



L A K E F R O N T  
W E L L N E S S C E N T E R, S . C .

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*Abundant Living... Discover the Possibilities!*

## YOGA FOR THE TREATMENT OF TRAUMA

### *The problem with being disconnected from the body:*

Many people in our world live most of the day in their heads and pay little attention to the moment by moment responses of the body because we are such a "thinking" culture. When someone has experienced a trauma, especially if that trauma included injury or harm to the body, there is an even stronger temptation to disconnect from the body because the body doesn't feel "safe" any longer. Focusing on the body or being in the body causes so much discomfort that it simply seems to make sense to live from the neck up. This may feel like it is working but continual disconnection from the body limits our ability to gauge true feelings and causes under-reacting to important moments/events or over-reacting to insignificant moments/events. Cutting one's self off from the body also prevents the release of the emotions and stuck energy caused by the trauma. This stuck energy may manifest in physical pain (stomach aches or headaches for example) and some physicians even believe that it can lead to more serious illness such as heart disease or cancer.

### *How yoga helps:*

Many psychotherapy models approach the treatment of trauma by encouraging the individual to start paying attention to the body again by noticing thoughts, feelings and physical sensations. Yoga is a wonderful tool to use during counseling sessions or as an additional practice to enhance existing therapy. Yoga asks us to be present in our body as we learn new ways to breathe and pay attention to the subtle cues that our body is offering us. It helps unlock the suffering that we carry from trapped emotion and trauma. The movement of the poses (also called asanas) allows us to focus gentle attention on the places in the body that hold the memory and pain caused by the trauma. Yoga teaches us that it is safe to be in the body and that the body can even feel like home again. At one time in our life we may not have been "in charge" of what our body was experiencing (due to traumas such as car accidents, witnessing violence or physical or sexual abuse), yoga reminds us over and over that we are now the one deciding which movements/poses are comfortable and which movements/poses are not feeling "right" for our body. With new awareness of the body's cues it is also easier to notice the beginning signs of budding anxiety. Research shows that it may be easier to stop the cycle of panic in beginning stages.



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### *Breath work is a core component of a healing yoga practice:*

Yogic breathing techniques (prana-yama) used regularly can improve our health, decrease stress and anxiety and lift depressed mood. Often times we fall into a pattern of shallow breathing which increases the heart rate and causes tension in the muscles. Shallow breathing patterns restrict the amount of oxygen the blood cells receive and prevent the full exhalation of carbon dioxide, which is a waste product of our respiratory system. Yoga teaches us to breathe from our diaphragm so that the lungs are fully engaged when we breathe. Bringing our attention to the breathe connects us to the very moment that we are in and reminds us that the simple act of breathing calms us, slows down our heart rate and releases muscle tension. Sometimes it is useful to consciously alter the inhalation and exhalation or even breathe in a focused way through the nostrils, called alternate nostril breathing or purifying breath. This breathing helps balance the right and left hemispheres of the brain. When the brain is out of balance it can trigger feelings of depression or even panic. Practice of this breath exercise can evoke feelings of peace and clarity.

### *Changes you may notice with a regular gentle yoga practice:*

Sometimes it will be a gentle knowing that you are feeling better and that you feel more relaxed and alive since you started your practice. Other people express that there are moments during their yoga practice when they feel a distinct shift or emotional release.

This is one of the reasons that it can be helpful to begin a yoga practice with a trained mental health practitioner who can gently assist you in moving through the emotion with guidance and safety. One yogi reported that her yoga mat was the one place that she was assured that she would be able to let go of her troubles. She would step on her mat and let everything else go. Another yogi reported that she would use her mat as a place to safely feel her body and her feelings when the world felt too overwhelming. Yoga is a physical, spiritual and mental practice that can stimulate a personal journey of great emotional healing.

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