

Healing Emotional Trauma with Yoga



Lord Siva

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1. Definition of Trauma

Emotional trauma is a condition in which there is a severe body/mind separation caused by a stress situation bigger than the personality's capacity to handle. The body, in order to protect itself, instinctively shuts down, resulting in dissociation from physical and emotional sensations, and the resulting energy is subverted into the bodymind matrix.

2. Condition at the Level of all Five Koshas:

1. Annamayakosha: Emotional trauma results in an extreme physical stress response that over time becomes a chronic stress response with occasional exacerbations where symptoms resemble the more acute trauma phase. Separation occurs when the stress is so overwhelming that communication between the Annamayakosha and the Manomayakosha shuts down in the service of self preservation.

(a) *Circulatory System*: The stress response initiates a process of cardiac system overload that eventually results in imbalance, breakdown, and destruction of the circulatory system. Due to the chemicals in the body (adrenaline and corticosteroids), the heart rate increases and peripheral vasculature constricts which results in hypertension as the workload resistance of the heart increases. The increased workload eventually results in weakened cardiac muscle and congestive heart failure.

(b) *Respiratory System*: Normal respiratory patterns can become disturbed by the sympathetic nervous system's over-stimulation resulting in breathing becoming more rapid, shallow, and mostly upper chest in nature. This pattern of breathing can result in anxiety attacks as well as decreased oxygen saturation for the cardiac muscle and other body tissues, throwing the body into an acid-base imbalance. This further stresses the body resulting in increasing the overall stress response.

(c) *Immune System*: In conjunction with the stress response, the immune system de-regulates creating over time an increased vulnerability to infectious disease. Immune system dysfunction secondary to stress has been associated with all manner of autoimmune diseases, co-morbidities and mortality.

(d) *Digestive System*: During the acute stress phase, blood gets diverted from the digestive organs resulting in digestion shutting

down. This disruption in the digestive process results in imbalances in appetite, digestion, absorption of nutrients, elimination, fluid regulation, and further impacts the overall acid-base balance of the body. As the stress response moves into a chronic disorder, diseases of the digestive system frequently result, including ulcers, colitis, irritable bowel syndrome, Crohn's disease, esophageal reflux, and chronic malabsorption issues.

(e) *Nervous System:* The sympathetic nervous system is over-stimulated during the initial trauma and becomes quickly (generally one trial learning) conditioned to respond in the same manner to stimuli associated with the original trauma. Chronic over-activation of the sympathetic nervous system results in neural cell degeneration and over all cortical atrophy, de-regulation of attention and concentration, memory impairment (sometimes including amnesia for the initial event), increased startle responses, sleep disorders, recurrent vivid nightmares, and in some cases the development of pseudoseizures.

2. Pranamayakosha: Imbalances in the energy body occur during the initial emotional stress response due to the disruption of the major vehicles for prana to enter the body. Breath is the main vehicle for prana and as the respiratory system de-regulates, the ability of prana to enter, be absorbed, and circulated through the vayus is limited. As the stress response becomes more chronic in nature, its effects on the heart, circulatory and digestive systems, further disrupts the flow of life energy in the body. Because the flow of energy becomes uneven in distribution, there may be areas of the body that receive too little prana while others may experience an overload. As a result, fatigue, lethargy, anxiety and depression are common.

3. Manomayakosha: During the acute phase of the stress response, the Manomayakosha separates from the Annamayakosha due to the overwhelming nature of the trauma. When this separation occurs, the flow of the Pranamayakosha is disrupted resulting in traumatic energy becoming stuck in the Annamayakosha and the Manomayakosha. Over time this results in anxiety / panic attacks, depression, depersonalization, amnesia for the traumatic event, and a generalized dissociation disorder.

4. Vijnyanamayakosha: During the acute trauma, the Vijnyanamayakosha serves as the witness of the trauma. Because the flow of prana is disrupted,

the balance of the Vijnyanamayakosha remains undisturbed. The witness function of the Vijnyanamayakosha is what frequently gets expressed as reports from the trauma survivor of watching what is happening to them as though it were happening to someone else.

5. Anandamayakosha: Because of the disruption in the other koshas and in the pranic flow, the Anandamayakosha is not accessible to consciousness. Only over time as the disruption is corrected and the pranic flow is re-established can the Anandamayakosha be glimpsed, encountered, and eventually re-entered.

Our yoga class will assist in restoring balance to all the energetic systems through the use of asana and pranayama which stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system and help to decrease the input from the sympathetic nervous system. Specific asana and pranayama practices will also be utilized to open up energy channels, increase the flow of energy through out the koshas and remove blockages and imbalances in the pranic systems. Meditation will assist students in entering the place of the witness where they can develop a safe place to work from when processing traumatic material. Relaxation techniques will be used to teach ways of evoking a parasympathetic response that can be easily learned and practiced outside of class.

