

Contemporary Yoga as Agent of Healing for Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence

Abstract

This study explores the psychological and physical benefits of contemporary yoga for female survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV).¹ My paper utilizes an interdisciplinary framework to analyze how and why the practice of yoga encourages personal growth, self-acceptance, and mindfulness, all of which help survivors rebuild their lives. The research uses the lenses of trauma and resilience theory to provide insight into how survivors of IPV integrate their experiences into a healthy post-trauma life.

The study focuses on intimate partner violence and the ways in which the incorporation of yoga helps survivors recover from abuse. I have relied on sources by Dr. Caroline Leaf, *Switch On Your Brain* and Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, et al., “Yoga as an Adjunctive Treatment for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: A Randomized Controlled Trial.” My research investigates the daily incorporation of yoga that can become a beneficial foundational therapeutic practice for domestic violence survivors’ goals of overall well-being.

This research addresses the challenges that come after a female removes herself from an abusive relationship and why yoga should be integrated into the healing process for survivors of domestic abuse. For the purpose of this research, within heterosexual or female same sex relationships, I focus on female victims of violent acts, whether by males or by other females.

¹ Intimate partner violence includes both spousal violence and violence committed in unmarried relationships, as well as in same sex relationships. Unfortunately, there is a stigma in regard to males being victims of IPV, because many lay persons believe men are always the abusers, rather than the abused. Scholars currently do not have the same amount of data to understand abuse of men in the depth they understand females as victims of IPV. This is an important topic that needs more research, but it will not be addressed in this paper and therefore I will use the pronouns she/her throughout the paper.

Introduction

My research started as a consequence of my own personal experience in a domestically abusive relationship where I nearly lost my life. My ex-partner had told me for months not to associate with my friends and family. After a long, painful journey, I escaped the relationship with help from the police, my family, an attorney, and the court of law. After my divorce was final, I felt lost on where to go next. I had lost my home, my marriage had ended, and I was isolated. It seemed that there was a lot of assistance to escape the relationship, from public safety and legal orders, but there was very little help for me after leaving the abusive relationship. I began suffering from anxiety and panic attacks during this transitional time and knew I needed to find some assistance. It was during that chaotic adjustment that I discovered yoga. Throughout my practice of yoga, I have been able to find physical and mental well-being. The practice has been so influential in my life that I wanted to research how and why yoga has played such a significant role in my healing process. The practice of yoga is multidimensional and includes physical and therapeutic roles that can help survivors overcome trauma. Through this research, I intend to bring awareness to the fact that yoga can serve as a healing agent for domestic violence survivors.

As a result of being a survivor of a domestically abusive marriage, I have suffered from anxiety, low self-esteem, and depression throughout the aftermath of leaving my abusive ex-husband. After leaving the relationship, I developed a passion for yoga because it helped me alleviate stress. Considering that I desired to pursue a healthier lifestyle, yoga was the best fit for me. I have noticed the emotional and physical benefits from the practice by practicing yoga daily either on my own or in a studio. Both forms of practice contributed to my overall well-being, but practicing in a yoga studio alongside a group of people helped to eliminate the feeling of

isolation I have experienced even after leaving the abusive relationship. As a consequence of practicing yoga, I have gained more self-awareness, contentment, and calmness. I also noticed that my mind-body awareness grew stronger. Through using yoga as a therapeutic practice, I have gained the ability to control traumatic thoughts and maintain a healthy mindset. The physical benefits I have gained are strength and overall good health. I feel that these benefits have been the most beneficial aspect of my healing process. The practice of yoga has inspired me to show other survivors how they, too, may heal from toxic relationships. Additionally, yoga has significantly lowered my stress and anxiety, which has improved my psychological health. The incorporation of yoga also has increased my flexibility and overall muscle strength, adding many benefits to my inner and outer physiological health.

My research focuses on the mental and physical benefits that survivors of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) experience when they incorporate yoga into their daily lives. The practice of yoga rehabilitates survivors to overcome and/or adjust to life by integrating the memories of previous abuse into their present lives. Survivors can use the practice of yoga to become psychologically and physically healthier. Yoga has many benefits that certainly resonate with the needs of survivors of intimate partner violence. Regular participation in yoga practices promotes health and well-being. Yoga helps survivors overcome trauma and meeting psychological and physical needs as a result of abuse.

Throughout this research, I have used the insights of trauma and resilience theory. I have incorporated the works of Bessel Van der Kolk to address the trauma theory and the work of George Bonanno to incorporate resilience theory. Sources from both of these scholars have helped to shape my understanding and work in order to link the trauma and resilience theory to yoga as a means of healing for survivors of IPV.

Few studies exist on the practice of yoga for survivors of domestic abuse, which is why I am researching this topic in order to help survivors learn about how they can achieve well-being after leaving an abusive relationship. For many survivors, yoga provides a foundation that creates a strong united community of female survivors who are actively overcoming abuse.² The importance of this research is to bring awareness to the benefits of practicing contemporary yoga in order to regain a healthy lifestyle for female survivors of intimate partner violence. I found that there is an abundance of research and resources for a victim of intimate partner violence and how the victim can remove herself from the abusive relationship, but there are few studies and resources on coping strategies for a survivor to regain her well-being. Many survivors of an abusive relationship suffer from anxiety, low self-esteem, and depression. They feel disconnected from their bodies and cannot detect how they feel and how to react to the emotions that they experience. I intend to bring awareness to the benefits of practicing contemporary yoga in order for survivors to regain a healthy psychological and physical well-being.³

The purpose of my research is personal to me, and this motivates me to create change for other women. I aim to bring awareness of the benefits of yoga to survivors. I am passionate about creating positive change for these survivors, which is the other reason I chose to research this topic. My topic is important because when a female is in an abusive relationship, she has usually been manipulated by the abuser, so that she becomes timid and afraid to speak up for herself or to act in her best interests. Domestic abuse can be mentally toxic for the victim. If the survivor does not achieve balance once she has left the toxic situation, she risks falling back to

² <https://exhaletoinhale.org/> and <https://www.purpledotyogaproject.org/>.

³ Cari Clark et al., "Trauma-Sensitive Yoga as an Adjunct Mental Health Treatment in Group Therapy for Survivors of Domestic Violence: A Feasibility Study," *Complementary Therapies in Clinical Practice* 20, no. 3 (2014): 152–158 (accessed March 3, 2018). <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.ctcp.2014.04.003>.

the toxicity and returning to her partner. She may become so desperate that she feels dependent on her abuser and incapable of surviving without him. The practice of yoga will help heal the mind and body towards a healthier well-being. Victims need all the help they can obtain to learn to live a "normal" life again. At times, if the survivor cannot find peace, she may return to what is comfortable again, often back to the abusive relationship, which could be a life-altering decision. In addition to my research about the benefits of yoga, I share my findings on the MALS website. Finally, the project culminates with a resource support website, *Yoga for Survivors*, which provides a discussion forum and source of information for survivors to assist them through this transitional period.

The next section in this paper includes the Introduction, following is Definitions, then the History of Yoga which contains the subsection Explanation on Origins and Types of Yoga. Following is the Literature Review section which contains research on the benefits of yoga practice for those who have experienced trauma, in particular female survivors of IPV. Then a section on Resilience and a Methodology section. Then the Interview Results, subsection of an Analysis of the Interview Results. Then the Conclusion section which focuses on the research, ending with the Recommendations for Further Research.

Introduction

Yoga benefits physical wellness and also provides a type of therapy that can benefit survivors of abuse. The practice of yoga connects the mind and body. Yoga consists of physical exercise, breath awareness, and meditation, which leads to healthy changes in lifestyle and cognitive thinking. It addresses where the trauma took place, whether it took place in the mental or physical aspects of the body. It is a formative therapy. Each form of abuse affects the mind and body, but abuse can happen in an array of forms. Talk-based therapy focuses on the conscious and unconscious thinking, while yoga focuses on *both* the mind and body. Yoga is a holistic practice that can be the foundation for good physical and mental health. The practice of yoga focuses on sensory experiences of breathing and physical sensations.⁴ Breathing exercises are used to treat a number of symptoms and health problems, not just for individuals with PTSD, but for those who have panic attacks, stress, anxiety, or general fear.

In her book *Living Your Yoga: Finding the Spiritual in Everyday Life*, Judith Lasater defines yoga as a “discipline [that] has less to do with accomplishment and more to do with intention and with commitment.”⁵ Lasater explains that yoga brings a “total clarity of awareness” and a “deeply connected state of being” due to yoga's ability to connect the mind and body.⁶

Caitlin Nolan's work provides a multidisciplinary perspective on domestic abuse and areas in a survivor's life where she may need assistance. In her research, Nolan focuses on the benefits of Trauma-Sensitive Yoga (TSY), which is yoga specifically designed for students who

⁴ Bessel van der Kolk, Laura Stone, Jennifer West, Alison Rhodes, David Emerson, Michael Suvak, and Joseph Spinazzola. “Yoga as an Adjunctive Treatment for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: A Randomized Controlled Trial,” *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry* 75:6, 560. (June 2014).
https://besselvanderkolk.net/uploads/3/4/9/8/34980287/yoga_f_j_clin_psychiat__1_.pdf.

