

# YOGA MAGAZINE

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**SLEEP...RELAX, REJUVENATE, REFORM**

GERRARD V SUNNEN

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# Including the Body in Healing the Mind

## The Role of Yoga Therapy in Eating Disorder Recovery

Words: Jennifer Kreamsoulas

When I was 38 years old, with two daughters under the age of three, I went to residential treatment for an eating disorder. It had been nearly 20 years since I was originally diagnosed with anorexia nervosa in college, and to be severely struggling again in my late thirties as a mother, wife and professional was heartbreaking for me and my family. I felt an incredible sense of failure as a mother and worried that my illness would damage my daughters. Yet I knew that treatment was the best choice for myself and for their sake. I needed to immerse myself in getting physically healthy and learn how to cope with the stress and overwhelm of life without the eating disorder. My intention was to return home more present and whole for myself and my family.

When I look back on that time in my life, what stands out are the life changing gifts that unfolded because of the relapse, which I share about in

my essay, "Revising the Role of Eating Disorder Recovery," in the new book titled *Embodied Resilience through Yoga: 30 Mindful Essays About Finding Empowerment After Addiction, Trauma, Grief, and Loss*. Being invited by Yoga and Body Image Coalition founder Melanie Klein to share my story of yoga and recovery in her book is an incredible gift and honour. Another gift of my journey is how it led me to support others in eating disorder recovery as a certified yoga therapist.

Yoga had been an incredibly stabilising and healing force in my life after I initially was diagnosed with an eating disorder in college. After I got married, started a full-time job and had children, time to teach and practice yoga disappeared. The absence of space in my life for self-connection on my mat opened the door for old coping skills to surface. After treatment, and when I

was holding steady once again in my recovery, I returned to teaching and practicing yoga and registered for a three-year yoga therapy training at Yoga Life Institute near Philadelphia, in the United States. My intention for attending this training was to deepen my knowledge of yoga, satisfy my deep love of learning and begin a new career as a yoga therapist.

## What is yoga therapy?

Yoga therapy calls on the practices, philosophies and tools of yoga to support others in making changes in their lives and to balance health. Unlike a group yoga class, yoga therapy offers an individualised experience. Common goals for yoga therapy are often related to lifestyle changes, physical health, stress, pain, emotional distress and mental health.

Depending on the client's goals and preferences, yoga therapy sessions include a mixture of discussion, education on yoga philosophy and direct experiences, such as asanas (yoga poses), breathing exercises, guided relaxation, meditation and grounding methods.

## What are eating disorders & why is yoga therapy helpful?

Eating disorders are serious but treatable mental illnesses caused by a range of biological, psychological and sociocultural factors, and they affect people of every age, sex, gender, race, ethnicity and socioeconomic group. According to the National Eating Disorders Association, up to 70 million people suffer from eating disorders.

Symptoms associated with eating disorders such as restricting food and/or food groups, bingeing, purging, abusing laxatives and over exercising, are ways of coping with trauma and other painful feelings and life events. Eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any psychiatric illness, and suicide is also common. Professional help and support are usually required to recover.

As a supplemental modality to traditional therapy, yoga therapy offers a safe space for those in eating disorder recovery to develop yoga-based tools and coping strategies as they explore emotional work with their outpatient team, which usually includes a psychologist, dietician and psychiatrist. Breathing exercises can help calm anxiety, slow down spinning thinking and cultivate presence and mental clarity. Yoga poses build mental and physical strength. With time, practice and support, exploring yoga poses can help clients become more comfortable in and accepting of their bodies. Exploring poses with the support of a certified yoga therapist is also a gentle way for individuals in recovery to reintroduce movement into life in a healthy and balanced



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way. This attention to embodiment through yoga poses can assist clients in learning how to feel sensations and emotions again and even relearn hunger and fullness cues.

Improvement in mood and self-esteem often occur as the yoga practices developed in session are integrated into daily life, creating a sense of personal empowerment and hope in the client's ability to manage eating disorder symptoms, practice new perspectives about food and nourishment and reframe negative body image thoughts.

Grounding or centering practices can help clients manage anxiety at meals and when encountering other recovery challenges. The core yoga philosophies of kindness, compassion and acceptance, to name just a few, are extremely valuable for reframing one's relationship with food and their body.

## Recommendations for finding a yoga therapist & taking public classes

To find a yoga therapist, seek out those certified by the International Association of Yoga Therapists (IAYT). These experts have completed at least 800 hours of training that includes yoga philosophy, the psychology of yoga, biology, anatomy and neurology, plus the practices of yoga poses, breathing, meditation, relaxation and more. They are also trained in making these practices accessible, trauma sensitive and adaptable in an individualised therapeutic setting.

Some yoga therapists, like myself, specialise specifically in eating disorder recovery. Some are more general or have a different specialisation. Take time to ask the yoga specialist you are thinking about working with questions so that you can make an informed decision and have a sense for how the sessions will best serve you.

