

Yoga Therapy in Practice

Healing Childhood Sexual Abuse with Yoga

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Abstract: *This article outlines the rationale and best practices for helping young people recover from the trauma of sexual abuse using integrative and therapeutic Yoga practices. As a model for such work, we describe a specific program, Healing Childhood Sexual Abuse with Yoga, currently offered by the authors in the Portland, OR area. The program serves both girls and boys and has a teen leadership component to allow older youth to serve as role models for preteens. This article outlines the necessary steps for working with this population, including self-inquiry, training, program design, teaching strategies, and integration with other therapies and services. A full eight-week curriculum is described, with focal points for each class, as well as suggested poses, mantras, creative activities, and mindfulness practices. The article also addresses specific contraindications and risk factors and ways they can be mitigated. Finally, it covers observed outcomes from two sequential eight-week sessions of the Healing Childhood Sexual Abuse with Yoga program.*

Keywords: *Yoga, trauma, sexual abuse, children, adolescents, PTSD, mindfulness, assertiveness*

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Introduction

This article outlines the rationale and best practices for helping young people recover from the trauma of sexual abuse using integrative and therapeutic Yoga practices. As a model for such work, we describe a specific program, Healing Childhood Sexual Abuse with Yoga, currently offered by the authors in the Portland, OR area. The program includes not only Yoga postures but also guided meditation, art projects, mindful eating, and other activities that address a full range of multisensory healing. The curriculum is designed to integrate with non-Yoga therapies the youth are receiving. In our professional experience, Yoga and related mindfulness practices can help restore sexual abuse victims to wholeness and a life of greater joy. In this article, we provide recommendations that can be used by clinical therapists, mental health specialists, social workers, Yoga therapists, or anyone who works with young people

or adults recovering from sexual abuse. For clarity, the term “Yoga teacher” will be used throughout to distinguish Yoga practitioners from the sexual abuse treatment therapists they collaborate with.

Sexual Abuse in the United States

Sexual abuse is widespread in the United States, and despite recent efforts to destigmatize being a sexual abuse survivor, much remains hidden and underreported.¹ An extensive literature review of U.S. Government sources, as well as retrospective and other clinical studies, reports that one out of four girls and one out of six boys are sexually abused before the age of 18.² Only 10% of these assaults are committed by strangers; the rest are committed by parents, siblings, foster caregivers, neighbors, or family acquaintances. Two in five of these children are abused by older or larger children, further increasing the sense of isolation that arises from sexual abuse, and 23% of all

incidents of sexual abuse are perpetrated by individuals under the age of 18. The median age for reported abuse is 9 years old, with one in five cases occurring in children age 8 or younger.

Consequences of Childhood Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse is a complex trauma that involves many destructive elements, including betrayal of trust, secretiveness, coercion, threats, unpredictability, long duration, family disintegration, and feelings of anger, fear, and shame. The long-term consequences of childhood sexual abuse include inappropriate sexual behavior, poor self-image, troubles with work or schooling, and increased risk of mental health issues and suicide.³ Because sexual abuse is an extreme violation of an individual's physical, emotional, cognitive, and familial integrity, it contributes to many conditions confronted by adult survivors, including homelessness, addiction, obesity, chronic illness, and depression.

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) has been reported to be five times more likely in female survivors of childhood sexual abuse compared to the general female population.⁴ Children who have been sexually abused exhibit more post-traumatic fear, anxiety, and concentration problems than do their non-abused peers. Most survivors of child sexual abuse do not meet the full diagnostic criteria for PTSD, but more than 80% are reported to have some post-traumatic symptoms.⁵ Overlapping symptomatology between PTSD and the effects of childhood sexual abuse in young girls and women include anxiety, depression, somatic complaints (in particular, greater pelvic and menstrual pain), low self-esteem, learning disabilities, running away, conduct disorders, delinquency, aggressiveness, substance abuse, self-mutilation, suicidal behavior, inappropriate sexual behavior, teenage prostitution, and early pregnancy.⁶

Rationale for Yoga as a Therapeutic Intervention

Given the severe, potentially lifelong consequences of the trauma of sexual abuse, it is critical to seek therapeutic interventions that can help survivors heal from their past abuse. Having seen Yoga's success in our own work with homeless youth, youth in foster care, and youth in other challenging circumstances, we decided to explore whether Yoga could support long-term recovery in survivors of childhood sexual abuse.

Specific research on the applicability of Yoga as a therapeutic intervention for survivors of child sexual abuse is lacking. However, there has been reported success in using Yoga as an intervention for PTSD, anxiety, and depres-

sion. For example, in one study, mind-body therapies that included guided imagery, meditation, movement, breathing, drawing, and other elements significantly decreased posttraumatic stress scores among adolescents presenting postwar PTSD symptoms.⁷ A mindfulness intervention that included breathing, meditation, and Yoga has been shown to significantly decrease anxiety and depression among adults with an anxiety disorder or panic disorder.⁸ While these studies, and others like them, support the applicability of mindfulness and Yoga for trauma-affected populations, more research is needed to determine the efficacy of similar programs specifically for sexual abuse survivors.

