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YogaHome:

Emotional, Physical, and Social Impacts of a Yoga Program on Community Homeless Shelter Residents

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This article reports on a qualitative analysis of semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with 12 women and 2 men who participated in a community-based yoga program, run by a certified yoga teacher and a social worker, at a homeless shelter in a medium-sized city in the Midwestern United States. This restorative yoga program was developed in the shelter in response to the severe stress of being homeless and the chaotic nature of shelter life. Based on an analysis of transcribed interviews, the following themes were generated and discussed: Yoga as Relaxation, Stress Relief, Pain Relief, and Future Practice. The challenges and adaptations used when working with this population were stressed so that other programs might be developed to address the mental and physical health and social needs of the sheltered homeless.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness issued a revised report in 2011 about the state of homelessness in America. The most recent data reported therein are from 2009 and suggest that the majority of states have experienced an increase in homelessness in the last decade. Families are increasingly vulnerable to becoming homeless, as are veterans and people who have previously been incarcerated (Paquette, 2011). Severe housing-cost burden, unemployment, low annual income, and foreclosure have also increased. These factors contribute significantly to homelessness (Pasi, 2011). Nationally, about 19% of homeless people are considered chronically homeless. Lack of affordable housing, low income, mental illness, and disability are just a few of the reasons for this problem. People who are chronically homeless are also more likely to have mental health and co-occurring substance-use disorders (Davis-Berman & Farkas, 2012; Rickards et al., 2010).

Limited research has been conducted on the use of yoga with marginalized populations, such as people in poverty, incarcerated populations, and the homeless. It is quite difficult to design and conduct this research due to the transient and often inaccessible nature of these groups. Despite these challenges, preliminary evidence of positive impacts of yoga

on stress reduction and well-being among inner-city students and among incarcerated women has been reported (Berger, Silver, & Stein, 2009; Harner, Hanlon, & Garfinkel, 2010; Mendelson et al., 2010).

In response to the severe stress of being homeless and living in the shelter system, yoga programs have been designed as intervention methods to help people cope and improve their quality of life. For example, Street Yoga (www.streetyoga.org) was founded in 2002 at a day shelter and school serving homeless youth. Since that time, their yoga programs have focused on youth and families that are homeless, in poverty, and/or struggling with abuse, addiction, or trauma (Davis-Berman & Farkas, 2012).

Another program that has generated some preliminary research data is the Integrative Restoration Institute (iRest) (www.irest.us) yoga nidra program. This program attempts to integrate unresolved issues of mind and body using a 10-step protocol. The iRest approach has been applied to homeless populations in a few states, but most extensively within a program in California called Committee on the Shelterless (COTS) (www.cots-homeless.org). In collaboration with the Institute of Noetic Sciences, COTS offers and evaluates yoga programs within homeless populations. Two groups of homeless adults ($n = 26$) took part in a four to six week yoga nidra course. Multiple measures developed for this study were administered before and after the completion of the yoga intervention. It is difficult to fully interpret these data because only the responses of those who completed the entire program were used, and this number was not specified. The post-intervention data indicated that scores decreased on a number of measures, including anxiety, perceived stress, hostility, depression, and somatic symptoms. The report on this study talked about the difficulty in doing research in the shelter, because some residents left the shelter during the study for various reasons. There was no control group used in this study. Thus, one could argue that the changes observed were not a result of the yoga nidra program (Vieten, 2012).

Although some interesting attempts have been made to examine the impact of yoga practices within marginalized populations, numerous difficulties consistently emerge in trying to conduct this research.

Small and often transient samples characterize research with the homeless. There is often a high dropout rate in the studies, making data collection and interpretation difficult. The selection of measurement instruments is also a challenge, because illiteracy, drug and alcohol impairment, and mental illness may be issues among the subjects.

A recent article (Davis-Berman & Farkas, 2012) addresses the challenges of designing and implementing a yoga program for homeless adults. What began as a structured yoga program in an urban shelter with a well-developed quantitative research plan became a more flexible program, with in-depth interviews used to collect data instead of survey instruments. The original plan involved a structured weekly yoga sequence, as well as the collection of data on depression and anxiety using survey instruments. The biggest challenge, from both a yoga practice and a research perspective, was the transient nature of the shelter population. Changing enrollment on a weekly basis made strict yoga sequencing impossible from one week to the next. Different levels of physical ability and various physical and mental illnesses were challenges to developing both the yoga sequence and the research plan. As a result, the use of quantitative measures was abandoned and in-depth interviews were employed. Although not a strictly predefined sequence, the yoga practice generally involved beginning with a short grounding meditation to help participants transition from the chaos of the moment to being present in the yoga room. This was usually followed by breath work and simple standing postures. All sessions ended with a short meditation and guided visualization (Davis-Berman & Farkas, 2012).

