

Moving from Darkness into Light:
Meanings and Experiences of Yoga for Trauma Survivors

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

Traumas such as experiences of military combat, violent personal assault, natural disasters, severe vehicle accidents, being taken as hostage or prisoner, and diagnosis of life threatening disease (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) impact every aspect and facet of the lives of trauma survivors including the physical, social, mental, emotional, psychological, and spiritual aspects of well-being. Trauma results in avoidance and dissociation, hyperarousal, and intrusion and constriction (Herman, 1997). Trauma may also lead individuals to anxiety, depression, somatization and cognitive distortions (Briere, 2004), disconnection from their bodies (Ogden et al. 2006; van der Kolk, 2006), and getting stuck in the past (van der Kolk et al., 1996). In leisure contexts, trauma may lead to experiencing avoidance, re-enactment in leisure, and the tendency to isolate and fear emotional and physical intimacy with others (Arai, Griffin, Miatello, & Greig, 2008). The foundation of trauma healing is establishing safety, mourning and reconnection with ordinary life (Herman, 1997), reconnection with the body, and being present (Levine, 2010). While cognitive therapy plays a role in trauma healing, somatic approaches provide additional support to reconnection of body and mind. Somatic-oriented therapies support trauma survivors to acquire a sense of safety and mastery over their bodies and to heal disconnection that results from trauma exposure (van der Kolk, 2003). The promise of interventions integrating body-mind in healing and support various mental health issues are growing and research is showing positive results. There is growing evidence of the role of physically-active leisure in healing trauma (Arai, Mock & Gallant, 2011). Yoga has been supported by a number of studies as a therapeutic intervention for both psychological and physiological conditions associated with trauma (Emerson & Hopper, 2011; Emerson, Sharma,

Chaudhry, & Turner, 2009; The Trauma Centre, 2013; van der Kolk, 2012; Ware, 2007) and posttraumatic stress disorder (Descilo et al., 2007; Emerson et al., 2009; van der Kolk, 2012). Yoga originated over 5000 years ago in India and is a holistic and comprehensive system of practice and wellbeing that creates individuality, space, and opening allowing the self to be in the body without judgment. According to Iyengar (2002), yoga lifts up from clutches of pain and sorrow, and enables to live fully, taking a delight in life. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the meanings and experiences of yoga for trauma survivors.

Phenomenology attempts to capture participants' perception of lived experience, plunging deep into the nature of being to embrace a mindful wondering about a project of life, of living, of what it means to live a life (van Manen, 2001). The study engaged thirteen individuals who experienced trauma and had been practicing yoga for at least five years in phenomenological interviews using open and active interview questions. Research questions guiding my study were: What is the nature of the yoga experience? What meanings do people who have experienced trauma make of this experience? What happens in the yoga experience that is healing? The findings emerged in the form of four essences describing the yoga experiences of participants: moving from the darkness of trauma into the light of yoga and living, entering into safe and sacred spaces, letting go into yoga and returning to embodiment of self, and embracing creativity and connection beyond the mat. Through the light that yoga brought into the darkness of the lives of the participants, they realized they are far more than just the trauma they experienced. This light allowed them know and touch the light within, feel safe again, reclaim their connection with self, befriending their bodies while being present in the moment and know the trauma has already happened and they do not have to stay there.

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What an amazing journey! This thesis journey has been a life changing experience. My heart expands with this new knowledge; it nurtures me to keep going and creates a shift in my understanding, allowing transformation to unfold. It is amazing to see the process of growth and development of my journey and how and when the lights came on.

First, I would like to thank God, for all the blessings, for being by my side throughout my life, lighting up my path and showing me the way, for all the messages sent throughout my life journey that assures me that I am on the right track.

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Finally, to the love of my life, my husband Amr, what could I possibly say? I truly appreciate your understanding, wisdom and advice. I respect and value the freedom you give me and am so thankful for all what you have done for me. I am who I am today because of you. I sometimes wonder how you tolerate my moods!! I will forever love you deep from my heart. The world will definitely be a better world with more people like you. I more than love you!

"The lamps are different, but the light is the same, it comes from beyond"

Rumi (1207-1273)

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Traumas such as experiences of military combat, violent personal assault, natural disasters, severe vehicle accidents, being taken as hostage or prisoner, and diagnosis of life threatening disease (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) impacts every aspect and facet of the lives of trauma survivors including the physical, social, mental, emotional, psychological, and spiritual aspects of well-being (Salston & Figley, 2003; Tosevski & Milovancevic, 2006). Trauma results in avoidance and dissociation, hyperarousal, and intrusion and constriction (Herman, 1997). Trauma may also lead individuals to anxiety, depression, somatization, and cognitive distortions (Briere, 2004; Friedman, Keane, & Resick, 2007), disconnection from their bodies (Ogden et al. 2006; van der Kolk, 2006), and getting stuck in the past (van der Kolk et al., 1996). In leisure contexts, trauma may lead to experiencing avoidance, re-enactment in leisure, and the tendency to isolate and fear emotional and physical intimacy with others (Arai, Griffin, Greig & Miatello, 2009). The foundation of trauma healing is establishing safety, mourning and reconnection with ordinary life (Herman, 1997), reconnection with the body, and being present (Levine, 2010). While cognitive therapy plays a role in trauma healing, somatic approaches provide additional support to reconnection of body and mind.

Interventions integrating mind and body therapy in healing and treating various mental health issues are developing and growing. Research is showing promising and positive results for non-traditional mind and body therapies. Such therapies and interventions include, for example, music therapy (Bulfone, Quattrin, Zanotti, Regattin, & Brusaferrero, 2009; Kemper & Danhauer, 2005; Pratt, 2004), arts therapy (Cassileth, 1999; Champman, Morabito, Lodakakos, Schreier, & Knudson, 2001; Pratt, 2004), eye movement desensitization and reprocessing

therapy (EMDR) (Shapiro, 2007; van der Kolk, 2002), sensorimotor therapy (Ogden, Minton, & Pain, 2006), dance and bodily movements therapy (Berrol, 1992; Gray, 2001; Hanna, 1995; Herber, 1993; Pratt, 2004; Schmais, 1985), deep breathing (Brown & Gerbarg, 2009; Kjellgren, Bood, Axelsson, Norlander & Saatcioglu, 2007), meditation (Holzel, et al., 2011; Kjellgren, Bood, Axelsson, Norlander, & Saatcioglu, 2007; Salmon, Sephton, Weissbecker, Hoover, Ulmer & Studts, 2004; Schreiner & Malcolm, 2008), and yoga (Berger & Owen, 1992; Elkins, 2003; Schell, Allolio & Schonecke, 1994; West, Otte, Geher, Johnson & Mohr, 2004; Wood, 1993; van der Kolk, 2012).

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the meanings and experiences of yoga for trauma survivors. The intent was to give rich description and evoke new and deeper understandings of the phenomenon of yoga practice as experienced by participants. Authors such as Levine (2010), Ogden, Minton and Pain (2006), and van der Kolk (2003) believe people who experienced trauma require the incorporation of some form of somatically oriented therapy to acquire a sense of safety and mastery over their bodies and to heal disconnection that results from trauma exposure. While cognitive therapy plays a role, somatic approaches support reconnection of mind and body. I am exploring yoga as a form of leisure activity that may complement and aid trauma therapy, not as a replacement to it. I chose a qualitative method as it moves beyond observable, surface behaviour where inductive researchers analyze both the inner and outer perspectives on human behaviour.

Qualitative research seeks depth over breadth (Patton, 2002), in this study I am interested in the rich description of the experience of the participants. As van Manen (2001) describes, the study of phenomenology begins with the question: what is the lived experience?

A lived experience is the beginning, middle, and end of a phenomenological study. I believe there are a number of similarities between yoga as a practice and phenomenology as a research approach. Both are concerned with the true essence of the experience. Both are based on not judging the individual. Both allow the individual to plunge deep into the true nature of being. Both are holistically somatic and spiritual, and are concerned with the individual's both inner being and physical outer-being. Observing participants in my yoga classes evolve and transform encouraged me to understand, share, and value such experiences as they truly are, without adding, predicting or evaluating them.

I believe we must look to participants themselves to explore the experience, as it is, with its core and essences. Phenomenological research is mainly achieved through connecting with human beings to reveal the essential features of one's consciousness of a certain life phenomenon (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). While no words can replace experience, a phenomenologist starts with the things themselves, attempting to capture a clear and rich description as a foundation for interpretation and analysis of this experience (Heidegger, 1962).

According to van Manen (2001), the stories of others provide an opportunity to gain knowledge of life events, emotions, and situations we would not normally experience.

Therefore related research questions addressed in this study include:

What is the nature of the yoga experience?

What meanings do people who have experienced trauma make of this experience?

What happens in the yoga experience that is healing?

In this study, I focus on yoga as a healing modality for trauma for a number of reasons. First, yoga has been supported by a number of studies as a therapeutic intervention for both psychological and physiological conditions associated with trauma and posttraumatic stress disorder (Arpita, 1990; Campbell & Moore, 2004; Gura, 2002; Khalsa, 2004; National Centre for Complementary and Alternative Medicines, 2012; Shapiro, Astin, Bishop, & Cordova, 2005). Further, mindfulness interventions have been integrated into treatments for trauma with promising preliminary results (Becker & Zayfert, 2000; Simpson, et al., 1998). The integration of mindfulness skills increases the individual's ability to come into contact with painful memories, feelings, and thoughts without engaging in avoidance strategies. Being mindful is about "paying attention in a particular way; on purpose to the present moment and nonjudgmentally" (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4). van der Kolk (1994) explains that the goal of treating trauma is to help people live in the present, without feeling or behaving according to irrelevant demands belonging to the past. With an emphasis on mindfulness and supporting individuals to be in the present moment, we look to yoga in the process. Stone (2008) explains that "yoga begins in the present moment, and the present moment begins in silence" (p. 7). The body, breath, mind, and transcendent states of pure consciousness are sheaths and layers of the same unified person, and neither can be divided nor separated. Yoga as an integrative practice incorporates and combines all those elements and layers, the body (postures), breathing (pranayama), mind (meditation), and higher consciousness connection that can be a support and helpful in the healing journey of many clinical conditions (Kjellgren, Bood, Axelsson, Norlander, & Saatcioglu, 2007; Salmon, Lush, Jablonski, & Sephton, 2009).

Second, while yoga is expanding rapidly in the West and literature indicates the general benefits of yoga, I feel it is important to stay rooted in a mindful practice that is true to the philosophical and spiritual roots of the tradition. Since 1990, the discipline of yoga has evolved and expanded to an industry that generates more than 6 billion dollars, from classes, trainings, apparel, media and equipment. According to Hayes & Chase (2010), 15.8 million people in the United States practiced some kind of yoga, and additional 9.4 million people reported their desire to try yoga. A comprehensive survey of complementary health use by Americans identified yoga as the sixth most commonly practiced among adults, with more than 13 million practitioners in 2006 (National Health Interview Survey, 2007). With this expansion, yoga has been taken up in a number of different ways; including an alignment with physical fitness and consumerism. It is my hope that this study sheds light on, and calls a return to, the depth and meaning of a practice of yoga that integrates and bonds all aspect and layers of the body, mind and spirit. An approach where yoga is about self-inquiry, self-encounter, self-surveillance and dismantling barriers to realizing one's full human potentials.

Third, my focus on yoga as a healing modality for trauma stems from my experience as a dedicated yoga and meditation practitioner and Experienced Registered Yoga Teacher (E-RYT) for over two decades. I am also a Certified Reflexologist interested in the body-mind healing aspects and I have witnessed a huge transformation both personally and for my participants. Further, in preparation for this research, I embarked on Dr. Bessel van der Kolk's *Trauma Sensitive Yoga Teacher's Training* with the intention of developing a deeper understanding of the phenomena of my study.

