

Treating Rape Trauma Syndrome with Therapeutic Yoga

I. Medical View

A. Analysis of Rape Trauma Syndrome

Rape Trauma Syndrome (RTS) was first identified in the mid-seventies by Ann W. Burgess and Lynda L. Holmstrom after studying the common patterns of rape survivors (Menna). Reactions and adjustments to rape are similar to that of other major traumas experienced. Most rape victims do experience a predictable range of emotions or characteristics following the assault. Per the study, RTS is found to have common characteristics in direct response to the profound fear inherent in sexual assault. Though each individual responds differently, the pattern of characteristics is the same.

The immediate response to a sexual assault is known as the Acute Phase. This phase lasts anywhere from days to a few weeks. The initial response of this phase is separated into two categories: expressed and controlled. Victims in the expressed category show great emotional expression such as crying, screaming, agitation, etc. While those in the controlled category focus on containing their emotions and keeping their composure. Neither category is superior to the other, but a response to the trauma (Menna).

Along with the emotions experienced are the physical concerns. During the attack, the victim will go into “fight, flight, or freeze,” where they think they can fight and run away from their attacker. When this doesn’t happen the victim goes into a freeze, a response that takes place in order to survive and avoid further injury. This response often takes place because a victim is paralyzed by fear of being hurt or killed (Community Crisis Center, Inc).

Victims also experience disorientation during the attack where they feel outside their bodies. This disorientation helps the victim dissociate from the pain and fear at the time. The victim will also focus on survival during the attack. Doing anything necessary to survive, from submission to the attacker’s requests to pleading with their attacker. Again, survival is the primary focus.

After the attack, during the Acute Phase, the victim will often experience shock associated with cold, faintness, and nauseous. The awareness of physical pain will follow after the shock where ever the attacker touched or hurt them, along with general soreness and tension.

B. Symptoms of Rape Trauma Syndrome

It is important to recognize the four phases a rape survivor will go through. The first being the Acute Phase explained above, when everything in the victim’s life falls apart. The second phase is the Reorganization Phase where the victim, also known as survivor after the attack, attempts to reorient their life. This is a very difficult phase since the survivor cannot leave the scene of a crime, so to speak, when the body is the crime scene. At which point the body is no longer seen by the survivor as their own, but as an enemy always there to remind them of what they wish to forget.

Many survivors attempt to go back to their life's routine before the attack, but are plagued by anxiety and fear. Survivors are often overwhelmed with emotions of shame, guilt, lack of trust in those around them and a desire to isolate themselves from others. Most survivors are not even aware of these emotions or affects they have on the day-to-day life. Without a connection to the body, survivors are unable to listen to the internal state of being that navigates through life. This contributes to a feeling of being lost (Menna).

After the Reorganization Phase survivors begin to experience symptoms that leak into their life, which inhibits their sense of recovery even further. These symptoms are part of the next stage called Intrusive Symptoms. Imagine the sensation one feels during an action packed movie that keeps "you on the edge of your seat," such sensations include anxiety, tension of the body, intense distress, etc. This is what a survivor experiences frequently instead of that short stint during a movie. Such sensations cause survivors to continually be in a hypervigilant mode to their surroundings (Menna).

Along with this constant attunement with their surroundings, survivors experience other sense arousals out of nowhere. These intrusive symptoms include a lack of attention due to intrusive thoughts and images, recurring nightmares, flashbacks, anxiety attacks, crying spells, and feelings of shame and embarrassment. No matter what a survivor tries to do, these symptoms will intrude causing quite an effect on their lifestyle (Community Crisis Center, Inc).

C. Lifestyle Assessment

As noted above, survivors are unable to escape the scene of the crime which allows the mind to fire intrusive thoughts and memories, keeping the survivor under constant fire. In an attempt to limit these attacks survivors enter into the next phase – Avoidance. In order to limit the memories of the attack survivors will avoid the place of attack, such as their home, or any place that reminds them of the place of attack, such as parks or open fields like the park a survivor was attacked in. For a survivor who was very active this can greatly alter their lifestyle, causing them to eliminate all activities they felt identified who they were before the attack (Community Crisis Center, Inc).

Avoidance also happens in an even more intimate manner for survivors. Unable to avoid their body, survivors begin to unconsciously attack their own bodies. By avoiding any attempt to care for themselves many survivors will turn to eating disorders or drugs. Both symptoms of avoidance take a survivor down a new dependence pattern in order to avoid any thoughts or memories related to their body and attack. This need to numb their feelings increases as the dependence continues eventually becoming an addict (Menna).

