



Healing & Resilience Through Yoga

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*Trauma
Basics*



Trauma Definition

Anything that overwhelms our ability to cope and respond, and leaves us feeling helpless, hopeless and out of control.

(Hala Khouri, *Off the Mat Into the World*)

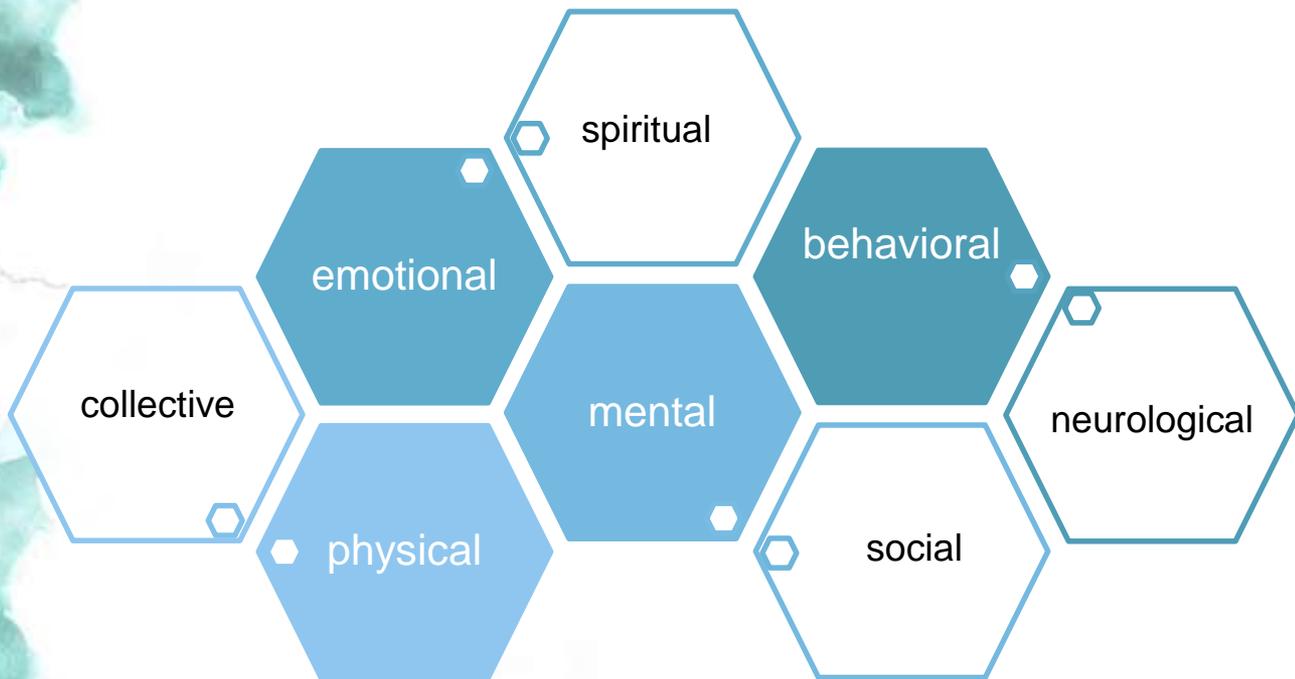


Artist: Rachel Stribbling

The Neurobiology of Trauma

*Fight, Flight or
Freeze?*

What if we don't return to balance? The long-term sequelae of trauma





Healing through the body

“Psychologists usually try to help people use insight & understanding to manage their behavior. However, neuroscience research shows that very few psychological problems are the result of defects in understanding – most originate in pressures from deeper regions in the brain... When the alarm bell of the emotional brain keeps signaling that you are in danger, no amount of insight will silence it.”

~ Bessel van der Kolk (The Body Keeps the Score)



Growing Evidence & Uptake

According to NIH, **10** out of 14 yoga studies found mental health benefits (among other positive outcomes)

****Gap in evidence regarding adaptability for diverse contexts and effectiveness for populations with overlapping /complex traumas**

<https://nccih.nih.gov/health/yoga/introduction.htm#hed3>

What does research show about yoga for wellness?