REFLEXIVITY

In phenomenological research, reflexivity is essential to understanding lived experiences. According to Patton (2002), one of the main themes of qualitative research is an awareness of voice, perspective, and reflexivity that involves the researcher's own perspective throughout the research process. Throughout the process, I was not able to separate the yoga teacher and the researcher in me, and I believe that both played an essential role throughout the whole study. According to Dupuis (1999), "[w]e also must describe how our human selves and our personal experiences influenced our decisions we made and our interpretations of the data" (p. 60). Throughout more than two decades of my yoga life, both as a dedicated yoga practitioner and yoga teacher, I have been living and witnessing the healing and transformative powers of yoga. My yoga space - and I do not mean my yoga mat or yoga room, I mean my yoga spiritual space - was my path to liberation and enlightenment. I felt the need to share my yoga experience with people who lost connection with their bodies, hoping yoga might be a way to honor, reconnect and gain back trust with their own bodies. We live in our bodies, where our feelings, emotions, and experiences reside. In 2012, I received specialized training and certification in trauma sensitive yoga through the Trauma Centre of the Justice Research Institute in Boston, Massachusetts and Kripalu Centre for Yoga and Health, Massachusetts, where I was so privileged to study with the world's renowned trauma expert Dr. Bessel van der Kolk and Yoga Teacher David Emerson. I felt a calling and also a responsibility to explore the sacred liberating and transforming yoga experiences of people who experienced trauma, so that others may benefit. For me, it's more than just teaching yoga postures, it's the gift of sharing who I am as a person and not only giving my students what they wanted, but also what

they needed. I think that the ultimate gift yoga has given and taught me is that the greatest thing you can ever do is to give back.

It is amazing to see and witness the process of growth and development of my yoga journey throughout the years, and how and when the lights came on. I transformed mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically and became more open to possibilities than I previously knew or imagined existed. It's been a life-changing, a life-altering, journey and experience that has been empowering and rewarding on so many different levels and layers. How could I not want to share these life empowering experiences and practices with others and everyone? My enthusiasm grew into curiosity as I stepped into the phenomenological realm and wonder of the depth of this study.

I approached the interviewing process with an open heart. I cannot deny that with the first few interviews I was aware of respecting the participants' space and holding back my questions. Further, while all questions were related to the participants' yoga experience not the trauma experience (see Interview guide – Appendix B), I was amazed at how participants opened up and shared their trauma experience with me. They knew that the study was about exploring yoga and trauma, but I guess part of it was also the trust that develops between yogis and yoginis (yoga practitioners). I was absorbed in their stories, with such a natural understanding. Every word uttered through the participants' mouths was a reminder of the wonders and power of yoga.

The interviews were the most amazing part of this study; it was so enjoyable. Most of the interviews took place on yoga mats and we were even dressed in comfortable yoga pants! During the interviews the participants and I laughed, cried, smiled, paused, hugged, stretched,

chanted, breathed, and we spent precious powerful moments in silence. And at the moments of silence, they were singing the tunes, without any words. Silence became more powerful than any words; I was listening to their waves within.

Yoga allowed me to listen with softer ears. It was the depth of the experience, my receptive state, or both, that allowed the words to sink deeply into my being and flow seamlessly into my soul. Instead of just hearing their words and stories, I was feeling and absorbing them. Instead of just listening to their experiences, I was understanding them. Yoga allowed me to see with a more loving eye. Instead of just looking at them, I was seeing inside them. Yoga allowed me to have a more passionate heart, instead of analyzing their experiences; I was comprehending and absorbing the meanings in those experiences. I found myself taking pieces of their life and writing a story, where the broken pieces became their glory. I celebrated their success, cried for their pain and losses and joined them in their dreams and hopes. What an amazing journey.

SUMMARY

The title of this study ‘Moving from darkness into light’ was selected through the words of the participants themselves. Participants used the word “darkness” to explain their trauma and “light” to describe their yoga experience. Participants explained that yoga was like light brightening up the darkness of their trauma.

Chapter One has provided an introduction and overview of the study including the rationale for choosing the research topic, method, and the similarities of phenomenology and yoga. The chapter ends with an initial discussion of reflexivity, introducing my journey both as

researcher and a yoga practitioner/teacher that will be woven throughout this study as I journalled throughout the journey.

Chapter two introduces the literature review for both trauma and yoga. The section on trauma discusses the symptoms of trauma, modalities of healing trauma and the importance of the somatic or bodily connection and awareness. A review of yoga follows, explaining what yoga is, yoga sutras, yoga as a form of leisure and ending with reviewing mindfulness.

Chapter Three describes the study's methodology. This includes a discussion of phenomenology as a methodology and research design. Following this is a description of participants and the different traumas to which they were exposed. The chapter ends with a description of the phenomenological interviews, data analysis, and ethical considerations. Documents used to guide the study (e.g., letters of information, informed consent forms, interviews guides, etcetera) appear in the Appendices at the end of the thesis.

Chapter Four describes the findings. Drawing from the meanings and experiences of yoga for trauma survivors, four essences have emerged: *moving from the darkness of trauma into the light of yoga and living, entering into safe and sacred spaces, letting go into yoga and returning to embodiment of self, and embracing creativity and connection beyond the mat.*

Chapter Five then provides a discussion of these essences, implications of the study, possible limitations, and recommendations for future research. Definitions of Sanskrit terms used throughout the text and underlined are explained in Appendix A.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this study is to explore the meanings and experiences of yoga for trauma survivors. This chapter reviews relevant literature that begins to describe the phenomenon of interest. I first begin with an overview of the literature that describes trauma, its nature, symptoms, and process of healing. Since people live in their bodies, I then introduce the importance of including the physical body and the somatic connection and awareness as an aspect of trauma healing. As the focus of this study is on experience of yoga, I then review literature that explores yoga as a form of leisure and the physical and spiritual healing aspects of yoga. I also describe the practice of yoga and provide an overview of mindfulness as an essential part of this experience.

TRAUMA

Trauma, as a construct within the social sciences, is often questioned due to the numerous, and often ambiguous definitions spread throughout various disciplines (Leydesdorff, Dawson, Burchardt, & Ashplant, 1999). The term trauma is Greek in origin, meaning to physically harm, disturb, wound, or pierce the bodily boundaries (Garland, 1998; Leydesdorff, Dawson, Burchardt, & Ashplant, 1999). In medical terms, trauma refers to the morbid condition of a body produced by a serious physical wound or injury, or by an act of violence. However, psychiatrists, psychotherapists, psychologists, and a variety of other health professionals have increasingly used a broader understanding of the term trauma. Events considered traumatic include experiences of military combat, violent personal assault, kidnapping, a terrorist attack, torture, natural or man-made disasters, severe vehicle

accidents; being taken as a hostage or prisoner in a concentration camp; and diagnosis of a life threatening disease (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Laungani (2002) defines trauma as, “a state of physical and/or emotional shock, which may be a result of real, anticipated, imagined or repressed experiences” (p. 129). Trauma has been recognized as a multifaceted experience that disrupts functioning on a systemic level involving both body and mind (Damasio, 1994; van der Kolk, 1994). Haskell (2003) describes trauma as “an event that continues to exert a negative effect on thinking (cognition), feeling (affect), and behavior long after the event is in the past” (p. 113).

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (4th ed.) (*DSM-IV*) (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) defines trauma as:

Direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one’s physical integrity; or witnessing an event that involves death, injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of another person; or learning about unexpected or violent death, serious harm, or threat of death or injury experienced by a family member or other close associate (Criterion A1). The person’s response to the event must involve intense fear, helplessness, or horror (or in children, the response must involve disorganized or agitated behavior). (Criterion A2) (p. 424).

Within the *DSM-IV*, this definition of trauma is connected to diagnoses of posttraumatic stress disorder, an identifiable condition related to exposure to extreme stress and trauma.

PTSD is a term describing long lasting psychological disturbance and an accompanying set of ineffective responses to traumatic life events (Kleinke, 1989). The addition of PTSD to the

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (3rd ed.) (*DSM-III*) (American Psychiatric Association, 1980) helped to shift understanding of PTSD. It validated and legitimized the

experiences of individuals experiencing trauma. This was significant because it encouraged healthcare providers to view disorders as a human experience rather than human weakness.

Exposure to traumatic events does not always lead to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Bisson, Brayne, Ochberg, & Everly, 2007; Kessler, Sonnega, Bromet, Hughes, & Nelson, 1995). Only about 25 percent of individuals who have been exposed to a potential traumatic stressor develop PTSD (Yahuda & McFarlane, 1995). Tsay et al. (2000) in their review of trauma studies stated that only between 27 and 46 percent of individuals who experienced trauma reported posttraumatic stress symptoms. According to Blonna (2005), PTSD is diagnosed when symptoms of an acute stress last for over a month, and sometimes even for years or decades after the event of trauma.

In the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (4th ed., Text Rev.) (DSM IV-TR)* (American Psychiatric Association, 2000), PTSD is listed as an anxiety disorder. For a person to be diagnosed with PTSD the entire experience that triggered the anxiety must include certain features. The first set of features involves the nature of the event or immediate experience: the individual must have experienced what the DSM IV-TR refers to as an extreme traumatic stressor. It may have been either a direct or witnessing threat of death or serious injury, or physical integrity either to the individual or someone else.

Symptoms of trauma.

Individual's responses and reactions to trauma could be intense fear, a sense of extreme helplessness, or horror. Symptoms include re-experiencing the event, avoiding stimuli associated with the trauma, numbed responsiveness, and increased arousal such as being easily

startled. Psychiatrist Judith Herman (1997) in her book, *Trauma and Recovery*, combine the many symptoms of trauma into three main categories: hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction. Herman (1997) explains, “hyperarousal reflects the persistent expectation of danger; intrusion reflects the indelible imprint of the traumatic moment; constriction reflects the numbing response of surrender” (p. 35). A brief description of each of the three categories will follow.

First, *hyperarousal*, is the first cardinal symptom of PTSD, well documented in a large variety of people who experience trauma (American Psychiatric Association, 1980; Herman, 1997; Kardiner, 1941; Kolb, 1987; van der Kolk & Ducey, 1984). In this stage, individuals are easily frightened, react irritably to small stimulus, and sleep poorly (Herman, 1997). The symptoms of hyperarousal are described as “the human system of self-preservation going into permanent alert, as if danger might return at any moment” (Herman, 1997, p. 35). According to Kolb (1987), a study that played tapes of combat sounds to Vietnam veterans, those with PTSD showed increased heart rate and blood pressure, some even became so agitated they asked to discontinue the experiment. Veterans without PTSD and those who had not experienced combat were able to listen to the combat tapes without significant physiological responses. Individuals with PTSD show an extreme startle response to stimuli associated with the traumatic event (McFall, Murburg, Roszell, & Veith, 1989).

Second, *intrusion*, can be experienced long after the actual trauma or the initial danger has passed. According to Herman (1997) individuals relive the trauma as if it was repeatedly happening in the present and intrusion prevents survivors from being able to resume any normal course of their lives. Herman (1997) also adds that the traumatic moment becomes

encoded in an abnormal form of memory, which can break spontaneously into consciousness, both as flashbacks during waking states and as traumatic nightmares during sleep. According to van der Kolk (2000), intrusions are horrifying, they prevent being able to attend to the present and interfere with dealing with the past. Individuals never know when they will encounter some reminder of the trauma and even simple and normal safe environments may feel dangerous.

Reliving a trauma may be an opportunity for mastery; however most individuals do not welcome this experience and rather they fear it. Herman (1997) explains,

Reliving a traumatic experience, whether in the form of intrusive memories, dreams, or actions, carries with the emotional intensity of the original event. The survivor (individual) is continually buffeted by terror and rage. These emotions are qualitatively different from ordinary fear and anger. They are outside the range of ordinary emotional experience, and they overwhelm the ordinary capacity to bear feelings (p.42).

Reliving trauma again provokes intense emotional distress and may result in a narrowing of consciousness, a withdrawal from engagement with others, and possibly an impoverished life.