⁵ (Berkeley, CA: Rodmell Press, 2000), 12.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xix.

have experienced trauma, especially post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) due to intimate partner violence.⁷ Likewise, Nolan mentions the effects of PTSD and the need for psychotherapy to address the disorder. Her research highlights the intensity of the psychological, emotional, and/or physical treatment of an IPV relationship.

The following scholarly sources provide foundational ideas and studies critical to my work. Benjamin Greenwood explains in the article, “The Role of Dopamine in Overcoming Aversion with Exercise,” that when experiencing traumatic events, the neurotransmitters in one’s brain fire differently than they do in a healthy brain.⁸ Similarly, in the book *Switch On Your Brain*, cognitive neuroscientist Dr. Caroline Leaf explains how the brain reacts and can heal from toxic thoughts and environments. Leaf’s study focuses on how healthy thoughts can physically change the nature of the brain.⁹ She elaborates, “As we consciously direct our thinking, we can wire out toxic patterns of thinking and replace them with healthy thoughts.”¹⁰ This brings hope to survivors.

Another scholar who has provided insight is Dr. van der Kolk, who is a leading scholar and practitioner.¹¹ He is an expert on trauma and advocates a controversial topic of integration of memories. In the book *The Body Keeps the Score : Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, van der Kolk includes the topic of integration and yoga which included a study of women who experienced trauma. He states, “Our decision to study yoga led us deeper into

⁷ Caitlin Nolan, “Bending Without Breaking: A Narrative Review of Trauma-Sensitive Yoga for Women with PTSD.” (PhD diss., Florida State University, 2016), 32-35, accessed February 24, 2019, ScienceDirect. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ctcp.2016.05.006>.

⁸ Benjamin Greenwood, “The Role of Dopamine in Overcoming Aversion with Exercise,” 2.

⁹ *Switch On Your Brain*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2013. Ebook, 23.

¹⁰ *Switch On Your Brain*, 23.

¹¹ van der Kolk’s personal website: <http://besselvanderkolk.net/index.html>, Neuroscience Center: <https://www.bostonneurodynamics.com/> and Trauma Center <http://traumacenter.net/index.html>.

trauma's impact on the body.”¹² Van der Kolk explains, “yoga significantly improved arousal problems in PTSD and dramatically improved our subjects' relationships to their bodies.”¹³ He elaborates on the importance of helping people who have experienced trauma feel relaxed and safe in their bodies.

Scholar Alyson Ross et al., addresses and explains the benefits of practicing yoga.¹⁴ The study brings insight to the physicality of yoga and how the practice benefits the body. Ross' work emphasizes that the practice of yoga in her everyday life helped relieve her struggles and pain from the abusive situation in which she once lived. The study highlights that the practice of yoga for survivors can increase self-awareness, which helps them tune in to the needs of their bodies. This can also help with mental stress. Each of these sources has been vital to my research because they have proven the overall well-being benefits that come from the practice of yoga.

Throughout this research, I use a humanistic perspective that addresses meaning, value, trauma, and self-actualization. This approach demonstrates how yoga can help survivors overcome the past because it helps them to cope with the numerous negative consequences of their traumatic experiences. I use a holistic perspective that emphasizes the connection of mind, body, and spirit. I use this perspective to help survivors find ways to a natural mind-body balance, such as reducing anxiety, headaches, and anxiousness. Using this approach and the incorporation of multiple sessions over time, long-term healing can happen for survivors' mental and physical health.

¹² Viking, New York, (2014): 290.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Alyson Ross, Erika Friedmann, Margaret Bevans, and Sue Thomas, “National Survey of Yoga Practitioners: Mental and Physical Health Benefits,” *Complementary Therapies in Medicine* 21, no. 4 (2013): 313-323. Accessed March 3, 2018. 10.1016/j.ctim.2013.04.001.

Physiological and psychological research is needed in order to provide the most effective resources for survivors of IPV. This topic incorporates an array of disciplines, which when merged together, provides a well-rounded solution for survivors of IPV. Allen Repko and Rick Szostak's book *Interdisciplinarity Research: Process and Theory* maps approaches to interdisciplinary writing. This book addresses numerous fields of study and the interconnectedness of interdisciplinary research topics. My research is interdisciplinary within the fields of psychology, health studies, and women's studies.¹⁵ Psychology is relevant because of the mental trauma experienced by women who have been abused in relationships as well as the mental healing provided by yoga. In an abusive relationship, the victim may experience both physical and emotional abuse. The field of health studies is important to my topic because practicing yoga can help increase strength and flexibility while bringing relaxation to the body and calmness to the mind. Women's studies correlates with the community of domestic violence survivors, with the majority being women, and the yoga community.¹⁶

¹⁵ 3rd ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2017), 36.

¹⁶ "About 1 in 4 women and nearly 1 in 10 men have experienced contact sexual violence, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner during their lifetime and reported some form of IPV-related impact." from <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/intimatepartnerviolence/fastfact.html>.

Definitions

This paper utilizes clinical terminology and assumes the following definitions.

- Abuse refers to any repeated cruelty or violence against someone.¹⁷
- Domestic violence and or domestic abuse can be any form of physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, or financial abuse in an interpersonal relationship.¹⁸
- Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is another term used frequently that is also interchangeable with the term domestic violence/abuse and can be defined as a social or behavioral action with negative effects on physical, emotional, or sexual health in both heterosexual and same-sex relationships.¹⁹
- Interpersonal Violence (IV) is another way of saying relationship violence or IPV, which includes any threat of violence such as assault, rape, or murder.²⁰

¹⁷ Angus Stevenson, "Abuse." *Oxford Dictionary of English*, Oxford University Press, (2010). https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199571123.001.0001/m_en_gb0002970.

¹⁸ Graham Gooch and Michael Williams, "Domestic Violence/Abuse." *A Dictionary of Law Enforcement*, ed. 2, Oxford University Press, (2015). DOI: 10.1093/acref/9780191758256.001.0001.

¹⁹ Bonnie E. Carlson, "Intimate Partner Violence." *Encyclopedia of Social Work*, Oxford University Press, (2008). <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195306613.001.0001/acref-9780195306613-e-210> and Cronholm, Peter F, Colleen T Fogarty, Bruce Ambuel, and Suzanne Leonard Harrison. "Intimate Partner Violence." *American Family Physician* 83, no. 10 (May 15, 2011): 1165. <https://www.clinicalkey.com/#!/content/playContent/1-s2.0-S0002838X11601627>.

²⁰ Miquel Porta and John M. Last. "Interpersonal Violence." *A Dictionary of Public Health*, Oxford University Press, (2018). <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191844386.001.0001/acref-9780191844386-e-2370>.

History of Yoga

The word “yoga” means to bind together.²¹ It has been practiced since before the twelfth century as an Ancient India tradition.²² The practice of yoga has been reinvented over the past 150 years.²³ The practice of yoga has changed over the generations to fit the specific needs of the ones practicing the art.²⁴ Yoga is practiced to improve health and then adapted into focus for specific benefits over the years.²⁵ India’s ancient yoga tradition consists of healing, spirituality, meditation.²⁶

The yoga period of Medieval Developments consists of Yoga in the Tantras, Hatha Yoga, Nāth Yogīs, and the Yoga Upanisads. The Medieval Developments period is followed by the Modern Practices of Yoga. The Modern Practices of Yoga includes, Yoga in the Tantras that used earlier traditions of yoga theory and practice.²⁷ Hatha Yoga is innovative in its view of the, “yogic body as a pneumatic, but also a hydraulic and a thermodynamic system.”²⁸ The Nāth Yogīs period highlights, “agenda of bodily immortality, invulnerability, and the attainment of supernatural powers.”²⁹ The Yoga Upanisads practice, “ metaphysical correspondences between the universal macrocosm and bodily microcosm, meditation, mantra, and techniques of yogic

²¹ ‘Yoga,’ Oxford Reference Online.

<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803125346857>.

²² David Gordon White. “Introduction: Yoga, Brief History of an Idea,” *Yoga in Practice*, edited by White David Gordon, 2. Princeton; Oxford, *Princeton University Press*, (2012). JSTOR.

²³ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 2..

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

practice.”³⁰ The Modern Yoga period is based off a historical platform and adapts present day techniques to the practice.³¹

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Swami Vivekananda introduced yoga to the western world.³² The ancient practice of yoga turned into a mass culture phenomenon.³³ Much of the yoga practiced today has very little in common with the ancient yoga.³⁴

Explanation on Origins and Types of Yoga

Yoga is an integrative holistic practice that increases relaxation and mindfulness. This approach to healthy cognitive behavior is an impactful self-care therapy that benefits a survivor’s healing process.³⁵ The practice of yoga helps to improve present body and mind functioning which improves the overall quality of life so survivors can begin to thrive. Yoga is an essential aspect of the recovery process that helps a survivor learn calming and self-regulation techniques that are taught on the mat but can be implemented beyond the mat.

