

Yoga in a Post-traumatic World

*More is now known about the benefits of yoga in the treatment and prevention of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). To celebrate the United Nations World Day of Yoga (21 June) a group of yoga teachers and therapists, including STARTTS counsellor **DOMINICA DORNING**, discussed their experiences using yoga to overcome trauma.*

Thank you very much everybody for coming along to the Yoga in a Post-Traumatic World debate. We have got an amazing panel for this inaugural United Nations World Day of Yoga.

It is very hard to avoid trauma. Perhaps trauma starts before birth. It is also very hard to avoid vicarious trauma because we read about it and see it all the time. A lot of us in the yoga world make the choice for a moment not to look at newspapers, magazines, or watch TV for just this reason. We feel that by avoiding the media we can get on with our own lives and develop our body, mind and spirit in the way we need to. How can yoga be used to avoid and deal with trauma?

Yoga prepares us all to be of service, and to truly be of service, we need to know how to work with trauma as it moves through our body, so that it does not affect us and stop us from being useful to the world around us and to ourselves. So I am just going to slowly introduce this panel of wonderful people here. Fernando Charnis is a yoga teacher at Bendy Awareness.

Fernando Charnis: I work in a correctional centre where there is an assistance program for people who were addicted to drugs and committed crimes to get more drugs. This special program aims to help them manage their own problems and be reintegrated into society. Yoga is not perceived as something useful to be taught in jails, so there is no budget for it.

I go there every week just for the satisfaction of being with these guys. When they finish they are the most grateful of all the students. So I hope that I am making a difference to their lives as well.

Cate Peterson: The problem is that two years ago it hit the news that yoga was being taught in some jails and they had to formulate a national policy to stop teaching it in jails.

Now, Dominica teaches at STARTTS to refugees who have experienced trauma and torture.

Dominica Dorning: I am a clinical psychologist and a yoga teacher and, as Cate said, I work at STARTTS as a therapist, so my main role is to conduct one-on-one counselling sessions with asylum seeker and refugee clients. Just recently in the last five to six weeks, we have started a group yoga program with Tibetan refugees in Dee Why. We are up to about week four and it is going really well. I have a discussion with them and provide information about the impacts of trauma on the body and the brain and then do another 45 minutes of physical practice that complements what we have discussed. The feedback is really good so far

and everyone seems to be enjoying it. It enables us to provide a service to a larger group of people. I feel really lucky to be here and do that with my work.

Cate Peterson: How easy was it for you to get the program started and get it through the people who have to make decisions? Was it a no-brainer that they would accept teaching yoga?

Dominica Dorning: Yes, it was. We are very lucky at STARTTS. We work with a biopsychosocial model of care. So we are open to treating all those different elements. We have staff members who work with the body and the arousal system and massage therapists, ortho-bionomists, acupuncturists, nutritionists, and so yoga was just I guess a natural progression of those kinds of things.

The hardest part for me was finding the time to develop the program and still see my individual clients and uphold that part of my role. But we are hoping just by starting slowly, we will get some good outcomes and hopefully, have a bit more of a reason to make it broader and have it for more than just one group going at a time.

Cate Peterson: You are working with Tibetan refugees as a specific group. Are you separating it by nationality?

Dominica Dorning: This is a 10 week, closed-group project just to get some data on how it is working. Logistically, it is easier to do it with a single language group. So we are using an interpreter, which is interesting. If we were to do that with two or three languages in the room it would probably be challenging.

The Tibetans are a beautiful group. They have such a rich history of meditation and some have practised yoga in India whilst waiting to come to Australia so they are open to the idea. It has been a nice place to start.

Cate Peterson: The third person in our panel is Rob Ginnivan. Rob works with people who have come back from war zones. How long have you been doing that now?

Rob Ginnivan: I am the national mindfulness coach, yoga and meditation teacher for Soldier On, a program that it is starting to make an impact in the community. It is aimed at reintegrating our wounded soldiers and contemporary war veterans back into the community. Many have done a number of tours of duty and are back. A lot of them are psychologically injured.

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There are between 3,000 and 7,000 out there. But many have not come forward to get help. We say to them please do come out and get assistance because it is okay to do so. I am co-authoring a book with one of our wounded warriors, Todd Berry. He is our poster boy for Soldier On and he is now a public speaker. John Ogilvy from Byron Yoga Centre and myself are sending Todd on a scholarship to do the yoga teacher training in Bali. We have empowered them to spread the word about the benefits of yoga and help others.

