

# The Use of Yoga as a Healing Method for Survivors of Sexual and Domestic Violence

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**Abstract.** This study examines the use of yoga to increase self-compassion in female survivors of sexual and domestic violence. Because of the isolating nature of sexual victimization, many survivors are left abandoned by their support systems and begin to blame themselves for the violence inflicted upon them by turning their anger and isolation inwards and/or learning to dissociate from their physical and emotional pain. A preliminary analysis of the data suggests that the yoga program increases the participants' self-compassion. The implications of increased rates of self-compassion include better overall wellness for survivors by increasing their feelings of self-kindness, mindfulness, and connection.

## Introduction

There are many negative long-term affects of sexual or domestic violence victimization. Many survivors are at increased risk for depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety disorders, and a whole host of chronic medical conditions. Historically, service professionals have not given credence to a woman's experience with sexual and domestic violence as a link to these other health concerns (Stenius & Veysey, 2005). Often times their feelings of connection to their own bodies and their connection to the world around them is disrupted at a very basic level (Filipas & Ullman, 2006).

Yoga is an ancient healing tool that's use for healing and comfort is traced back in history 5000 years (Iyengar, 1966). In a 2010 synthesis of existing research on the use of yoga for mental health, Mehta and Sharma found eighteen interventions conducted in seven countries around the world. The synthesis of existing research concluded that yoga was a promising treatment for depression and anxiety among multiple client populations (Mehta & Sharma, 2010). The recently published book, Overcoming Trauma through Yoga, echoes this trend. "Over the past 10 years some of America's leading trauma experts have begun to employ yoga in the treatment of trauma" (Emerson & Hopper, 2011).

Because of the promising work that has been done around the world and previous literature on the use of yoga with trauma survivors, the Wichita Area Sexual Assault Center has added trauma-sensitive yoga to their victim services. This study will explore the perspectives of five to ten survivors of sexual and domestic violence who are utilizing the trauma-sensitive yoga group. The group facilitator is a 200-hour registered yoga teacher through Yoga Alliance and is also a trained sexual assault victim's advocate. This program evaluation will explore the link between survivors who use yoga as a healing tool and their rates of self-compassion.

## Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance

The research was conducted as a qualitative project that focused on participant's perspectives of the teen and adult trauma-sensitive yoga groups. The study utilized semi-structured interview questions to get feedback on the use of yoga in a survivor's healing journey. Specifically, the research examined a client's participation in yoga in relation to their rates of self-compassion. Questions relating to common humanity, self-kindness, and mindfulness were asked of each survivor.

The following are examples of the semi-structured interview questions: “What have you enjoyed about the yoga group?” “What have you disliked or been uncomfortable with?” “When you are going through a hard time, do you give yourself the caring and tenderness that you need? Can you give us an example of this?” “When something upsets you, do you try to keep your emotions in balance? Can you give us an example of this?” “What about the yoga group has helped you become more kind and compassionate to yourself? In what ways have you found yourself being more kind to yourself?”

The researchers conducted individual interviews with each participant. After the individual interviews were complete, separate focus groups for the adult women and teen girls groups were scheduled to explore connections and trends in the interview data.

The survivors who participated in the study were chosen through convenient sampling. All girls and women attending either the teen or adult yoga group were given the choice to participate. There were no financial benefits for participating. After agreeing to participate in the study, participants all signed informed consent or assent forms that outlined the procedures, purpose, risks, benefits, confidentiality, and their rights as participants in the study. Survivor confidentiality is an ethical foundation of the researchers. The only record of participants identifying information is kept on the informed consent and assent forms. These forms are kept in a locked file cabinet for 5 years before being destroyed. All participants were all allowed to pick their own pseudonym for their quotes within the results of the research. Before interviews and focus groups were scheduled or conducted, the researchers obtained approval from the Wichita State University Institutional Review Board and the Wichita Area Sexual Assault Center Board of Directors.

This study was intended as a pilot study to determine future programming for survivor services within the Wichita Area Sexual Assault Center and to measure how the program affects rates of self-compassion and reactions to trauma among survivors of sexual and domestic violence.

## Conclusions

The trends in the interview and focus groups showed promising and positive reactions of survivors to the trauma-sensitive yoga groups. The teen group interviews revealed strong connections between participating in the yoga group and feelings of connection and common humanity. Several of the teen participants spoke of the benefits of being in a group where peers understood and were not judgmental. The adult group tended to show more connection to mindfulness and self-kindness. The yoga group was a way to take care of their body and mind. The patterns of yoga and the concentration on things like breath and balance seemed to connect to their ability to notice pain and find ways to create comfort within their own body and mind.

The preliminary research on the use of yoga with survivors of sexual and domestic violence shows positive results as a healing method in relation to survivor self-compassion and overall wellness.

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