Not all survivors take the intimate phase of Avoidance into addiction of drugs or food. Some will begin to "hide out" by becoming obsessive regarding work or exercise. These survivors will spend long hours at work or in the gym in hopes to avoid being alone or with others (Menna).

Overall, survivors' core beliefs in life are greatly altered. Their ability to trust others diminishes as well as their ability to find happiness as they did before the attack. Ideas regarding what is good and pleasurable, such as sex, is greatly altered. Over time these altered ideas go from what was good to now

bad. Survivors are unaware of this change as part of the effect the rape had on them. Most will believe that these thoughts are a current issue that cannot be changed.

D. Medical Treatments

Main stream treatment of RTS is talk therapy with a trauma counselor and a support group of other survivors. Talk therapy is a means to allow survivors to verbalize their experience as well as cognitively work through the trauma. This helps the survivor identify their core beliefs, which they lost trust in after the attack, and to place the responsibility of the attack on the assailant (Menna). Though talk therapy with a counselor or group is helpful for survivors to begin the process of understanding the thoughts that surface, it doesn't address the disconnection with the body. With this lack of body connection many survivors, up to 45%, will relapse into the RTS symptoms (Emerson).

II. Yogic View

A. Rape Trauma Syndrome via the 5 Koshas

Yoga focuses on the entire human organism – body, mind, and spirit – which allows a survivor to engage fully in the healing process. In order to complete this process the 5 koshas must all be addressed in a manner similar to that listed below.

1. Physical

Yoga can uniquely address the physical needs of a survivor and provide a means to cultivate a friendly relationship with the body. The first step to connecting to the body is to create a safe space in which to practice yoga. This should be a room that does not have open windows or doors, has soft lighting in order to see but to create a sense of calm, and is reserved for quiet to help the body relax. By creating an environment of safety a survivor can allow the first shield of their guard down (Kolk).

Next the survivor needs to connect with the breath. Breath plays such a large part in how the body responds to situations. If a survivor can recognize a natural, calm breath pattern then they are more in tune when the breath quickens due to stress. This recognition allows survivors to notice how recurring thoughts or certain environments cause stress in the body. This first step of breath recognition allows the survivor to begin to change the way they react to the pattern, thus giving them the first tool to taking back control of their bodies and life.

Once an established awareness of breath is made the survivor begins the physical yoga postures. It is important to remember that certain postures are not relaxing or therapeutic to survivors as a start to their physical practice. Begin with seated postures that allow a sense of control and awareness of their surroundings. Incorporate awareness of the breath to help calm the nervous system, as well as neck stretches that allow the student a good view of their environment and a gentle warm-up (Emerson).

The physical practice not only allows the survivor a safe space in which to cultivate a new relationship with their body, but it also works on a deeper level within the body. The physical practice develops a

body that is strong and feels comfortable, which can reduce autonomic sympathetic activation (the fight or flight response), muscle tension, physical symptoms and blood pressure. It can also improve neuroendocrine and hormonal activity, sleep patterns and overall quality of life (Emerson).

2. Energetic

Addressing the energetics of the body is essential to the healing process. Trauma is the un-discharged energy that gets trapped in the body as a result of the shocking and life-threatening attack in which the victim is unable to escape or fight back (Eckel). This un-released energy continues to hold tension in the body which prevents survivors from understanding the root of their physical and emotional symptoms. The physical practice of yoga allows survivors to recognize the body's response to poses.

In addition it allows survivors to sit for a short period of time observing the uncomfortable sensations that arise. The key here is a short period of time, if a survivor knows that the sensation is going to end then they are able to tolerate the discomfort until the position is changed. As noted by trauma expert Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, "The process of being in a safe space and staying with whatever sensations emerge and seeing how they come to an end is a positive imprinting process. Yoga helps them befriend their bodies that have betrayed them by failing to guarantee safety" (Kolk).

This stuck energy from trauma is also connected to the second Chakra. Chakras are the energy that runs through the physical body along the fascia. These energies communicate via the nadis known scientifically as psycho-neuro-immunology. When the chakras become imbalanced, as in a trauma, the communication gets either tangled or disconnected all together (Weber).

The second chakra is the place of Svadhithana or "in one's own abode" (Weber). A trauma causes a survivor to feel as if they are outside of their abode or that it is no longer their abode but a traitor. This also attributes to the sensation of feeling lost. Through a steady yoga practice on a daily basis, a survivor can begin the process of reconnecting to their "abode" once more. By observing the thoughts and feelings that arise during the yoga practice, the survivor is able to see how these thoughts and emotions are not them. The survivor is no longer identified with the trauma but begins to see a space of safety within themselves.

