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Yoga Will Heal

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Article

Helping Refugees Heal through Yoga: The Healing Method

TITLE

Helping Refugees Heal
through Yoga,
The Healing Method: A
Mental Health Approach to
Yoga

AUTHOR

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Helping Refugees Heal through Yoga,

The Healing Method: A Mental Health Approach to Yoga

by Yoga Will Heal (www.yogawillheal.com)

Overview: Refugees have often gone through traumatic experiences, which opens the opportunity for healing tools to be presented in refugee camps and community groups. The Mental Health Foundation states that “trauma can make you more vulnerable to developing mental health problems. It can also directly cause post-traumatic stress disorder” (Mental Health Foundation, 2023). ***The Healing Method: A Mental Health Approach to Yoga*** can be a healing tool for many refugees in coping with areas of mental health and trauma.

About Yoga Will Heal: *Yoga Will Heal* developed *The Healing Method: A Mental Health Approach to Yoga* to help teachers, health professionals and individuals better understand how yoga can help in the healing process. Anyone can become Yoga for Mental Health Certified through online courses at <https://yogawillheal.thinkific.com>. You can learn more about this method by visiting www.yogawillheal.com/the-healing-method.



Introduction

Refugees have often gone through traumatic experiences, which opens the opportunity for healing tools to be presented in refugee camps and community groups. The Mental Health Foundation states that “trauma can make you more vulnerable to developing mental health problems. It can also directly cause post-traumatic stress disorder” (Mental Health Foundation, 2023). Some people turn to alcohol, drugs, or self-harm to try and manage difficult memories and emotions. Depending on how trauma impacts a person, it can make it harder to trust people and thus making it harder to maintain relationships and friendships. It can also cause difficulty managing emotions and reacting in a healthy manner based on memories of what happened in the past, not the current situation. *The Healing Method: A Mental Health Approach to Yoga* can be a healing tool for many refugees in coping with areas of mental health and trauma.

“Trauma is not what happens to you; it is what happens inside you as a result of what happens to you” (Mate, 2023). Mate states that this is good news. There are tools we can use to help in healing the trauma that exists inside of us. Those with trauma often feel unsafe inside their bodies while consistently feeling discomfort inside (Van der Kolk, 2015). “Their bodies are constantly bombarded by visceral warning signs, and, in an attempt to control these processes, they often become expert at ignoring their gut feelings and in numbing awareness of what is played out inside” (Van der Kolk, 2015, p.97). People with trauma learn to hide from their emotions. There is a growing awareness of integrating yoga into the healing journey from nonprofit organizations working with refugees dealing with trauma to health professionals helping those struggling with mental health.

Lifting Hands International (LHI), a US based nonprofit organization, has been providing yoga workshops and classes for refugees through their community center in Greece since 2016. “In the seven years since we started, we’ve had thousands of refugees who have participated in yoga sessions and seen the physical and mental health benefits of yoga-based movement,” says Walker Frahm, the Chief Operations Officer for LHI. “Working with traumatized populations, we’ve found that mindfulness and movement are invaluable in feeding the minds and souls of those we work with; even as we also strive to meet their physical needs through food, clothing, and hygiene distributions.” In addition to providing these resources, LHI trains volunteers from within the refugee community to facilitate yoga sessions on their own. Community centers have also been established in Moldova for Ukrainian refugees, and plans are being made for a similar center in Western Ukraine.

When thinking about creating a healing environment for those dealing with areas of mental health and for those who have experienced trauma, yoga is a great tool for healing. “Yoga is a safe way to experience yourself. Yoga gives you courage to face your sensations” (Van der Kolk, 2015). When yoga is

used for mental health and trauma healing, there needs to be space for three healing elements based on reflecting, digesting and integrating (Hübl, 2020). First, in order to look at our lives deeper, space needs to be made for reflection. Second, our emotional systems need time to digest our experiences, just like our physical body needs time to digest food. Third, integrating what we have learned into our lives is an important aspect of learning and increasing our perspective. By engaging all three of these elements into our yoga practice and lives, we can expand our understanding, learn from our experiences and continue in our healing journey.

Yoga Will Heal, an online community for healing tools, developed *The Healing Method: A Mental Health Approach to Yoga* to support yoga instructors and health professionals in focusing their classrooms and techniques as they help the growing need of people struggling with mental health and trauma. This approach can also be used by individuals in their own yoga practice to learn self-regulation techniques to bring balance to their nervous system. "Yoga can help us bring awareness to our thoughts, giving us the space to recognize unhealthy thought patterns, learning to refocus, and training ourselves to stay in the present moment" (Holzer, 2022). "Yoga can be useful in helping refugees and migrants, but can also be used in helping other vulnerable and at-risk populations such as on Indigenous reservations," says Danielle Gilmore, a yoga instructor specializing in a holistic fitness approach and who currently works with Indigenous populations. "Studies show Indigenous people have disproportionately higher rates of mental health problems such as suicide, post-traumatic stress disorder, violence and substance use disorders" (Indian Health Service, 2023).

The Healing Method: A Mental Health Approach to Yoga is a holistic yoga approach to help in the healing process of those who struggle with areas of mental health and trauma. This method allows the integration of different philosophies in creating a mindful, hands-on approach that works best for the participants. This healing method was

developed by Dr. Angie Holzer, based on her experience working with at-risk and vulnerable populations in North and Central America, Europe and throughout Africa. Dr. Holzer's approach stems from her training in India with Yoga Dinesh, along with her time teaching at Stanford University, where she was certified in Yoga for Mental Health. This method integrates a variety of models and theories including the Kosha Model, a mindfulness approach on being nonjudgmental, the three elements of trauma healing from Dr Thomas Hübl (reflect, digest, integrate) and the Polyvagal Theory in using the vagus nerve to calm the body.

Four Healing Foundational Elements of The Healing Method: A Mental Health Approach to Yoga



1–Safety

Create a safe space and environment to help participants experience physical sensations and process emotions. By creating a safe place, participants are more able to relax and explore their emotions needed in the healing process. A safe space includes a comfortable environment to move around, close eyes during meditation, express emotions and reduce any environmental elements that could cause triggers.

2–Simplicity

Keep it simple. With instructions, elements, poses and class work. One of the main goals is to teach tools and techniques for participants to use throughout the rest of their lives to help heal. Keeping the approach simple will increase the likelihood of ongoing participation and allow

participants to understand and remember to integrate yoga into their lives.

3–Connection

Creating connections can help in the healing process. Connecting with the breath can activate the parasympathetic nervous system, calming the body. Connecting with the body through movement has been shown to help with different areas of mental health. Connecting with the sensations of the body can help in the process of movement. Being a part of a yoga community can also help with connecting with self and others. “Being able to feel safe with other people is probably the single most important aspect of mental health; safe connections are fundamental to meaningful and satisfying lives” (Van der Kolk, 2015).



4–Reflection Time

Creating space to reflect is an important part of healing. This can be done during the yoga practice, at the end of the practice or encourage participants to take time to reflect on their own with what they just experienced. Reflection time can be taking a walk and process on experiences, talking with a friend, writing in a journal and other ways that allows a person to process experiences in a comfortable setting.

To learn more about *The Healing Method: A Mental Health Approach to Yoga*, visit <http://www.yogawillheal.com/the-healing-method>.

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