Third, when *constriction* or numbing is experienced, individuals become completely powerless and go into a state of surrender (Herman, 1997), and self-defense systems shut down, or the individuals feel immobilized. For example, individuals describe feeling they cannot physically escape thus they instead escape by shifting their state of consciousness. Elements are detached from their usual meaning making. Perceptions of the event are numbed or distorted, and sometimes there is an accompanying experience of altered sense of time, often described by the individuals as being in slow motion. Herman (1997) also shared that individuals in this stage, might feel like observers outside their bodies, as if they are outside the traumatic event, as if the experience is not happening to them. They experience an altered state of

consciousness that could be seen as one of nature's small mercies, a protection against unbearable pain (Herman, 1997).

According to Briere (2005) as a result of the complexity of some posttraumatic outcomes, psychological assessment in this area has to potentially address a wide symptom cluster including: altered self-capacities, cognitive disturbance, mood disturbance, and overlapped avoidance responses. *Altered self-capacities*, emphasizes dysfunction in the area of identity, affecting interpersonal relatedness (Briere, 2005), occurring where there has been severe or extended childhood abuse or neglect, especially when parent-child attachment is affected (Cole & Putnam, 1992; Herman, Perry, & van der Kolk, 1989).

Cognitive disturbance, describes the effects of interpersonal victimization (e.g., child abuse or adult assault) on cognitive functioning including perceived low self-esteem, self-blame, perceptions of helplessness and hopelessness, expectations of rejection and loss, and an overestimation of the amount of danger in the world (Foa, Ehlers, Clark, Tolin, & Orsillo, 1999; Janoff-Balman, 1989; McCann & Pearlman, 1990). Such cognitions may form relational schemata involving low self-perception as a result of maltreatment from others that easily evoked or lead to reactivated experiences of, self-hatred, anger, fears of abandonment, or other trauma responses (Baldwin, Fehr, Keedian, Seidal, & Thompson, 1993; Briere, 2002).

Mood disturbance, studies indicate that exposure to traumas can result in disorders involving anxiety, depression, and anger or aggression (Heim & Nemeroff, 2001; Pollock et al., 1990) that are commonly comorbid with posttraumatic stress (Kessle et al., 1995).

Overlapped avoidance responses refer to avoidance of activities that appears to reduce the experience of trauma-related dysphoria. Examples of such responses are *dissociation*,

substance abuse, and *tension reduction*. *Dissociation*, has been defined as disruption in the usually integrated function of consciousness, memory, identity, or perception of the environment (Elzinga, Bermond, & van Dyke, 2002). According to Briere and Spinazzola (2005), dissociative symptomatology can be broadly defined as alterations in conscious awareness that arise, in part from defensive changes in otherwise integrated thoughts, feelings, memories, and behavior. It is considered to serve as a defense mechanism against intolerable trauma-associated memories and feelings, where the symptoms might include depersonalization, a general feeling of being detached from one's experiences and body, and derealization where experiences as perceived as feeling weird or unreal (Elzinga, Bermond, & van Dyke, 2002). Other symptoms include a lack of emotional responses, a decrease in awareness of surroundings, and even the inability to remember a significant aspect of the trauma (LaMonthe, 2002; van der Kolk, van der Hart, & Marmar, 1996). A number of studies indicate that individuals with chronic trauma are more likely to engage in *substance abuse*, including the use drugs and alcohol (Grilo et al., 1997). These substances are taken to anesthetize negative affect associated with the traumatic experience and memories (Khantzian, 1997); and may constitute a form of emotional avoidance. This may also leave the individual vulnerable to further trauma (Acierno, Resnick, Kilpatrick, Saunders, & Best, 1999). Conversely, according to Briere and Spinazzola (2005) clinical experience suggests that substance use can also aid to alleviate affective numbness in people who have experienced trauma by inducing transient and predictable pleasurable bodily sensations or emotions. *Tension reduction*, involves individuals seeking temporary distraction through relying on external ways of avoiding or reducing active

abused-related distress such as compulsive sexual behavior (Briere & Eliote, 2003) and self-mutilation (Briere & Gil, 1998).

Trauma healing.

Understanding the processes of healing in the aftermath of trauma is made possible through the work of authors such as Bass and Davis (2008), Herman (1997), Levine (2010), and the literature on mindfulness and trauma recovery (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Langer, 2005; Levine, 2010; Seigel, 2007). In this section, I introduce the stages of trauma healing and recovery described by Bass and Davis (2008) in their book *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*, written for women who are survivors of child sexual abuse. I also introduce psychiatrist Judith Herman's approach, from her book *Trauma and Recovery: The aftermath of violence from domestic abuse to political terror* (1997), addressed to therapists and based upon her three decades of research on trauma, where she classifies trauma healing in three integrated stages. I will then discuss what Levine (2010) introduces as the 'antidote' for trauma in his book *In an Unspoken Voice: How the Body Releases Trauma and Restores Goodness*. Both Herman (1997) and Levine (2010) agree that safety is the foundation of healing trauma.

Bass and Davis (2008) describe healing following trauma as both a process and continuum:

The healing process is a continuum. It begins with an experience of survival, an awareness of the fact that you lived through the abuse and made it to adulthood. It ends with thriving – the experience of a satisfying life no longer programmed by what happened to you as a child. And in between is the healing process (p. 63).

As Bass and Davis (2008) describe, healing exists between survival and thriving, where healing is not a random process. There are recognizable stages through which all survivors pass. Bass and Davis (2008) explain that healing is not *linear*; rather it is an integral part of life. The healing process is like a *spiral*, where individuals go through the same stages again and again, traveling up the spiral, passing through them at a different level, and with a different perspective. Bass and Davis (2008) also explain that although most of the following healing stages are necessary for every survivor, few of them are not applicable for every survivor (such as the emergency stage, remembering the abuse, confronting your family, and forgiveness).

Bass and Davis (2008) describe several trauma-healing stages. *The decision to heal* involves the need to make an active commitment to heal and the individual demonstrates a willingness to change. *The emergency stage* involves beginning to deal with memories and suppressed feelings, which can throw one's life into utter turmoil. *Remembering* is the process of retrieving both memories and feelings. *Believing it happened* becomes a vital part of the healing process. *Breaking silence* is a powerful healing force that can dispel the shame of being a victim. *Understanding that it wasn't the one's fault* involves a shift from self-blame to placing blame on the abusers. *Making contact with the child within* involves the generation of compassion for oneself in face of the trauma experienced. *Trusting oneself* involves reconnection with the inner voice, the best guide for healing as individuals begin to trust their own perceptions, feelings, and intuition as a new basis for action in the world. *Grieving and mourning* is a way to honor the pain, let go, and move into the present. Reconnecting with and expressing, *anger - the backbone of healing* is pivotal to healing and a powerful and liberating force. *Disclosures and confrontations* may be important for some but not others and may be an

important cleansing tool. *Forgiveness* of self is essential; however, forgiveness toward the abuser is not necessarily an essential part of the healing process. *Spirituality*, having a sense of a power greater than oneself, can be a real asset in the healing process. This may be found through religion, meditation, nature, or a support group. Last, *resolution and moving on*, as individuals move through these stages, they reach a point of integration where feelings and perspectives stabilize. While history cannot be erased, deep and lasting changes in their lives may take place. Having gained awareness, compassion, and power through healing, individuals have the opportunity to work toward a better world.

Similarly, Herman (1997) outlines three stages of trauma healing: establishment of safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection with ordinary life. Safety is the foundation for trauma healing (Herman, 1997). The three stages of recovery should not be seen as set in stone, but as an attempt to simplify and organize an extremely complex and chaotic process (Herman, 1997). As Herman (1997) notes, whatever the order is, no single course of recovery follows these stages through a straightforward linear sequence. The three stages will be briefly discussed.

In the first stage, *restoring control and establishing safety*, establishing individual safety takes precedence over all others, for therapeutic work cannot succeed if safety has not been adequately secured also therapeutic work should not even be attempted until a reasonable degree of safety has been achieved (Herman, 1997). This stage lasts days for some, maybe weeks for others, even years for chronic traumatic or childhood abuse survivors. The establishment of safety refers to the individual or survivor having a stable living situation, financial aid, mobility, and a plan for self-protection in daily life (Herman, 1997). In the absence

of, without any one of these elements, it will be difficult for individuals to commit themselves and concentrate fully in therapy, due to feelings of insecurity.

In the second stage, *remembrance and mourning*, where remembrance involves the individuals or survivors sharing details of the trauma story, integrating trauma from the past into the present, emphasizing an eye should be kept on the intensity of the intrusive symptoms experienced and should be kept at a tolerable level (Herman, 1997). If a drastic increase in symptoms such as self-harm or anxiety take place, this is a message to re-examine and slow down the process of remembrance.

In the third stage, *reconnection*, individuals learn how to take power in real-life situations through a conscious choice to face danger (Herman, 1997). After individuals come to terms with trauma experienced in the past, they can start reconnecting or learning to tolerate various levels of emotions in everyday life. Herman (1997) adds that at this stage in recovery, individuals come to understand their post traumatic symptoms are a “pathological exaggeration” (Herman, 1997, p. 197) of what a normal reaction to danger is, and they have grown to become aware of their feeling of vulnerability regarding even the tiniest threats or reminders of their trauma. Here, individuals might decide to face their fears instead of having a passive response to them.

People who have experienced trauma may live in a world of chronic dissociation. A perpetual state of disembodiment keeps individuals disoriented and unable to engage in the here and now. According to Levine (2010), healing includes reconnection of body and mind where people who have experienced trauma:

In their healing journeys, learn to dissolve their rigid defenses. In this surrender they move from frozen fixity to gently thawing and, finally, free flow. In healing the divided self from its habitual mode of dissociation, they move from fragmentation to wholeness. In becoming embodied they return from their long exile. They come home to their bodies and know embodied life, as though for its first time. While trauma is hell on earth, its resolution may be a gift from the gods (p. 356).

Somatics: Why the body?

Individuals live in their bodies. The body cannot be separated from who they are or how they feel. Finlay (2011) explains:

It is impossible to separate our bodies from who we are and what we do in the world. Our body is the vehicle for experiencing, doing, being and becoming. We use our bodies before we think about it in everyday life activities. Through our bodies we perceive the world and relate to others and – in the process – we learn about ourselves (p. 29).

According to Hanna (1993), life means movement and vice versa and since we are living inside our bodies, our bodies are our vehicles to stay alive. Hanna (1993) explains:

Whatever life may in abstraction, we know that the way life manifests itself in living bodies is through autonomous movement. The living body is a moving body indeed; it is a constantly moving body. This is the prime trait by which we recognize life and distinguish the quick from the dead” (p. viii).

Many individuals after being exposed to trauma develop a conflicted relationship with their bodies (Ogden, Minton, & Pain, 2006; Rothschild, 2000; van der Kolk, 1994). Individuals do not see their bodies as belonging to them or under their control. Disconnection from their bodily experience occurs because they learn from past experiences that it might feel better to separate themselves from this unsafe place (van der Kolk, 2006). When Individuals are asked to focus on inner sensations in the body, they become overwhelmed with trauma related

perceptions, feelings, and emotions. They may even experience a lack of integration physically with some parts of their body, or a sense of disembodiment or emptiness (van der Kolk, 2006). Individuals who have trauma-related disorders lose somatic connection to present reality. At a body level, these responses are experienced as the past event happening again and again (van der Kolk et al., 1996). This is an aspect of *intrusion* as described by Herman (1997) and van der Kolk (2000).

Daniel Siegel in his foreword to the book *Trauma and the Body* by Pat Ogden (2006) shares that focusing on the body for attaining mental well-being has existed for thousands of years in the contemplative tradition and in our modern world. He urges we have forgotten the hard-earned wisdom of such ancient traditions turning toward the body with mindful awareness of the here-and-now allows pathways to integration to open and healing becomes possible.

Swami Sivananda Radha (2006) explains the role of the body in emotional regulation, where the body is the instrument through which individuals act out their desires and exercise their will. Bringing the body under control through the discipline of yoga will also help to bring the mind and emotions under control.