The practice of yoga does not focus on how the person looks, but how the practice makes the person feel. It can be practiced by anyone at anytime. Yoga helps to refresh and improve the mind and body connection. This connection is especially important when one has experienced trauma and has tried to disassociate with her body and mind to alleviate abuse. Practicing yoga incorporates self-care and reflection in search of realigning with one’s inner peace and happiness by bringing the body and mind to a healthy medium.

³⁰ David Gordon White. “Introduction: Yoga, Brief History of an Idea,” *Yoga in Practice*, edited by White David Gordon, 19. Princeton; Oxford, *Princeton University Press*, (2012). JSTOR.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

³² *Ibid.*, 2.

³³ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁵ Benjamin Greenwood, “The Role of Dopamine in Overcoming Aversion with Exercise,” 5.

Literature Review

Women from any walk of life, race, age, education, or economic group can become victims of domestic abuse. This is an issue that needs more awareness. More research needs to be done in order to help prevent a toxic relationship and to help a survivor overcome the abusive relationship.

Survivors of intimate partner violence may have psychological or physical effects from the abuse. Stress placed on the body and mind when in an abusive relationship. There is an even bigger risk of abuse once the survivor has separates themselves from their abuser. Even after the survivor leaves the relationship, the abuser can still hold power that extends beyond physical harm; such abuse can even extend into emotional and financial control. The abuser thrives off control and dominance over the victim.

The effects of abuse may be so extensive that psychotherapy is not enough for the survivor due to its talk-based nature and primary focus on the mind. Psychotherapy neglects the physical body that experienced the trauma.³⁶ By using the yoga for therapy, survivors heal their bodies and minds. Psychotherapy positively impacts a survivor's mental state. Yoga provides therapeutic healing for the survivor that is both mentally and physically impactful. A survivor is vulnerable after leaving a toxic relationship and can benefit from this therapeutic combination.

There are numerous styles of yoga. Each style of yoga focuses on the mind, body, and soul as the positions and flow of body movements arranged differently. Each yoga lesson is different due to the environment, instructor, style, and the mindset that the student brings to the practice. There are many different approaches used in yoga classes but it consists mainly of

³⁶ "Psychotherapy." In *A Dictionary of Nursing*, edited by Martin, Elizabeth A., and Tanya A. McFerran. : Oxford University Press, 2017. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198788454.001.0001/acref-9780198788454-e-7493>.

breath awareness, physical exercise, and mediation. Contemporary yoga, is a newer form of yoga incorporates all styles but mainly reliant on variations of hatha yoga, and is more focused on fitness, mediation, and alignment.³⁷ Each class can change to fit what the student needs. Glenda Twining explains in *Yoga Turns Back the Clock: The Unique Total-Body Program that Fights Fat, Wrinkles, and Fatigue* that routine yoga practice helps to increase cardiovascular efficiency and immunity; decrease cholesterol, blood pressure, hostility, and depression; and improve balance, memory, posture, and concentration.³⁸ This benefits survivors and helps them improve emotionally and physically past the traumatic effects from the abuse.

There are many mental, emotional, and physical benefits to practicing yoga. Twining elaborates, “The International Association of Yoga Therapists groups the benefits of yoga into three categories: physiological benefits, psychological benefits, and biochemical benefits.”³⁹ These are only a few of the benefits that other survivors can gain by incorporating the practice of yoga into their daily lives.

Contemporary yoga, a subset of TSY, incorporates all different forms of yoga, which allows one to design or practice any form of yoga. This style opens up creativity and emotions from each person who practices it. Each person has her own path to the mat, which is welcoming when practicing contemporary yoga. The most important aspect of contemporary yoga is that with each type she practices, she can personalize it by adding her own style.

³⁷ A style of yoga which focuses on breathing exercises and gentle movement between postures, sometimes used as a preparation for meditation. “‘Hatha Yoga.’ *OED Online*,” Oxford University Press, June 2019. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/84570?redirectedFrom=hatha+yoga>.

³⁸ Glenda Twining, *Yoga Turns Back the Clock: The Unique Total-Body Program that Fights Fat, Wrinkles, and Fatigue*. (New York: Metro Books, 2009), 9.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

The practice consists of breathing, forms, and mindfulness that modifies to provide recovery for survivors of abuse. Throughout the practice of yoga, tension releases and she can rebuild herself. Lasater says, “The practices of yoga, which include poses, breathing, meditation, and self-awareness techniques, are difficult in and of themselves.”⁴⁰ The best part about yoga is that there is no right or wrong position, making yoga a safe place to create her own practice, find personal growth, peace, and relaxation.

Trauma defines as, “A physical injury or wound, or a powerful psychological shock that has damaging effects.”⁴¹⁴² There is a type of yoga called Trauma Sensitive Yoga (TSY) which focuses specifically on people who have been victims of abuse. Trauma Sensitive Yoga developed by Bessel van der Kolk.⁴³ The practice creates using trauma based theories and trauma survivors to construct an effective and reliable yoga routine.

TSY helps survivors improve their physical and mental health. This teaches survivors coping mechanisms and self-care. TSY helps a survivor to regain connection, both psychologically and physically. These connections are what makes this practice unlike traditional (talk) therapy, in which the patient talks to a therapist. Traditional therapy, also known as psychotherapy, addresses the mind, but not the body.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Judith Lasater, *Living Your Yoga: Finding the Spiritual in Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: Rodmell Press, 2000), 30.

⁴¹ Colman, Andrew M. "trauma." In *A Dictionary of Psychology*. : Oxford University Press, 2015. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199657681.001.0001/acref-9780199657681-e-8554>.

⁴² For more information on the term “Resilience,” refer to Steven M. Southwick, George A. Bonanno, Ann S. Masters, Catherine Panter-Brick, and Rachel Yehuda, "Resilience Definitions, Theory, and Challenges: Interdisciplinary Perspectives," *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* 5 (October 2014): 1-14. 10.3402/ejpt.v5.25338.

⁴³ Jackson, Kate. “Trauma-Sensitive Yoga.” *Social Work Today* 14, no. 6 (2014): 8. <https://www.socialworktoday.com/archive/111714p8.shtml>.

⁴⁴ “Psychotherapy.” In *World Encyclopedia*. : Philip's, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199546091.001.0001/acref-9780199546091-e-9480>.

In a TSY session the yoga instructor uses invitational language throughout the yoga class. The instructor welcomes the yoga student to try or stay in a position if it is her decision to do so. Students can let the instructor know if adjustments are not welcome. This allows the student to design the class in such a way that she feels safe.

TSY specifically focuses on survivors of abuse. Group therapy trauma yoga can help female survivors increase mental stability. Trauma-sensitive yoga generally incorporates invitational language which is to empower and help the students feel in control of their bodies.⁴⁵ There are modifications to each pose, and the choice to have no physical adjustments.⁴⁶ Cari Clark et al. elaborate on how trauma-sensitive yoga decreases anxiety, depression, and PTSD in women who are survivors of domestic abuse.⁴⁷ These feelings experienced when someone has faced a traumatic experience in her life, as Clark et al. assert. Good mental health needs to be a daily practice, not just something that occurs when problems arise. Addressing the importance of mental health with survivors of domestic abuse and recommending that survivors focus daily on their mental health can be beneficial to their state of mind. Clark explains, “This form of yoga incorporates a series of postures and breathing that aim to strengthen the connection to one’s self after the body has experienced a traumatic event, from combat to interpersonal violence.”⁴⁸ During yoga sessions, there are various themes that can be addressed by the yoga instructor. These themes are often words for meditation. For example, “In addition, four key themes are emphasized during the practice including: experiencing the present moment, making choices,

⁴⁵ Nolan, “Bending Without Breaking,” 33-34.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Cari Clark et al., “Trauma-Sensitive Yoga as an Adjunct Mental Health Treatment in Group Therapy for Survivors of Domestic Violence: A Feasibility Study,” 152–158.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 153.

taking effective action, and creating rhythms.”⁴⁹ These class themes put the survivor into a positive mindset for her practice that can be carried out in her day to day life.

The practice of yoga provides many mental benefits. Ross explains, “Even the subset of 242 subjects reporting a history of depression reported excellent mental health, with 41.7% flourishing and 49% moderately mentally healthy. It is not surprising that the more an individual does yoga, the more strongly they believe yoga improves their health.”⁵⁰ The practice of yoga encourages self-actualization, such as the realization of her present self, situation, and environment, which can help survivors overcome the past and find freedom in their futures. It allows women to express themselves in a physical way by acknowledging real feelings and moving on to growth and enlightenment. Survivors of mental and physical abuse are often hindered due to leaving/living in a toxic relationship. An awareness and understanding of yoga's numerous health benefits can impact the survivor in many positive ways. Yoga can help survivors of IPV find balance amidst the chaos.