The present qualitative study is based on the same style of shelter yoga classes and the same face-to-face interview methodology used by Davis-Berman and Farkas (2012). It builds on the previous literature in that it focuses on applying the positive findings about the impact of yoga to an increasingly vulnerable segment of the population, the homeless. Shelter life is known to be extremely stressful and chaotic (Davis-Berman, 2011). The purpose of the present study is to examine the impact of an innovative yoga program designed to address this chaos.

Methods

Participants

Participants were selected from an overnight shelter (www.stvincentdayton.org) for women and children in a medium-sized Midwestern city. This shelter serves single women and mothers with children. Occasionally, married men stay in the shelter with their wives; single men are housed in a separate shelter. Following approval by the university's institutional review board, the investigators met with the shelter director and obtained permission to offer a six-week yoga program. Yoga classes met once a week for 60 minutes in the shelter. The shelter director and case managers talked to the residents about the program and erected signs in the shelter announcing the day and time of the yoga program. The director compiled an initial list of interested single women who expressed a desire to participate. One of the investigators met with these women to explain the program and obtain their informed consent prior to commencement.

The women and children's shelter has 220 beds. Single women are housed in a dorm setting, sleeping in one big room on small twin beds. These single women congregate in a large room during the day, with tables, a television, and laundry facilities. The women with children are kept separate from the single women at all times. In general, the shelter is spartan in appearance; security guards screen for weapons and other contraband items at the front entrance.

Participant Demographics

Twelve females and two males were interviewed for this study; all attended at least three yoga sessions in the program. Five of the respondents were White and nine were African American. Respondent age ranged from 19 to 59 years. This was a medically diverse sample: a few of the women had serious health problems, others were in wheelchairs, some struggled with substance abuse and mental health issues, and one was in end-stage kidney failure.

Program Description

The idea of a six week class structure with the same people in attendance was quickly abandoned, as participants indicated that they wanted a long-term program. Also, it soon became evident that the initial

program design was not appropriate for the shelter population. Participants often had appointments that clashed with the yoga class schedule. Others were housed in the community without warning, and once people were placed in more permanent housing, they were not permitted back into the shelter to attend classes.

To adapt to these challenges, the program was switched to an open enrollment format where anyone who wanted to join the class during a particular week was welcome. At the beginning of each class, new participants were given consent forms to complete. The yoga program took place once a week in a small room adjacent to the large day-room in the shelter. All 60-minute sessions were taught by a certified yoga instructor and an assistant, who was a licensed social worker but not a trained yoga instructor. This program was restorative in nature, focusing on relaxation, breathing, and other stress-reduction techniques.

Classes began with a short grounding meditation to assist the participants in separating themselves from the noise and chaos in the shelter. Although not a scripted sequence, the yoga practice usually involved a warm-up of shoulders, spine, and hips. Depending on the participants in attendance, exercises included crescent moon, balancing poses, cat stretches, and leg stretches. All sessions ended with a short meditation series. It is important to note that class often included participants on mats and on chairs. Therefore, modifications for each stretch and posture were presented. For more in-depth discussion of the program and yoga class sequences, see Davis-Berman and Farkas (2012).

Data Collection

Participants who had attended at least three yoga sessions were interviewed using a semi-structured format by one of the investigators (the social worker). They were asked to talk in a general and open-ended way about their experience with the yoga program. They were also asked why they attended the program, what they enjoyed most about yoga, and what they enjoyed least about yoga. Respondents were then asked to discuss any physical, emotional, or spiritual impacts resulting from the yoga program. Finally, participants were asked what needed to be changed about the program and what, if anything, they might

take away from this program to use in life, either in the shelter or out in the community. Fourteen interviews were conducted; each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes.

Data Analysis

Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed for analysis. Topic coding was done by the investigator: Interviews were read and detailed topic areas across interviews were identified (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Following this preliminary topic coding, codes were then abstracted into themes using the constant comparison method (i.e., systematic comparisons were made across codes), in which similarities and differences were highlighted. Themes emerged by combining similar or identical codes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). By highlighting differences, unique themes emerged. An independent rater (the yoga instructor) examined the codes and themes. This was done to reduce bias in the interpretation of the transcripts and to serve as a check on the reliability and validity of the coding scheme and themes.

Results

Analysis of the transcribed interviews resulted in the identification of the following themes by both the investigator and the independent rater: *Yoga as Relaxation*, *Stress Relief*, *Pain Relief*, and *Transference of Skills*.