PTSD in my view continues to affect people beyond the military. Wounded Warrior by name is not limited to people that fought in the war. There are also photographers, journalists, supporters, sappers, engineers, people that support the military and they too experience trauma. Yoga is really helpful in getting them back on track, and I have been working with some people that were suicidal but are now reintegrating back into the community. We just need to spread the word more.

I have done mindfulness teaching for the Royal Commission for Child Sexual Abuse because they suffer from post-traumatic stress and my work is starting to become even broader than that.

Cate Peterson: Shirley Hicks is an expert on PTSD. She is a psychotherapist and yoga teacher.

Shirley Hicks: I am a somatic psychotherapist and I have been working with clients for about 20 years mainly in trauma recovery. They may present with an eating disorder, drug and alcohol addiction, gambling, chronic depression, anxiety, but underneath that, is either some form of complex trauma, as a result of child abuse, developmental trauma, or the more widely understood PTSD.

So my basic role is to help people find their bodies again because they are absolutely disembodied and if we can help our clients find their bodies then they will be able to navigate the world.

Some colleagues of mine and I went to the States and did a yoga program with Bessel van der Kolk, who was one of the lead psychiatrists who actually coined the term PTSD way back in the 1960s. They have developed a yoga program backed by research. They have just released a paper with the results of a research project where they surveyed women who were experiencing PTSD and were highly dissociative, unable to manage emotions at all. After 10 weeks of trauma-aware yoga, 50 percent of those clients no longer show any PTSD symptoms. So it is quite amazing work.

I am also here today representing Trauma Sensitive Yoga Australia, where we run programs for both yoga teachers and mental health clinicians, to make them aware yoga is one of the areas that is sadly missing in the treatment of trauma.

Cate Peterson: Atira Tan has been involved in the organisation she founded in 2004 Art2Healing, working with women and children who have been sexually trafficked throughout South East Asia

Atira Tan: I work with women, children and young people who have been sold into the sex slavery industry in Asia and the Pacific. We work in South Asia, India, Nepal, South-East Asia, and in Australia, with the indigenous population in the Northern Territory. I work with child sexual abuse survivors, women and girls who have been sold at a very young age. The youngest I have worked with in Cambodia was sold when she was 18 months old.

When Shirley talked about healing and trauma recovery being connected to the body, she hits it on the nail. When something painful happens to your body through sexual abuse, you immediately disassociate and disconnect from your body because that experience is too painful.

Yoga and body-based therapies are very important to reconnect our minds and our presence back to our bodies, in a healthy and safe way, in a way that maybe gives us pleasure again.

Because the body and the mind are two parts of the same coin, so it is really imperative that we start this conversation about yoga with trauma.

I work as an expressive arts therapist and a yoga teacher. I am very passionate about somatic experiencing and about the intelligence of the body as a tool that we can use in healing. So I am very passionate about spreading that message and what I have learnt from the women I work with, as well the ways they have reclaimed their sense of power and strength through their body.

Cate Peterson: What yoga actually means is to yoke our body, our mind and our spirit together. So I am really interested to know how it looks to you guys when you see somebody come back into a state of being yoked. When they come back into their bodies and are present. I want to question whether you agree with the statement of the Dalai Lama who said, “We are not human doings, we are human beings”.

So how do we move back into a state of full presence and full being? To the place where perhaps happiness is to be found? Would anybody like to talk to that?

Rob Ginnivan: As you mentioned Dr Bessel van der Kolk has written a great book called *The Body Keeps the Score* and it is so true. And certainly the people I work with experience more psychological injuries than physical ones. I speak about feeling freedom in the body, just by moving it in certain ways, down one side, down in the legs, in the hips. And “freedom” is a word that I know people want to hear because they are not free, especially in relation to what goes on inside their minds.

Then I start talking about the link between the mind and the body. I do not use any bells or chimes or omming. It is not science, just moving the body around can still the mind, which can help with what is going on with the body. That is how we introduce yoga to ex-soldiers.

Cate Peterson: In yoga we always come from the mind into the body and from the body into the mind, and what you are saying is that the body has been lacking in what we do with people who have been through trauma. So what part of the yoga helps people come back into their body and into their mind?

Shirley Hicks: This might be heretical to say, but it is not so much about what type of yoga but the context and the intention in which yoga is delivered. That is the most important part of the work - when

clients feel safe and feel they have the choice to do what they wish with their bodies. But people who are recovering from trauma, they have no capacity to remove themselves from their past, from the hell they experience in their body.