YOGA

It is beyond the scope and the purpose of this study to discuss the history of yoga. Instead, I will discuss aspects of the yogic philosophy that is relevant to the study. The practice of yoga originated in India over 5000 years ago. Archeological excavations in the Indus and Sarasvati Valleys discovered stone seals showing figures in yogic postures dated from 300 BC (Sivananda Yoga Centre, 1983). Hindu *Vedas* are the first written mention of yoga that is dated

around 2500 BC (Sivananda Yoga Centre, 1983). Yoga then was introduced to the United States in the late 19th or early 20th century through several *Swamis* (masters) such as Swamis Vivikenanda, Krishnamacharya, Paramahansa Yogananda, Kishnamurti and others. Prominent Indian Swamis and Gurus and American transcendentalists like B. K. S. Iyengar, T. K. V. Desikachar, Sivananda Saraswati, K. Pattabhi Jois, and many others continued introducing the teachings of yoga with all of its different schools and styles.

What is yoga?

“All life is yoga”

Sri Aurobindo, 1872-1950 - *The Synthesis of Yoga* (1996, p.4)

Yoga is a comprehensive and holistic system of practice for physical health and psychological well-being. The word ‘yoga’ is derived from the Sanskrit root ‘yug’ meaning to ‘yoke’ or ‘unite’ which signifies the bond and connection of the body, mind and spirit (Desikachar, 1999). Yoga creates individuality, space, and opening (Desikachar, 1999), allowing the self to be in the body without judgment. Yoga is about self-inquiry, self-encounter, self-surveillance and dismantling barriers to realizing one’s full human potential (Smith, 2007). Yoga is a timeless pragmatic science evolved over thousands of years dealing with all aspects of individuals as a whole, whether physical, moral, mental, and spiritual well-being (Iyengar, 2001). Yoga is a practical discipline integrating a wide variety of practices aiming to cultivate a state of mental and physical health, well-being, inner harmony, and ultimately a union and connection of the human individual with the transcendent existence (Aurobindo, 1999). According to Iyengar (2002), “yoga is an art, a science and a philosophy. It touches the life of a

man at every level, physical, mental, and spiritual. It is a practical method for making one's life purposeful, useful and noble" (p. xvii). Iyengar (2002) adds that yoga "lifts up the practitioner from the clutches of pain and sorrow, and enables them to live fully, taking a delight in life" (p. xvii).

Yoga is often presented as multifaceted. It is comprised of different paths leading to the same goal of union including: Bhakti yoga or devotion, Karma yoga or action of selfless work, Raja yoga or meditation, Mantra yoga or sound, Jnana yoga or wisdom, and Hatha yoga or the purification of body and mind (Feuerstein, 2003). Iyengar (2001) in the preface of his book *Light on Yoga* explains "yoga is a timeless pragmatic science evolved over thousands of years dealing with the physical, moral, mental and spiritual well-being of a man as a whole" (preface, no page number).

Yoga traditions include the practice of meditation and focused awareness (*dhyana*); breathing regulation and techniques (*pranayama*); and a practice of physical postures (*asana*) (Desikachar, 1999; Forbes, 2011; Turlington, 2002). Physical postures focus on a mindfully isometric exercise and stretch rather than on aerobic fitness. All three components are interconnected as physical postures are linked and connected with the breath and performed with focused awareness. *Pranayama* translates as control of the life force. Richard Rosen (2002) exquisitely describes pranayama in his book *The Yoga of Breath: A step-by-step guide to pranayama* as:

If you pull pranayama apart, you'll find two smaller words, *prana* and *ayama*. Prana literally means "to breath forth," and the verb an, "to breathe" or simply "to live." The entry for prana in my Sanskrit-English dictionary reads, "breath of life, breath, respiration,

vitality, vigor, energy, power, and spirit.” Prana is a subtle energy that pervades every corner of the universe (p. 18).

Yoga simply is *a way of living*. According to Stone (2008) “yoga is a way of being and a mode of existing” (p. 8). Stone (2008) adds that “yoga begins in the present moment, and the present moment begins in silence. From that silence, words are born” (p. 7). The first word in the Yoga Sutras thread is *atha* that literally means ‘now’, and the present moment (Stone, 2008). This particular word for now means preparedness in arriving at this auspicious stage of desire and commitment towards self-realization, the highest goal of yoga.

Thousands of years ago, yoga’s central premise was simply to still the busy mind and thoughts through meditation. Meditation is the ultimate form of yoga practice and an integral part of the path of discovering, loving, healing, and transforming the totality of one’s being (Stephens, 2010). Meditation is the mental process involving focused attention aiming to achieve higher, deeper mental and spiritual awareness, steadying, quieting, or opening the mind for purpose of alter states of consciousness. Meditation is a tool to reach inner quietness and stillness. Kabat-Zinn in the introduction of his book *Wherever you go, There you Are*.

Mindfulness Meditation for Everyday Life (1994), described meditation in very simple words:

Meditation is simply about being yourself and knowing something about who that is. It is about coming to realize that you are on a path whether you like it or not, namely, that path is your life. Meditation may help us see that this path we call our life has direction; that is always unfolding, moment by moment; and that what happens now, in this moment, influences what happens next (p. xvi).

Meditation is the process of deepening and refining the attention and awareness and putting them to a greater practical in one's life (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Being present in the moment where stillness, insight, and wisdom arise only when being present in the moment.

Yoga Sutras.

Essential to the yoga path is the Yoga Sutras written by Sage Patanjali around 200 B.C.E. According to Turlington (2002), the Yoga Sutras is an ancient text that covers many aspects of life, beginning with a code of conduct and ending with a man's vision of his true self to illustrate the path and goal of yoga. Sutras literally means a rope or thread that holds things together and metaphorically refers to an aphorism, line, rule, or formula. Yoga Sutras consists of four chapters that include 196 sutra or aphorism. Turlington (2002) explains that the Yoga Sutras describe the nature of the human mind, techniques to master the mind and provide a "path toward states of tranquility, happiness, and unlimited comprehension" (p. 34). Becker (2000) adds the Yoga Sutras outlines a skillful way of conducting life that fosters moderation and harmony. The Yoga Sutras are very specific about the means to gain knowledge and the types of mental activities to be engaged. The Yoga Sutras contain essential advice for daily living and guidelines to allow for emotional enhancement, mental well-being and a more fulfilling and meaningful life - the ultimate aim of healing.

In the Yoga Sutras, Patanjali prescribes adherence to eight 'limbs' or steps, the sum of which constitute Ashtanga Yoga (8 Limbs of Yoga) which literally means (*ashta*=eight, *anga*=limbs), demonstrating the approach and to teachings of yoga. They act as guidelines on living a meaningful and purposeful life and serve as a prescription for moral and ethical conduct and self-discipline. They direct attention towards one's health and help individuals

acknowledge the spiritual aspect of human nature. Cope (2006) explains the 8 limbs of yoga as described by Sage Patanjali as: “yama: external disciplines and ethical practice; niyama: internal disciplines; asana: posture for meditation; pranayama: breath regulation; prtahayara: withdrawal of senses; dharana: concentration; dhyana: meditative absorption; samadhi: oneness” (p. 139).

The Ashtanga (eight limbs or steps of yoga) forms the structural framework for yoga practice. They are *limbs* in the sense that they all belong to the same body of teachings and each is essential. They are *steps* in the sense that there is a logical order to them and to how they should be approached. The first five limbs are external stages, while the last three are internal stages.

The five external stages of the eight limbs path of yoga starts with *Yama*, which is the first limb and deals with individuals’ ethical standards and sense of integrity, focusing on the behaviors and how individuals conduct themselves in life. Yama (the first limb) comprises of 5 external disciplines or practices: (1) *ahimsa*: harmlessness and no- violence (Iyengar, 2002) or “consideration for all living things, especially those who are innocent, in difficult, or worse of than we are” (Desikachar, 1999, p. 175); (2) *satya*: *truthfulness* (Iyengar, 2002); (3) *asteya*: “right communication through speech, writings, gesture, and action” (Desikachar, 1999, p. 175); (4) *brahmacharya*: resisting desires (Desikachar, 1999); and (5) *aparigraha*: moderation in all actions (Desikachar, 1999). *Niyama*, (the second limb) has to do with self-discipline and spiritual observances and compromise of 5 internal disciplines or practices: (1) *saucha*: cleanliness and purity (Iyengar, 2002); (2) *santosha*: contentment, or the ability to be comfortable with what the individuals have or don’t have (Desikachar, 1999); (3) *tapas*: removal of impurities both

mentally and physically through the maintenance of good habits such as sleep, exercise, nutrition, and relaxation (Desikachar, 1999); (4) *svadhyaya*: self study and checking oneself to evaluate that the principles of yoga are being followed (Iyengar, 2002) ; and (5) *isvara pranidhana*: reverence to a higher intelligence or the acceptance of one's limitations in relation to God (Desikachar, 1999).

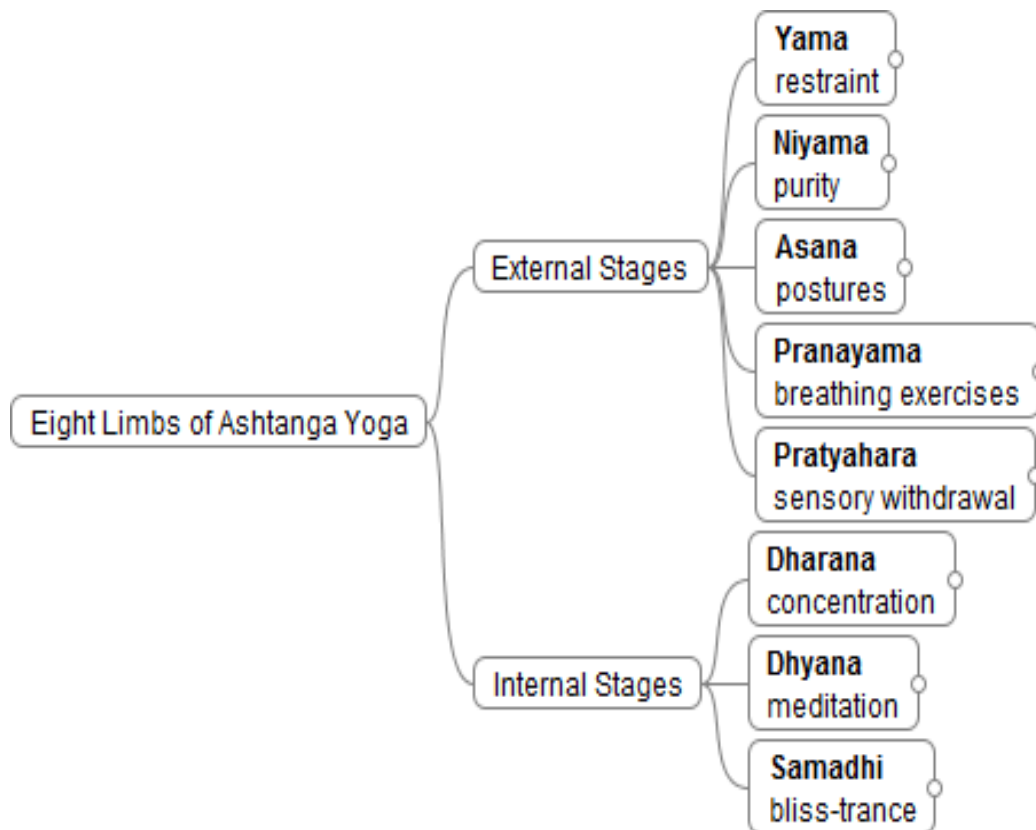


Figure 1. Eight limbs path of yoga (Ashtanga) as explained in the Yoga Sutras

Asana or postures (the third limb), practiced in yoga that must have the dual qualities of alertness without tension and relaxation without dullness (Desikachar, 1999). *Panayama*, or the conscious deliberate regulation of the breath (the fourth limb), where after regularly practiced, it reduces the obstacles that inhibit clear perception, and the mind gets ready for the process of

direction towards a chosen goal. *Prathayara*, withdrawal or sensory transcendence (fifth limb), involves conscious effort made to draw awareness away from the external world and stimuli; thus cultivating a detachment of the senses. Desikachar (1999) explained, “the restraint of sense occurs when the mind is able to remain in its chosen direction and the senses disregard the different objects around them and faithfully follow the direction of the mind” (p. 183).

