

Overcoming Trauma through Yoga

Reclaiming Your Body

David Emerson

Elizabeth Hopper, PhD

FOREWORDS BY

Peter A. Levine, PhD

Stephen Cope, MSW

INTRODUCTION BY

Bessel A. van der Kolk, MD

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*We would like to dedicate this book
to survivors of trauma everywhere.*

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Elizabeth Hopper

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Foreword

YOGA HAS BEEN PRACTICED in the East for thousands of years, and its adepts have claimed numerous benefits: physical, emotional, and spiritual. Until recently, however, these effects have not been quantified scientifically. With Bessel A. van der Kolk's compelling research on the efficacy and positive physiological effects of yoga in trauma recovery, a vital new application for this ageless health-promoting method has been revealed. This should be of no surprise when we realize that a common denominator of all traumas is an alienation and disconnection from the body and a reduced capacity to be present in the here and now. Indeed, some survivors of trauma are attracted to yoga classes. However, many more would be overwhelmed by a room full of other people deep-breathing, sweating, chanting, and straining into seemingly impossible body postures.

In this landmark book the authors bridge this gap and offer survivors a gentle, step-by-step, *mindful* yoga that is tailored for their specific needs. They help survivors to develop a trauma-sensitive yoga practice that they can apply in the safety of their own homes. *Overcoming Trauma through Yoga* begins with a clear, accurate, and informative summary of what trauma is. It dispels common myths about trauma and invites understanding and self-compassion. The authors then help the reader to encourage present-moment experience, to

learn about making choices from inner impulses, to move rhythmically within themselves, and to interact positively with others.

The next phase of the book encourages therapists to practice yoga themselves and then helps these clinicians integrate yoga-based practices into their therapy practice.

Finally, there is an informative section for yoga instructors to help them design trauma-sensitive yoga classes. The authors discuss how teachers can create a safe environment through the use of invitational, exploratory, and accepting language to promote inner experiencing. Further, they describe the qualities teachers need to cultivate in order to work effectively with traumatized students. They also give valuable advice on what to do if students are triggered in their traumatic reactions by different yoga postures and breathing patterns. In this way the risks of retraumatization are greatly reduced while healing possibilities are enhanced.

David Emerson and Elizabeth Hopper do all of this from the joined perspective of an expert yoga teacher and an experienced trauma therapist. This well-conceived book is a tremendous resource for therapists and yoga teachers. By engaging the wisdom of their bodies, it is a great companion and guide to those taking the journey of recovery from trauma to wholeness. *Overcoming Trauma through Yoga* is a gift for those taking the hero's journey of recovery and vibrancy.

Peter A. Levine, PhD,
author of *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma* and
In an Unspoken Voice: How the Body Releases
Trauma and Restores Goodness

Foreword

WHEN I WAS IN GRADUATE SCHOOL, a mentor of mine said something that seemed exceedingly important. He was talking about psychoanalysis, but I thought what he said applied to all of life. He said, “The goal of psychoanalysis is to help the patient acknowledge, experience, and bear reality.”

Acknowledge, experience, and bear reality. Yes! Each of those three words seemed exactly right. But I was most interested, at the time, in the final word: “bear.” He was giving voice to something I already knew: the reality of our experience here on this planet can be difficult to bear.

I had never heard anyone say this quite so directly. And it came as a kind of relief to me, quite frankly, to know that others also have difficulty bearing life.

Human beings are tender creatures. We are born with our hearts open. And sometimes our open hearts encounter experiences that shatter us. Sometimes we encounter experiences that so violate our sense of safety, order, predictability, and right, that we feel utterly overwhelmed—unable to integrate, and simply unable to go on as before. Unable to bear reality. We have come to call these shattering experiences trauma. None of us is immune to them.

Trauma may result from overwhelming or violent physical experiences, or from difficult psychological and emotional experiences. Its impact may be sudden and dramatic—or the result of gradual and unrelenting violations of our very sense of self. Sometimes, we are not even aware that we're experiencing trauma until weeks, months, or even years have passed. Its damage can be quiet, creeping, and insidious.

I spent my entire childhood in a family whose life was profoundly colored by the effects of trauma—and yet we were only vaguely aware of its presence. My father—like so many of my friends' fathers—had fought in World War II. Fresh out of college and at the tender age of twenty-two—a brilliant scholar, kind, sensitive, handsome, winning—he found himself on the killing fields in Italy and Sicily with altogether too little preparation. And he was quietly tortured for the rest of his life by his experiences there.