In developing our approach, we also turned to the research examining what types of interventions best support healing from childhood sexual abuse. There is growing evidence that Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT) is an effective treatment for sexually abused children.⁹ This treatment model includes eight core components: education about sexual abuse and PTSD, emotion regulation skills, individualized stress-management skills, an introduction to the cognitive triad (relationships between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors), creating a trauma narrative (a gradual exposure intervention wherein children describe increasingly distressing details of their sexual abuse, to help them integrate the experience), cognitive processing, safety skills and education about healthy sexuality, and a parental treatment component. Randomized, controlled trials for sexually abused children that use models other than TF-CBT are rare.

Jim Hopper, PhD, an expert in sexual abuse and mindfulness and an instructor at Harvard Medical School, has further described the following as essential first steps in any treatment for healing from sexual abuse:

- “Establishing safety and stability in one’s body, one’s relationships, and the rest of one’s life.
- Tapping into and developing one’s own inner strengths, and any other potentially available resources for healing.
- Learning how to regulate one’s emotions and manage symptoms that cause suffering or make one feel unsafe.
- Developing and strengthening skills for managing painful and unwanted experiences, and minimizing unhelpful responses to them.”¹⁰

Those familiar with Yoga practices and philosophy will immediately recognize that Yoga is an ideal opportunity to initiate, amplify, or integrate the tenets of both Hopper’s work and TF-CBT. Our work has drawn upon some of these best practices, with greater emphasis on mindfulness, multisensory integration, and body-focused practices.

The Healing Childhood Sexual Abuse with Yoga Program

The Healing Childhood Sexual Abuse with Yoga (HCSAY) program was first developed by Mark Lilly, founder of Street Yoga, in conjunction with the Morrison Family and Child Services Family Sexual Abuse Treatment (FSAT) team in 2005. It has been further refined by Jaime Hedlund, who has served with Street Yoga for three years and taught FSAT classes for the past two years. Street Yoga teachers continue to maintain a close working relationship with FSAT therapists.

The primary focus of HCSAY's work with FSAT is girls age 7 to 18 and boys age 7 to 12. There are separate, though similar, eight-week programs for boys and girls. Some of the older girls in FSAT also receive training in leadership, which they then use to serve as assistants in the classes for the younger girls. This gives them a chance to both model and deepen their own healing while serving others. HCSAY is also currently developing, in collaboration with two other agencies, a specialized program for boys age 13 to 19 who have been convicted of at least one sexual offense. The majority of these boys have themselves been either sexually abused or hypersexualized in their childhoods (through exposure to pornography or provocative parental/adult sexuality). These boys and young men present with many of the same issues as those solely suffering from abuse, with the added cofactors of having themselves caused harm to others, usually to siblings or other young family members.

The Healing Childhood Sexual Abuse with Yoga program is focused on building safety, strength, and assertiveness in all participants. All activities return again and again to these three principles. More specific goals for both program participants and the community impact of the program include:

- Helping young survivors of sexual abuse find integration and healing.
- Reducing the likelihood of revictimization.
- Helping young offenders heal and not reoffend.
- Helping parents cope with the pain of their child's sexual abuse.
- Helping to expose the extent of this problem and its high costs and consequences.
- Integrating therapeutic Yoga into current best practices for sexual abuse treatment.

The HCSAY program offers not only a healing tool but a preventative one as well. As participants move through the curriculum, they grow in assertiveness and develop stronger healthy boundaries. This lowers their chance of being victimized again. Sexual predators and other abusers prefer weaker

prey, and this program is designed to directly counter that by helping the young people grow stronger.

The complex nature of post-sexual abuse traumatization strongly suggests that any new intervention be closely integrated with existing therapies. For this reason, we intentionally structured our series to complement the other therapies the youth were receiving. We have found that Yoga reinforces other therapies. We always work closely with the therapists and social workers involved in a child's treatment work. We devised our curriculum after extensive consultation with the team at FSAT and other centers and continue to solicit their input after every session.

The final component of this program is work with non-offending parents—the “other” parents of abused children, parents who did not commit the abuse. Most nonoffending parents are struggling to understand their own relationship to the abuse, while at the same time helping their traumatized child recover. This component was developed as part of Street Yoga's Mindful Parents and Caregivers program, designed by Mark Lilly and Erika Ruber.

