

Addiction Recovery, Trauma Healing and Yoga

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The statistics are staggering. Some reports indicate that as many as one in three suffer from some type of addiction disorder. A multi-faceted condition with many forms, including: alcohol, illegal and prescription drugs, eating disorders (anorexia, bulimia, compulsive overeating), compulsive spending, gambling, exercise bulimia, sex, love, porn as well as addiction to relationships and roles, addiction causes social, psychological and physical harm. It affects people of all ages, backgrounds and socio-economic status. In addition to the addict, it affects families, friends and ultimately society as a whole. Addiction is an equal opportunity destroyer.

Disease or Moral Dilemma?

Regardless of the position one takes on the long-standing debate, addiction experts generally agree that although influenced by environmental, social and biological factors; rather than a moral deficiency, addiction is a disease. It affects the brain, the master controller of the entire nervous system.

To function, the human brain relies on neurotransmitters and receptors to initiate responses like muscle movements or emotions. With addiction, the brain increases the level of the brain chemical dopamine in response to reactions to compulsive behaviors and/or thoughts. As a result, sensing, perception and reaction, the functional processes of the nervous system, are affected. Tests with magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) reveal that all addictions - substance or process - cause similar reactions in the brain.

Trauma As The Root of Addiction

Because the effects of addiction are physical, mental and even spiritual, its exact root is often difficult to pinpoint. However, it can be argued that the root of all addiction is unresolved emotional trauma.

Often the definition of trauma centers around what's known as 'shock trauma', i.e. car crashes, war, murder, natural disasters, etc. However, new leaders in the field of trauma healing like Dr. Peter Levine, author of the best-selling book *Waking The Tiger: Healing Trauma*, defines trauma this way; 'On a broad level, trauma is anything from one's life experience that remains trapped and unresolved causing disturbances at the biological, physiological, emotional, mental or behavior levels.' He further states; "Traumatic events challenge and overwhelm our capacity to cope and respond physically and/or emotionally." With this definition, risk factors for childhood trauma would include such events as: divorce, death or serious illness of family member, hospitalization or medical procedures, exposure to violence of any kind, drastic changes in social-economic status, immigration, learning disabilities, etc.

Rather than in the event, Dr. Levine and others view trauma as a disease of the nervous system. Another way to think about it is, 'the issues live in our tissues.'

One of the indications of unresolved trauma is that the capacity to self-regulate is damaged; responses are often reflexive and impulsive. In the effort to regulate a dys-regulated nervous system, those dealing with addiction will turn to any substance or process in an effort to find homeostasis.

Recovery, Relapse and Yoga

In a word, the characteristics and effects of addiction could easily be described as 'separation'. Addictive behaviors separate and disconnect us

from ourselves, our loved ones, our environment, our spirituality and so much more. Conversely, the word yoga as translated from its Sanskrit origin means union, integration, balance, wholeness. Yoga and its practices teach 'the fine art of balancing our multi-dimensional lives' while living in a ever - changing, dynamic and complex world.

One of the most well-known and pervasive addiction recovery models in the world is the 12-step program. Created in 1939, the 12-step program approaches addiction at a cognitive level. Study and work of the steps can offer those suffering with any addiction disorder great insight into addictive behaviors and introduce spiritual principles to inspire positive action. These programs have been a lifeboat to freedom from addiction for millions worldwide.

Among many other things, yoga includes a somatic approach. Combining therapeutic yoga that specifically addresses trauma and addiction with the practical tools of the 12-step program creates a model that addresses addiction as a physical, mental and spiritual dis-ease, providing a truly holistic recovery approach. Not a program replacement, this type of yoga therapy provides adjunct tools to address the disease of addiction, specifically as it relates to relapse prevention.

The unprecedented success of 12-steps programs notwithstanding; statistics show that relapse rates and/or program abandonment is ridiculously high. After a period of abstinence, the stresses of life show up and unless a person is exceptionally well equipped with tools and practices to meet the challenges, the temptation to go back to the familiar can be overwhelming.

Based on the ancient Yoga Sutra 2:16 *Heyam Duhkham Anagatam* meaning 'suffering that has not yet come can be avoided', yoga therapy for addiction helps the addict recognize the signs of relapse at the level of feeling and sensation in the body and gives them a set of tools and practices that help restore balance, before the relapse. This combined approach helps them find nervous system regulation in sustainable non-destructive ways rather than destructive ones.

Using the tools of the ancient art and science of yoga, addiction sufferers can find practices that integrate and enhance physical, mental and spiritual well-being, helping them to recognize that ultimately the separation between them is artificial.

Writer Info: Owner of CITYYOGA School of Yoga and Health in Indianapolis, Nikki Myers is an accomplished Yoga and Somatic Experiencing Therapist. A unique focus of her path has been the integration of yoga in healing. Born from her personal struggles with addiction, Nikki is a co-founder of Y12SR, the Yoga of 12-Step Recovery. Y12SR has been featured at both Addiction Recovery and Yoga conferences throughout the United States, as well as in Yoga Journal and the New York Times. For more information, email nikki@cityyoga.biz or visit www.yogaof12steprecovery.com.