



## **YOGA THERAPY FOR THE TRAUMA OF SSRI WITHDRAWAL**

By Kelli Foulkrod

We now know that surgery is considered a traumatic experience from the body's perspective, even if the surgery is life saving. When the body is put under anesthesia, cut open by a knife and organs moved around, the body interprets this experience as dangerous. Any time there is tissue damage (i.e. surgeon cutting you open with scalpel) the body registers this as a near death experience and sends out instinct responses in an effort to survive. This includes activating the immune response, the threat system of the body with the fight/flight reactions. I believe the same bodily metaphor applies to psychiatric drugs being dispensed without proper informed consent on risks and withdrawal.

When a person is unknowingly poisoned and finally realizes they have been ingesting a neurotoxic chemical and sees the devastating health consequences of withdrawal and protracted withdrawal, I believe the body goes into a state of extreme hyper-arousal and threat response to this traumatic experience. This is not taking into consideration any previous unhealed traumatic energy stored in the body from childhood, which likely led the individual to the mental health system in the first place. It is QUITE alarming to uncover the truth about psychiatric drugs, be addicted to the drugs and unable to stop taking them without severe suffering and illness, and then have the same medical establishment that got you addicted to the poison telling you protracted withdrawal isn't possible and is simply an indication you need to take the poison for the rest of your life.

I'm suggesting that being lied to and drugged is a trauma to the nervous system and that one piece of recovering from psychiatric drug withdrawal is addressing the trauma of being poisoned, lied to, and misinformed of the risks of these chemicals. I'd like to share a holistic model using yoga, breathwork, community, and ceremony/ritual to move trapped energy in the body specific to SSRI withdrawal. Obviously the answer to SSRI withdrawal is NOT more pharmaceuticals (although the pharmaceutical industry would disagree!). Often times folks in an acute or protracted withdrawal state cannot tolerate herbs and supplements due to dysautonomia in the nervous system, so we are left to Spiritual forms of healing as the remedy.

To take the spiritual piece a step further, what if psychiatric drug withdrawal, as hellacious and soul crushingly traumatic as it is, what if it has the potential to create a spiritual awakening within the individual, leading them on the hero's journey to wholeness? What if it was possible to have an epidemic of millions of people waking up to the truth about pharmaceutical drugs attempting to stop the drug, suffering tremendously from iatrogenic disease and eventually healing and in the process gaining healing capabilities for having made the journey? What if we can turn our poison into medicine and reclaim our personal power from the pharmaceutical industry?

### **TRAUMA FROM A YOGA PERSPECTIVE**

We hear so much about fight and flight and much less about the FREEZE RESPONSE. The freeze response, also known as the immobilization response, influences how you're likely to react when the situation confronting you overwhelms your coping capacities and leaves you paralyzed in fear. Quite literally the energy of overwhelming experiences gets frozen and stored in the psoas muscle.

#### **Psoas Muscle:**

The psoas muscle is considered to be the muscle of the soul in yoga traditions. When I am working with a client using yoga therapy, the pelvis and psoas muscle is where we always begin. We want to bring fluidity and openness to the frozen psoas muscle, which is literally holding the energy of our overwhelming experiences. The pelvis is considered the "attic" of the body; that place of storage

where you shove boxes of your undigested emotional turmoil to deal with at a later date. Often times, hip openers, like pigeon pose, can elicit tears in my students. This is also the center of your body, connecting lower and upper parts of the body.

The psoas muscle starts in the low back, attaching to the vertebra lowest rib attaches (T12), and also attaching to the vertebrae of the lumbar spine (L1-5). It then runs over the front of hips on both sides, cradling the pelvis and attaches at the top of the thigh bone. The psoas muscle becomes engaged when the body enters the fight flight response, and it is a central part of the body's stress and fear responses. The psoas muscle is the only muscle that connects your spine to your legs, and so it is vital to walking and running (mobility).

There is also a feedback mechanism between the psoas and the nervous system, since the lumbar nerve plexus is embedded within the psoas. A tensed psoas influences the operation of the vagus nerve, which signals to the nervous system there is danger and elicits a state of alert, telling the body to stay in the active/ready mode, and not to relax. In other words, when your psoas stays tensed, you stay in the fight or flight system. For many people, the psoas and sympathetic nervous systems are over-engaged, not only because of sitting, but also because of the levels of stress or anxiety involved in life, and we know that psychiatric drug withdrawal is VERY stressful on the body.