The Core HCSAY Curriculum

Below, we describe in more detail the model curriculum of HCSAY. This curriculum is designed for use with two groups—teen girls (13–18) and young girls (8–12)—and includes the opportunity to engage teen leaders in the young girls' group. However, this girls' program provides the foundation of the boys' program, as many of the needs for healing from sexual abuse transcend gender boundaries.

The HCSAY curriculum is composed of eight 90-minute sessions led jointly by a trained Yoga teacher and a sexual abuse treatment counselor (usually a licensed clinical social worker or mental health therapist). The classes offer a safe, predictable blend of Yoga postures, art, mindful eating, ritual, *mantra* meditation, and more.

When we asked what value Yoga could bring to young people healing from the trauma of sexual abuse, we returned over and over again to the understanding of the uncertainty these youth live with. Most fear being victimized again, even if the attacker is in prison. They feel vulnerable. From this awareness, we decided that a sense of safety was the first priority, to be cultivated through the strengthening power of Yoga. We also learned that so much of the trauma comes from ruined relationships. To foster healing in this area, we added assertiveness as a primary goal of this work. With safety and strength, young people can begin to assert themselves again in life, strive to meet their own needs, feel themselves to be valuable, and confront with greater power threats that might arise in the future, whether from other people or from their own potentially self-destructive behavior.

With this in mind, all sessions were designed within the overarching framework of “fostering assertiveness from a core of safety and strength.” Each week has a theme, affirmation, series of poses, and other activities. [See Table 1 for more specific information about the eight-week curriculum.] The themes of the eight sessions are Safety, Boundaries, Strength, Assertiveness, Power, Intuition, Trust, and Community. Each was chosen to balance inward-directed and outward-directed focus, and between personal wisdom/inner strength and relationship with others. The overall sequence is intentionally structured so that each session provides the necessary foundation for the following session. Sexual trauma can produce large gaps in memory and a sense of fragmented life experience. For this reason, it is necessary to create a unified program and explicitly connect the dots from week to week.

Teen Leadership

The teen leadership component has proven central to the HCSAY model. The first eight-week series takes place with a group of teen girls. At the end of the session, the Yoga teacher and FSAT therapist offer the opportunity for some of the teens to become youth leaders for the next session with the younger girls. The teens’ role in the second session is to support the teacher and therapist by helping with the class. It also provides a wonderful opportunity for them to be an example of strength and healing for the young girls.

As teen leaders repeat the eight modules, they reinforce the life skills learned when they were participants. The skills become a more natural part of their healing experience. Leadership puts the teens in a useful position to practice assertiveness, create boundaries, enforce safety, and build trust. Giving back by sharing their experience is key to healing wounds of the past.

| Module | Affirmation/ <i>Mantra</i> | Movement/ <i>Asana</i> | Other Activities |
|---------------|---|---|--|
| Safety | “I have the right to be safe!”/ “I am safe!” | Name game, child’s pose, seated mountain pose, mountain pose, warrior 1, and deep breathing | Standing in our safe space (art activity) |
| Boundaries | “I have the right to personal space!” | Dog, tree, ragdoll, basic sun salutations | Walking/dancing with scarves |
| Strength | “I am strong!” | Creating strength poses in small groups, Noticing sound in body: “I am happy, I am strong” chant, breaking down <i>OM</i> | Draw a picture of a time when you felt strong. |
| Assertiveness | “I have the right to stand up for myself and other people!” | Mountain pose, warrior poses, sun salutations, “Yogini Says” game | Scarf walking with assertiveness; eye contact with shaking hands |
| Power | “I am powerful!” | <i>Mudra</i> , warrior poses, inversions | Draw/color where you feel powerful in your body |
| Intuition | “I am smart and wise!” | Warrior poses, rag doll, rabbit pose, cobra | Intuition game |
| Trust | “I trust myself!” | Balancing poses, options for poses with eyes closed | Community tree pose |
| Community | “I am not alone!” | Flow from poses from the entire series | Celebration! Eye pillows/ power bead bracelets |

Table 1. *Eight-Week Curriculum of HCSAY Program for Girls.*

Working with younger girls also helps the teens connect and create empathy. Interacting with them gives the older girls a concrete understanding of themselves at the ages when their own abuse happened. This empathy allows them to create a gentler inner voice and recreate their personal narrative. The older girls realize by witnessing and serving the younger girls that it is not written all over their being that they have been abused. They learn to look at themselves differently, not as someone who has been abused and nothing more but as someone having that history as just one part of themselves and their life story.

There are, however, several considerations when incorporating teen leadership into the model. Therapists and the Yoga teacher should offer an extensive training workshop for all teens who want to be leaders. The workshop should:

- Evaluate why the teens like Yoga and why they want to share what they have learned.
- Present clear boundaries and guidelines for interaction between teen leaders and young girls (e.g., guidelines around contact outside of the group, exchanging phone numbers or email addresses, giving gifts, and so on).
- Offer role-play situations. Often, young girls confide in teen leaders before they approach therapists or the Yoga teacher. It is critical that the teen leaders have an action plan for when these situations come up.
- Offer tools for “reparenting” the younger girls. This could include sharing knowledge about how to praise a child and using compassionate, mindful communication.

