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When Mindfulness Will (and Won't) Work for Treating Trauma, and One Technique That Can Be Effective

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National Institute for
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The research shows that meditation – mindfulness meditation – changes the brain and changes the areas of the brain that are most affected by trauma.

So, it's key that mindfulness meditation-type practices are very good for traumatized people.

The downside is that, in practice, the better off you are, the more composed you are and the easier it is to meditate.

If you're a very frightened, traumatized person, trying to do meditation is likely to drive you nuts. People think about trauma as something that was out there and something from the past that comes into *you* – that is a fundamental misunderstanding.

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Trauma is about the residues that are left inside of you. Trauma is about having physical sensations, emotions, and feelings that are happening right now that don't belong here.

The past is the past – but trauma is about the residues of the past in your current system.

Traumatized people try *not* to feel those things – by drinking, by running, by numbing themselves out.

The moment you start allowing yourself to become calm, the toxins of the past will start coming up. So it's very easy to become overwhelmed by what comes up as you do mindfulness meditation.

“The moment you start allowing yourself to become calm, the toxins of

Jon Kabat-Zinn taught me this – I was very surprised by it because it sounded so intense to me, but he said, “I think it is malpractice to do meditation without doing yoga with traumatized people.”

“Why do we do yoga with traumatized people instead of doing meditation?”

Now, why do we do yoga with traumatized people instead of doing meditation?

When you do yoga, you can concentrate your mind on touching that toe or keeping your breathing going while you have one foot in the air.

In some ways, yoga organizes your attentional system into very specific movements and postures and keeps you away from the free-floating (residue) that comes up when you do meditation.

So, yoga is a much easier way of becoming mindful than meditation is – and they probably have similar effects.

The benefit from yoga over meditation is that, for one, yoga very specifically does focus on breathing, and by focusing on breathing, which many yoga teachers tend to neglect, you can train people to develop good heart rate variability.

In our study of yoga in PTSD, we found that people develop better heart rate variability, which means that their overall capacity to become calm increases.

But equally – if not more – important is that the triggers for your trauma are not primarily outside of oneself.

Most people like to talk about, “Oh, that horrible person there / the terrible car out there / the firecrackers caused me to feel this way.”

But the triggers are more often interoceptive triggers – feelings that you have inside of your body.

“The triggers are more often interoceptive triggers – feelings that you have inside of your body.”

For example, if somebody touches you or if you start having sexual feelings or you start having sensitizations, that becomes a reminder of your trauma and you start going nuts!

The big benefit of yoga is that you learn to breathe yourself into body positions that are potentially very triggering, but by having the voice of your yoga teacher and having that deep attention to trying to breathe while you do the posture, you can detoxify that particular interoceptive awareness into a piece of safety.

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Now, maybe, it becomes safe to take a deep breath.

With yoga, you can begin to pay attention to parts of your body that are internal triggers for you to go into the traumatized state.

For example, the most flagrant example is doing the “happy baby posture.”

People, who have been sexually abused and hear this, say, “Oh, no. That’s impossible. The happy baby posture is a posture in which you lie on the floor on your back, you put your legs straight up in the air, you hold your toes with your hands and you spread your legs as wide as you can.

It doesn’t take a lot of imagination to understand that this might be hard if you have a sexual abuse history – and certainly, if you have

You need to very slowly – and that is what our trauma program does with activity – very slowly educate, help, and guide people into ever-more-complex areas of their internal worlds and to make them tolerable.

What keeps coming up is that when traumatized people start doing yoga, they often encounter contrary sensations and feelings in their bodies that are terrifying.

That’s where the sound of the voice of the yoga teacher becomes extraordinarily important.

The sound of voice becomes very important to help people regulate their arousal.

Then there’s the power of breath at this point – you hear the yoga teacher talk about focusing your breath, “Notice your out breath. See what happens. Slow it down.”

So, you get an organism that learns how to tolerate feeling those sensations. Once that sensation is no longer a trigger – once that part of your body becomes a safe part – you’re liberated. It’s over!

This is an alternative to telling the story – and as a therapist you know that oftentimes telling the story is just that – it’s telling the story, but it doesn’t make the trauma go away.

But once the sensation becomes a safe sensation, the trauma is gone.