### **Releasing the psoas:**

#### **1. Breath**

Diaphragmatic breathing relaxes psoas and stimulates the vagus nerve, which brings the relaxation response. This means not just chest breathing, but expanding the diaphragm and ribs, enabling a much deeper breath. There are many breathing techniques that help with this and one of my favorites is ratio or coherent breath.

#### **2. Meditation**

Most people have little attention for their psoas and so can't feel if its tensed or not. This is something you can change through exercises in body awareness. Becoming aware of whether it is tense or not is the first stage in releasing the tension. Sometimes solo meditation is contraindicated in high states of anxiety (benzo WD case example).

#### **3. YOGA**

There are many yoga poses that help to relax the psoas muscle. Lunges and warrior poses (demo) quickly and gently invite the psoas muscle to lengthen, stretch, and relax. It is within the tightness and constriction of the muscles and fascia of the psoas where the energy of traumatic experiences is held.

### **Backbends for relaxation response**

Backbending yoga poses open the heart center and release the spine. In many ways, they could be considered quite emotionally vulnerable postures to place the body in and are sometimes met with resistance. However the vulnerability risk is worth it, because the science of yoga is now showing us that backbends help to reset the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS) and drop the body into the relaxation/parasympathetic response more rapidly.

### **Vagus Nerve:**

The ANS regulates internal organ functions, such as heart rate, digestion rate and pupil dilation. It also responds to trauma or threat. The ANS is conceptualized as two branches, the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems. The sympathetic nervous system activates the body, especially during emergencies ("fight-or-flight"); the parasympathetic is calming ("rest-and-digest").

The vagus nerve regulates the heart, face, lungs and breath; all parts of the body used to interact with others. This mammalian system is what Dr. Porges calls “social engagement system.” According to Porges, social engagement, in turn, works to “down regulate” (calm) the sympathetic nervous system, and the fight response. Stated another way, it is in large part through our face/heart/brain connection, mediated by the vagus nerve, that we learn to temper our responses to interpersonal threats and challenges.

### **Vagal Tone (Heart Rate Variability) Exercises:**

- **Humming (Or chanting or singing!):** The vagus nerve passes through by the vocal cords and the inner ear and the vibrations of humming is a free and easy way to influence your nervous system. Simply pick some favorite tune and you’re ready to go. Or if yoga fits your lifestyle chanting “OM” and other mantras works too. Notice sensations in your chest, throat, and head.
- **Connection:** Healthy connections and relationship to others is vital to all healing process. SSRI Withdrawal breeds isolation and social withdrawal. “Prolonged Hugging” in powerful exercise also known as “hugging until relaxed.” The instructions are to “stand and place your arms around your partner, focus on yourself, and quiet yourself down, way down.”
- **Cold Water:** Try finishing your next shower with at least 30 seconds of cold water or splashing your face with ice cold water. The mechanism here is not known, however acute cold exposure has been shown to activate the vagus nerve and decrease the sympathetic “fight or flight” response and increase parasympathetic activity.

### **Social Engagement System:**

Dr. Porges’ 1994 Polyvagal Theory says the ANS is a hierarchical system of three circuits, “in which *newer circuits inhibit older circuits*”. And when an individual gets threatened, those systems resort to older and older circuits, in an attempt to survive.”

Once a threat is registered, a mammal starts out trying to use the “social engagement system” to look at each other and resolve things warmly; that’s our first, vagus parasympathetic circuit.

If that fails, we devolve into more primitive fight/flight animal system kicks in, where our sympathetic circuits take over and juice up our adrenalin. And if that fails, our ancient reptilian unmyelinated vagus circuit takes over and knocks us out into immobilization, called dissociation in humans.