Yoga as Relaxation

Participants saw the yoga room and the weekly yoga session as a relaxing oasis from the chaos of their lives and the difficulties of living in a shelter environment. The room itself was bare, but it did have a window to let the sun shine in. The experience of an oasis was not a visual escape, but rather emotional and psychological. For many, the time spent in the yoga room was a welcome and refreshing respite from the reality of poverty and being homeless. Participants became friends and were supportive and encouraging to each other in the yoga room. Describing his experience in the program, Mr. L said, "Sometimes you just need that place where you can go and relax and this gives you that opportunity." Ms. D expressed a similar sentiment when she described how she felt while in the yoga room: "It's like out there is not even there. It doesn't ex-

ist for whatever time I'm in here." Finally, Ms. A's comments provide some insight into the yoga room as a place to relax. She said:

This is where you relax, and have a good time. Lay it out, ya know? Just have a good time. Just get away from all of this conflict and bickering. I know why everyone is bickering—because they're stressed out. This makes me forget I'm in a homeless shelter. One day out of the week. Quiet.

Stress Relief

Relief from stress was an important theme in the participants' discussion. Although yoga class was only offered for one hour once a week, it seemed to serve as a vehicle to release stress for the attendees. Even one hour of stress reduction seemed to have made a difference, as participants would talk about the effect of class on their stress levels. Breathing techniques, movement, and visualization were used to teach stress reduction. A short meditation at the end of each class reinforced the impact of these techniques on stress and anger reduction.

Ms. F had been hit by a car and was still recovering physically and emotionally while participating in class. In talking about yoga, she said, "It relaxed my nerves for one thing. Every time I think about the accident, it cracks me up and I cry a lot." Ms. B echoed this sentiment: "My favorite part was the relaxation where you just relax and be calm at the end." She also talked about breathing techniques, saying, "I learned how to deal with my stress. When I'm stressed out in the corner, I scream or I just take a deep breath." Ms. C described the impact of class on her emotions by saying, "When I came to class I was so stressed, and when I left, I was less stressed. My body is relaxed, and I could also go to sleep at night." Finally, one respondent with serious physical health problems talked about the emotional impact that yoga had on her daily life. She said:

I love it. It's relaxing and it puts me away from the hustle and bustle out there. My nerves are bad right now and I sleep through the night when I do yoga. I'm trying to get to my happy place.

Pain Relief

Many of the respondents were in physical pain at the time of the program as a result of illness, injury, or accidents. Others seemed much older than their actual age, with all of the aches and pains that often accompany a life in poverty. For them, participating in yoga seemed to help control and diminish their pain. One of the reasons that Ms. F began attending the program was to try to cope with the physical pain from being hit by a car. She reported that yoga helped her pain a great deal. Regarding yoga and pain management, she said:

The one thing I like is learning different rotations of the body. It helps a lot because I was hurting in my back and my leg...in multiple parts of my body. So, I said do it, it will just go away.

Ms. L said that the major reason that she starting coming to yoga was that she was in search of pain relief. She was relying primarily on a wheelchair to ambulate; she usually participated in yoga while sitting in a chair. She reported, "Yoga is really helping my back...seriously." As she progressed with yoga, her flexibility increased and her self-reported pain diminished. Her only regret about the yoga program was "that y'all don't come often enough. We have to wait until Thursday."

Ms. H had braces on both of her legs and had a great deal of pain and difficulty with mobility. In order to participate in yoga she required assistance getting to the mat and getting up to a standing position. She said, "I'm supposed to be doing daily deep breathing exercises and stretching exercises for my bad leg and I just don't." She went on to say that yoga class reminded her to take care of herself and stop being "self-neglecting."

Transference of Skills

The most significant theme discovered in participant response to the program was the desire to apply the skills learned in yoga class to life outside of the shelter. When we planned this yoga program, we hoped that its impact would be felt outside of the confines of the shelter. The emphasis on breathing and gentle stretching sequences was an effort to teach techniques that could be used as coping skills at any

time and in any situation. Knowing that living in the shelter was temporary, the transference of these skills to life in the community was essential.

Mr. and Ms. L were regular attendees and talked frequently about continuing to practice yoga after they were placed in the community. Ms. L said, "I would like to meet you guys somewhere else after we leave the shelter." Mr. L was more direct about continuing yoga when he said, "I'd like to continue. I hope that I continue. Keep working out. Keep continuing. Find a class that I can get into." Mr. A also talked about wanting to be involved in a formal yoga class after he left the shelter. He said, "I'm thinking how I can inspire other people to get in yoga classes. I want to extend the power of being relaxed, too."

Ms. D saw yoga as her oasis from chaos. In thinking about leaving the shelter she said:

Well, I'd like to continue if I have to do it by myself or keep it up. I would like to join a yoga class.

That'd be awesome. Three or four times a week would be lovely.

Those who did not express a desire to continue yoga still talked about the newly acquired techniques and how they could use them in their lives outside of the shelter.