So we try to bring them back into a present moment body. It does not matter whether you are doing Ashtanga, Iyengar, Hatha, Dru, or whatever it is, the yoga style is not what it is about. It is more probably about the empathic resonance of the teacher to the client’s needs and for the client to discover their body.

And when Cate asked what do you witness? It is quite amazing to see people’s bodies awakening and moving again. I am not really that interested in the mind because the mind is just trying to find a story to explain the body’s experience.

So I just help them to experience the body. The mind will catch up soon and will create a more supportive and empowering story for the body.

Cate Peterson: That is a really fascinating perspective. In my own practice and my own personal life, when I have been through a traumatic moment, it is by doing the physical work that I feel better, rather than by talking about the experience. And that is a fairly contentious statement also.

Shirley Hicks: I think the physical stops the trauma. We all have traumatic events, but it is only trauma when the body gets locked in a past experience and does not realise that the body is now in a new experience.

When people are traumatised they often never had a choice. So if we can physically move when we are experiencing anxiety or stress in our lives, then we sort of trauma proof ourselves. Those who never had the chance to do so, we must provide them with that choice consistently, over a period of time, so that their bodies start to wake up again.

Dominica Dorning: I think the most important part of yoga is using the breathing. I think, similar to what Shirley was saying, it does not matter what type of movement, what type of yoga, what the intervention is. The science is there, when we lengthen the exhaled breath we activate the parasympathetic nervous system which is the part of our body that turns off the stress response.

I am working with clients from places like Iraq, Afghanistan, Tibet, Burma, Iran, Sri Lanka, countries that have been in conflict for a long period of time.

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So people have not just lived through one single incident trauma but their nervous systems have been running in a fight-or-flight response their whole lives. So they are affected in a way that none of us ever have.

So our nervous system is ok in most of us. When it is activated by some kind of threat we can get it back to normal pretty quickly. Whereas many people we work with, their minds are really agitated. So a lot of the breath work really helps to regulate it and calm down and make the body more of a safer place enabling them to function and be part of the world.

It is interesting, in my master’s degree we learned a bit about using the breath in a Cognitive Behaviour Therapy focused course. I was young and I thought It did not make any sense. It was not until I started practising yoga and copied what my yoga teacher was doing in a class with my clients, in one-to-one therapy, that it started to make sense to me and I felt confident to do it and then the people I was doing it with obviously realised that it was beneficial to them as well.

Cate Peterson: Can it really be that simple? Does it just come down to lengthening the exhale and it works? I am wondering what your experience is of teaching classes.

Fernando Charnis: I agree with a lot of what has been said here. With my yoga students, the question for them is, how did they get into drugs and become an addict?

When working with them I just focus on the moment, on how they move. I start by reconnecting with the body because that is what they feel, that is what we can connect with more easily. The mind is there somewhere. We are not even aware of it. By the end of the class, by their movements and synchronising their breathing with their movement, that is when they start to realise that they have thoughts and then they come into the moment.

Atira Tan: I know when I lived in India I used to go to the Himalayas with the monks who did their yoga practice there. It was very romantic. But their practice was not about getting into poses, but about elongating the breath as much as possible.

I was in awe looking at them. They could breathe just one sun salutation; just that would take three minutes because they knew that the state of mind was connected to their breath. So this is one of the core practices in the yoga that I teach in the shelters for women. In addition to regulating the nervous system, it is also about bringing presence to our body and the way we breathe. The breath itself is the gift of life. The tool of the breath brings us into the moment because each breath is different.

There is the flight response but there is also a freeze response and this is what I see in a lot of the women and children that I work with. When you have been violated you freeze because there is nowhere for you to go. You are locked in a room for many hours a day, stuck there. So the process that I see these women and children go through is like thawing out. They are learning how to be safe, how to find the autonomy, their choice, and reconnect safely back to the body again.

The feedback that I get is, “I didn’t even realise I had a body that I could feel. I didn’t know what it was like to do that because I was numb”. And yoga has been amazing for “de-numbing”, for awakening slowly and lovingly bringing safety back to life.

Cate Peterson: I am watching this panel. It is really amazing how we learn from each other. We have all got these very separate client groups with separate nationalities, separate experiences, but all similar results which is the constriction, the freezing, the fight or flight response. I think that most of us are frozen, in flight and fight mode to some extent, and that means that there is very limited capacity for us to deal with it. I am just wondering.