The Structure of a Session

The following structure outlines the general flow of every class. The core elements are repeated each week in roughly the same sequence. Consistency and repetition create a feeling of order, allowing growth and progress to occur more evenly. All necessary differences between the teen and young girls’ groups are noted. We describe the session thoroughly because we believe that the thought-out details and intentional interactions are critical to creating a healing environment and process.

Set-Up

It is enormously important to create a safe, sacred space where class will take place. Oftentimes, space is limited and not ideal for Yoga. A teacher’s ability to transform such a space provides an example of how girls can make sacred space for themselves anywhere they may be—on the street, in detention or residential treatment, in a foster care home, and so on. For this reason, we suggest taking at least 30 minutes before class to set up the space. Set-up includes

gathering all the necessary supplies for class, arranging mats and the sharing table, lighting candles, preparing water and snacks, placing snacks in front of each mat, and laying out an array of intention words (e.g., Strong, Safe, Power, Fun, Calm, Peace, Joy) that participants will choose from.

We use candles, tapestries, stones, and other natural objects to create a sacred space in an old gym. Be sensitive, however, to offering only secular elements—items rooted in specific spiritual or religious traditions might not be appropriate for the site you are serving. Multisensory integration is also central to this curriculum model. This includes scent through the strategic use of certain essential oils (it is important that the girls have a choice about whether they would like to receive this), relaxing music (another place to be careful and culturally sensitive), youth artwork and colorful fabrics to support the visual senses, the use of stones for tactile grounding and soothing, and the weekly snack to bring the taste elements into healing.

This is also an important time for the Yoga teacher and therapist to go over the class theme and plan with the team partners. Both the treatment specialist and the Yoga teacher should consider ways to make the students in the room feel as safe as possible. This could include forming the group in a circle or arranging mats so that the students’ backs will face the wall and placing “Class In Session” signs on the door to avoid interruption.

When teen leaders are assisting a young girls’ group, they should provide their input about the class plan and decide on the ways they would like to help that day. Some examples include reading the closing meditation, supporting a particular student in a pose, sharing a personal story about why they like Yoga, or how they relate the class theme to their life (e.g., “A way that Yoga makes me feel strong is...”). Set aside five minutes before class starts to create a small circle, thank the teens for being there, do some deep breathing, and “get grounded” for class.

Participants’ Arrival

The arrival process sets the tone for the class and is rooted in a consistent ritual that recognizes and honors the transition from the girls’ normal routine into the sacred space that you are creating. Girls should wait outside the space where Yoga will take place until everyone arrives. At that point, girls come into the space in pairs or small groups (when teen leaders are involved, each teen partners with a small group of young girls and escorts them in). Outside the room, each girl receives a hematite stone. This is explained as their special stone for the class. Hematite is a particularly grounding mineral.

The Yoga teacher is at the door to welcome the girls. She offers them their choice of essential oil (peppermint, which can be energizing, or lavender, which can be calming) and explains that they can have a drop of oil on their wrists to smell throughout class and notice how it makes them feel. She also guides girls to choose an intention word to bring to their mat. She explains that intention words are a special way for them to focus and enjoy their class. After the initial arrival, girls choose a mat and begin eating their snacks until all the girls are in the room and the group can start a check-in.

Checking In/Rebuilding Vocabularies

After the arrival ritual and as girls are eating their snacks, the therapist and Yoga teacher introduce the theme for the day and check in with the group. We call this check-in practice Rebuilding Vocabularies. This process is centered on introducing positive self-talk into the girls' experiences. As they check in with themselves and begin to notice how their bodies are feeling, the Yoga teacher and therapist offer the positive *mantra* for the day. Girls go around the circle, saying their name and repeating the *mantra* (e.g., "I am Jaime, I am safe!") and coupling it with their own creative pose or movement. The whole group then repeats the girl's *mantra* ("Jaime is safe!") and does the pose/movement. It takes courage to make these statements, especially if the girl doesn't necessarily believe them to be true. However, as she hears herself speaking in this strong intentional way, and feels supported as the group repeats it back to her, she increases her own ability to let positive affirmations become a more natural part of her vocabulary.

Many survivors of sexual abuse have negative associations with common words about the body, such as legs, hips, and chest, as well as words such as "safety," "trust," and "love." These words have been part of the betrayal—many abusers have told their victims, "I am doing this to you because I love you." Others have offered to keep a victim's sibling "safe" from the very same abuse, if only she will comply willingly. This portion of the class allows the students a chance to reconnect with their body in safe ways with words and to reclaim some of life's most common words.