The three internal stages of the eight limbs starts with the sixth limb *Dharana*, meaning one pointed attention or concentration, where individuals have relieved themselves from external distractions and can deal with the distractions of their own minds. *Dhyana*, mediation or profound contemplation (the seventh limb) involves an uninterrupted flow of concentration (Iyengar, 2002). The last limb is *Samadhi*, or enlightenment. Samadhi is a perfect spiritual absorption where the attentive flow of consciousness merges with state of meditation that dissolves; consciousness appears to have ceased reaching a state of silence, merging into the core of being, in a profound state of serenity where awareness vanishes and one ceases to experience space and time (Iyengar, 2002).

Mindfulness.

Mindfulness is central to the practice of yoga allowing a simple yet powerful path for getting in touch with one’s own wisdom and vitality (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). According to Follette, Palm, and Pearson (2006), the integration of mindfulness in exposure to trauma could increase an individual’s abilities to contact stimuli without engaging in avoidance strategies. Most importantly, the process of noticing and contacting experiences without judgment is a part of the path to self-acceptance and healing, a fundamental goal for many people who experienced trauma.

The origins of mindfulness practice, cultivating conscious attention and awareness, are based in Eastern spiritual philosophies and contemplative traditions, such as Buddhism (Baer, 2003; Follette, Palm, & Pearson, 2006). More recently, many Westerners have been using it to manage anxiety, calm themselves, and think more effectively. Mindfulness has found new utility in psychotherapy practice (Follette, Palm, & Pearson, 2006). Mindfulness practice has been recently applied to treatments of several psychological and health-related problems, and research is showing successful outcomes in psychological intervention (Becker & Zayfert, 2000; Simpson et al., 1998).

According to Kabat-Zinn (1990), mindfulness is an awareness of moment-to-moment experience. It is a type of attention developed by intentionally concentrating on parts of life we ordinarily would not notice. Mindfulness is different from our everyday state of awareness. Linehan (1993) describes mindfulness as a combination of the *what* skills of observing, describing, and participating and the *how* skills of a nonjudgmental attitude, focusing on one thing at a time, and being effective. The purpose of mindfulness is not to point out what is wrong, but to help people find what is right (Kabat-Zinn, 1990).

Harvard University Psychology professor Ellen Langer wrote in her book, *On Becoming an Artist*, mindfulness allows us to consider rules and patterns without allowing behavior to be mandated by them. Without the ability to perceive through a lens of mindfulness, it is difficult to move outside our familiar ways of seeing, in this ways, mindfulness makes it possible to adapt to changes in our environment (Langer, 2005). Seigel (2007) reported that mindful awareness practices improve emotional regulation, reduce negative mindsets, and improve

thinking (p. 6). Mindful awareness practices also “improves immune response, stress reactivity, and a sense of general physical well-being” (Seigel, 2007, p. 6).

Hahn (1975) explains that mindfulness is a way to arrive at liberation from narrow views and obtain fearlessness and compassion. Langer and Moldoveanu (2000) explain that mindfulness has been defined in the literature as the process of “drawing novel distinctions” (p. 2), or observing alternative perspectives, through self-observations, which may lead to four possible consequences, including: a greater sensitivity to one’s environment, increased openness to new information, creation of new categories for structuring perception, and an enhanced awareness of multiple perspectives in problem solving.

Being mindful is about getting relief from constant *mind-chatter*, that jumble of thoughts, feelings, and memories that most individuals have in their minds. It is not about controlling mind chatter or shutting it down. Siegel (2007) explains that mindfulness embraces uncertainty. Mindfulness and surrender allow for a paying of attention to the present moment with non-judgmental awareness of inner and outer experience (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Being mindful focuses attention on what is happening in the moment, watching without judging oneself or others. Instead of focusing on the mind chatter, mindfulness involves being aware of it and watching it as it goes by. Mindfulness is identified as a useful tool in developing emotion regulation skills. Rather than serving a control function, mindfulness strategies are taught to increase awareness and flexibility of responding to emotional experiences (Linehan, 1993; Langer, 2005; Salmon, Lush, Jablonski, & Sephton, 2009; Salmon, Sephton, Weissbecker, Hoover, Ulmer, & Studts, 2004).

Leisure and yoga: A means to an end or end in itself?

A yoga experience is influenced by how individuals understand and make meaning of that experience. In part, we may look to the leisure literature to understand how people make sense of experience. Leisure experiences may be thought of as both an end in itself (valued for the sake of the experience) or as a means to another end such as health, well-being, or accomplishment. Emphasizing the former, Pieper (1963) defines leisure as “an attitude of non-activity of inward calm, of silence; it means not being ‘busy’ but letting things happen” (p. 43). Similarly, DeGrazia (1962) defines leisure as the performance of an activity for its own sake or its own end. Taking up this idea more recently, several authors have begun to explore spiritual aspects of leisure. McDonald and Schreyer (1991) define spirituality as “an individual’s attempt to understand his/her place in the universe” (p. 179). Whereas, Shafranske and Gorsuch (1984) define leisure as, “the courage to look within and to trust. What is seen and what is trusted appears to be a deep sense of belonging, of wholeness, of connectedness, and of openness to the infinite” (p. 233). Benner’s (1988) definition is, “spirituality is the response to a deep and mysterious human yearning for self-transcendence and surrender” (p. 104).

Emphasizing leisure as a means to achieving some other end, other authors note that people’s lifestyles, including their leisure styles, seem to influence their health status, quality of life, and well-being (Ewart, 1991; Sobel, 1995). Similarly, the notion that leisure may act as means of coping with stress is not a recent idea in the leisure research literature (Caldwell & Smith, 1988; Weissinger & Iso-Ahola, 1984). Emerging empirical evidence suggests that leisure involvement contributes to overall health and well-being (Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993; Oullet, 1995). Leisure is thought to lead to improved psychological well-being through such

mechanisms as stress reduction, improved mood, and increased self-esteem (Driver, Brown, & Peterson, 1991; Iwasaki & Schneider, 2003; Mannell & Kleiber, 1997).

There are several forms of mindful and spiritual leisure practices combining body, mind and soul. According to the National Centre for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) (2011) in the United States, mind-body practices such as yoga; meditation, guided imagery; progressive relaxation; qi gong, and tai chi are described as focusing on “interactions among the brain, mind, body, and behavior, with the intent to use the mind to affect physical functioning and promote health” (pp. 2-3). For the purpose of this study, I focus on yoga (physical postures, meditation and breathing techniques) as it combines physical, mental and spiritual aspects of practice.

Leisure researchers interested in health recognize that separating physical and mental health is impossible. The body, mind and soul connection is indisputable and the value of meaningful leisure experience can easily intertwine physical and mental outcomes (Henderson & Bialeschki, 2005). Research examining and exploring the type of leisure activity and its role in dealing and coping with stress focus more on leisure in the form of physical activity verses leisure in the form of spiritual state, *more doing than being*. Regular physical activity reduces symptoms of anxiety and depression (Camacho, Roberts, Lazarus, Kaplan & Cohen, 1991; Ross & Hayes, 1998; Stephens & Craig, 1990), and lowers participants’ stress levels (Berger, 1994). There has been a growing interest in the contributions of leisure to physical and mental health and well-being (Driver, Brown & Peterson, 1991; Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000; Iwasaki & Schneider, 2003; Mannell & Kleiber, 1997)

Continuing the means-end debate, a substantial body of clinical research and studies also describes the many health benefits of yoga. It is beyond the scope of this study to review this large body of research literature in detail. I will, however, refer to a few of these studies that focus on yoga as a means to improving physical health. In a study by Carson et al. (2007), women with breast cancer had less pain and fatigue and increased relaxation after one week of weekly yoga practice. Yoga has also been found to effective with patients who had mild to moderate hypertension (Damodaran et al., 2002). Another study showed that after 3 months of weekly yoga sessions, the intensity of migraine headache was lowered (John, Sharma, Sharma, & Kankane, 2007). Yoga has also been found to reduce pain (Curtis, Osadchuk, & Katz, 2011).

A significant portion of yoga research has also focused on the effect on psychological and well-being showing that the practice of yoga and breath technique and control (*pranayama*) can lead to positive psychological benefits (Berger & Owen, 1992; Elkins, 2003; Schell, Allolio & Schonecke, 1994; West, Otte, Geher, Johnson & Mohr, 2004; Wood, 1993). Positive effects of yoga have been demonstrated for reducing participants' perception of stress and anxiety (Bower et al., 2005; Brown & Gerbarg, 2005; Campbell & Moore, 2004; Gura, 2002; Heilbronn, 1992; Lartha & Kaliappan, 1991; Michalsen, et al., 2005; ; Rubin & Feeney, 1986; Shapiro, Austin, Bishop & Cordova 2005). Several research studies shows that yoga is effective for alleviating depression (Balasubramaniam, Telles, & Doralswany, 2013; Campbell & Moore, 2004; Forbes, et al., 2008; Kamei, et al., 2000; Khumar, Kaur, & Kaur, 1993; Uebelacker, et al., 2010; Woolery, Myers, Sternlieb, & Zeltzer, 2004). Yoga improves quality of sleep (Balasubramaniam, Telles, & Doralswany, 2013; Khalsa, 2004; Beddoe, Lee, Weiss, Kennedy, & Yang, 2010; Manjunath & Telles, 2005). Yoga improves mood (Arpita, 1990; Lavey, et al., 2005;

Woolery, Myers, Sternlieb, & Zeltzer, 2004). Several authors found that daily yoga practice helped with insomnia (Balasubramaniam, Telles, & Doralswany, 2013; Brown & Gerbarg, 2005; Khalsa, 2004; Van Houten & McCord, 2004), through breathing techniques (*pranayama*) as it helps to quiet the mind, reduce obsessive worry, and induce a state of physical and mental calmness conducive to sleep.

The leisure studies literature also positions leisure as connected to other ends such as spiritual well-being. Spiritual well-being has been found to be an important coping resource that may mitigate the negative impact of stress on mental and physical health (Pargament, 1997). Hawks (1994) defines spiritual health as:

A high level of faith, hope, and commitment in relation to a well-defined worldview or belief system that provides a sense of meaning and purpose to existence in general, and that offers an ethical path to personal fulfillment which includes connectedness with self, others and a higher power or larger reality (p. 6).

Studies of the relationship between leisure and spiritual well-being are important as spiritual well-being may be viewed as a benefit of leisure and as an enhancement of the human condition (McDonald & Schreyer, 1991). Hawks (1994) identifies a number of the internal and external characteristics of spiritual health and well-being. Hawks (1994) also explains external characteristics as: trust, honesty, integrity, altruism, compassion, and a relationship with a higher power or larger reality that transcends an observable physical reality. The internal characteristics such as: life purpose and ultimate meaning, sense of connectedness with others, deep concern for and commitment with something greater than self, a sense of wholeness in life, strong beliefs, principles, ethics and values, and love, joy, peace, hope and fulfillment.

Further, Miller (1999) explains that empirical evidence has shown to support the relationship

between spirituality and psychological and physical well-being. There is growing evidence that spiritual health exerts a major influence on the other dimensions of health (Goodloe & Arreola, 1992).

Specific to trauma, Arai, Mock and Gallant (2011), explain there is a significant role for physically active leisure in supporting people who experienced trauma, indicating:

There is a growing body of literature in leisure that explores the role of physically active leisure in helping people to cope with the stress and heal the spiritual, social and psychological wounds associated with trauma and to transcend these challenges to become more present and engaged in living (p. 419).

Where then does yoga exist in this place between viewing leisure as a means to an end, or an end in itself? Arai, Griffin, Miatello and Greig (2008) explain that:

Given the significant impacts of trauma on overall health, there is a significant role for leisure in supporting individuals who have experienced trauma to: cope with the stress associated with trauma; to heal the spiritual, social, and psychological wounds associated with trauma; and to transcend these challenges to become more present and engaged in living (p. 38).