Studies have suggested possible benefits of yoga for several aspects of wellness, including stress management, mental/emotional health, promoting healthy eating/activity habits, sleep, and balance.

^ More

- **Stress management.** Of 17 studies (involving 1,070 total participants) of yoga for stress management included in a recent review, 12 showed improvements in physical or psychological measures related to stress.
- **Mental/emotional health.** In a recent review of 14 studies (involving 1,084 total participants) that assessed the effects of yoga on positive aspects of mental health, 10 studies found evidence of benefits, such as improvements in resilience or general mental well-being.
- **Promoting healthy eating/activity habits.** A 2018 survey of young adults (involving 1,820 participants) showed that practicing yoga regularly was associated with better eating and physical activity habits. In interviews, people who took the survey said they thought yoga supported healthier habits through greater mindfulness, motivation to participate in other forms of activity and eat healthier, and the influence of a health-minded yoga community.
- **Sleep.** Yoga has been shown to be helpful for sleep in several studies of cancer patients and older adults and in individual studies in other population groups, including people with arthritis, pregnant women, and women with menopause symptoms.
- **Balance.** Of 15 studies (688 total participants) looking at the effect of yoga on balance



Hart
Yoga

“While trauma can be hell on earth, trauma resolved is a gift of the gods—a heroic journey that belongs to each of us.”

~Peter Levine (*Walking the Tiger*)

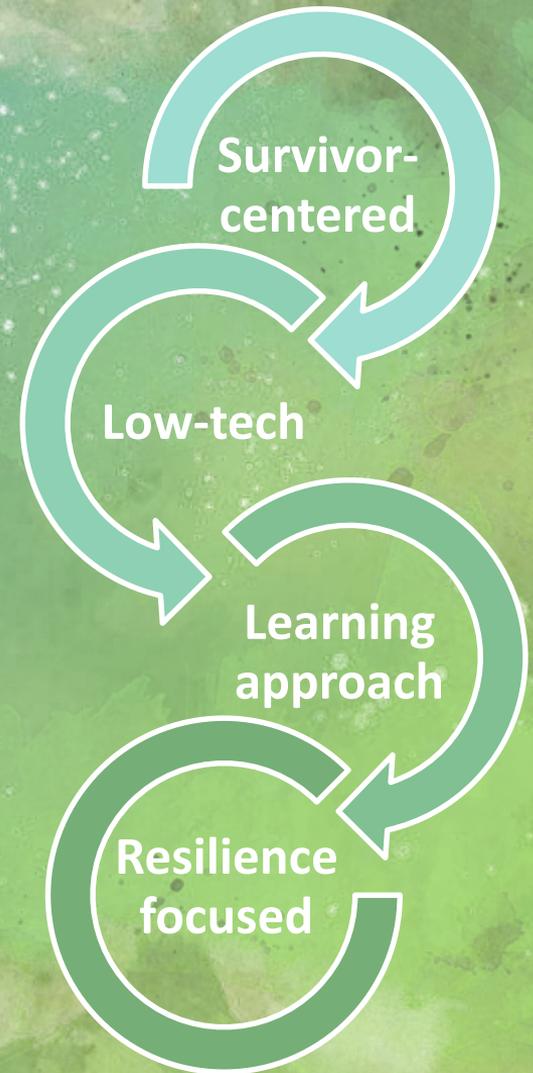
Program Design

- **Aim:** Cultivate a safe and predictable environment where participants can have their own experience, connect & build trust with others, and heal from trauma.
- **Participants:** Women & girls residing in one of 3 shelters run by Willow International (NGO working to prevent and respond to human trafficking in Uganda)
- **Structure:** 12 week cohort with progressive content (one hour session/week). Themes: Grounding (session 1-4); Understanding (session 5-8); & Inner-strengths (session 9-12)
- **Content:** Breath work, simple asana, visualizations & brief discussions.