Greenwood explains the effect that exercise can have on the physical aspect of the brain. Exercise, specifically yoga, can help regulate neurotransmitter levels to a healthy range so a survivor can have a healthy mental state.⁵¹ Other possible research could focus on measuring the impact that the practice of yoga has on the survivor's physiological health.⁵²

Leaf highlights the importance of taking time to think through issues or situations. She explains, “thinking causes important neurotransmitters—chemicals in the brain that carry electrical impulses—to flow. These neurotransmitters plus electromagnetic and quantum activity

⁴⁹ Cari Clark et al., “Trauma-Sensitive Yoga as an Adjunct Mental Health Treatment in Group Therapy for Survivors of Domestic Violence: A Feasibility Study,” 153.

⁵⁰ Ross et al., 321.

⁵¹ Benjamin Greenwood, “The Role of Dopamine in Overcoming Aversion with Exercise,” 3.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 3.

cause changes deep inside the cell, affecting genetic expression and protein synthesis...⁵³ The changes in the cells can become positive or unhealthy due to the thoughts within the brain. This stresses the importance of positive thinking to provide a healthy brain and body. Leaf goes on to elaborate, “By consciously becoming aware of your thought life you are retranscribing and changing your underlying neuronal networks. You need to uncover the toxic thoughts that create such powerful internal conflicts in your mind and that are capable of causing such radical electrochemical imbalances...”⁵⁴ In her research, Leaf explains how redirecting the brain to healthy thoughts physically changes the brain and body.⁵⁵ When survivors spend time daily practicing yoga, including meditation and breathwork, it can create a mindset of peace, self-awareness, and motivation that can physically change the matter in the brain to a healthy brain. Leaf continues, “So it is the quality of our thinking and choices (consciousness) and our reactions that determine our ‘brain architecture’—the shape or design of the brain and resultant quality of the health of our minds and bodies.”⁵⁶ Leaf researches how important it is for someone to have a healthy reaction to events or circumstances for a healthy overall well-being.⁵⁷ Incorporating positive lifestyle choices changes an unhealthy brain to a healthy, thriving brain.

Leaf elaborates on the structure of thoughts in the brain, stating they form tree-like structures called magic trees.⁵⁸ She explains, “The branches with all the memories and emotions are attached to a cell body with a type of protein that is like glue—like branches attached to a

⁵³ Leaf, 123.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 114.

tree trunk.”⁵⁹ She highlights the shift in the brain from a negative thought to a positive, healthy thought:

The electromagnetic and quantum signals from your decision to change attack the branches of the toxic thoughts, weakening them because the signals are more powerful than the negative thoughts. This causes neurochemicals to flow like oxytocin, which remolds; dopamine, which increases motivation and focus; and serotonin, which makes you feel good. These chemicals also weaken the toxic branches.⁶⁰

Leaf explains that the glue moves from the toxic tree to the healthy tree.⁶¹ When a survivor thinks positivity, areas in the brain start to change from toxic to healthy areas.

A physical change occurs in the brain when a person has been through trauma. Leaf studies the neuroplasticity of the brain and the alteration of the brain structure from a victim of PTSD.⁶² Positive thinking redesigns the structure of the brain due to its neuroplasticity.⁶³ When a victim of IPV focuses on positive thinking, healthy new circuits created in the brain.⁶⁴ Survivors can heal the area affected from the trauma by practicing self love and encouraging healthy thoughts. Leaf explains,

Neurons that don't get enough signal (the rehearsing of the negative event) will start firing apart, wiring apart, pulling out, and destroying the emotion attached to the trauma. In addition, certain chemicals like oxytocin (bonds and remolds chemicals), dopamine (increases focus and attention), and serotonin (increases feelings of peace and happiness) all start flowing around the traumatic thoughts, weakening them even more. This all helps to disconnect and desynchronize the neurons; if they stop firing together, they will no longer wire together. This leads to wiping out or popping those connections and rebuilding new ones.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ Leaf, 132.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 132.

⁶¹ Ibid., 132.

⁶² Ibid., 50.

⁶³ Ibid., 125.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 56.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 50.

When practicing yoga, a survivor can heal the exact spot in the brain that was once damaged by the abuse. This is why the practice of yoga is important for a survivor to practice daily in order to heal. Since the brain is neuroplastic, the brain is able to heal.⁶⁶ The practice of yoga can increase the serotonin and dopamine levels in the brain; over time, this helps to heal the brain.⁶⁷ This change in thinking affects all aspects of one's life.

The trauma within a domestically abusive relationship can affect victims mentally, physically, and psychologically, while the trauma from a domestically abusive relationship can affect the survivor after she has left the relationship.⁶⁸ In the article, "Bending Without Breaking: A Narrative Review of Trauma-Sensitive Yoga for Women with PTSD," Caitlin Nolan explains,

there is mounting evidence that yoga impacts autonomic nervous system (ANS) activity. The ANS is comprised of the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) and the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS). Together, the SNS and the PNS responses regulate the body's innate reaction to stress. Stress disrupts the body's equilibrium, which results in ANS imbalance: specifically increased SNS activity and decreased PSN activity... A regular yoga practice may increase PNS [peripheral nervous system] activity, particularly through the regulation of breathing... Studies have also shown that yoga may reduce the stress hormone cortisol, increase the inhibitory neurotransmitter GABA [gamma-Aminobutyric acid], and lower heart rate variability.⁶⁹

Similarly, the study "Yoga as an Adjunctive Treatment for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: A Randomized Controlled Trial" by Van der Kolk et al. involves women with chronic treatment-resistant PTSD who attend supportive therapy sessions along with a yoga program for 10-weeks to reduce PTSD symptomatology.⁷⁰ The study consists of both psychotherapeutic and

⁶⁶ Leaf, 2.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 5.

⁶⁸ Nolan, Caitlin. "Bending Without Breaking: A Narrative Review of Trauma-Sensitive Yoga for Women with PTSD," 32. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ctcp.2016.05.006>.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 33.

⁷⁰ van der Kolk et al., "Yoga as an Adjunctive Treatment for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: A Randomized Controlled Trial," 563.

pharmacologic approaches.⁷¹ Results from Van der Kolk's study show that "yoga poses are likely to help individuals to observe and tolerate physical sensations and to use this tolerance to disconnect their physical feelings from the emotional reactions to assaults in the past."⁷² Victims of domestic abuse often departmentalize, push away, or avoid dealing with trauma. Yoga can help a survivor deal and cope with her tragic past and get through in a healthy way. Van der Kolk states, "If traumatized individuals can learn to identify and tolerate physical sensations, they are likely to increase emotional awareness and affect tolerance."⁷³ This highlights the importance of yoga and its psychotherapy aspect. Yoga is powerful in the way that it heals, which can help a survivor heal from trauma. This is why yoga is important for survivors of IPV, because it provides gateways to a more positive life. The trauma theory elaborates throughout van der Kolk's work. Specifically in "The Compulsion to Repeat the Trauma: Reenactment, Revictimization, and Masochism," van der Kolk explains, "Traumatization occurs when both internal and external resources are inadequate to cope with external threat."⁷⁴ Explaining that the mind and body from the individual who experienced the trauma will react to trauma in his or her own way.

After the survivor leaves the abusive relationship, she may experience trauma bonding.⁷⁵

This is a coping mechanism that the brain does in order to protect the survivor. The brain tends

⁷¹ van der Kolk et al., "Yoga as an Adjunctive Treatment for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: A Randomized Controlled Trial," 563.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., 564.

⁷⁴ van der Kolk, "The Compulsion to Repeat the Trauma: Reenactment, Revictimization, and Masochism," *Psychiatric Clinics Of North America*. 12, (1989): 393.

http://www.traumacenter.org/products/pdf_files/Compulsion_to_Repeat.pdf.

⁷⁵ Patrick Carnes, *The Betrayal Bond : Breaking Free of Exploitive Relationships*. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, Inc. (1997): 27.

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=nlebk&AN=11778&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

to push trauma away to the unconscious and reminds itself of the positive.⁷⁶ This coping mechanism can hinder a survivor who has just removed herself from the toxic relationship. The survivor's mind may be reminding her of the positive interactions which may encourage her to go back to the abusive relationship. This could lead to harsh retaliation against the victim for leaving the relationship, which can lead to high risk associated with lethality.⁷⁷ This highlights the importance of a survivor incorporating the practice of yoga into her life. Yoga provides grounding and stability to survivors and aides in survivors not returning to the abusive relationship.

There are psychological benefits of yoga due to the interconnectedness of the mind and body, which ties into the important need for mental health therapy. Yoga helps increase contentment. Van der Kolk explains, "The mindfulness aspect of yoga is hypothesized to foster emotion regulation by simply noticing the fear, as opposed to engaging in avoidance."⁷⁸ Wherever a victim is in her journey of life, it is important to be present in the moment. When contentment has been met, the survivor can correctly analyze where she is in her journey, where she came from, and where she hopes to go.