PHOTO: JAN KOVOY

Fernando Charnis: The people we deal with are the heavyweights, let's say, of trauma, but we are all currently in trauma. We all have our own moments. We just do not open our eyes and live in the moment. Each person has different levels of development and you cannot compare one to another. Each person lives a different life and what you have learnt in the past informs the way you react and live the present moment. So it is hard for me to compare the guys who have been on drugs with someone who was raped or someone who witnessed his best friend die beside him.

But it is important to acknowledge that each one of us has that wound inside and we have to live with it, leave it behind, and just live the moment, start with the body if that is what you know and go on from there.

Rob Ginnivan: We have a universal commonality: the breath and the body. It all comes back to the breath. It all comes back to the body, regardless of what

kind or level of trauma you have experienced.

And as long as we lead by example ourselves, by practising the use of the breath and the body to connect mind and body, we will create more harmony in ourselves.

Then if we can then go out to the community and impart that knowledge, wisdom, passion and compassion to other people and then encourage them to do the same, then the ripple effect of yoga will reach the world.

Cate Peterson: Do you think that we can get to a point where we are able to teach each other how to deal with trauma?

I want to ask that because we are continually being exposed to trauma in our own lives. Even in our culture we send a lot of our kids into the frontline of conflicts around the world and then face difficult situations at home.

Are there some tools in our kit as yoga teachers that we can use with people to establish a sense of peace and wellbeing?

Shirley Hicks: The best we can give our clients and ourselves is awareness. If we are aware of our present experience, then we are able to process it and work with it, rather than park it somewhere, then we can avoid trauma. Trauma and PTSD are two very different things.

We need to regulate our emotions. These are skills we need and I think they should be taught at school. Children should be taught how to breathe, how to be in their bodies, and how to express their feelings in a healthy way. So this is generational, not just a three-year program here and there.

But then I think as yoga teachers we have a great capacity to demonstrate, model and support our clients to build an awareness of their bodies. Not just to make their bodies look like mine in a yoga class, but to find out how their body feel when doing yoga and I think that really does trauma proof us a little bit.

Cate Peterson: I want to know if anybody has any burning questions that they'd like to ask the panel?

Audience: There is some controversy surrounding the religious roots at World Yoga Day especially in India. I know Rob was saying that he avoids the use of chimes and chanting, and I was wondering if any of you had experienced resistance to yoga on the grounds of religion and how you get around that.

Shirley Hicks: That is quite common. I work in fairly mainstream programs, there is no Sanskrit. It is grounded body work.

Rob Ginnivan: I think when you link it back to science, it is pretty much generally accepted by everybody. If anyone chooses to take on a different path, then that is their choice.

Atira Tan: I think it depends on different cultures. I work in Asia and they are very open to yoga, so when I mention yoga, everyone says, "Oh yes, yoga, I love yoga". But the programs I run here in Australia are with young people, so we have to articulate things a little bit differently. So I say: "We are going to breathe and stretch and get into our bodies", so I articulate it in a way that feels comfortable to them. Again, it comes back to safety. We want our students to feel safe, welcomed,

to feel okay with what they are doing, so I think that is the most important thing.

Rob Ginnivan: With the military guys I work with, I replace the word "yoga" with "warrior body movement" and "mind stillness". I just make it accessible to the way they would like to receive it.

Cate Peterson: I am going to give you all some homework to prepare for next year when we resume this conversation. Take some time to think about how trauma affects you. When you use that word, can you discern where that lands in your own body? Because it is only by feeling it in our own bodies, dealing with it, as Rob says, and then showing by example, that we can activate others to do that. As Narendra Modi says beautifully, "all the things that yoga gives us prepares us to deal really well with climate change". Thanks so much for coming.

Rob Ginnivan: Can I just say one more thing in addition to support Cate. We have representation from the United Nations here today and I just want to acknowledge them. The United Nations were formed 69 years ago so that we would not have another world war and so far we have not. And I think that by promoting yoga with the United Nations' support in the community, we can keep preventing some of the darkness and nasty situations that occurred in the past.

Dominica Dorning: I guess also just as a psychologist I do not want to forget the mind. Yoga is about managing the fluctuations of the mind. I think today we have spoken about the body and how yoga helps us recover from trauma. But it also allows our thinking brain to switch back on again. So when we down-regulate our stress system, our frontal cortex, our thinking brain, our decision making brain, our problem solving brain comes back on line and that is the kind of thing that we need working all the time to function as a human and also improve the world.

So do not forget your minds, take really good care of them, do your yoga and get some therapy too if you need.

Cate Peterson: Thank you very much panellists. 卐