Body Scan and Movement Choices

Depending on the history of trauma, the day, and countless other factors, some students may arrive at class in a hyperaroused state. Many others are low in energy and benefit from bringing energy into their body and cultivating vitality and awareness. It can be hard to meet the individual needs of each student in a group setting. After the check-in, we typically invite the girls to become aware of their cur-

rent mental and physical state through a full-body scan. The students keep their eyes open and scan through the body by placing their hands on each part (e.g., the teacher cues, "Notice the top of your head," and the girls gently touch the top of their head).

We then begin the movement practice with a "Chaos to Stillness" exercise, such as having the girls shake and wiggle different parts of their bodies, or move around the room with scarves, allowing them to move freely in space, and then come back to a place of stillness. This type of exercise shifts the energy in the room and is useful for both those who arrive hyperaroused and for those low in energy. The return to stillness also provides a concrete example of how to apply self-soothing techniques in the midst of a chaotic situation.

As girls start to feel more comfortable in the group, we offer them more opportunities to choose whether they need to do a stillness exercise (e.g., tree pose) or an awakening exercise (e.g., gently tapping on their body) to begin their Yoga practice. This allows the girls to gain more control over their physical experience while learning to notice how their physical experience changes from moment to moment.

Return to Strength

After returning to an energetic (as opposed to mentally checked-out) stillness, the focus shifts to strength and assertiveness. See Table 1 for the postures and practices that are emphasized at each weekly session. The goal of each Yoga practice is to give the students an opportunity to become aware of how their bodies feel. With this awareness, students regain the control over their bodies that was lost in trauma, or perhaps never felt. They recognize that they can change the way their bodies feel by moving them.

In addition to practicing poses, we share practical tools for developing assertiveness. Girls practice using their voice (speaking/chanting loudly and softly), introducing themselves to each other, looking each other in the eye, and letting their classmates know if they need more personal space. They also have opportunities to share poses and movement with the group. Girls can take risks and practice assertiveness within a safe and supportive environment. They hear the strength in their own voices, begin to feel it in their bodies, and recognize their right to stand up for themselves and their personal boundaries. These skills build protective strength and prevent the risk of future abuse.

Closing

Each class ends with a relaxation. Lying down in *savāsana* (corpse pose) with eyes closed can be triggering and scary to the students, so we also offer different forms of relaxation.

We have found it successful to do an art project while listening to peaceful music, story, or meditation. Every class also has a formal closing. The leaders invite the girls to honor themselves for showing up and learning new things, then ask that they look each other in the eye as they greet everyone with a *namaste*. The session ends with chanting *om* and/or a group *mantra* (e.g., “We are powerful, peaceful warriors!”).

When teen leaders are present, the teens offer and repeat positive affirmations to each girl at the end of class, such as “You are strong and beautiful,” “You deserve to be heard,” and “You have the right to personal space.” It is important that the young girls receive these comments from safe peers. They may have only heard such statements from offenders who say similar things to “groom” their victims before abuse. Hearing affirmations in a safe space reinforces the girls’ ability to retain and believe them.

Nonoffending Parent Program

To augment the classes the youth receive, Street Yoga also offers a four-week series for the nonoffending parents. This workshop is aimed at helping parents better manage their own stress and engage in more healthy ways with their traumatized child. Modules cover diverse aspects of self-care, trauma-informed mindfulness, compassionate communication, and safe communities.

Outcomes

We have not yet conducted formal research to evaluate the effectiveness of this program. However, at the end of the first eight-week session, we surveyed seven girls age 13–18 to gauge their experiences. The girls completed a survey consisting of 30 statements focused specifically on how Yoga made them feel, the class themes, and their level of satisfaction with the program. The girls were asked to report whether they agreed, somewhat agreed, disagreed, or neither agreed nor disagreed with each statement. We also left space for them to provide free responses and additional comments

85% of the girls agreed that Yoga made them feel more energetic, happier, more focused, and less nervous and tense (all drawn from separate questions). Girls were also asked to report if they practiced Yoga on their own. 71% of the girls reported practicing on their own once a week, with the other responses being “never” and “once a month.”

When asked to comment on the statement, “Throughout the past eight weeks of Yoga classes, I have learned techniques that allow me to feel safe in my own body,” 6 out of 7 (85%) girls marked “Agree,” while the 7th girl left the answer blank. Similarly, 6 out of the 7 (85%) girls surveyed agreed that they “gained more emotional, physical, and

mental strength, and have thought about what it means to trust themselves and other people.”