When one has experienced abuse, the body can feel tense and have trouble resting or falling asleep. The survivor will often unconsciously compartmentalize her feelings in her body as a coping mechanism to feel no pain. Ross states that, "The large majority [yogis] agreed or strongly agreed that their yoga practice improved their general health (89.5%), energy level

⁷⁶ Dutton, Donald & S.L. Painter. "Traumatic bonding: The development of emotional attachments in battered women and other relationships of intermittent abuse." *Victimology*, 139.

⁷⁷ Judith McFarlane, Angeles Nava, Heidi Gilroy, and John Maddoux. "Risk of Behaviors Associated with Lethal Violence and Functional Outcomes for Abused Women Who Do and Do Not Return to the Abuser Following a Community-Based Intervention." *Journal of Women's Health*, 276. 10.1089/jwh.2014.5064.

⁷⁸ Van der Kolk et al., "Yoga as an Adjunctive Treatment for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: A Randomized Controlled Trial," 560.

(84.5%), and happiness (86.5%). The majority agreed or strongly agreed that yoga improved their sleep (68.5%) and their interpersonal relationships (67.0%).”⁷⁹ These life benefits would positively impact survivors of domestic abuse because their whole world has been turned upside down from the toxic relationship that they were once in and the challenge of trying to build their lives back up and find overall well-being.

Women who suffer from PTSD may find a way to cope by incorporating yoga into their lives in order to gain an overall well-being. Autumn Gallegos et al. they explain how a conducted study highlights ways to treat PTSD with yoga and mediation.⁸⁰ In a study focused on emotional treatment, Gallegos explains, “complementary health approaches may be more tolerable than trauma-focused interventions, as evidenced by drop-out rates in traditional PTSD treatment.”⁸¹ Yoga compliments the intervention treatment by helping survivors overcome the effects from the abusive relationship and aids in their mental health by a theoretical approach that can become part of the treatment for domestic survivors. This can also practiced after the treatment completed.

Ross, an expert on therapeutic yoga, conducted a group study which focused on the positive effects that participants experienced when they practiced yoga. The participants measured on sleep, energy, diet, weight and interpersonal relationships.⁸² The physical poses that used during the analysis of the study include standing poses, vigorous poses including

⁷⁹ Alyson Ross et al., "National Survey of Yoga Practitioners: Mental and Physical Health Benefits," *Complementary Therapies in Medicine* 21, no. 4 (2013): 318. doi:10.1016/j.ctim.2013.04.001.

⁸⁰ Autumn Gallegos et al., “Meditation and Yoga for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: A Meta-Analytic Review of Randomized Controlled Trials,” *Clinical Psychology Review* 58 (2017): 115-124. 10.1016/j.cpr.2017.10.004.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁸² Alyson Ross et al., "National Survey of Yoga Practitioners: Mental and Physical Health Benefits," 318-319.

backbends, sun salutations, and arm balances, inversions such as head stands and shoulder stands, and gentle and/or restorative poses.⁸³

In the rise of mental illnesses, yoga therapy is gaining popularity in order to help with reducing the symptoms of anxiety, depression, and PTSD. Unfortunately, survivors of IPV are at a higher risk for developing PTSD. Yoga can improve mental health by increasing self-awareness and decreasing stress which encourages calmness and focus. This mental help would make yoga a beneficial therapeutic treatment to anyone with anxiety or depression, especially a survivor.

The daily practice of yoga creates a solid foundation for the development of strong self-awareness. Lasater states, "In its broadest sense, yoga practice is about inviting what is unconscious to the surface so that it can be integrated into conscious awareness."⁸⁴ Yoga teaches the victim to observe and acknowledge her life where it was and is presently. The incorporation of yoga encourages a positive mindset.

When a victim practices yoga, she can focus on herself without any expectations, worry, or stress. She can be within her own thoughts and feelings while forgetting the outside world. The practice becomes a creative outlet that can strengthen her inner light. She grows in her thoughts and strengthens her self-awareness. Yoga encourages the person to focus on what her feelings of the mind and body.

The yoga mat is the place where one who has been uprooted can start to heal and move forward. She can become physically and mentally stronger while finding joy again. Practice can

⁸³ Alyson Ross et al., "National Survey of Yoga Practitioners: Mental and Physical Health Benefits," 317.

⁸⁴ Judith Lasater, *Living Your Yoga: Finding the Spiritual in Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: Rodmell Press, 2000), 91.

bring empowerment to the survivor in regards to making her own decisions and understanding how she feels. These seem like small goals, but when she has been abused, these small choices make a profound difference in the recovery process. Learning how to cope with stress in a healthy way is crucial to her well-being. By incorporating yoga into one's daily life, a person can become more present. The practice helps her to cultivate awareness found from within and off the mat.

Yoga is a healthy practice to incorporate into one's lifestyle. The practice of yoga can help the victim release stress from the body and mind to help the victim become calm, happy, and at ease, which has positive mental health benefits. Therapy is also a beneficial treatment for survivors who suffer from any mental health condition, especially PTSD. The practice brings a strong mindset and confidence to the yoga student.

The practice of yoga provides situational awareness and the healthy behaviors to control emotions. Yoga places emphasis on mindfulness to reduce stress and increase awareness of emotions and psychological well-being, such as mind-body connections. When in a controlling relationship, the victim may have a fight-flight mindset around her abuser. This highlights the survivor's need to reconnect with her mind and body in a healthy way.

Studies demonstrate the powerful mind-body benefits and this intervention is needed in order to guide survivors to a more positive and healthy lifestyle. In the article "Effects of Yoga on Depression and Anxiety of Women," M. Javnbakht et al. focus on the effects of yoga in women, specifically comparing the intervention of yoga with women who had depression and anxiety.⁸⁵ Javnbakht states, "The results indicate that yoga can effectively decrease state and trait

⁸⁵ M. Javnbakht, Hejazi Kenari, R., and Ghasemi, M.. "Effects of Yoga on Depression and Anxiety of Women." *Complementary Therapies in Clinical Practice* 15 (2009): 103–104. Accessed March 16, 2019. doi:10.1016/j.ctcp.2009.01.003.

anxiety.”⁸⁶ State anxiety occurs when there is danger.⁸⁷ Trait anxiety is where one suffers with anxious feelings over the anticipation of day to day living.⁸⁸ Anxiety can be an effect from trauma in an IPV relationship. She may visit a physician to request help with her anxiety. Javnbakht explains, “Yoga is commonly perceived as an alternative medicine.”⁸⁹ By adding the practice of yoga into her life, it may be enough to help her cope holistically. Javnbakht elaborates, “This study has shown that yoga could be an effective treatment of anxiety in women and that it has the potential to play an important therapeutic role in addition to or indeed, instead of medication.”⁹⁰ Yoga is a mind-body-lifestyle intervention that could be an alternative to medication. The practice of yoga can work alongside or take the place of treatments such as medicine or talk therapy. This explains how incorporating yoga into her life can change her brain chemistry naturally and possibly improve her coping strategies with these transitions without medications. When a survivor leaves an abusive relationship both her mental and physical body needs assistance, which is where the practice of yoga can play a formative role in her healing process.

When a survivor has been in a manipulative relationship, she has often been torn down emotionally and would benefit from self-acknowledgement and empowerment. Javnbakht explains,

Yoga classes encourage individuals to become aware of their bodies, and thus tension through specific body postures (Asana). By raising awareness of body tension and in learning a method by which this can be reduced, may serve to increase self-confidence by promoting a personal sense of control. Additionally, by focusing on and developing personal concentration and meditation could also help to facilitate self control and self

⁸⁶ M. Javnbakht, Hejazi Kenari, R., and Ghasemi, M.. “Effects of Yoga on Depression and Anxiety of Women.” *Complementary Therapies in Clinical Practice* 15 (2009): 104.

⁸⁷ Research Network on SES and Health, <https://macses.ucsf.edu/research/psychosocial/anxiety.php>.

⁸⁸ <https://macses.ucsf.edu/research/psychosocial/anxiety.php>.

⁸⁹ M. Javnbakht et al., “Effects of Yoga on Depression and Anxiety of Women,” 102.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 104.

efficacy.⁹¹

Both studies emphasize the need for and the relationship between mediation and self-acknowledgement.

When leaving an abusive relationship, it is important to gain situational awareness and make educated decisions. The practice of yoga can help survivors feel in control again. It helps them to gain awareness and to control their emotions by teaching survivors to place their thoughts and emotions in the present moment, to take in their current environment and situation, as well as change their perspective to a positive and empowering one.

The practice of yoga creates a healthier well-being. Yoga also has the physical aspect of creating a strong and energized body. Females who have experienced abuse, whether it is mental or physical, tend to negatively analyze themselves. For example, she may feel unworthy, inadequate, and unsure of herself due to the effects of being in a toxic relationship. With yoga, her attitude is capable of changing so that she will view herself more positively.