3. Chakra Relationships

First Chakra: Fear, loss of safety and security, living outside the body - dissociation, thinking mind takes over. Focus on grounding, creating safety, create awareness of the body to allow them to live in the body. Relates to feet and legs, element is earth.

Second Chakra: Loss of feeling in the body, emotional 'numbness' fear of intimacy, obsessive tendencies, guilt. Balance by focusing on flowing movement, expressing and feeling the emotions, nurturing and doing what feels good for the body. Relates to the pelvic area, element is water.

Third Chakra: Self esteem, energy levels, will and shame. Balance with vigorous practice, abdominal strengthening, deep relaxation and

developing stress awareness. Needs grounding and emotional contact. Relates to stomach, digestive system and metabolism. Element is fire.

Fourth Chakra: Self acceptance, grief, compassion, betrayal. Balance with journaling, breathwork, working with the arms to experience reaching out and taking in. If emotions arise allow them to move and release. Relates to the lungs, heart, upper back, ribs, shoulders, hands and arms. The element is air.

Fifth Chakra: Speaking your truth, speech and verbal expression, communication. Balanced by chanting, singing, artistic expression and loosening of the neck and shoulders.

Sixth Chakra: Illusion/intuition/fantasizing. Can be related to nightmares, obsessions and ability/inability to dedicate to a spiritual path. Balance using guided visualizations and meditation. Element is light and air. Relates to the third eye.

Seventh Chakra: Spiritual separation, vision, belief systems. Balance through increasing awareness, re-establishing physical, emotional and spiritual connection and meditation. Relates to the brain and nervous system. Element is space.

4. Ayurvedic Indications

As each individual is a combination of Doshas, these indications must be taken in a very general sense. The Kapha individual will likely respond to trauma by going into a depressive state. They will likely respond best to the practices which are heating and energizing, moving the energy compressed and trapped in the body. The pitta individual will be more apt to deal with trauma with anger - possibly repressed anger. There may be a sense of 'boiling' - an explosion ready to go off. Because the pitta is action oriented they may be more likely to resort to action in the case of a trauma, resulting in a lesser long term effect (Waking Tigers - Levine). The pitta will respond well to practices that are very grounding, cooling and restorative. Cooling breaths will be key to taking them out of an agitated state. The vatta individual is more likely to respond to a trauma situation with dissociation - from the event and from the body. The emphasis with vatta would be to

create an environment that is grounded and safe and to gently bring the person back into the body and explore their relationship to it.

5. Objectives of the Program

The objective of the program is to assist the participants in accessing themselves at the level of all five koshas. In doing so we hope that they gain a better understanding of their relationship to their body, mind and emotions and that they emerge better equipped to deal with both their past trauma and their daily lives.

6. Group Demographic

Our group is made up of adults who are psychiatrist or psychologist referred and have a history of trauma. The group will contain both male and female participants. They have little or no experience in Yoga but are participating willingly as they have been advised by their therapist that this program would be beneficial to them.

Healing Emotional Trauma Eight Week Class Outline

- 1. Creating Safety, Understanding Your Body and the Stress Response*
The focus of the first class will be grounding and understanding the stress response. Through exercises we will set up an environment of trust and safety.
- 2. Body Awareness, Reclaiming your Body*
This class will be spent primarily in Yoga postures, slow movement with awareness of breath will keep the students focus in the body.
- 3. Empowerment*
A strong physical class to engage the student in feeling strong and centred.
- 4. Breath - Integrating Breath and Movement*
In this class we will focus on the power of breath to open the heart centre, release stress and deepen the experience of yoga postures
- 5. Speaking our Truth - healing and releasing through sound*
In this class students will have the opportunity to work with sound to release stress and discover their inner voice.

6. Staying Present - developing the witness

A more introspective class, students will be introduced to the idea of the witness, and use of the witness to assist them in dealing in stressful situations. Some longer holdings, followed by guided meditation will be featured.

7. Establishing Connection -

Connecting movement, breath, softness and strength with deep meditative awareness.

8. Yoga off the Mat - developing your own practise

An integrating practise followed by an informal reception. Handouts, herbal tea and companionship to wrap up the series.

7. Wellness Factors:

Prannayama - Prannayama is key to relaxation and accessing the emotional body. In trauma, a heightened long term stress response is adopted, the breath is key to unlocking this chronic tightness. Durgha prannayama will be taught to 're-teach' the body how to breathe and to access the diaphragm, thereby turning on the parasympathetic response. Nadir Shodhana will be taught to balance the system and introduce the idea of nasal dominance and it's role in the stress response. Finally a light Ujyai will activate the throat chakra and assist the student in monitoring the breath through the sound element.