A recent study was conducted between 2009 and 2011, examined yoga as a complementary treatment for chronic posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The study was funded by The National Institute of Health, and was led by Dr. Bessel van der Kolk at The Trauma Centre at Justice Resource Institute in Boston, Massachusetts. According to The Trauma Centre website, the randomized controlled study found a short-term yoga program was associated with reduced trauma symptoms in women with PTSD. In this study, 64 women, 18 to 58 years old with chronic, treatment un-responsive PTSD, were randomly assigned to 10 weeks of a treatment condition of trauma-informed yoga classes or a control condition, Women's

Health Education classes. At the post-treatment assessment, the yoga group exhibited statistically significant decreases in PTSD symptoms compared to the control group. Sixteen out of 31 (52%) of participants in the yoga group no longer met criteria for PTSD compared to 6 out of 29 (21%) in the control group. The Yoga Group reported reduced dissociative symptoms, approaching statistical significance. Statistically significant decreases in affect dysregulation and increases in tension reduction activities were also reported by the Yoga Group (The Trauma Centre, 2013).

Traditional trauma therapies have faced challenges in the treatment of childhood onset chronic trauma and its associated symptoms of affect deregulation, heightened physiological states, somatic problems, dissociation, and avoidance. Body-based work, such as yoga, may act as a treatment bridge, increasing a sense of awareness, safety and mastery over one's body while building skills to effectively interpret and tolerate physiological and affective states. Yoga, one of the top ten most widely practiced forms of complementary alternative medicine in the United States, incorporates techniques of breathing exercises, physical postures, movement, relaxation and mindfulness.

The questions posed as research questions in Chapter One then remain: What is the nature of the yoga experience? What meanings do people who have experienced trauma make of this experience? What happens in yoga experience that is healing? An increasing amount of research considers the use of mindfulness-based approaches integrating body and mind, such as yoga, in healing trauma. Individuals live in their bodies, there is need to bring back the bodily awareness and connection that was lost due to trauma exposure. Few studies attempt to understand the stories and experiences of trauma survivors. To fill this gap in the literature, the

current study explores the *how* of the experience and *what* is healing in the yoga experience. It aims to enhance our understanding of the meaning of the yoga experience in the healing journeys of participants.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the meanings and experiences of yoga for trauma survivors. This chapter discusses the philosophy and methodology of phenomenology. This is followed by a discussion of the research design and methods as shaped by phenomenology. I share my experience of recruiting the participants of the study, conducting phenomenological interviews, and analyzing and presenting the data in keeping with phenomenology. I end the chapter with a discussion of ethical considerations.

PHENOMENOLOGY

“Phenomenology asks for that which makes a some-‘thing’ what it is—and without which it could not be what it is”

(van Manen, 2001, p. 10)

In this quote in which he builds from the work of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, van Manen (2001) points us to the attempt phenomenological exploration makes to articulate the essence of some-“thing” (p. 10). Looking at the history of phenomenology, it started around the late 19th century, when the mathematician and philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) was exploring the question of “how objects, actions, and events appear in the consciousness of the actor” (Daly, 2007, p. 94). As Groenewald (2004) explains:

To arrive at certainty, anything outside immediate experience must be ignored, and in this way the external world is reduced to the contents of personal consciousness. Realities are thus treated as pure ‘phenomena’ and the only absolute data from where to begin. Husserl named his philosophical method ‘phenomenology’, the science of pure ‘phenomena’ (p. 43).

According to Daly (2007), Alfred Schutz believed individuals interpret their lives and world based on their experiences. Schutz continued Husserl's concept of phenomenology and introduced and familiarized it to the world of social science research. In the beginning of the last century, Merleau-Ponty (1962) introduced "essences" to the world of phenomenology, explaining that phenomenology is "to return to the things themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge" (p. ix). According to van Manen (2002):

Phenomenology does not offer us the possibility of effective theory with which we can now explain and/or control the world, but rather it offers us the possibilities of plausible insights that bring us in more direct contact with the world (p. 9).

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the meanings and experiences of yoga for trauma survivors. A phenomenon is the object of a conscious subject's experience as it presents itself (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology is a descriptive qualitative study of the human experience where it aims to come to a deeper understanding of the nature of the everyday experiences. It is the study of the life-world, "the world as we experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or reflect on it" (van Manen, 2001, p. 9). Phenomenology as an inductive methodology attempts to capture participant's perception of their lived experience (Patton, 2002). The aim of phenomenology is to faithfully conceptualize the processes and structures of life, how situations are meaningfully lived, and as experienced, with nothing added, and nothing subtracted (Giorgi, 2009). Merleau-Ponty (1962) remarked that phenomenology could only be understood by doing it. Phenomenologists seek to capture, catalog, and interpret the lived experience (Wagner, 1983). Patton (1990) explains that phenomenology focuses on how individuals put together the phenomena experienced in a way

as to make sense of the world and, in so doing, develop a worldview by asking the question: what is the structure and essence of experience of the phenomenon of individuals? Where there is no separate or objective reality, it is only what they know their experience is and what it means.

Such a focus allows for a deep understanding of a particular phenomenon or experience of participants. Phenomenology is most compatible when the interest is a deep understanding of a lived experience. According to van Manen (2001) phenomenology:

Reintegrates part and whole, the contingent and the essential, values and desires. It encourages a certain attentive awareness to the details and seemingly trivial dimensions of our everyday educational lives. It makes us thoughtfully aware of the consequential and the inconsequential, the significant in the taken-for-granted (p. 8).

As consciousness is at the heart of phenomenology, creation of theories or generalizations is not what phenomenology is about, but rather it offers the possibility of plausible insights, bringing individuals in more direct contact with the world (van Manen, 2002).

In this study, I chose a phenomenological approach as I am inquiring about the nature of lived experience. Phenomenology, unlike grounded theory, does not aim to end with the development of a theory that explains the world (van Manen, 2001). In contrast, phenomenology is most characteristically about “thoughtfulness” that embraces a “mindful wondering about the project of life, of living, of what it means to live a life” (van Manen, 2002, p. 12).

RESEARCH DESIGN

As a dedicated yoga teacher and practitioner who truly believes the core of understanding is in *experiencing the experience*, phenomenology resonated as the most suitable method for my study. I was interested in *what* is the experience, not the *why* and *how* of this experience. I was inspired by van Manen's (2001) methodological approaches for phenomenological research. van Manen (2001) explains that in the practice of human science research, "various methodical activities cannot really be performed in isolation" (p. 30). Adhering to van Manen (2001), I describe different aspects of this methodological approach in the following paragraphs.

Phenomenology asks us to *turn to a phenomenon that seriously interests us*. As I mentioned in an earlier section, I have a strong interest in holistic spiritual healing through both body and mind. As I described earlier I have been a dedicated yoga teacher and practitioner for over two decades.

Phenomenology also asks us to *investigate the experience as we live it*. I gained an understanding of the yoga experience of participants through interviews that allowed participants to open their hearts and minds as I attempted to understand their expression of their experience. This was done through offering a sacred and comfortable space for interviewing so participants could feel safe and comfortable. Questions were carefully worded, hoping to minimize the imposition of predetermined responses (Patton, 2002).

In describing the phenomena through the art of writing, I carefully chose my words. According to van Manen (2001), phenomenology is about the art of being sensitive to the

subtle undertones of language where language speaks when it allows the things and experiences themselves to speak. van Manen (2001) adds:

An authentic speaker must be a true listener, able to attune to the deep tonalities of language that normally fall out of our accustomed range of hearing, able to listen to the way the things of the world speak to us (*p. 111*).

Phenomenological exploration involves *balancing the research context by considering parts and whole*, articulating the challenge of getting lost in writing, and no longer knowing which direction to go. Throughout this study it was important to step back and look at the total, at the contextual givens and how each of the parts contributes and complements toward the total (van Manen, 2001), and to go back to the research questions and measure the overall design of the study against the significance the parts played in the total structure (van Manen, 2001) of the phenomenon.

PARTICIPANTS

“The basic datum of phenomenology is the conscious human-being”

(Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 98)

According to van Manen (2001) the data of phenomenological studies are human experiences. “We gather other people’s experiences because they allow us to become more experienced ourselves” (van Manen, 2001, p. 62). There is no fixed number of participants that is appropriate for qualitative research (Henderson, 1991; Manson, 1996) where the results should be recognized by the data collected rather than the number of participants (Manson, 1996; Patton, 1990). Giorgio (2000) suggests the number of interviews usually ranges from one to 10 participants. The recruitment goal for the study was initially 8 to 12 participants, however

I interviewed 13 participants. I support Patton (2002) who stated that purposeful sampling focuses on information-rich participants whose experience illuminate the question(s) under study.

For recruitment, I used a number of purposeful sampling methods. I was fortunate and grateful to maintain a good and strong connection with the yoga community. I posted a recruitment flyer (see Appendix C) to advertise about the study at various facilities that offer yoga classes (yoga studios, gyms, community centers, and the University of Waterloo). I also distributed flyers and emailed a study description brief to fellow yoga teachers, yoga participants, psychotherapists, and friends to pass it along to their connections and individuals who might be interested to be part of the study. I have also been on the committee for a yoga fundraising event, so I sent the volunteers and yoga teachers involved in the event information about the study. The recruitment poster advertised that the criteria for participation included having a minimum of 5 years yoga experience. The poster also clearly indicated that the focus was on yoga experiences of trauma survivors and participants and self-identified themselves as having experienced trauma in their lives. I also used snowball sampling as an approach for locating information-rich key participants (Patton, 2002), where I asked participants to recommend or pass details about the study to others whom they thought fit the criteria of the study. One additional participant was recruited through snowball sampling.

The study examined the lifeworlds and lived experiences of 13 participants including 10 females, and 3 males. The youngest participant was 28 years old, and the oldest was 73 years old. Participants had a range from 7 to 45 years of yoga experience and practiced a variety of yoga styles and traditions, such as Hatha, Ashtanga, Vinyasa Flow, and Sivananada yoga.

Participants lived in various cities in Southern Ontario (Toronto, Cambridge, Kitchener, and Waterloo) and represented a wide range of racial and cultural backgrounds. Participants represented a variety of occupations such as: retired engineer, financial advisor, professional, writer, university professor, postdoctoral fellow, school teachers, and yoga teachers. Participants had differing levels of education: 4 participants had 6 graduate degrees (Master and PhD).

All 13 participants received an Information Letter (see Appendix D) that in addition to describing the study also served two additional purposes. First, it assured participants' that their identities would be protected throughout the study, as pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality. Second, it highlighted that if any participant wished to withdraw at any time from the study, they would be immediately granted the approval to do so without any penalty or consequences. Participants also completed and signed an Informed Consent Form (see Appendix E). Through signing this form, participants indicated their informed and voluntary consent to participate in the study process, to have the interviews audio recorded, and to allow use of their words (verbatim quotes) and description of experiences.

Participants in this study self-identified a range of trauma experiences. Traumas described by participants included sexual assault, domestic violence, abuse experienced at the hands of parents and partners, conflict with family members, having a suicidal family member, family members involved with the criminal justice system or who have experienced war trauma, and being kicked out of home, being diagnosed with a life-threatening disease, having third degree burns, being involved in a major car accident, losing a son through motor vehicle accident, having a brain tumor leading to loss of sight, experiencing a severe chronic eating disorder, and

cancer. Participants also described chronic stress associated with having a son with acute life-threatening illness, or a son with special needs. Several participants had experienced multiple traumas and most participants also experienced anxiety, major depression, and chronic migraines as a result of their trauma. Some also described the use of drugs and alcohol addiction.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL INTERVIEWS

van Manen (2001) explains that researchers could borrow the experiences of others to gain knowledge for themselves. Before the interviews, I either spoke with or met with all participants to build trust and rapport. It was important to remember in this process that safety is essential to trauma healing (Herman, 1997). Trust is also essential in research that aims to ask participants to openly discuss their experience to gain insights and understanding into their yoga experience.

