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Yoga for Stress Management and Trauma:
Working with TAY with Co-Occurring Mental
Health and Developmental Disabilities

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What is Yoga?

“A combination of physical forms, focused breathing, and purposeful attention or mindfulness” taken from Jennifer West’s foreword in Trauma-Sensitive Yoga in Therapy by David Emerson

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Many forms of asana practice

- Hatha – general term used for physical yoga practice. Includes many styles such as Anusara, Kundalini, Ashtanga, Gentle, Power yoga, Bikram, Iyengar, Jivamukti, Vinyasa Flow, Yin Yoga, Restorative, etc...
- Typical yoga class in a studio is usually 90 minutes and may include props like a blanket, block or strap, physical assists, teacher moving around the class, partner work, may be music or chanting

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- Research indicates that yoga can be helpful in addressing mental health symptoms and increasing ability to manage stress effectively (Brussing et al, 2012; Lavey et al, 2005; Shapiro et al, 2007) but very little research specifically on yoga with populations with developmental disabilities. This is an area that needs to be explored.



At CHLA Division of Young Adult and Adolescent Medicine, we are using Trauma Sensitive Yoga based yoga interventions as adjunctive treatment for TAY with promising clinical / observational results.



What is Trauma?

- Involves a situation in which we are powerless to respond – our normal fight / flight / freeze response fails to protect us. We are overpowered.
- Used to be thought of as disease of the mind, of the past but trauma is a problem of the present and both the mind / body.

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Trauma cont...

- Can effect nervous system function and can trigger problems with subcortical brain response / emergency response
- Chronic, complex trauma can cause adaptive responses (fight / flight / freeze in response to threat) to become chronic and non-adaptive (non crisis situation triggers trauma response)

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Trauma can leave us feeling disconnected from our own bodies

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We need treatments that work with both body and mind so that in the midst of stress or trauma responses, people can use their body responses to manage symptoms / calm down enough so that they can access logical brain and then use coping skills learned in therapy.

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What is Trauma Sensitive Yoga?

Developed out of the Yoga Center at Trauma Center at JRI by David Emerson and Bessel van der Kolk to use as adjunct to traditional therapy. Started 2003 and has been evolving ever since.

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- All TSY participants should have individual therapist
- Yoga teacher and therapist work together closely
- Very different than typical yoga
- Used in residential settings for youth, in clinic settings with adults with PTSD, with veterans diagnosed with PTSD.

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Goal of TSY with Youth

- Increase ability to experience emotions safely in present moment
- Increase ability to regulate arousal levels using body awareness and breath
- Gain sense of safety and comfort within one's body

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6 Themes of TSY

- Present moment experience
- Practice making choices
- Taking effective action
- Creating rhythms
- Spatial orientation
- Sensing Dynamics

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TSY promotes awareness, agency, safety in the body/mind: I can be in my body safely. I can make choices based on what I feel in my body. If I start to feel out of control, I can use my breath and my body as a resource. I am in the driver's seat.

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Some ways that TSY differs from regular yoga

- Invitational Language
- Concrete and body based vs abstract / cognitive focus
- Support's choice versus doing the "right" form or what teacher tells them.
- Teacher is safe, predictable, consistent
- No straps, lighting doesn't change, consistent physical environment, private room, no mirrors, fewer participants /more space

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Cont...

- Consistent pattern to class – beginning, middle, end always the same.
- Minimal alignment cues
- Lots of options for savasana, shorter savasana
- Eyes can be open or closed
- Slower paced class
- Lots of countdowns so people know what to expect and can modify accordingly
- No physical assists ever

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TSY / TAY / ID and DD

- Everyone can benefit from improved stress management – trauma or not
- Body based coping – not dependent on specific verbal or cognitive abilities
- Focus on agency and choice
- Develop community
- Inclusive setting – easy to modify for various levels of ability
- Not behavioral treatment
- Great for youth with sensory issues

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Research

- Trauma Center - Pilot study: n=16 women btwn 25 – 55 randomly assigned to TSY or DBT. After 8 wks, yoga group had greater reduction in frequency of PTSD sx's, increase in positive affect / decrease negative affect, increase in physical vitality and body attunement. Findings non-significant, probably due to small sample size but point in positive direction (Emerson, Sharma, Chaudhry, Turner 2009)

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More research

Application of Yoga in Residential Treatment of Traumatized Youth: Clinical observation and anecdotal data indicate that TSY with youth may improve self regulation, body awareness, symptom management and sense of agency (Spinazzola, Rhodes, Emerson, Earle and Monroe, 2011)

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Yoga as an Adjunctive Treatment for PTSD: A Randomized Controlled Trial – Trauma Center Study

- TSY vs group therapy control for 64 women w PTSD. 52% of participants in the Yoga Group no longer met criteria for PTSD compared to 21% in the Control Group. Statistically significant decreases in affect dysregulation and increases in tension reduction were also reported by the Yoga Group (van der Kolk et al, 2014)

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Responses from Youth

- “I’m mad” example
- Increased body awareness
- Tears in class
- Grandpa’s feedback
- Teaching yoga to family at home, using breath when mad at school, etc.
- Observational gains, clinical gains
- Decreased Pain sxs

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“Yoga helps me feel relaxed and good. I actually went out and got a yoga DVD and did it at home. I got really emotional after practice because I felt good and I usually don’t feel like that.”

“My goals were to get in touch with myself and find peace. It’s really hard but yoga helps. I do yoga and feel relaxed.”

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Case Example

Mary is a 16 yo girl who has been diagnosed with Mild ID, ASD and Anxiety D/O NOS. She attends a local high school, where she goes to a mix of special education and general ed classes. She was referred to yoga by her individual therapist bc she complains of being “stressed out” all the time, worries a lot about school and friends, has had difficulty sleeping and shuts down completely when upset. Mary was removed from her mother’s care by DCFS due to neglect and abuse (mom has untreated schizophrenia) but is now safe and stable, living with her aunt who is very supportive.

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Resources

- Trauma Center Website: www.traumacenter.org
- NCTSN website: www.nctsn.org
- Overcoming Trauma Through Yoga: Reclaiming Your Body by Emerson & Hopper
- Trauma-Sensitive Yoga in Therapy - Bringing the Body Into Treatment by Emerson
- NCTSN Guide: The Road to Recovery: Supporting Children with IDD Who Have Experienced Trauma

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