Finding a public yoga class that

aligns with the values of recovery is important and may take time, given how fitness focused many yoga classes and environments are. To support eating disorder recovery, I recommend choosing offerings that are gentle for beginners or restorative in nature as these practices are focused on bringing balance to all the systems of the body and calming the mind. Yin yoga can also be a nice option as well as flow classes that are not vigorous or heated. Vigorous styles are more appropriate for those in well-established recovery with stable physical activity.

When possible, take classes with yoga teachers who are trained in trauma sensitive or trauma informed yoga, and in studios that do not have mirrors. Mirrors can be a distraction and heighten body image concerns. Because learning to listen to one's body is a vital aspect of eating disorder recovery, an environment without mirrors might encourage a more internal experience.

I'll share that when I first started



my yoga therapy training, it had not occurred to me that someday I would support others on their eating disorder journey. In fact, this was a calling I had not quite seen coming. But with time, reflection and guidance from mentors, my dharma revealed itself. My life journey prepared me to support others in eating disorder recovery through yoga therapy. What a gift! I believe we must include the body in healing the mind, and I feel incredibly honoured to hold space for others on their recovery journeys.

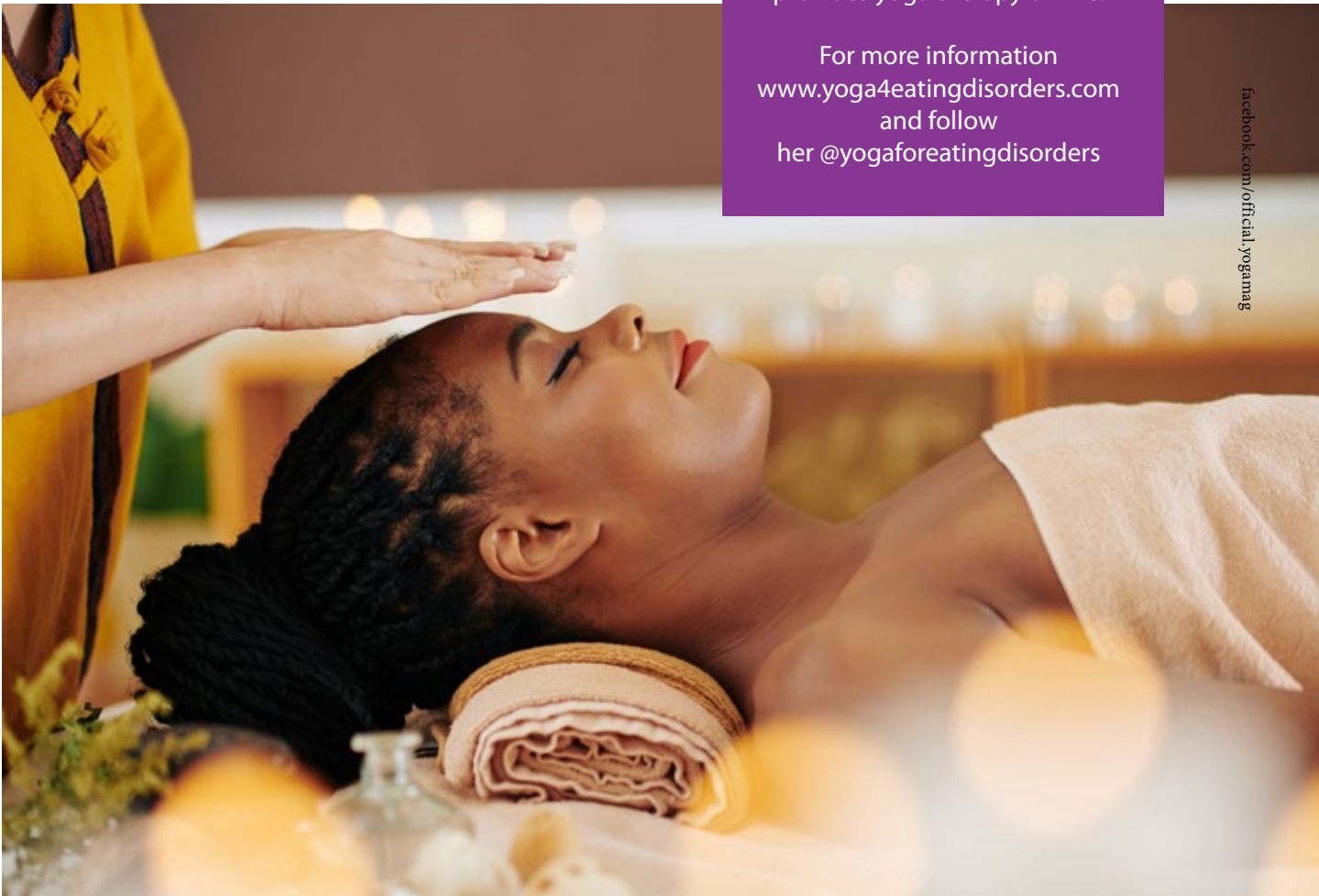


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For more information  
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*Embodied Resilience Through Yoga: 30 Mindful Essays About Finding Empowerment After Addiction, Trauma, Grief, and Loss (2020, Llewellyn Worldwide) is out now.*