My brother and sisters and I only recognized the poisonous effects of trauma with hindsight. All we knew as kids was that whenever a war movie came onto the TV set, Dad would quietly get up and leave the room. We would find him on the back porch smoking a cigarette and gazing into the middle distance. We found out later that his actions during the war were heroic. But he never talked about them. He could not. He simply did not have words. They had shattered something inside, very close to his heart. His quiet suffering affected us all. And perhaps the most difficult aspect of our experience as a family was that our collective trauma was never named. It was never addressed. It was invisible.

We are fortunate today to live in a time when this form of suffering is named. Over the past twenty-five years a whole cadre of experts—psychologists, social workers, doctors, nurses, neuroscientists, social scientists—have begun to drill down into the suffering of trauma, attempting, at last, to understand precisely how it works. And how it might be healed.

Our decades of study have yielded tremendous results. And one of the most interesting of these is our growing understanding of how trauma affects the body. We now recognize that trauma plays out its debilitating course *in the body*.

In trauma, the body's alarm systems turn on and then never quite turn off. And we experience the intense suffering of never truly feeling relaxed, at ease in life, always intensely on guard, with the primitive brain constantly scanning for threat or opportunity. Our inner sentry is always on watch. We cannot sleep. Our trust in the rightness of things is destroyed. Worst of all, for those of us who have been traumatized, the body becomes a kind of alien force. We perceive it as unknown, unpredictable, unreliable, even "the enemy."

But our understanding of the body's response to trauma has brought encouraging news. It is possible to intervene directly in the body's difficult state of hyperarousal. We now know that we can intentionally and systematically intervene in the body's own alarm systems and begin to turn them down.

I have seen various kinds of body interventions work dramatically—but none more so than the physical practices of yoga. Yoga is part of an ancient system meant precisely to address human suffering—and particularly to address it in the body, where it lives.

I have spent most of my adult life studying yoga. And I have come to see that it can be a particularly healing intervention for those tormented by the unhealed effects of trauma.

Yogis discovered that there are two primary roots to physical suffering. One is craving and its many effects: greed, grasping, clinging, addiction. The other is aversion: fear, terror, hatred, avoidance, anger, resentment. Trauma is an aversive state par excellence—a hardwired, persistent aversive state. Yogis—practicing intensively over the course of hundreds of years—learned to reach in and turn off the switches that control fear, terror, aversion. To turn down the volume on hatred and resentment. And to systematically begin to reestablish feelings of well-being.

Over the past ten years some of America's leading trauma experts have begun to employ yoga in the treatment of trauma. The Kripalu Institute for Extraordinary Living, which I direct, is now involved in some of the first sophisticated research into the effects of yoga on trauma.

And we are lucky now to have an excellent book exploring this emerging field. David Emerson and Elizabeth Hopper have brought

us a practical and comprehensive look at the many ways in which yoga techniques can intervene in the complex processes of trauma. Their book is a clearheaded and compelling investigation of yoga and trauma. It will offer a very practical form of hope to thousands, and a platform for the development of a new wing of trauma research. It is a welcome and important contribution, and I recommend it to you.

Stephen Cope, MSW,

director of the Kripalu Institute for Extraordinary Living and
author of *Yoga and the Quest for the True Self*

Introduction

BESSEL A. VAN DER KOLK, MD

*Founder and Medical Director of the
Trauma Center at Justice Resource Institute*

THERE MUST BE many different things that inspire people to develop a yoga practice, and what got us at the Trauma Center involved in yoga was rather peculiar. After all, what does it take to get a rather conventional person to stand on one leg with his fingers pointing at the sky for prolonged periods of time, or to casually lie on the floor to assume the posture of a happy baby?

Somewhere around 1999 we became familiar with a new biological marker called heart rate variability (HRV). HRV had recently been discovered to be a good way to measure the integrity of one of the brain's arousal systems, the one located in the oldest part of the brain: the brain stem. Well-regulated people tend to have robust HRV, which is reflected in their ability to have a reasonable degree of control over their impulses and emotions. This is mirrored in the capacity of their inhalations and exhalations to produce rhythmical fluctuations in heart rate. People who are easily thrown off balance tend to have low HRV, and they also are at risk for developing a variety of illnesses, including depression, heart disease, and cancer.

After several months we had collected enough tracings of our traumatized patients to make us conclude that they have unusually low HRV. This could help explain why traumatized people are so reactive to minor stresses and so prone to develop a variety of physical illnesses. Aside from our scientific interest, there also was a more per-