Program Influences & Innovations

- Trauma theory
- Contemplative science
- Explicit social justice & feminist framing



Trauma Symptom

Hart Yoga Focus

Easily triggered, extreme vigilance
(hyper aroused state)

Activating the parasympathetic nervous system (forward folds, diaphragmatic breathing, long exhales)

Feelings of helplessness or powerlessness

Decision-making opportunities and bringing awareness of structural (non-personal) dimensions of individual and collective trauma.

Social isolation

Cultivating new community. Bonding through new, shared experiences.

Disrupted bio-rhythms (sleep, eating, etc.)

Creating rhythms through synchronized movement and breath.

Disconnected from body and/or dissociation

Creating an embodied experience. Language to explore muscular engagement and physical sensation in the body.

Destabilized, loss of center, “spacing out.”

Connecting to your physical center. Grounding exercises, balancing poses and gentle core engagement

Shallow/anxious breath

Intentional deepening of the breath and experimenting with different modalities of breath.

Inability to tolerate/fear or discomfort

Engaging with all states that arise. Pendulating between intensity and rest.

Muscular tension, physical pain

Enhancing flexibility, openness and strength.



*Let's
Practice!*



How it differs from 'regular' yoga? Gentle path to embodiment~

- Grounded: supported, centered and physically located in present time
- Language: inclusive, permissive, anchoring
- “Looking inside” (interoception): curiosity, choice and compassion

***Can still be moments of discomfort ~ aspiring towards 'staying power'*



Artist: Grace Helmer

Feasibility Pilot:

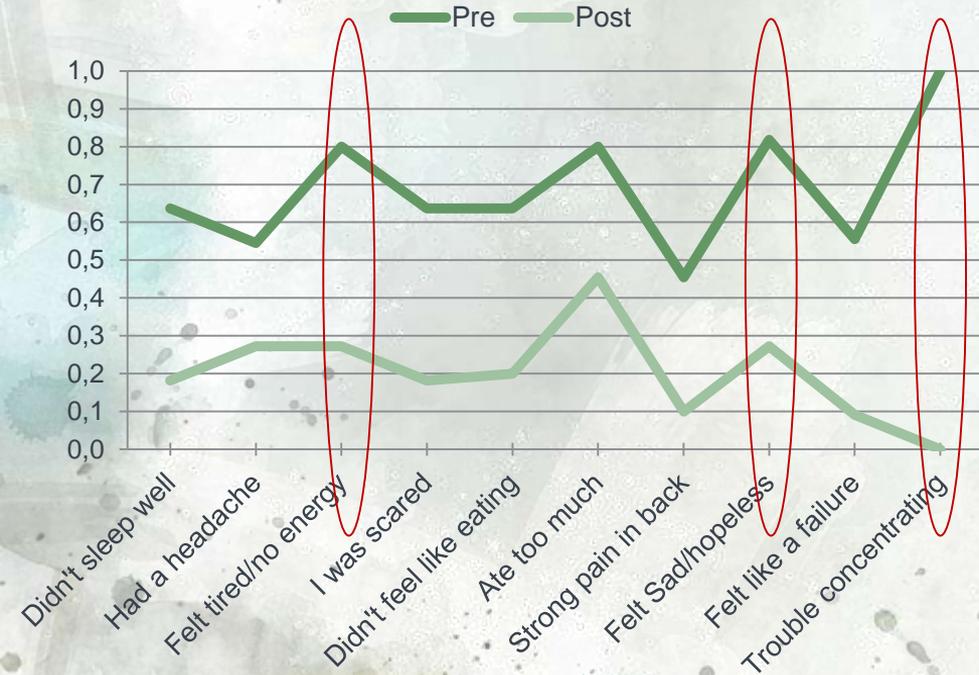
Can Hart Yoga be integrated within a safe-house setting for survivors of human trafficking in Uganda?