Face-to-face, one-on-one interviews were conducted with each participant using semi-structured open-ended questions that were in keeping with phenomenology (see Appendix B). According to Patton (1990), the use of open-ended questions allows the researcher to understand and capture participants' points of view. Holstein and Gubrium (1995) explain that social researchers generate data by asking people to talk about their lives; results, findings, or knowledge come from conversation. The focus of the interviews was not on *why* an experience emerged, but to seek rich descriptions of true essences of this experience. I approached each interview with an open mind as each participant had a story to tell, a unique perspective, background, and life. I allowed the interview to unfold based on the participants' narratives, emerging needs, and ways of relating.

Interviews ranged between 75 and 120 minutes and one interview was 150 minutes in length. All interviews were audiotaped with the informed and written consent of participants (Appendix E). I transcribed all interviews into verbatim transcripts. Throughout the data analysis, verbatim quotes from the interviews were used to formulate the essences that explain and convey participants' depth of emotions, thoughts and feelings, their experiences, and basic assumptions. As I mentioned in the previous section, participant confidentiality was protected through the use of pseudonyms. I was conscious of, and considered, ethical issues throughout the study.

Given the nature of the study, I attempted to provide privacy and comfort to participants, and to ensure that the space in which interviews took place were inviting, welcoming, sacred, and quiet to ensure participants would feel comfortable and safe while openly sharing their experiences. I assured the locations of the interviews were of the participants' choice, and where they felt both safe and comfortable. Five interviews took place in the privacy of my home's cozy living room. Three interviews were conducted in participants' homes, as per their request where we comfortably sat in their kitchen or living rooms. Because of the driving distance, two participants preferred to have the interviews at yoga studios close to their homes. We sat comfortably on our yoga mats and did a few stretches throughout the interview. Finally, three interviews took place at the University of Waterloo.

At the beginning of each interview, I took enough time to walk each participant through the interview process and experience. I also informed participants of the freedom to stop the interview, if at any time they do not feel comfortable for any reason. I also asked them to skip any question they did not want to answer. Before we started the interview, I checked to make

sure participants felt comfortable and were ready to share their lived experiences. My first question was a general question, asking participants to describe and share their yoga experience. Interviews then began to organically shape and flow on their own. My interview guide was carefully carved, and I found the questions naturally flowed without my need to look at the questions. At the end of the interview I always checked that I did not miss any question. It was amazing to notice that often participants discussed and answered questions before I even asked them, again assuring me that my questions were relevant in exploring the experiences. All the questions were about their yoga experience not the trauma, however most participants felt comfortable and opened to share their trauma experience as well.

DATA ANALYSIS

There are four fundamental existential themes that pervade the lifeworlds of all human beings, regardless of their differences, whether the differences are historical, cultural or social (van Manen, 2001). van Manen (2001) adds:

All phenomenological human science research efforts are really explorations into the structure of human lifeworld, the lived world as experienced in everyday situations and relations. Our lives experiences and the structures of meaning (themes) in terms of which these lived experiences can be described and interpreted constitute the immense complexity of the lifeworld (p. 101).

According to van Manen (2001) the four key existential themes are: lived space (spatiality), lived body (corporeality), lived time (temporality), and lived human relation (relationality or communality). van Manen (2001) further explains those existential themes.

Lived space (spatiality), is the felt space that differs from mathematical space such as length, height, depth, or distance. It is sometimes difficult to put into words, as it is largely pre-verbal and not typically reflected upon (van Manen, 2001). Lived space describes the way different spaces make individuals feel or how those individuals become the space they are in (van Manen, 2001). *Lived body (corporeality)*, is the physical body where individuals reveal something about themselves. *Lived time (temporality)*, is the subjective time as opposed to clock time or objective time (van Manen, 2001), it is the different speeds at which time is perceived to passing in different situations. *Lived human relation (relationality or communality)*, is the lived relation maintained with others that could mean human beings, or in a larger existential sense of purpose in life, meaningfulness, grounds for living, as in religious experience of the absolute Other or God (van Manen, 2001). Those four existential themes guided me throughout absorbing, understanding, and analyzing the data of the study.

Data analysis included the following sequential steps. First, transcripts were thoroughly read to gain a sense of the whole experience (Wertz, 2011), identifying statements separately in each participant's description of their healing journey, and highlighting key and significant statements. Phenomenology requires the researcher to become immersed in the data. Consequently, I read and re-read the transcripts over and over to get a sense of the part and the whole. I moved between looking at the whole of *all transcripts and ideas*, and the part or *individual statements* (Wertz, 2011).

Second, these statements were divided into meaning units by deleting repetitive and overlapping statements (Creswell, 1998). Meaning units involve a search for the main ideas, feelings and elements of experience. This is achieved not only by reading and re-reading the

transcripts but also by thoroughly searching for, and writing a description of, the components of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Wertz (1985) explains that a meaning unit is “a part of the description whose phrases require each other to stand as a distinguishable moment” (p.165).

Third, I reflected on each meaning unit. I rechecked the content of each meaning unit to ensure consistency with the transcripts.

Fourth, I then clustered together the meaning units that showed similarities. Initially a number of essences were created and then merged together into five main essences, which were later collapsed into four main essences. Here two essences were collapsed to eliminate a false divide between ideas, and to allow the aspects within the final essence to move more fluidly together. van Manen (2001) describes essences as that which makes a thing what it is. I described each essence in words as I created interpretive text.

Fifth, suitable verbatim direct quotes from each interview’s transcript were added under the appropriate essence, as I am not only interested in what the participants say, but also in the way and how they said it. I used the participants’ own words with all their rich meanings, words, and descriptions.

Sixth, I reflected on each essence separately to understand what it expressed about the overarching phenomenon of interest in this study-*the experiences and meanings of yoga*. I focused mainly on the meanings described about the healing process through participants’ experiences.

Findings were displayed by interweaving both my reflections and the direct quotes from participants. Throughout the journey of this study, I maintained a journal to reflect my emotions and feelings. This journal has become a vital part of my life - a part of me that allows

me to let go of assumptions, judgments or interpretations, and a space for exploring any pre-conceptions I may hold. I believe journaling has attempted to allow me to create a space and distance between myself and my own yoga experience, provided a location for emerging suppositions and biases that arise, and also helped me to become aware of assumptions I hold. I attempted to avoid having the analysis be driven by my assumptions. I approached analysis with a sense of openness to details and looked at the data through a spiritual lens. I attempted to absorb and feel every word participants shared with me.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The qualitative research interview is designed to explore the lived world and experiences of individuals. Through these interviews, researchers try to understand these experiences. During an interview or at any stage of the data analysis, moral and ethical issues can arise. I assured that ethical codes and guidelines were followed throughout the different stages of the study.

Confidentiality is a major and vital concern throughout all stages of qualitative research. To ensure participants were fully informed about confidentiality, they received a copy of the Information Letter (Appendix D). To ensure confidentiality throughout the research process participants were assigned a pseudonym of their choice; however, two participants chose to use their real names as they felt they shared the truth about their lives and wanted to be true to whomever reads their stories. I assured all electronic audio or documents were kept securely in my computer using passwords and all forms were locked in my desk, I was the only person with access to this information. I personally transcribed all interviews and each interview was

labeled using pseudonyms. All transcripts were stripped of any information that could identify participants' names.

To remain true to participants' experience of the phenomenon, I emailed participants who wanted to receive a copy and attached a copy of the transcripts to ensure I had accurately captured their thoughts and opinions. All participants were sent an Appreciation Letter to thank them for their participation and time (Appendix F). Phenomenological analyses conducted and results presented were woven and written with the participants' words and descriptions. The essences utilized and were created from quotations emerging from all of the participants. I attempted to offer a reliable understanding of the phenomenon by including all the participants' experiences, not excluding any on the basis of difference (Becker, 1992).

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the meanings and experiences of yoga for trauma survivors. This chapter unfolds meanings and experiences of yoga described by participants throughout their healing journeys from trauma. Findings are based on analysis of semi-structured, one-on-one interviews, in attempt to understand the yoga experiences of thirteen trauma survivors. The essences presented in this chapter reflect the co-creation of knowledge about this experience of yoga. In this process I re-negotiated my understanding as a yoga teacher in the shift to becoming the interviewer and phenomenological researcher.

During the interviews we laughed, cried, smiled, paused, hugged, stretched, chanted, breathed, and we spent precious powerful moments in silence. Yoga allowed me to listen with softer ears. It was the depth of the experience, my receptive state, or both, that allowed the words to sink deeply into my being and flow seamlessly into my soul. Instead of just hearing their words and stories, I was feeling and absorbing them. Instead of just listening to their experiences, I was understanding them. And at the moments of silence, they were singing the tunes, without any words. Silence became more powerful than any words; I was listening to their waves within. Yoga allowed me to see with a more loving eye. Instead of just looking at them, I was seeing inside them. Yoga allowed me to have a more passionate heart, instead of analyzing their experiences; I was comprehending and absorbing the meanings in those experiences. I found myself taking pieces of their life and writing a story, where the broken pieces became their glory. I celebrated their success, cried for their pain and losses and joined them in their dreams and hopes. Yoga allowed me to learn lessons from failures, to value light

in darkness, to find serenity in inner conflicts, the strength within fear, the fairness in what is wrong, the joy within the tears, the humility within success, and the love within the hate.

My own yoga experience as a practitioner and a yoga teacher, the significance of my existing worldview, and reflexive voice were present in this study as they influenced interpretation of data and were important components in establishing trustworthiness (van Manen, 2001). In this amazing journey of this study, I was constantly reminded to pay close attention to my inner voice, to listen to the messages and intuitive nudges that I clearly kept receiving from participants, guiding me through, all the way along the path to a wonderful place where my inner voice and waves became my own guiding Guru. Without any questions, expectations or judgment, I surrendered, I floated, allowing and welcoming whatever was meant to arise. I agree with Giorgi (2000), that researchers cannot escape sharing their own worldview. However, I tried to rely mainly on the participants' own words to convey and illuminate their stories.

After finishing and transcribing all the interviews, I was left with rich experiences and insights and wondered how I would possibly bring it all on paper. The experiences were so intense and deep that I was left with a responsibility to deliver them to you, the reader. I was both armed and fortunate with the gift of my own yoga practice, in approaching the data. While writing this chapter, I was absorbed and immersed in the data and the amazing poignant transformational stories and lived experiences of the participants. I was overwhelmed with the amount of openness, feelings, emotions and great insights participants shared with me.

I was inspired by van Manen's (2001) four lifeworld fundamental existential themes in the analysis and the presentation of the findings. According to van Manen (2001), and as

described in the previous chapter, those four key existential themes are: lived body (corporeality), lived space (spatiality), lived time (temporality), and lived human relations (relationality or communality). I believe that both yoga and trauma are experienced by the body, mind and spirit; in a felt space; during a time; and with other human relationships. I felt I was describing and presenting the experiences as *what, where, when, and who*, as I read and re-read, listened and re-listened to the interviews over and over and over in attempt to get a sense of the part and whole (Wertz, 2011).

I relied mainly on the words of participants themselves; after all it is *their* experiences and *their* own stories. I could not include in this thesis all of the ideas that arose in the interviews. Some ideas will be the focus of future studies. I was inspired by Henry David Thoreau's words "simplify, simplify", so I am presenting my findings in a very simple fashion, allowing the voices and the own words of participants to describe, explain, and share their own stories.

The findings demonstrate the emergence of four essences that arose from understanding and analyzing the stories, meanings, experiences, and words of participants. Those four essences are: *moving from the darkness of trauma into the light of yoga and living, entering into safe and sacred spaces, letting go into yoga and returning to embodiment of self, and embracing creativity and connection beyond the mat.*

MOVING FROM THE DARKNESS OF TRAUMA INTO LIGHT OF YOGA AND LIVING

Darkness ends, it ends, you don't have to stay there... the true essence of who you are is light... yoga helped me build a life, it helped me find myself again (Rachel)

Moving from Darkness into Light is the title written by the own words of the participants themselves. A number of participants referred to their trauma experiences as dark. For example, Rachel said: “we call it ‘the dark days’ in my house.” Lucia explained her trauma as: “dark place.” Mike added: “there is a darkness perceived, when I look back it [trauma] is a dark time... that was very dark and everything was dim, everything was black and grey and sad.” Anne added: “I think that those four years that I have spent in that depth of depression was like walking through the dark night of the soul... a period of the darkness.”