A huge part of the problem, in my opinion, about the epidemic of traumatized people enduring psychiatric drug withdrawal that is not recognized or validated by the medical community or largely the mental health system. It is the ultimate slap in the face, the lack of community and social engagement for those who have been harmed by psychiatry. SSRI withdrawal is INCREDIBLY isolating. Most mainstream folks don’t get it, or believe it, and most people in acute withdrawal are told they are making it up, their lab work is fine, so it must all be “in their head”. My theory is that if we had community support around people in withdrawal, the withdrawal symptoms could be lessened by accessing the social engagement system of the nervous system without resorting to the immobilization response and the individual getting stuck in the trauma of withdrawal. \* Insert 5-minute elevator pitch for ORGANIC MENTAL HEALTH HEALING CENTER ☺

### **Embodiment Practices**

#### **Orienting Response:**

The orienting response is the body’s immediate response to a change in its environment, when that change is not sudden enough to elicit the startle reflex. It is an evolutionary mechanism to scan the environment for a sense of safety in novel situations.

**Orienting Exercise:** Find a comfortable seat. With eyes open turn your head slowly side to side, taking in the room around you, noticing sights, sounds, smells and whatever else is present. Now, close your eyes and again turn your head side to side. Repeat three times, get still and notice how your body feels.

*When we turn our heads side to side and look around the room, we have scanned for potential threats to safety and this physiologically calms the nervous system to feel more comfortable in a new space. This stops hyper-vigilance and allows the individual to feel grounded and safe.*

### **Trauma Releasing Exercises:**

**Body Boundaries** – Trauma victims often live disembodied, or lacking a sense of bodily sensation awareness. So the first step of working with a traumatized nervous system is to bring awareness back into the body. One tool I use is to expand the awareness of yourself just 3-6 inches outside of the perimeter of the body. Tracing awareness in the mind's eye starting with crown of head and extending all the way down to the toes, sensing the space just outside the body. Also another exercise is to take the hands and gently pat the perimeter of the body, silently in the mind saying this is my body, it is safe to be in the body.

**Trembling and Shaking** – learning from animals in the wild and how they discharge trauma and predatory overwhelm from their nervous system. Birds don't fly around with PTSD or depression due to almost being eaten...they instinctually know how to reset the system and discharge the energy of the fight vs flight system from the body after the scary experience has stopped. There are specific postures and movements that can be done to fatigue the sympathetic nervous system muscles (thighs, calves, etc) in order to induce trembling and shaking. Another option is instructing and cuing the body to play out the movements of flight or fight that got shut down during the original trauma; for example "throw a tantrum or run like hell" and allowing the body to act out that movement.

**Felt Sense Exercises** – Far too many people intellectualize their humanity and live disconnected from the sensations in the body. The unconscious mind works on metaphor and symbolism and therefore we can access deeper aspects of the psyche for healing by getting back in touch with the "felt sense" of the body.

Prompts:

- What do you SENSE in your body when you recall learning the truth about psychiatric drugs? What is your bodily felt sense, or how does your body feel when you remember that?
- Sense ALL of it.
- Are the qualities of sensation clear or unclear?
- Are there any words, phrases, images that come from this felt-sense?

### **Descriptors for the Felt Sense:**

1. **feeling/sensation**
  - a. **pressure** – even, uneven, supportive, crushing, little circulation
  - b. **air** – gentle, cool, warm, right, left, stimulating, rush, like a feather, like mist
  - c. **tension** – solid, dense, warm, cold, inflamed, protective, constricting, angry, sad
  - d. **pain** – ache, sharp, twinge, slight, stabbing
  - e. **tingling** – pricks, vibration, tickling, numb
  - f. **itch** – mild itch, angry itch, irritating itch, subtle itch, small itch, large area of itching
2. **temperature** – warm, hot, burning, cool, cold, clammy, icy, frozen, oven, fire, sunshine
3. **size** – small, medium, big
4. **shape** – flat, circle, blob, triangle
5. **weight** – light, heavy
6. **motion** – circular, erratic, straight line
7. **speed** – fast, slow, still

8. **texture** – rough, soft, sandpaper, smooth, silky
9. **element** – fire, air, earth, water, wood
10. **color** – gray, blue, orange etc.
11. **mood/emotion** sinking, pulling in, open, closed, uplifting, sunny, dark
12. **sound** – buzzing, humming, choppy
13. **taste** – sour, bitter, sweet
14. **smell** – pungent, sweet, sour, rotten
15. **absence/nothingness** – blank, empty

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