Survivors who have been abused mentally, physically, or both can have lower self-esteem or feel inadequate. They may also hesitate to make small decisions, and they may feel insecure in their daily routines. Being in an abusive relationship can cause the survivor to fear being around others or engaging in other relationships due to their past experiences. In "The Longitudinal Mental Health Benefits of a Yoga Intervention in Women Experiencing Chronic Stress: A Clinical Trial," Harkess et al. explains,

The practice of yoga provides psychological benefits. Kaitlin Harkess contends, Although stress may be a motivating and useful experience in the short-term and can lead to adaptive responses and resilience, stress that lasts over extended periods is concerning as it is physiologically detrimental and can contribute to maladaptive psychological

⁹¹ M. Javnbakht et al., "Effects of Yoga on Depression and Anxiety of Women," 104.

states, including clinical anxiety and depression.⁹²

Harkess elaborates, “While a number of individual activities may reduce stress and promote mental and physical health, yoga has been proposed as a potentially useful approach to reducing psychological distress due to its integration of physical exercise and meditation.”⁹³ Yoga offers calmness, clarity, and peace of mind.

Yoga promotes psychological benefits which a lot of survivors need because they have low self-esteem due to being in an abusive relationship. One of the reasons survivors may criticize themselves may be because they feel like their outward appearance lacks worthiness or that they have internalized degrading statements. When a survivor was in the toxic relationship, she may have been told negative things about her self-worth which can negatively impact her state of mind. This shows how intensely survivors need the feeling of contentment.

The gathering and participation for the practice of yoga as a group creates a community of women with similar views, stories, and lifestyles. This group interaction brings together survivors that have similar feelings about their own self-worth which creates a bond of understanding and encouragement while reducing feelings of isolation. Practicing yoga tends to encourage a healthier approach to life. A healthy lifestyle may consist of sleep habits, exercise, nutrition, religion, quality time with family and friends, and personal time. When practicing yoga, these healthy habits can trickle into every aspect of her life which can help her to gain an overall well-being.

⁹² Kaitlin Harkess, Paul Delfabbro, and Sarah Cohen-Woods, "The Longitudinal Mental Health Benefits of a Yoga Intervention in Women Experiencing Chronic Stress: A Clinical Trial," *Cogent Psychology* 3, no. 1 (2016): 3. doi:10.1080/23311908.2016.1256037.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 3.

Practicing yoga can help the mind and body feel at peace, which is therapeutic. Yoga is a powerful practice that connects the mind and body. It focuses on the breath, inhalation and exhalation. Breathing properly relieves stress and anxiety from the body.

The practice focuses on meditation which provides peace and concentration to the mind. Practicing yoga helps to maintain a natural mind-body balance such as reducing anxiety and depression. This is especially beneficial when trying to overcome the effects of domestic abuse. Some literature contradicts the benefits of yoga for survivors of IPV due to little information addressing the long-term mental health of survivors.⁹⁴ Contradictory research mentioned in Harkess' study found that women who practiced yoga for an hour a week for two months only experienced small or insignificant changes towards their psychological measures with chronic stress.⁹⁵ Harkess' study gathered information on females who practice yoga on a weekly basis for a limited period of time. The results may have been different if the women had been evaluated for a longer period. This would allow time for the body to adapt and change with the effects from the practice. Reaching a healthy physical and mental state takes time and consistency. Ross notes, "While the evidence of yoga's positive impact on health is substantial, nearly all published research has focused on individuals with no prior yoga experience. Few published studies have focused on the health and variations of practice in individuals who practice yoga."⁹⁶ Ross's study highlights the need for more research addressing survivors and yoga.

⁹⁴ Harkess, 14 and Ross., 314.

⁹⁵ Kaitlin N Harkess et al., "The Longitudinal Mental Health Benefits of a Yoga Intervention in Women Experiencing Chronic Stress," 14.

⁹⁶ Alyson Ross et al., "National Survey of Yoga Practitioners: Mental and Physical Health Benefits," 314.

Resilience

Victims can face an array of hurdles to be overcome in order to leave an abusive relationship. Most of those hurdles deal with physical adjustments, but the emotional hurdles can be the most challenging. Often, a victim has feelings for her abuser. Even though the abuser has harmed her, she was invested in the relationship, normally due to caring for that person. Most abusers change their personality where their charming side can turn on and lure someone into their lives, manipulating that person to feel loved and cared for.⁹⁷ Once they have reeled that person in, they slowly start to present signs of the abuse from which they gain pleasure.⁹⁸ After making the victim feel that they are in the wrong, they keep rekindling the relationship time and time again.⁹⁹ Unfortunately, this is a brutal cycle that the victim goes through until she decides to remove herself from it.

There is a transitional period from when a victim is in the midst of her abusive relationship to when she escapes. It is important for her to acknowledge her emotions during this transition. When a survivor practices yoga, it is her choice hold a pose, to stay in that pose, and to later move away from the pose. It provides modifications that can be met for anyone at any physical level. The practice of yoga connects the body and mind. This connection helps the survivor to regain control of her life.

Practicing yoga can renew a survivor. The freedom and empowerment from the practice may also view as a novelty for a survivor. After most toxic relationships end, freedom and choice has been taken away from her; when she is practicing yoga, she can find her freedom of choice

⁹⁷ "Is Your Relationship Based on Power and Control?" *National Domestic Violence Hotline*, 2015, www.thehotline.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2015/01/Power-and-Control-Wheel.pdf.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

again. It is important for survivors to gain a sense of personal control. Yoga specifically provides victims with a sense of control. That she can reclaim herself during her own practice.

Resilience is important in overcoming a toxic relationship. Dr. George Bonanno is a professor of psychology who focuses his research on resilience theory.¹⁰⁰ The term resilience is defined as, “the ability to become strong, successful, or happy again after a difficult or trying circumstance.”¹⁰¹ There are factors that encourage resilience to take place. In “Resilience in the Face of Potential Trauma,” Bonanno explains, “... many of the same characteristics that promote healthy development should also foster adult resilience.”¹⁰² A survivor has to be adaptive to change in both environment and self. In order for a survivor to recover from the past, she needs personal strength and endurance to rebuild her life. Survivors are able to recover from their abusive past and lead quality lives. Practicing yoga can help ease the recovery process by giving the survivor something to focus on and a place to feel welcomed each day.

In “Resilience in Women Who Experience Domestic Violence,” Konstantinos Tsirigotis and Joanna Łuczak explain, “The concept of resilience is used to describe the ability of the individual or group to face adversity positively, even when the environment is unfavourable. Resilience is characterised by human capacity to respond to everyday life demands in a positive way...”¹⁰³ Resilience consists of personality characteristics and skills to cope with stressful situations.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ Professor George Bonanno hosts the Loss, Trauma, and Emotion Lab, <https://www.tc.columbia.edu/LTElab/> and “Loss, Trauma, and Human Resilience: Have We Underestimated the Human Capacity to Thrive After Extremely Aversive Events?” *American Psychologist* 59, no. 1 (January 2004): 20–28. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.59.1.20.

¹⁰¹ Garner, Bryan A. "resilience." In *Garner's Modern English Usage*. : Oxford University Press, 2016. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780190491482.001.0001/acref-9780190491482-e-6769>.

¹⁰² Bonanno, George A. “Resilience in the Face of Potential Trauma.” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 14, no. 3 (June 2005): 136. doi:10.1111/j.0963-7214.2005.00347.x.

¹⁰³ Tsirigotis, Konstantinos, and Joanna Łuczak. “Resilience in Women Who Experience Domestic Violence.” *Psychiatric Quarterly* 89, no. 1 (December 2017): 203. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s1126-017-9529-4>.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 204.

Konstantinos and Łuczak explain in a study of women, "... psychological violence and physical violence were the most commonly experienced forms of violence, while the person most often inflicting violence against them was the husband."¹⁰⁵ The study highlights the importance of resilience. Resilience played a large role throughout my journey away from the traumatic experience of IPV. Konstantinos and Łuczak goes on to explain that, "Resilience of study women suffering domestic violence was lower than resilience of the general population, not experiencing domestic violence."¹⁰⁶ The study emphasizes the importance of survivors incorporating the practice of yoga into their daily lives. Konstantinos and Łuczak state,

"...domestic violence experienced by women in the form of disturbed psychological functioning and physical health, resilience is damaged by that too, which ought to be taken into account when devising and implementing help schemes for those women. Therefore, it seems advisable to also consider that aspect of the psychological functioning of women experiencing domestic violence in actions aimed at providing them with psychosocial help."¹⁰⁷

Both of my interviewees had suffered from IPV and made statements that indicate they are resilient. The practice of resilience is psychological which enables a person to cope with stress.¹⁰⁸ By incorporating yoga into mine and my interviewee's lives, our level of resilience increased, allowing us to cope with IPV.