3. Psycho-Emotional

The energetics of the trauma is closely linked to the thoughts and emotions that develop after a trauma. As noted in the previous section, energy is trapped in the body and our brains take over in an attempt to analyze a way out of the trapped sensation. Unlike animals, which instinctively shake themselves after a traumatic event, humans get stuck in the memory of the event and rely on the brain to adjust (Eckel). However, the brain is ineffective in adjusting the body and energy of the body and will simply hit re-play on the memory in hopes to change the outcome.

In order to eliminate the skipping record of the mind, survivors must incorporate mindful meditation to their yoga practice. Mindful meditation is the technique of becoming a careful observer of the ebb and flow of the internal experience (Kolk). Noticing whatever thoughts, feelings, and body sensations, or

impulses emerge without placing any judgment on them. Much like the physical practice, meditation is about tolerating the discomforts of the internal experience, not running away, as well as recognizing that they will shift and change.

4. Wisdom

As survivors become more aware of their breath, body, and feelings, they also become more compassionate towards themselves. They begin to recognize that they are in control of their bodies. This recognition is one that is very important to establish throughout the yoga practice, that it “is okay to come out of a pose at any time.” Knowing they have this choice deepens a survivor’s sense of self. They are in control of their entire self, no one else (Emerson).

With mindful meditation survivors begin to practice mindfulness in all things that they do. This mindfulness allows them to make clear and effective choices based on their own experience as it happens in the moment. Being able to make decisions in the moment from internal feedback gives a survivor the ability to trust themselves again. Something that was lost during the attack.

5. Empowerment (a.k.a. Bliss)

The true bliss for a survivor is the sense of feeling whole and complete, as if they truly belong within themselves and no longer fear the world around them. This sense of empowerment is in itself a spiritual uplift. Once a survivor has achieved this phase they no longer are haunted by the symptoms of the Rape Trauma Syndrome on a daily and consistent means.

As with all humans, bliss is something we hope to obtain, but often only see it for moments at a time. A survivor will experience the same with their sense of empowerment. This does not mean they will relapse into the full RTS, but instead reminds them, like all of us, that yoga is a life time journey that needs to be practiced in order to continue to see the great benefits and the moments of true bliss.

B. Healing Program

The following is the preliminary idea of treating a survivor of Rape Trauma Syndrome with therapeutic yoga. The program is geared to slowly ease the survivor into body and mind awareness, as well as teaching them the tools to change how they react to stress as they become more aware of its affects.

Pranayama Practice: Four practices listed in order of practice.

- A. Rhythmic Breathing – Student should sit in a comfortable place and position. Taking a deep inhale and a slow long exhale. With the next inhale student will count slowly to four and on the exhale the same amount of time. Student will continue with this rhythm until the length of the breath no longer creates tension. Once this happens the student will add another count and once this count of five feels easier student will continue with the next count. Student keeps this addition of counts until reaching eight counts, at which point student will then move back down the counts to four. Student ends with a deep inhale and long slow exhale and then sits for a few moments with a natural breath.

- B. Ujayi Breath – Student should sit in a comfortable place and position. Taking a deep inhale and a slow long exhale. Inhale and exhale deeply through the mouth. On the exhales, begin to tone the back of the throat, slightly constricting the passage of air. Have student imagine they are fogging up a pair of glasses. Once comfortable with the exhale, begin to apply the same toning of the throat to the inhales. This will sound like the ocean. When student is able to control the throat on both the inhale and the exhale, close the mouth and begin breathing through the nose. Continue applying the same toning to the throat as when the mouth was open. The breath will still make a loud noise coming in and out of the nose. Student ends with a deep inhale and long slow exhale and then sits for a few moments with a natural breath.
- C. Three Part Breath – Student should sit in a comfortable place and position. On each inhale, fill the belly up with breath focusing on expanding the belly with air like a balloon. On each exhale, expel all the air out from the belly through the nose. Draw the navel back towards the spine to make sure that the belly is empty of air. Have student repeat this deep belly breathing for about five breaths.

On the next inhale, fill the belly up with air as described above. Then when the belly is full, draw in a little more breath and let that air expand into the rib cage causing the ribs to widen apart. On the exhale, let the air go first from the rib cage, letting the ribs slide closer together, and then from the belly, drawing the navel back towards the spine. Repeat this deep breathing into the belly and rib cage for about five breaths.