The girls reported coming to Yoga for a variety of reasons, including:

- “because it’s fun, energetic, and calming”
- “to work on my body”
- “to center my spirit, mind, body, and soul”
- “to have fun and be calm”
- “to find things I can do every day”

One participant’s favorite thing about Yoga is that she “get[s] to be free.” Another girl commented that her favorite thing about the Yoga session was “the food.” When asked about their least favorite part of the Yoga session, the girls commented, “N/A,” “Nothing. I loved it all,” and “I didn’t go to every class.”

One month after the first session had ended, the Yoga teacher and FSAT therapist reconvened at the Youth Leader training workshop with four soon-to-be youth leaders. We had the teen girls complete a questionnaire to learn more about why they wanted to be leaders for the young girls’ group. We asked them nine open-ended questions regarding their experience in the first group and their reasoning for choosing to be a youth leader. When asked what they gained from the first eight-week Yoga group, girls reported:

- “How to be assertive and be safe.”
- “I learned how to balance out my crazy life without getting or going crazy, and I learned how to be assertive.”
- “More flexibility, strength, courage, assertiveness, power.”

When asked about why they wanted to be youth leaders, girls reported:

- “Because it helped me so much, and I was so grateful and I just want to help share that feeling with people who have suffered through this.”
- “Because it helped me and made me feel more relieved.”
- “To know that everyone’s life gets crazy sometimes and it’s important to show them healthy ways to sort it.”

Interestingly, the teens expressed a few notable concerns at the workshop about what their experience would be like guiding younger girls. Some responses included:

- “...that they might not like me or the group or something.”
- “...girls won’t participate and feel excited and grateful for being here.”
- “The younger girls won’t like me.”

Leading up to the young girls’ group, the teens expressed further anxiety that the little girls would hate them and be mean to them. FSAT therapists and the Yoga therapist considered that these feelings could be attributed to the ages at

which the teens' abuse occurred—that their idea of being that age had been skewed because of the trauma. When we reminded the teens after the second session was completed that they had been afraid of the young girls, they couldn't believe they had felt that way. They had grown so close, and felt like the young girls looked up to them in a very special way.

The FSAT therapist provided her observations after the two sessions of Yoga. Her feedback was especially important, as she has worked with many of the girls for several years and continues to work with them. She writes:

The girls progressed tremendously with the Yoga/therapy curriculum. I saw an increase in assertiveness, including the way some of the girls held themselves with better posture and confidence. Ultimately, this will serve as a prevention and protective factor for them in preventing the likelihood of revictimization. One of the 10-year-olds that I work with blossomed in the on-going group. She started to share more of her story and connect better with the other girls in group [therapy].

Many of the teens increased empathy for themselves and developed a more gentle inner voice. I think working as mentors for the younger girls helped them to see how very young and vulnerable they were when the abuse happened to them. I believe the mentor piece helped them alleviate misplaced guilt and blame off of themselves.

Giving the younger girls positive messages helped them to re-parent themselves with those same messages. In order for trauma work to be truly processed at a deeper level, kids have to be able to be present both emotionally and physically. The Yoga helped them to feel more safe in their bodies and more mindful about their environments. Ultimately, they can then be present for the difficult processing to occur.

Principles and Best Practices

The following section of this article provides general strategies and best practices for individuals considering working with child survivors of sexual abuse. These principles are based on the clinical experience of the authors, as well as guidance the authors have received from researchers and other experts in the field of trauma and recovery.

Preparing to Work with Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse

The details of the practice we share with our young participants should be accessible to any experienced Yoga

teacher or therapist, especially when working with a qualified coleader. To implement this kind of work, however, we urge a great deal of preparation. Working with people recovering from sexual abuse presents a number of boundary issues that require self-awareness and strength to address mindfully. Also, working with children or adults recovering from any kind of trauma can retrigger past traumas experienced by the Yoga teacher. A solid grounding in trauma-informed Yoga is encouraged. The Trauma Center in Boston (www.traumacenter.org), along with trainings specific to working with at-risk youth, is a good resource for pursuing this work.

You can also learn about the magnitude of this issue by researching childhood sexual abuse as it applies to your desired client population (e.g., boys, girls, adults, families, parents, siblings, or offenders). Furthermore, as uncomfortable as it may be, it is prudent to read survivor accounts of sexual abuse. This will give you a richer context to support your work. Although counselors and therapists have access to confidential information about each child's abuse, you, as a Yoga service provider, will be outside that circle of privilege. And for good reason: you do not need to know your participants' individual stories. That knowledge is not required to share Yoga effectively; in fact, having even a patchwork of case histories is more likely to be distracting and can subtly lead instructors to teach to specific students' stories or treat individual students differently, rather than sharing equally with all the participants.

With training and awareness of the issues around sexual abuse and trauma recovery, investigate the therapeutic work already going on in your community. Look for opportunities to build a relationship with a sexual abuse treatment and recovery program, ideally the one where you will offer your therapeutic Yoga services.