¹⁰⁵ Tsirigotis, Konstantinos, and Joanna Łuczak. "Resilience in Women Who Experience Domestic Violence," 209.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 209-210.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 209.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 204.

Methodology

The methodologies used in my research paper have elements of autoethnography due to the personal connection from my past relationship. In the book *Critical Autoethnography: Intersecting Cultural Identities in Everyday Life* by Robin Boylorn and Mark Orbe, autoethnography define “as cultural analysis through personal narrative.”¹⁰⁹ I conducted observational research on myself and others. I used the data gathered in the interviews that I conducted to draw parallels between the data and my own life. For these results, I highlighted similarities between myself, my life, and my data.

To start this interdisciplinary research, I searched an array of subjects connected to the practice of yoga. I studied scholarly work pertaining to neuroscience, psychology, and physiology with an emphasis on how yoga can impact survivors of trauma. Throughout my research process, I discovered the connection between psychology and physiology. Many overall well-being health benefits come from these fields due to the practice of yoga and the mind-body connection the practice provides. Throughout this research process, I learned how interdisciplinary the topic of IPV is and the imperative need for survivors to incorporate a healthy daily routine.

I interviewed two yoga instructors to better understand the benefits that yoga can provide. I conducted phenomenological semi-structured interviews.¹¹⁰ Roulston explains semi-structure interviews. She states, “interviewers refer to a prepared interview guide that includes a number of questions. These questions are usually open-ended, and after posing each question to the

¹⁰⁹ Robin M. Boylorn, and Mark P. Orbe. *Critical Autoethnography: Intersecting Cultural Identities in Everyday Life*. Routledge, 14.

¹¹⁰ Kathryn Roulston, *Reflective Interviewing: A Guide to Theory and Practice*, London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2010. 14-15 and 16-19. doi:10.4135/9781446288009.

research participant, the interviewer follows up with probes seeking further detail and description about what has been said.”¹¹¹ I chose this method to gather the most information on the benefits of yoga. The interviews were held over a recorded phone call to document the interviews and collect data.

In *Reflective Interviewing*, Roulston explains, “interviews have been used by researchers working from different theoretical approaches, and how these might be applied in their own research studies.”¹¹² Roulston's work helped me to understand efficient and effective ways to conduct research material and analyze results, as well as strengthen my interviewer skills. I interviewed two female yoga instructors to learn their beliefs about the benefits of yoga on their students. I conducted phone interviews for both interviews.¹¹³ During the interviews, I coded themes discovered throughout the conversations to organize data.¹¹⁴ In “Doing Interviews,” Steinar Kvale explains, “Coding involves attaching one or more keywords to a text segment in order to permit later identification of a statement, whereas categorization entails a more systematic conceptualization of a statement, opening for quantification; the two terms are, however, often used interchangeably.”¹¹⁵ The codes I used were mental and physical effects from the practice of yoga. Themes that emerge from my interviews and my autoethnographic analysis are physiological and neurological benefits. The interviews highlight cultural experiences of female victims of IPV.

¹¹¹ Kathryn Roulston, *Reflective Interviewing: A Guide to Theory and Practice*, London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2010, 15.

¹¹² London: SAGE Publications Ltd (2010): 1. doi:10.4135/9781446288009.

¹¹³ The appendix provides a list of the interview questions used to conduct the interviews.

¹¹⁴ *Reflective Interviewing: A Guide to Theory and Practice*, 151-154.

¹¹⁵ Steinar Kvale. *Doing Interviews. Doing Interviews*. London: SAGE Publications, Ltd, (2007), 105. doi: 10.4135/9781849208963.

The two yoga instructors I chose to interview are well known in the yoga community. Of the two yoga instructors I interviewed, one is an instructor specializing in Trauma Informed Yoga and the other interviewee is a yoga therapist. I found the two interviewees through their social media accounts where I contacted them directly.

Interview Results

The results from my interviews link to autoethnographic introspection and scholarly literature findings. The results support my research question to discover if the practice of yoga can provide positive psychological and physiological results for survivors of domestic abuse. The two interviewees advocate using the practice of yoga as a healing agent for survivors of domestic abuse. The common theme revealed by coding in both interviews links to physiological and neurological benefits.

In the first interview, I interviewed a PTSD/trauma trained yoga therapist, who has been practicing yoga for nearly a decade.¹¹⁶ During Interviewee One's college years, she was raped. This tragic event caused her significant emotional trauma that trickled into numerous areas of her life and eventually led to a harmful lifestyle. Interviewee One recalled, "I closed up, wasn't living a healthy lifestyle, relied on drugs and alcohol to feel full and numb the pain from the rape."¹¹⁷ Later in life, she decided to join a dear friend at a yoga class.

After months of continuing to practice, yoga became her escape from the trauma and her way to heal the pain. She found the importance of showing up on her mat. Interviewee One elaborated, "Yoga has been a regular practice by allowing [me] to connect with my body."¹¹⁸ She explains how her mat is her meter and how it gauges her spiritual, emotional, and physical levels to feel a sense of awareness and stability.¹¹⁹ Interviewee One goes on to elaborate on the physiological and neurological benefits from practicing yoga. Interviewee One says, "Our bodies are like a vehicle. What we put in them is what's coming out," suggesting the importance of

¹¹⁶ Interviewee One. Interview by Taylor Ohman. Phone Interview. March 18, 2019.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

taking care of our physical bodies and our mental health in order to become our best selves. The practice of yoga can influence an all around healthier lifestyle such as adequate sleep, diet, and exercise will result in an overall healthier, happier people. Yoga provides a solid foundation for both physical and mental health. Interviewee One acknowledges the benefits from her practice of yoga, explaining the benefits of effective breath work and how focusing of her breathing is now a coping mechanism for her. Interviewee One shared how she taught yoga to a man who was partially paralyzed, and after years of instructing visualization, breath, and meditation yoga, he was able to walk again which highlights how impactful the practice of yoga can be for someone who has been physically injured, specifically victims of IPV. Interviewee One stated, “Yoga helps to eliminate feelings of fear and anxiety. It is a stress relief. Yoga helps emotionally and mentally.”¹²⁰ When feeling anxious, it is not just the physical aspect from the poses that we can control, we can also control our breathing. By forcing the mind to focus and control our breathing, it not only oxygenates the blood but also places our thoughts on something other than what causes a rise of stress and anxiety. Interviewee One elaborates on how humans store trauma in the body and mind, which is why transitioning from the cause of fear to focusing on our breath can provide a sense of calmness. Interviewee One stated, “Yoga makes pathways.”¹²¹ Studies have shown that yoga does create healthy pathways in the brain.¹²² These pathways gain by incorporating positive actions and thoughts.¹²³ Interviewee One highlighted the importance of taking care of our bodies both mentally and physically and how yoga impacts numerous aspects

¹²⁰ Interviewee One. Interview by Taylor Ohman. Phone Interview. March 18, 2019.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Benjamin Greenwood, “The Role of Dopamine in Overcoming Aversion with Exercise.” *Brain Research*, 5. August 28, 2018. Accessed April 1, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.brainres.2018.08.030>.

¹²³ Leaf, *Switch On Your Brain*, 33.

of our daily lives. This also includes cognitive changes in the pathways of the brain.¹²⁴ This interview highlighted the physiological and neurological benefits of incorporating yoga into one's daily life.

I also interviewed another yoga instructor, Interviewee Two, who has been practicing yoga for ten years.¹²⁵ Interviewee Two specializes in Trauma-Informed Yoga and is the Founder and Executive Director of a nonprofit organization that incorporates yoga for domestic violence survivors. Interviewee Two is a survivor of domestic abuse. This trauma led her to suicidal thoughts. She knew she needed to find something to help clear her head and discovered yoga. Interviewee Two found that her yoga practice benefitted her life and made her want to share it with others. Interviewee Two stated, "Through healing comes transformation," which indicates that healing impacted her.¹²⁶ After abuse, the prefrontal cortex stops firing as many neurons, but yoga helps to reactivate that part of the brain, tuning into the part of the brain that was damaged.¹²⁷ The neurological benefits from yoga provided Interviewee Two with a healthier mindset.

Interviewee Two explained how she felt lost during a transitional period in her life. She knew there was something about yoga that brought more positivity and less suffering. Interviewee Two expresses the importance of showing up to practice, explaining that the time on the mat helps to explore and heal a void. Yoga created a shift for her. Her cup was overflowing and she wanted to share this gift of yoga. Interviewee Two volunteered at a domestic violence shelter which inspired her to focus her nonprofit on victims of abuse. She mentions the

¹²⁴ Interview One. Interview by Taylor Ohman. Phone Interview. March 18, 2019.