Discussion and Implications

The themes generated from these semi-structured interviews support the idea that the yoga program had a positive impact on participants by increasing relaxation, reducing stress, and reducing physical pain. These positive results are important because the nature of doing yoga in a community-based homeless shelter makes research and program evaluation quite challenging. By allowing the participants to tell their own stories about their experiences with yoga, greater insights were gained. Participants' personal stories yielded much richer and more detailed information than would depression and anxiety inventories. Participants were also able to go into depth about their experience in the interviews.

These positive sentiments were surprising given the chaos in the participants' lives and the number and severity of the challenges that they brought to the yoga room. Many of the participants were physically

feeble, with broken limbs, dizziness, renal disease, poorly controlled diabetes, cellulitis, severe arthritis, and back pain. Most looked and seemed much older than their stated age. There were even participants who had recently had major surgery or who were in class with an oxygen tank. It was interesting to hear that despite high levels of pain, engaging in stretching, moving, and breathing seemed to make a difference. This was the case even among participants who attended only a few sessions. It was very moving to observe and to hear in the interviews that the physical movement in class was helpful to them.

The self-reported impact on the stress of the participants was dramatic. In learning to connect breath with movement, participants were able to relax; something that is often difficult to achieve in homeless life. Given the stress of living in poverty and sleeping and living in a group setting like a community shelter, the ability to relax is a major benefit. This relaxation even led to some participants falling asleep on their mats. It was inspiring to learn that participants could trust enough to be open to learning and practicing stress-reduction techniques like imagery and breathing.

This yoga program acted as an oasis for the participants. For one hour a week, worries were cast aside. Participants who regularly attended the program saw significant gains. Physical and emotional pain was lessened through movement, stretching, and breathing. Some participants talked about being able to move better, with less physical pain.

We believe that one hour of relief and respite was itself a victory, as participants talked about the stress reduction they felt after attending class. We hope that the gains made and the skills acquired will extend beyond the shelter walls: Future research could assess the impact of yoga training beyond the classroom hour.

Challenges and Adaptations

This program and our experiences as teachers and leaders have prompted us to think about challenges we encountered and adaptations we made in designing and executing this community-based program. We hope that our experience can be helpful to others as they implement yoga programs within marginalized populations.

Our first challenge was to let go of expectations. Yoga teachers usually encourage students to commit to their practice over time. In the shelter program, it became clear that we might only see a given participant one time. We learned to stay with a simple routine that could be repeated weekly, emphasizing breathing, relaxation, and meditation. It was also critical to be flexible; classes needed to be changed and developed based on the needs and strengths of those in attendance.

Another important challenge was to avoid getting attached to participants. They talked a lot during class about their lives, including sharing their various reasons for being homeless or their frustrations with the system. The participants had experienced so much pain and loss, yet they often dealt with it better than we did. Another unique challenge regarding attachment was that participants were often housed suddenly. It was not uncommon for us to arrive at the shelter only to hear that a yoga participant had been housed or had left the shelter for another reason. After leaving, the shelter guests were not permitted to return, even for a visit.

Teaching students with a wide variation in physical ability has been quite a challenge. We had five participants with broken bones, and three that we knew of were pregnant (one was eight months pregnant at the time she was in class). The average age of participants was 40, yet they seemed much older. Most were obese; many were struggling with addiction, mental illness, or were sick with colds and flu. Some had had serious surgeries. In any one class, at least half of the participants were unable to be on the floor; they had to work from rickety chairs. We adapted by developing chair movements that mirrored the movements of those working on the floor.

Finally, class discipline was sometimes an issue. Traditionally, yoga students are quiet, cooperative, and reflective. Our class was far from quiet; cell phones sometimes rang and participants took calls. Our adaptation was to stay present in the moment, use our intuition, and go with the flow. We tried to react to each situation without judgment; however, we made it clear that we need to maintain control, sometimes asking people to be quiet, to listen, or to turn off phones. Altercations in the shelter itself among resi-

dents and between staff and residents did not intrude into our space; having a classroom separate from the population was a boon. Considering the drug abuse, mental illness, and extreme stress experienced by the program participants, we had very few problems.

In conclusion, one of the greatest impacts of the YogaHome program has been on the presenters themselves (Davis-Berman & Farkas, 2012). We had to learn to be more flexible, both emotionally and spiritually. We found it necessary to let go of some of our judgments and beliefs, to get out of our safe and secure middle-class existence. We learned that one small gift of breathing could ease our frustration over the research and programmatic challenges. Despite the challenges, we enjoyed watching the participants relax. The most uplifting experimental results were the hugs that we received from people who have too little touch in their lives—those who are truly considered outcasts. 🌱

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