Healing & Resilience Through Yoga

Sophie Namy
SVRI Forum 2019
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Trauma Basics
Trauma Definition

Anything that overwhelms our ability to cope and respond, and leaves us feeling helpless, hopeless and out of control.

(Hala Khouri, Off the Mat Into the World)
The Neurobiology of Trauma

Fight, Flight or Freeze?

Artist: Rachel Stribbling
What if we don’t return to balance?
The long-term sequelae of trauma

- physical
- mental
- emotional
- collective
- spiritual
- behavioral
- social
- neurological
“Psychologists usually try to help people use insight & understanding to manage their behavior. However, neuroscience research shows that very few psychological problems are the result of defects in understanding – most originate in pressures from deeper regions in the brain... When the alarm bell of the emotional brain keeps signaling that you are in danger, no amount of insight will silence it.”

~ Bessel van der Kolk (The Body Keeps the Score)
Growing Evidence & Uptake

According to NIH, 10 out of 14 yoga studies found mental health benefits (among other positive outcomes).

**Gap in evidence** regarding adaptability for diverse contexts and effectiveness for populations with overlapping /complex traumas.

[https://nccih.nih.gov/health/yoga/introduction.htm#hed3](https://nccih.nih.gov/health/yoga/introduction.htm#hed3)
“While trauma can be hell on earth, trauma resolved is a gift of the gods—a heroic journey that belongs to each of us.”

~Peter Levine (Walking the Tiger)
Program Design

• **Aim:** Cultivate a safe and predictable environment where participants can have their own experience, connect & build trust with others, and heal from trauma.

• **Participants:** Women & girls residing in one of 3 shelters run by Willow International (NGO working to prevent and respond to human trafficking in Uganda)

• **Structure:** 12 week cohort with progressive content (one hour session/week). Themes: Grounding (session 1-4); Understanding (session 5-8); & Inner-strengths (session 9-12)

• **Content:** Breath work, simple asana, visualizations & brief discussions.
Program Influences & Innovations

- Trauma theory
- Contemplative science
- Explicit social justice & feminist framing

Survivor-centered Learning approach Resilience focused Low-tech
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trauma Symptom</th>
<th>Hart Yoga Focus</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Easily triggered, extreme vigilance (hyper aroused state)</td>
<td>Activating the parasympathetic nervous system (forward folds, diaphragmatic breathing, long exhales)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feelings of helplessness or powerlessness</td>
<td>Decision-making opportunities and bringing awareness of structural (non-personal) dimensions of individual and collective trauma.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social isolation</td>
<td>Cultivating new community. Bonding through new, shared experiences.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disrupted bio-rhythms (sleep, eating, etc.)</td>
<td>Creating rhythms through synchronized movement and breath.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disconnected from body and/or dissociation</td>
<td>Creating an embodied experience. Language to explore muscular engagement and physical sensation in the body.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Destabilized, loss of center, “spacing out.”</td>
<td>Connecting to your physical center. Grounding exercises, balancing poses and gentle core engagement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shallow/anxious breath</td>
<td>Intentional deepening of the breath and experimenting with different modalities of breath.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inability to tolerate/fear or discomfort</td>
<td>Engaging with all states that arise. Pendulating between intensity and rest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muscular tension, physical pain</td>
<td>Enhancing flexibility, openness and strength.</td>
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</tbody>
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Let’s Practice!
How it differs from ‘regular’ yoga? Gentle path to embodiment~

➢ Grounded: supported, centered and physically located in present time
➢ Language: inclusive, permissive, anchoring
➢ “Looking inside” (interoception): curiosity, choice and compassion

**Can still be moments of discomfort ~ aspiring towards ‘staying power’**

Artist: Grace Helmer
Feasibility Pilot:

Can Hart Yoga be integrated within a safe-house setting for survivors of human trafficking in Uganda?

- April – June 2017, cohort of 12 adolescent girls (15-20 years) living in one of Willow International’s shelters
- Self-administered pre/post questionnaires: somatic and emotional symptoms (based on PhQ9 – validated depression scale) + self rated overall physical and emotional health
- Observation and informal feedback (staff and participants) to explore acceptability and resonance
**Feasibility Pilot**

Symptomology, last 2 weeks (n=11)  
(0=no days, 1=some days, 2=almost all days)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symptom</th>
<th>Pre</th>
<th>Post</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t sleep well</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had a headache</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt tired/no energy</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was scared</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t feel like eating</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ate too much</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong pain in back</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt Sad/hopeless</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt like a failure</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trouble concentrating</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Perceived Health (n=11)**  
(0=very poor, 5=excellent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Post</th>
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<td>0.3</td>
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**72% average attendance**
Aspirations & Tensions

Aspirations

Address current gap in psycho-social care (promising findings around feasibility, resonance and healing)

Low cost and sustainable (participants can integrate practices & carry forward)

More diverse access to body-based interventions

Tensions

How to maintain focus on social justice and systemic oppression alongside individual work?

Balancing agility/flexibility with structure needed for expansion?

Identifying like-minded donors with an openness to explore?
“Yoga means union. I welcome yoga to bring union and peace in my mind . . . and to take away that anger.”

“The way to do yoga is to learn to feel your breath, so that your heart is not panicking.”

“I used to think yoga was only for those energetic, young ‘kung-fu type’ people – now I know I can do yoga, and I can practice in a way that protects my sensitivities.”

(participants, Hart Yoga/OMPowerment Training, Kampala)
Holding people in their perfect wholeness...
Thank you!

Collaborators:
- Kelsey Galaway: Willow International
- Catherine Carlson & Violet Nkwanzi: University of Alabama

All the strong women and girls, for their time, energy, and feedback

Trauma informed trainers: Off the Mat (USA), Trauma Center (USA), Minded Institute (UK)

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