On the next inhale, fill the belly and rib cage up with air as described above. Then draw in just a little more air and let it fill the upper chest, all the way up to the collarbone, causing the area around the heart to expand and rise. On the exhale, let the breath go first from the upper chest, allowing the heart center sink back down, then from the rib cage, letting the ribs slide closer together. Finally, let the air go from the belly, drawing the navel back towards the spine. Allow student to continue at their own pace, eventually coming to let the three parts of the breath happen smoothly without pausing. Making sure to remind them to notice the sensations that arise but to not fight or think through these thoughts. Remind them that it is only momentary and will pass as they continue to focus on the breath.

- D. Brahmarya Breath – This breath is an excellent breath to calm the nervous system. Let student know if they at any time feel anxious or unable to calm down to find a quiet space in which to practice this pranayama until they feel relaxed. As in prior breaths have student sit comfortably. Take a few deep inhales and exhales. When ready to start take the next exhale and hum through the exhale till there is no breath left. This should stay a steady rhythm of breath and the hum should be low and only one note, not varying. Continue to inhale and then exhale out the nose with the hum. Bring student's awareness to the vibration at the chest and how it creates a sense of relaxation. Student ends with a deep inhale and long slow exhale and then sits for a few moments with a natural breath.

Meditation Practice: A mindful meditation is the most helpful practice for any trauma survivor. The student will want to practice rhythmic breathing to start and then slowly allow the breath to ease into its own natural rhythm. Have students softly keep their awareness on the breath as it enters the nostril and leaves the nostril. Notice the temperature of each breath and any sensations, such as moisture.

After a few minutes on the breath have students begin to notice the body, slowly working from head down to legs. Have them rest their awareness on any sensations that arise during the scan. This awareness of the sensation is not to think or judge but to simply be aware. Remember it is helpful to remind students that these sensations are temporary and will end.

Once the body scan is finished have the students bring their awareness to the forehead between the eyebrows. Have the students' breath into this area. Once this becomes easy have them shift their awareness to a space behind within the head between the ears. Breath into this space until it becomes easy. Have students note the sensations that arise. Maybe they feel the spot of awareness begin to breathe with the inhalation and exhalation. From there have students bring awareness to the spot on the forehead on inhalation and then move awareness to spot in the mind on exhalation. Continue to shift between the two places until this becomes easier.

Once students find this awareness technique easy have them soften the breath back into its own rhythm and simply keep a softened awareness on the space between the two points. Allow thoughts to pass through with no judgment or analyzing. If certain sensations or thoughts become uncomfortable then bring attention back to a smooth and even breath, just staying aware of the sensation without judgment. Once it passes draw awareness back to the place between the two points in head. Have students practice this from 3 minutes to as long as they can keep the focus. Slowly adding time, little by little, with each meditation.

Asana Practice: Practice the following postures with blankets and blocks to support the body and help the students feel comfortable in each pose without excess strain. It is important to remember that these poses will bring up unwanted sensations. Eliminating unnecessary strain will help the student work more on the sensations without fear of hurting themselves.

Move with the breath in each pose. Allow the students to move between sides getting use to the pose in a small amount and then have them hold each side while counting out loud from five down. Remind the students before poses that if they feel uncomfortable to come out of the pose for a few breaths and to try again if possible. Do not rush or push students!

- Virasana with neck rolls (keeping eyes open).
- Virasana with arms lifting up and down along the sides. (snow angel)
- Virasana with arms lifting up and down in front. (robot)
- Virasana with one hand to the waist and other arm reaching up and slightly over the head. Stretching that side of the body.
- Virasana with arms in cactus, moving one shoulder back to move into twist and then to the other side.

- Ardha Matsyendrasana with focus on breath to move deeper into twist as comfortable
- Janu Sirsasana
- Baddha Konasana with torso lifted. Then slowly begin to tilt with breath until a comfortable forward fold is found.
- Low Lunge with focus on building strength in legs. Give a visual of a strong foundation.
- Low Lunge with arms in cactus and creating a twist from side to side.
- Utkatasana
- Ardha Uttanasana
- Padottanasana without the fold. Lift one arm up beside ear and then over for a soft stretch, repeat on other side.
- Tadasana, have student soften eyes and just become aware of any sensations in the body. Noting what the sensation is (tension, relaxation, etc) and where it is in the body.
- Allow student to choose to rest in a seated position with back supported against wall or in Savasana. Have them rest for up to 5 minutes or longer.

Once students are comfortable with this sequence more postures that emphasize hip opening can be added but remember to work slowly and not to add supine postures until after a month or more, so students have time to get acquainted with holding postures that bring up unpleasant sensations.

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