Visualization / Guided Visual Imagery:

(a) Creating a Safe Place: This particular imagery involves having the student visualize a place where they feel safe. It can either be a familiar place that they have been to before, or it can be totally fictional. The idea is that if a student can learn to visualize a safe place they can increase their feelings of safety and decrease their feelings of anxiety and decrease their chronic sympathetic arousal.

(b) Growing Roots into the Ground: Here the students image themselves as standing on the Earth and growing roots deep into the ground that nourish them and connect them to all living things. The idea is to increase feelings of grounding and support as well as suggesting ways of nourishing the self. This is particularly useful for teaching students ways of coping with feelings of dissociation and depersonalization that may arise for them.

Mudras - Mudras provide a direct experience of energy. They have specific energetic effects and can be chosen to enhance the other practises of Yoga. We have chosen three mudras for their specific effects.

1. Adhi Mudra - soothes and calms the nervous system. Curl the fingers around the thumbs forming a soft fist with the thumbs held inside. Hands rest on the thighs or knees.
2. Merudanda Mudra - energizes and strengthens the solar plexis area and warms the entire body. Straighten the thumbs and curl the fingers into the palms of the hands maintaining a gentle pressure of the fingernails into the palms. Rest hands on the thighs with thumbs pointing upwards.
3. Vaikhara Mudra - provides a sense of protection, courage and instills confidence. Forearms are crossed in front of the chest and the fists held against the body.

Asanas - Asanas are fundamental to the program as the body is the vehicle for the emotions and the residue of emotional trauma. Focus of the postures will start with grounding and proceed to sensing sensation in the pelvic area, and move up to opening of the heart.

8. Marketing

Our marketing efforts will be directed primarily to professionals in the mental health field as we feel it is imperative that participants have professional support as they move through this process. An article will also be submitted to the state mental health newsletter to raise awareness of Yoga's benefits in healing trauma (article attached).

9. Resources

Waking Tigers - Healing Emotional Trauma by Peter Levine
Robin Perkins Ph.D., Licensed Clinical Psychologist
Joseph Lepage, MA, Director, Integrative Yoga Therapy
Scott Blossom, Doctor of Oriental Medicine.

10. Intake Form

In addition to the information on the IYT standard intake form, we would request the following information:

1. Release from therapist
2. History of Trauma, therapy
3. Goals and expectations
3. Concerns regarding class
4. Are there any challenges you anticipate, and how can we support you in this class

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Class Outline: Body Awareness, Reclaiming Your Body – Class 2

1. Intake: Formal intake has been completed prior to the first class
Informal greeting of each participant as they arrive.
Checking in with students re energy levels etc.

2. Breath Awareness:

Lying on back to create sense of grounding and feeling throughout the back body. Three part breath, followed by pelvic lifts and tilts. - This exercise will bring the student into breath and body awareness while maintaining grounding and increasing parasympathetic response.

3. Warm ups and postures:

Leg and hip warm ups using strap for stability. - This exercise will take the students attention into the lower energy centres, open the hips and stretch and strengthen the legs and create further grounding.

Fish with Strap - This support fish is a gentle backbend and will incorporate the shoulders and upper back more fully

Spinal Rocking - This exercise is primal and soothing and opens and massages the spinal column and spinal nerves.

Rock to Squatt - Grounding, stretches out the lower back, further opening of the hips.

Table - Cat and Dog - spinal warm up, in the crawling stance - natural movement from child to upright standing position. Also cross crawl of leg and hip.

Child Pose - relaxation and parasympathetic response

Rolling up SLOWLY to standing

3a: Tadasana - Half Moon, Clock breath, Goddess, Hara Kumbhaka

All of the standing postures and breathing exercises will focus on grounding and sensing the ebb and flow of the breath in the body.

Balancing: Eagle, and tree to emphasise the experience of contraction and expansion in the pelvic area.

Hero 2: Strengthening the legs and opening the heart, getting a sense of being strong, courageous and soft in safety.

Wide angle forward fold to quadraped back into child.

Extended child to prone position

Extend alternate leg and arm, gentle locust warm-ups.

Roll over onto the back, knees to chest, gentle rocking and come into savasana.

Relaxation: Tension release, with visualization of water cleansing out the negative and the tension and leaves behind a sense of lightness, relaxation and vitality in the body and mind.

Bring students out of relaxation and in sitting position lead through the Hasta Mudras, finish with Bhairava Mudra to Anjali mudra to finish.