- April – June 2017, cohort of 12 adolescent girls (15-20 years) living in one of Willow International's shelters
- Self-administered pre/post questionnaires: somatic and emotional symptoms (based on PhQ9 – validated depression scale) + self rated overall physical and emotional health
- Observation and informal feedback (staff and participants) to explore acceptability and resonance

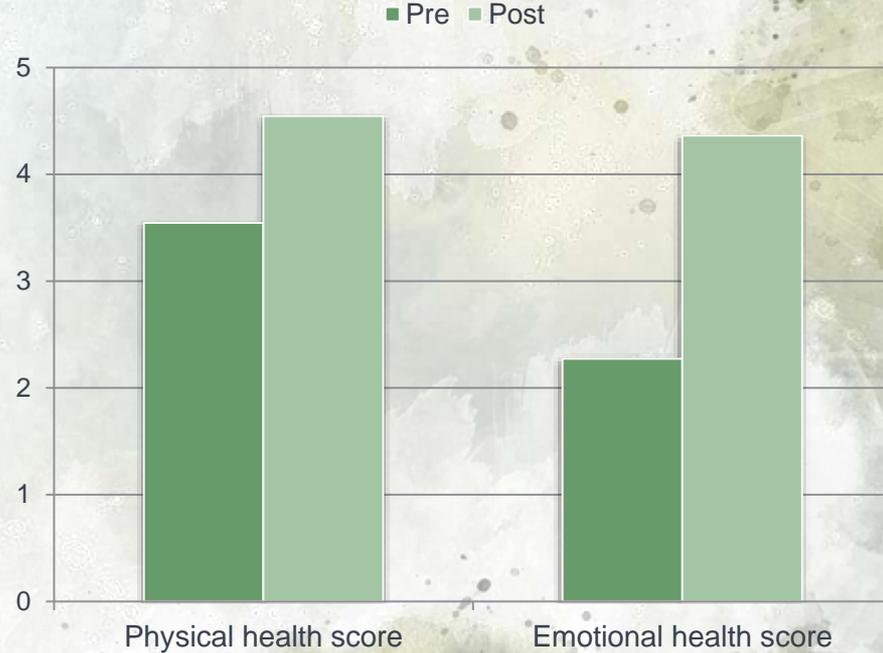
Feasibility Pilot

****72% average attendance ****

Symptomology, last 2 weeks (n=11)
(0=no days, 1=some days, 2=almost all days)



Perceived Health (n=11)
(0=very poor, 5=excellent)





Aspirations



Tensions

Address current gap in psycho-social care (promising findings around feasibility, resonance and healing)

Low cost and sustainable (participants can integrate practices & carry forward)

More diverse access to body-based interventions

How to maintain focus on social justice and systemic oppression alongside individual work?

Balancing agility/flexibility with structure needed for expansion?

Identifying like-minded donors with an openness to explore?



“Yoga means union. I welcome yoga to bring union and peace in my mind . . . and to take away that anger.”

“[In yoga] you have to learn to feel your breath, so that your heart is not panicking.”

“I used to think yoga was only for those energetic, young ‘kung-fu type’ people – now I know I can do yoga, and I can practice in a way that protects my sensitivities.”

(participants, Hart Yoga/OMPowerment Training, Kampala)

*Holding people
in their perfect
wholeness*

Thank you!

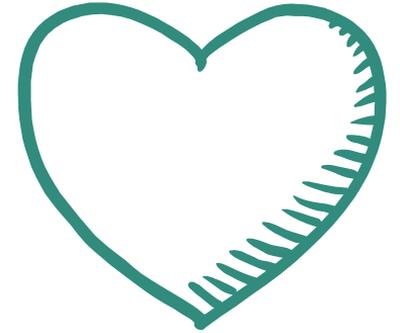
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➤ All the strong
women and girls,
for their time,
energy, and
feedback

➤ Trauma informed
trainers: Off the
Mat (USA),
Trauma Center
(USA), Minded
Institute (UK)



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