¹²⁵ Interview Two. Interview by Taylor Ohman. Phone Interview. March 26, 2019.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Benjamin Greenwood, "The Role of Dopamine in Overcoming Aversion with Exercise," 2.

importance of applying training in everyday life. Interviewee Two says, “Everyone can practice, anyone willing to show up, anyone present and willing. It takes dedication.”¹²⁸ She explains how yoga can be practiced by anyone, it just takes showing up regularly to practice. Yoga can practice in several ways. Interviewee Two states, “Just breathe, yoga has very little to do with the physical aspect at its core, it is all about connecting. If all you do is sit there, then you are doing yoga. The breath is the base work of any yoga practice.”¹²⁹ The practice of yoga is not just physical and psychological but also contains the practice of mediation. Interviewee Two highlights the flexibility of the practice of yoga for survivors of IPV. A survivor can show up on the mat just to practice breathwork to calm the brain or participate in a more physical practice through flows.

Interviewee Two feels that she can make better choices in her life due to practicing yoga. When you incorporate something healthy in your lifestyle, it encourages more healthy aspects to become part of your daily life. Interviewee Two explains how important her yoga practice is to her. Interviewee Two states, “I have no other choice, the application is key. My life is so much brighter now, I am suffering much less, and no longer emotionally unstable.”¹³⁰ These are the effects that Interviewee Two has experienced in her own life, both mentally and physically, by practicing yoga.

Interviewee Two explains how she enjoys getting on her mat for overall well-being. Interviewee Two explains, “The mind works better with connection and breath and yoga provides that ability to gain perspective. Your practice will provide an overall peace and

¹²⁸ Interview Two. Interview by Taylor Ohman. Phone Interview. March 26, 2019.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

calmness.”¹³¹ The term “getting on the mat,” is something both interviewees mention in their interviews. This term explains that the person has a calming place to go to. Practicing yoga also provides myself with a sense of peace and safety both physically and mentally.

Analysis of the Interviews Results

My intent was to interview two instructors who had students affected by IPV. Each instructor has practiced yoga and helped many students from all walks of life, in particular, ones who have been through traumatic experiences. Throughout the interviews I found that these two interviewees also were victims of IPV. The interviews focused on the practice of yoga and the benefits from incorporating yoga into one’s daily life. These yogis were able to provide me with deep insight on how the benefits of yoga induced well off the mat. The recurring theme I noticed throughout the interviews was the resilience each woman had and the immense positive impact that yoga had on their overall well-being.

¹³¹ Interview Two. Interview by Taylor Ohman. Phone Interview. March 26, 2019.

Conclusion

My conclusions based on the research of secondary studies that support the conclusions of the interviews and my personal experience. I have found that there are very few resources for survivors long-term, that is, after they leave the abusive relationship. My research and personal experience shows that yoga provides an extensive number of benefits for a survivor's mind and body. It should be a fundamental tool for survivors after leaving the toxic relationship.

My research process of analyzing how therapeutic exercise can benefit survivors of intimate partner violence can become a foundational element in a survivor's healing process. As Ross suggests, "The more they practiced yoga, whether in years, number of classes, or amount of home practice, the higher their odds of believing yoga improved their health."¹³² Yoga can play a significant factor in the healing process for survivors.

The regular practice of yoga can influence other lifestyle factors such as sleep, diet, social interactions, work, and exercise. Yoga therapy groups will provide peace, comfort, and support for survivors. When a survivor thinks positively and feels physically fit, she will have a greater sense of well-being.

My study indicates that the practice of yoga impacts women in a number of positive ways. When a survivor needs to let go of the past and allow herself to be open to what the future holds, the practice of yoga allows her to recover from negative past memories with present-day activities and goals. Many survivors learn through yoga that abusive relationships in their pasts do not have to define their futures. Incorporating yoga into her daily life will increase her physical and mental health so she will not just heal her psychological wounds, she will build emotional resilience and thrive. Based on the conclusions from my research, including the

¹³² Alyson Ross et al., "National Survey of Yoga Practitioners: Mental and Physical Health Benefits," 322.

interviews and my personal experience, I have found that yoga should be a foundational practice in the healing process for survivors of intimate partner violence.

Recommendations for Further Research

Studies exist that claim there are many benefits of yoga in numerous areas addressing one's well-being,¹³³ but there is a lack of research within the time frame from when a victim leaves her abuser until she has recovered healing from the abuse. Studies need to be conducted on survivors who incorporate yoga into their lives during this time period in order to evaluate the psychological and physical benefits that come from the practice of yoga both long and short term. They are isolated studies that show none or very little increase in a participant's overall health when incorporating yoga into her life. Short-term studies are still reliable but are not as comprehensive and long-lasting as they should be in order to gather all the information needed. Long-term studies need to be conducted that include follow-up studies which would be beneficial to the field. Yoga used as a healing agent from IPV is working its way into research studies, and several domestic violence shelters have introduced yoga to survivors as part of their healing process.

Moreover, as Nolan explains, "Future research should include larger-scale, rigorous studies that examine more diverse populations and larger samples and should be conducted by independent researchers."¹³⁴ Future studies are needed on women who have experienced the trauma of IPV and who also practice TSY. There is a need for this research in order to understand the needs of survivors, so that they can receive the help they need.

¹³³ *Yoga for Health*. Updated May 2012. Bethesda, Md: U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health, National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, 2012., "Yoga Benefits the Body and Mind." *Occupational Health*, (June 7, 2013). *Gale Academic Onefile* (accessed September 22, 2019). https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A337144772/AONE?u=tel_a_etsul&sid=AONE&xid=b4a88860., and *International Journal of Yoga - Philosophy, Psychology and Parapsychology* (n.d.). *Gale Academic OneFile* (accessed September 22, 2019). https://link-gale-com.iris.etsu.edu:3443/apps/pub/8RMO/AONE?u=tel_a_etsul&sid=AONE., and *Yoga Journal (Online)*. Berkeley, CA: California Yoga Teachers Association, 1975.

¹³⁴ "Bending Without Breaking," 39.

I advocate research into long-term benefits from a more in depth and prolonged practice of yoga by the research subjects. Reviewing the practice of yoga by subjects practicing over a longer period of time and incorporated into a survivor's daily life, her psychological health has a greater chance of improving. I agree with the analysis by Ross regarding the limited number of studies that research females who regularly practice yoga after leaving an abusive relationship. This lack of research is why I feel it is important to generate more information in this area. The current studies conducted included females who did not incorporate yoga into their daily lives. Studies should also conduct survivors who have practiced yoga regularly before, during, and after their abusive relationship and examine if there is a significant difference in their overall well-being versus survivors who incorporate yoga into their lives after the abusive relationship.

Further research is also needed on a survivor's mental and physical health directly after she leaves the abusive relationship in order to evaluate the benefits a survivor may gain by practicing yoga. Research should conduct how the practice of yoga controls or possibly eliminates trauma bonding. This can be a crucial transitional time for survivors; if their needs are not met, the risk of returning to the abusive relationship may increase. There are safe spaces and other domestic violence shelters that offer some forms of counseling and life skills for women immediately after they remove themselves from the abusive relationship. More knowledge is needed on the IPV population and how the social work community can provide more resources to IPV survivors. There is an interdisciplinary approach needed in order to assist IPV victims and survivors. It includes psychology and social work disciplines working in tandem with this issue of intimate partner violence. The effects from IPV can be both physiological and psychological which makes the need for survivor support complex in regards to how the survivor was affected by the abuse and the intensity of those effects.

Other scholars and practitioners should conduct similar studies to Greenwood's research, which explains the change in neurotransmitter levels, in order to further understand how those levels can be regulated to a healthy range.¹³⁵ Equally important is understanding how inflammation affects the brain due to stress. He elaborates on how inflammation in the brain can impact a person's thought process, specifically in the prefrontal cortex.¹³⁶ Medicine may prescribe to help level out the serotonin and dopamine levels.¹³⁷ Greenwood's study explains how these levels may need to be lowered and that is where exercise such as yoga could help.¹³⁸

The benefits for survivors to incorporate the daily practice of yoga highlighted throughout this research. Further research is still needed for survivors of IPV. Research is needed during the transitional period of the removal from the abusive relationship to finding their own path and gaining overall well-being again. The incorporation of holistic mind-body therapy, such as yoga, shows significant benefits for survivors of IPV.

¹³⁵ Benjamin Greenwood, "The Role of Dopamine in Overcoming Aversion with Exercise," 3.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. Who can practice yoga?
2. How did you become interested in practicing yoga?
3. Did you ever consider giving up practicing yoga and if so, why?
4. How many years have you been practicing yoga?
5. Why did you decide to become a yoga instructor?
6. How many years have you been a yoga instructor?
7. What type of training did you have to be able to teach yoga (and/or trauma classes)?
8. What types of yoga exercises are most suitable for those who have experienced trauma?
9. What benefits come from practicing yoga?
10. What benefits have you gained from practicing yoga?
11. What types of benefits do you see from your students by incorporating the practice of yoga (or trauma yoga) into their life?
12. What would you tell prospective students or those who have never practiced yoga, what are its benefits?