

Grief in the Tissues: Trauma Recovery from a Yoga Perspective

Amy Weintraub, LifeForce Yoga Healing Institute

What is post-traumatic stress disorder and when does it occur?

- ⊕ PTSD may occur when a person is threatened with death or serious injury, or witnesses such a threat to others. Someone involved in such an event may respond with feelings of intense fear, helplessness, or horror.
- ⊕ Most of us have been traumatized by an event in our lives. That doesn't mean we suffer from PTSD. Statistics vary, but it is estimated that the same event may induce PTSD in 20 - 40% of those involved, while 60 - 80% recover quickly.

Symptoms

- ⊕ Flashbacks
- ⊕ Nightmares
- ⊕ Avoidance of activity or people reminiscent of the event
- ⊕ Heightened arousal: irritability, sleep disturbance, irrational fears of being unsafe
- ⊕ Self-Medication with drugs & alcohol

The Yogic View

Excerpted from *Yoga Skills for Therapist* (W.W. Norton, 2012)

Yoga Meets Trauma

Therapeutic yoga approaches the emotions from the doorway of the body, or, more precisely, from the residue left in the body by trauma and loss and the everyday challenges of daily life. It meets the constrictions held and helps the client release them, often without words. This can be especially valuable when trauma has occurred pre-verbally or when trauma memories are stored intrinsically and cannot be recalled chronologically. This is also often the case in shock trauma, when the fight-or-flight hormone cortisol floods the limbic brain and disrupts the natural memory-arranging function of the hippocampus.

In developmental trauma, when a pattern of abuse has inclined the client to dissociate, often the memory of repeated trauma is there, but devoid of the painful emotions one would associate with the events. Yoga works bilaterally, integrating the emotions back into left-brain narrative in the case of developmental trauma, and integrating a more linear left-brain narrative into the emotionally laden intrinsic memories that accompany shock trauma. In either case, yoga, with its cultivation of an observing mind, its release of chronic tension stored in the body, and its many techniques using breathing and sound that help clients access the wellspring of well-being that exists beneath the effects of the trauma, can provide trauma survivors a way to feel safe in their bodies and safe in the world.

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- ⊕ *Samskaras* – Indelible imprints in our subconscious accrued through the experiences of daily life. They propel consciousness into action, *karma*, so that we repeat our patterned behavior (IV:9-11).
- ⊕ *Vasana* – Web of samskaras—the template of our actions and reactions (IV:8).
- ⊕ *Vasana* relates to the development of our neuronal pathways.
- ⊕ Chronic tensions held in the body/*samskara* relates to recent discovery of the role of the neuropeptides.

Guidelines for Meeting Trauma with Yoga

- ⊕ Safe Container (creating a ritual)
 - ⊕ Inner Sanctuary
 - ⊕ 4:4:6 Breath
 - ⊕ Movement & Mudra
 - ⊕ Inhale arms out in front of the heart
 - ⊕ Exhale hands in Eagle Mudra to the heart
 - ⊕ Toning (Nada Yoga— So Hum)
- ⊕ Permission
 - ⊕ Permission (from the student)– Limit hands-on adjustments and always ask.
 - ⊕ Permission (from you) is granted – to stop the process, be it a pose or an inquiry.
 - ⊕ Permission (from you) is granted – for feelings to flow on the yoga mat.
- ⊕ Move slowly
- ⊕ Cue to sensation
 - ⊕ Guided practice with sensory details
 - ⊕ Cues to feel sensation are specific and direct, not global
 - ⊕ Movement is slow
 - ⊕ When incorporated into vinyasa or stronger practice, cue between sequences
- ⊕ Grounding
 - ⊕ Root chakra poses, including standing poses.
 - ⊕ Mantra tone: Lum; So-hum
 - ⊕ Inhale: “I am” to the crown; Exhale: “Here,” down into the feet.
- ⊕ Yoga Nidra
 - ⊕ Intention/resolve (*sankapla*)
 - ⊕ Inner Sanctuary
 - ⊕ Body Scan (*annamaya kosha*)
 - ⊕ Breath Awareness (*pranamaya kosha*)
 - ⊕ Feeling & Balancing the Opposites (*manomaya kosha & vijnanamaya kosha*)
 - ⊕ Awareness of Self (*anandamaya kosha*)
 - ⊕ Suggestion: Self-acceptance, Gratitude
 - ⊕ Intention/resolve (*sankapla*)