important to remind them that one way to “sense” a movement is to look at the moving body part. Understanding the manifestations of trauma helps a facilitator to find optional ways of teaching so as not to cause fear or insecurity.

There are no physical assists in TCTSY. In a “normal” world, touching someone on the arm, helping them to press deeper into child’s pose or laying hands on a student’s forehead or shoulders during savasana is thought to be a reflection of this compassion. Quite the opposite is true for survivors of trauma and abuse. When an adjustment is provided it implies that their version of a form is incorrect thus adding to their sense of inadequacy. When hands are laid on someone it can be a visceral reminder of an unsafe touch that they have experienced. Most especially if their eyes are closed prior to the touch they will startle, leave the present moment and retreat back to the past. TCTSY facilitators are taught to refrain from teaching a particular alignment or position. They instead offer options so that students can practice in a safe manner; the focus is not on getting it right but rather is on experimentation.

Prior to studying TCTSY, Ayurveda beckoned to me. I have spent years absorbing these timeless teachings; I now understand that there is a divine order to all of life. Ayurveda was not only the preface for my work with Trauma survivors but informs every step I take in this field. Understanding how to nourish someone who has a vata disturbance is key to working in this realm. My yoga classes are infused with rhythm, predictability and grounded movement. I am grateful to blend these teachings together to nurture my students.

We are in a unique position as yoga teachers and ayurvedic practitioners to help those around us who are imprinted with the marks of trauma. There was a study published recently in the Journal of Clinical Psychiatry that details the effects of an 8 week, 1 hour per week trauma sensitive yoga practice with people who had treatment resistant PTSD. 52% of the people studied no longer qualified as having PTSD at the end of the 8 sessions. Studies continue with domestic violence victims in MN and veterans at Emory University in Atlanta. I have deep gratitude for all those who are at the cutting edge of this field; each teacher, each practitioner, each scientist has a vital role to play so that the suffering in our world may be lessened.

Bio:

Lisa Boldin is the owner of Sama Tal Ayurveda in Portsmouth, NH. She is a graduate of the Kripalu School of Ayurveda and received her 200 hr YTT in Classical Yoga from Yoga Life Institute NH. Lisa is a current candidate for Trauma Sensitive Yoga certification from the Trauma Institute in Brookline, MA. This mentored 110 hr program has a rich curriculum of both scientific exploration and yoga teaching.

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