

# Trauma Informed Yoga

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Yoga yields results. It's new. It's uncomfortable. It's vulnerable.

Bring up the topic of emotions in nearly any substance abuse support group and you'll likely be met by a chorus of groans and sighs. Feeling emotions upon entering recovery is something that many addicts find downright unpleasant.

Many people in recovery will tell you that a primary reason for their use of mood altering substances was to escape painful emotions—commonly caused by trauma. Upon entering recovery, the former addict no longer has a mood-altering substance to rely upon to escape these emotions and is left to feel them in their entirety. A former client described these returning feelings like standing in front of a dam that just broke, leaving him at the mercy of the tidal wave of emotion. Oftentimes, the person in recovery feels as if these overwhelming emotions will persist forever.

## Handling Our Emotions In A Healthy Way

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When emotions are not handled in a healthy manner, they tend to escape into our lives in other, unhealthy, destructive ways. Events, people, and situations that cause negative emotions and resentments become like pumping air into a balloon—over time if the pressure is not released, it pops.

A primary goal of treatment, therefore, is to provide clients with new skills to assist in the sometimes-frustrating process of handling emotions. Bessel Van Der Kolk, a leading expert in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, has stated—in regards to working with those suffering from PTSD and substance abuse— that “The challenge is to learn how to tolerate feelings and sensations by increasing the capacity for...sitting with yourself, and noticing what’s going on inside—the basic principle of meditation. They need to learn how to moderate arousal. Trauma-sensitive people have their sense of time thrown off and think something will last forever. Their challenge is to learn how to notice what is happening and how things can and will shift, rather than running away or turning to alcohol or drugs to self-medicate” (“Yoga and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” 2018).

One of the most common negative emotions that people entering recovery need to learn is to process is stress. Stress causes a physiological reaction in the body where cortisol and adrenaline are released from the brain and the body becomes emotionally flooded. The body enters a ‘fight or flight’ mode which can negatively affect the respiratory system, the heart, and other important bodily functions with prolonged exposure. People feel more irritable, keyed up, and impulsive when feeling stressed. Stress is unpleasant and causes those who are feeling it to look for ways to relieve it—for the addict, this means using mood altering substances. It is

one of the most common causes of relapse in the recovery community.

Finding new ways to deal with stress can be, well, stressful. Most stress reduction techniques have three things in common—they activate the relaxation response in the brain, involve physical activity, and rely on social support and connections (understanding the stress response). Therefore, there is a heavy emphasis placed on activities like self-care, going to recovery meetings, exercising, re-connecting with hobbies, engaging with a higher power, meditation, prayer, and treatment in recovery. These activities provide ways for the person in recovery to better handle stress and other strong emotions through healthy outlets.

## The Effects of Yoga Are Astounding

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One such activity that has been gaining more and more popularity in substance abuse treatment centers is yoga. Evidence of its effectiveness in dealing with stress has been accumulating over the years, yielding exciting results for those who suffer with stress. Yoga includes all three of the categories listed above: it activates the relaxation response in the brain, involves physical activity, and oftentimes is done in a group or with others. More and more substance abuse treatment centers across the United States have started incorporating yoga into their programs as a way for clients to de-stress and process past trauma in a healthy manner. “Yoga helps regulate emotional and physiological states. It allows the body to regain its natural movement and teaches the use of breath for self-regulation” (Yoga and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder).

## Reverse, Reduce and Prevent Stress

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The effects of yoga on the mind and body are astounding—it can reverse, reduce, and even prevent some of the negative effects of stress. ‘Yoga appears to blunt the harmful effects of heightened stress by influencing the body’s response to stress. This is reflected in slower heart

and breathing rates and lower blood pressure, all of which are good for the body. There is also evidence that yoga helps increase heart rate variability, an indicator of the body's flexibility in responding to stress ("Yoga can blunt the effects of stress" 2018).

Dr. Van Der Kolk shares his thoughts on the effects of yoga on the brain and reducing stress, he states, "It's very striking that there's nothing in western culture that teaches us that we can learn to master our own physiology—solutions always come from outside, starting with relationships, and if those fail, alcohol or drugs. Yoga teaches us that there are things we can do to change our brainstem arousal system, our sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems and to quiet the brain" ("Yoga and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder" 2009).

At Next Level Recovery, we are proud to offer weekly, trauma-informed yoga groups to our clientele. Clients have the chance to participate in yoga and experience firsthand the power of yoga on stress. Our yoga group focuses on correct breathing and proper movements through the yoga poses as a way to properly deal with past trauma that so many individuals struggle with in recovery. Adding yoga to your recovery program can be a powerful way to deal with stress and trauma, and also connect with others in a fun new way.

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