Anticipate Possible Conflicts

Therapists and counselors with enough Yoga experience and training to implement this program need to be extremely clear about their boundaries with clients and about their potentially ambiguous roles as therapist and/or Yoga instructor. In our experience, the ideal arrangement is one Yoga teacher working alongside one dedicated social worker or child abuse treatment specialist. This allows for clearer distinctions in the roles of the adults holding space for the healing. It also gives a safety net should any triggering events occur during the session.

A second area of possible conflict is when a survivor of abuse wishes to serve young people undergoing their own healing from sexual abuse.

As with any occupation, a substantial number of Yoga teachers, Yoga therapists, and social workers will be sexual abuse survivors themselves, some of whom will be drawn to this work. The experience of having traveled along the healing journey can be an invaluable resource to draw from, but can also cause conflict when the therapist is incomplete in his or her own recovery. Such an instructor must be aware of his or her own needs for continued healing. He or she must be careful not to put his or her own needs above those of the youth. So many of the sexually abused youth have come from broken homes where they had to fill the parental role for neglected younger siblings. They need the therapeutic Yoga time to heal their own wounds, not to support a teacher who is still visibly healing his or her own.

Commit to Ongoing Training and Support

We provide all potential volunteers with a 16-hour practical training that includes extensive role-play activities and teaches population-specific tools for working with at-risk youth. We decide their readiness to teach in the HCSAY program based on experience, referrals, intake interviews, and an extensive criminal history check. We do thorough orientations with the potential Yoga instructor and with the therapists and staff at program sites. We check in with volunteers on a weekly basis and try to meet as a group at least once every two months.

The Street Yoga teachers selected to work with sexually abused youth are among the most experienced and reliable in our network, and we work with them very closely to ensure continued success in the short and long term. For example, two of our core HCSAY team members recently attended a conference for providers of services for youth sexual offenders, to ensure continued refinement of our work.

Consider Potential Risks

The risks of sharing Yoga with vulnerable young people falls into two realms: risk to the youth and risk to the instructing Yoga teacher. It is important to consider these risks carefully and plan to reduce risk whenever possible.

Participant Risk

Sexual abuse is a deeply traumatic experience. Victims rarely have the chance to fight back or flee the abuser. Many resort to dissociation (mentally leaving the experience) or “freeze” behaviors to endure the actual violation. They may also live in a state of alert hypervigilance and fear, anticipating future abuse and preparing to defend themselves from threats. Individuals often find they swing dramatically between the extremes of being hyperaware

and hyperaroused and being dissociated or “checked-out.” These two states are the nervous system’s attempt to deal with the threat of the trauma, by either preparing the person to fight or flee (the hyperaware state) or to freeze (the dissociative state).

Significant trauma, either sudden and immediate or chronic and insidious, can alter the default state and sensitivity of the brain and nervous system. Strong emotions, physical sensations associated with the trauma, or feelings of uncertainty or unsafety can all produce both a dissociative response and defensive fear response. In the field of sexual abuse survivorship and recovery, this is known as *triggering*.

Survivors of sexual trauma often experience a fusion of physiological experiences. The physiological responses that

General Safety Guidelines

Consider these guidelines for supporting the goal of creating a safe space for healing:

- Participants tend to do better with guided meditation than with silence; silence can increase anxiety.
- Students should never feel pressured to close their eyes during relaxation, breathing exercises, or movement.
- We are mindful to not turn the lights out completely. Most of our participants report high fear of the dark.
- Absolutely avoid physical adjustments unless the student is at serious risk of injury. Instead, use modeling and verbal adjustments.
- We don’t bring unannounced guest visitors or observers to the class. These kids need predictability and a say in who is present.
- We strongly encourage everyone in the room (including visitors invited by the students) to participate.
- Wear conservative, nonrevealing clothing. Participants may be triggered by clothes that are more revealing.
- The youth should always be given a choice about being photographed for any reason. Many of our children were photographed as part of the sexual abuse, so that can be a trigger in itself. We carefully explain why we take pictures and that it is always their choice.
- The gender of the clinical therapists and Yoga teachers requires discerning consideration. A male teacher with a female group may be triggering, but with the right instructor, it could also be therapeutic.

occurred during a traumatic experience (increased heart rate, rapid breathing, sweating, butterflies in the stomach) are similar to those of fear, excitement, or nervousness. In many cases, situations that evoke fear or excitement (watching a scary movie, preparing for a test or event) trigger the survivor into a flashback, or a reexperiencing of the event. Triggering can also occur when a nontraumatic event is interpreted by the brain and nervous system as threatening—for example, smelling the same cologne on a passerby in the street that a rapist used. This sensory input “triggers” the brain to flood the body with stress hormones, just as if the trauma was occurring right then.

Triggering—both avoiding it when possible and knowing how to handle it when it happens—is a key concern for both survivors of sexual abuse and those who work with them. For people recovering from sexual abuse, Yoga can

bring to the surface fears, pain, and memories that have been long buried as a matter of survival. A Yoga practice that does not create a sufficient sense of safety risks pushing participants into posttraumatic states of extreme anxiety, hypervigilance, or dissociation. Yoga taught in a careless way can provoke experiences that are too strong for the young person to handle, risk retraumatizing them, and push them away from Yoga and its natural healing powers.

Triggering can occur during a Yoga practice when the instructor brings attention and energy to a specific part of the body, or when she or he has people lie on their backs or in another vulnerable position, or simply when certain words are spoken. The Yoga instructor, treatment specialist, and the youth all need to be aware of the possibility of triggering and develop safe ways for moving through its aftermath. With stringent preparation, both internally for the Yoga teacher

Strategies for Preventing and Responding to Triggering

Prevention

It is important for the Yoga instructor to be mindful that any pose can be triggering for trauma victims. Because survivors are often caught off-guard by triggers or body memories, it is difficult to prevent trauma memories by simply avoiding poses. However, some practices and postures may be more likely to trigger participants and can be avoided or introduced mindfully over time.

- Avoid breathing exercises that require students to hold their breath or require very rapid, exaggerated breath (e.g., breath of fire). You might want to offer these exercises as an option after many months of simpler breathwork.
- Delay teaching poses done on hands and knees, or with the pelvis raised in the air, (e.g., cat/cow and downward facing dog) until you feel the group has established an internal sense of safety. When you decide to share these poses, make sure to avoid walking around the room in a way that would put you behind the students’ hips (e.g., if the group is in a circle, make sure to walk around and offer help inside of the circle instead of outside the circle). This is also the case with any forward bend.
- Be sensitive to poses that put students on their backs. Offer poses like bridge, knees-to-chest, and plow with discretion. Especially avoid any pose where students lie on their backs with legs spread (e.g., happy baby pose/ dead bug pose, reclined butterfly).
- Poses that focus on the pelvic area should be delayed, possibly for many months, as should heart-opening sequences.

Responding to Triggering

It is important for the teacher and/or therapist to be able to recognize when people are triggered and have tools available to help them through this. For example, a child triggered by a downward dog pose may need to stand up and move around, or go into a secure child’s pose. Offering choices to participants can be immensely empowering.

Based on the work of Peter Levine, Pat Ogden, and others,¹¹⁻¹³ we have found three interventions can be helpful to deal with a triggered situation:

- *Grounding.* Literally have the students get close to the ground and use their hands to feel the solidness underneath them.
- *Orienting.* Help them remember where they are at the present moment and that the present moment is safe.
- *Resourcing.* Have the students draw upon emotional resources of strength and safety (e.g., a favorite song lyric or thoughts of a safe place). These can be developed beforehand for all participants, to be used in the case of triggering.

and externally for class content and structure, it is not difficult to avoid the poses that are most likely to be triggering.

Our work is grounded in the *mantra* “Safety First.” Nothing else is possible or desirable in the Yoga practice for the youth unless they feel totally safe. The most important mindset is to create safety by progressing slowly and mindfully. We have learned that in healing from sexual trauma, there is a small “window of tolerance” between the fight/flee (hyperarousal) and freeze (hypoarousal) feeling-states where healing can happen. The process of becoming aware of physiological experience through Yoga and mindfulness widens this window and provides an opportunity for healing unique to each individual.

Therapist Risk

Two risks, at least, present themselves to the therapist: one, that she or he will be triggered from past personal traumas by proximity with those recently victimized; and, two, that she or he will endure a secondary traumatic reaction, that is, will internalize and personalize the pain of others’ abuse to the point where it harms quality of life, work, and family relationships.

To counter this, all prospective Yoga instructors must approach the work with the highest sense of personal clarity and the strongest professional and emotional boundaries. This not only protects the Yoga teacher but also models strong self-care skills, which is very beneficial for the youth to witness.

Concluding Remarks

Sharing Yoga with young people recovering from sexual abuse has been one of the most satisfying avenues of Yoga service the authors have been fortunate to experience. The boys and girls show such a bruised beauty that when the practice begins, it’s hard to tell how they will respond. But when the sessions start, and they begin to feel safe, truly safe, both inside and out, you can feel the power of Yoga. The Healing Childhood Sexual Abuse with Yoga program works because it addresses the broad and complex nature of

sexual abuse trauma. It allows the youth to live at peace in their own bodies, sometimes for the first time in their lives. As the youth learn from us, we in turn learn from them, about resilience, hope, and what it means to trust oneself and one another.

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