Lara shared her poignant experience of the heaviness and darkness of her trauma experience and flashbacks:

I felt like I have fallen down a well and to come up, I could see a little bit a light up there but I have never been a depressed person but this was, this was heavy, heavy, heavy, heavy, and the sides of the well were very slippery and I was just kind of opening my way up the sides of this well but I could see some light up above, and it was a new territory to me so, it was, it was a really profound experience because I have had nightmares and flashbacks and could smell all the smells and hear all the things that were going on, it was a very visceral experience. (Lara)

Rachel explained her trauma: “Trauma takes away and destroys joy, it changes how you see the world... all what you wanna do is to crawl up in a ball and be safe.” Amy said: “you feel stunted, you feel completely blocked, isolated, you are your worst enemy. You become destructive, manipulative. You are completely lost, unaware. It is just a complete loss of self.”

Lara described the pain of flashbacks and how the trauma was revisited and relived frequently:

Trauma is about power and control... loss of innocence... I have been very traumatized and have been reliving all of that stuff a lot of the time and you know, it’s like very invasive, the remembering part can be very invasive. (Lara)

Mike described his trauma as a dark time where he was surrounded by sadness and grief, he explained:

There is a darkness perceived, when I look back it's dark time, when I look back at other periods it doesn't look that dark, but that was very dark and there was, everything was dim, everything was black and grey and sad. There was sadness, for me it was grief, it was overwhelming sadness just overwhelming sadness. (Mike)

Participants shared that trauma shook and shuddered their foundation and life. They described the feeling that arose during their trauma experience as: *"loss of innocence"* (Lara), *"takes away joy"* (Rachel), *"it feels awful"* (Louise), *"wounding" and "armoring"* (Althea); *"crushing" and "chaos"* (Lucia); *"agony", "dishearten", "despairing", and "debilitating"* (Sally); *"anger", "frustration", "sadness", "tearing", and "suffering"* (John); *"horror, despair, stifling, darkness, dim, overwhelming sadness, and grief", "shell-shock", and "catastrophic"* (Mike); *"shock", "slip away", "isolation", "physically closed off", and "clenched in stress and anticipation"* (Susan); *"crashing"* (Ann); *"stunted, completely blocked, isolated, you are your worst enemy, destructive, manipulative, lost, unaware, and a complete loss of self"* (Amy), and *"upheaval, blockage, and not being able to get past things"* (Paul).

I could listen, feel and sense the darkness in the tone of their voices, and could see it in the look of their eyes. When we started talking about yoga, immediately as if the sun has found its way out after a gloomy day, their voices were more positive and even louder, their eyes were glowing and sparkling and I felt a sense of warmth as if the whole space was lighting up. I also felt an inner light reflecting through my being. Paul explained his experience as *"darkness into light"*. Rachel explained her journey from darkness to light saying: *"In my darkest days I*

thought I was evil, I was told I was evil. But I have learned that I am not, Yoga was a large part, a very large part.” Rachel further explained:

Darkness ends, it ends you don't have to stay there, you don't have to stay there. It feels like you can never get up but it's not true. You don't have to stay in the darkness; light is always stronger than dark. The light is always stronger than the darkness. It takes patience, it takes time but the true essence of who you are is light. (Rachel)

When asked to explain their yoga experiences in just few words, here are some of the words how participants described yoga: *“Grace, sense of wholeness, glimpse of light of lightness, connectedness with life, all the goodness, a way of life” (Lara); “survival, light, it's where I feel most at home, truth, a framework, guidelines, a way to find peace”, “sense of belonging”, “comfort”, “safety”, “nurturing”, and” love” (Rachel); “connection, flow, calmness, inward, my place” (Lucia); “Healing, clearing, trust, joy” (Althea) “Confidence” (Louise); “State of peace”, and “relaxing” (Amy); “Fulfilling, calming” (Dreamer); “peace, profoundly significant part of my life” (Sally); “transformative, overwhelmingly joyous, fun, unconditional love, freedom”, “the way you live your life”, and “a healing art” (Mike); “a deeper” (John); “stillness, breath, presence, connection”, and “a tool to come back to oneself” (Susan), “awareness, calming, perseverance” (Paul); and “my life addiction” (Anne).*

When asked about her yoga experiences and what these experiences meant to her, Lara replied: *“it's a glimpse of light of lightness, of energy moving through you, of all the goodness and all the things that we could access moving through you when you open to it.”* Lucia shared that yoga made her feel positive, *“Yoga means that I can be happy, that I can deal with all the things that happen and still be happy in life and don't be crushed by the events and the challenges.”* She added, *“yoga is a big bridge from being in this dark place to being in this good*

place, it's transferring you there" (Lucia). Althea explained, "yoga is the vehicle that it provides to cleansing and healing and emptying the body of extraneous obstacles and obscurations that prevent the deeper qualities of being from expressing themselves."

Mike considered his trauma experience to be a catalyst for a shift in his consciousness. His yoga practice shifted to become more healing and true, Mike explained:

It was an incredibly difficult time, so through that time, I guess that was meant to be in a sense, I don't like to think of it that way, 'cause it's still a loss to me, but I look at that as being the catalyst for a whole change in consciousness that allowed me to see yoga in a whole light, a light that in fact had a more validity than I'd ever practiced within before. I was always done [it] with the wrong intent I'd say. It suddenly became a tool for healing and it was almost like tapping into a truth. A truth about something that was so incredibly important. It was going to change not only my life. (Mike)

Rachel added she was, *"thankful, grateful, yoga helped me build a life, it helped me find myself again."* Rachel continued, *"Yoga is a way to live your life, it's a way to find peace. What starts from the physical becomes so much more."* Lara described her experience of yoga as: *"a way of life... it helps you to appreciate diversity and people and cultures and experiences, and it's about the richness of life."*

Yoga once practice and tasted, becomes an integral part of the individual's life. Lara explains how yoga became a gift and an integral part of her life:

Yoga is a very healthy way of being in this world and so I can't imagine not having it be part of my life... after a while Yoga takes you and pulls you by the hair, like it is something that once you do it you have to do it and that's how I feel about it, so for me it was just been a total gift. (Lara)

Dreamer added: *“I’m very grateful I have found yoga, my life would have been very different without it... I am way more balanced and centered... yoga is a great value to everybody... there’s part of me that wishes everybody would do yoga.”* Amy also shared her experience of how yoga influenced her life:

Yoga has certainly left me with new excitement in my life, something new that was really important to me, and something that has had me grounded in times of stress. Yeah, I do think there is one thing I know that, certain changes to my lifestyle like adding yoga... you see yourself more who you strive to be and I think yoga helps with that. (Amy)

Anne described the sense and feeling of happiness, comfort and contentedness that yoga brought into her life:

My yoga practice to me is what I was meant to do with my life, and if I had to do my life all over again, I would do it exactly the same way, There is no regrets, there is no “Hey, lets play it again Sam.” It’s the way it was meant to be and I am definitely in a situation in life where I am meant to be, quite comfortable, quite content, and quite happy. It is because of and through the practice I feel the way that I feel now... I think that because I do what I do, creates what I am. (Anne)

Paul shared that yoga allowed him to get in touch to his true essence and foster a deeper sense of understanding of his life. Paul explained:

In my Yoga I think I become in touch with who I am and with life, it made me feel better about it. I am the type of person who would be prone to worry about things more at times in my life; I don’t do that as much any more. I think I have a much greater understanding of what is important in life. (Paul)

In a poignant moment, Rachel stated yoga brought back individuals to their true essence which is beauty, love, and compassion: *“in our essence, in that place you are beauty and love*

and compassion, that's who we are, and we've moved away, we've moved away and yoga brings us back." Sally described her experience of feeling more compassionate:

I think yoga, meditation and mindfulness together increase the chance for compassion... and the more I would be doing any of those practices, the more I would be patient. It increases patience, it increases awareness, it slows you down so you are less reactive ideally and more just aware of yourself and more aware of others... If I can give people some of the things I have felt, I think the world will be a better place for everyone no matter who they are, if they had some of things I have experienced from all of those things. (Sally)

Mike shared his experience of finding joy through yoga, he explained: *"[yoga] changed something in me and gave the opportunity to really feel joy again, because I was having a hard time to find the joy with the despair being so magnified."* Mike explained his experience of shift in his consciousness and feeling more joy, love, and happiness:

Yoga became almost a need for me and I felt that the more that I did it the better I felt about life in general but also there was something I think going inside that was shifting consciousness. There were elevated levels of joy in the practice of yoga that I couldn't get elsewhere... yoga makes me want to love you and it makes me want to love everybody that walks through the door, it makes me love people I encounter at the grocery store. It makes me want to love my father and mother-in-law on a deeper level than I respect them because they are my wife's parents, that they are my surrogate parents almost. Without the yoga, I wouldn't have had that deep transformative love that my father talked about in the dream that allows me to have yoga, or the awareness of yoga and maybe using yoga as a tool to bring out that in moments that I might not otherwise... Spiritually, yoga alleviated my consciousness to a point where I can see what was the important thing in life as opposed to more material based ideas which won't lead me to happiness. The happiness was really in doing the karma work and making

people's lives better and giving, there where the joy was, on the spiritual level this is where it existed. (Mike)

Lara shared her experience of finding joy that lies within her, she described it as: *"this wholeness connectedness, there is joy that is no longer kind of out there, it's kind of in here, a freedom... it's much more than you think, much more than you think."*

Anne shared the role her yoga practice played in coming out of the darkness. She spent a long time in the hospital where she had nothing to do. As she describes, her years of yoga experience were what helped her process all what she was going through:

In a hospital on a psychiatric ward there is no where to go and there is nothing to do, nothing to do, nowhere to go, and you are in here like 4 weeks, 8 weeks, you work on your stuff, I think that is what happened. You know when you have established a substantial amount of awareness which maybe I did establish in the years of practice, that when you walk in through the dark night of the soul, and you begin processing all this stuff, it was so great when I came out at the end of it. (Anne)

For some participants, yoga acted as means to understand and implement what the therapists were conveying and explaining verbally, it was the embodied application. Rachel shared her experience with her therapist whom allowed her to understand why she felt the way she felt, however yoga gave her the tools to heal:

I had help from a therapist as well. A psychiatrist that I used to see and continued to see and he was able to help me find reasons for what I felt, but not to give me the tools that I needed to move on. And Yoga gave me the tools, the psychiatrist gave me the understanding but yoga gave me the tools, the toolbox. So I recognized where the disturbing thoughts were coming from and what they were about. But yoga helped me still my mind; yoga helped me find the goodness. (Rachel)

Mike shared a similar experience where through grief counseling, he was getting “*some coping on an intellectual level*”, however his yoga practice was more of an embodied implementation, he explained:

Yoga helped me to heal on a level that was profound. For a while I went to grief counseling which was instrumental in my learning, but it was the yoga that really lead me to the place of happiness again, so one is theoretical, going to counseling; and the other one is practical, because you are learning it through the real life of interacting. (Mike)

ENTERING INTO SAFE AND SACRED SPACES

At the heart of this essence participants shared their experiences of feelings of coming home to a sacred space, their body, mind, and spirit. This required a sense of having a safe and sacred space, a home on the mat; a yoga teacher who was acted as a connection to spiritual energy, provided support and guidance through offering a safe, nurturing and rich yoga experience; and a yoga community (Sangha) that brought qualities and feelings of a family, offering comfort, safety, and connection. Each of these was crucially important in providing an accepting, supportive, and a non-judgmental space.

Coming home to safe and sacred space.

As Lucia described, “*Yoga is my place, yoga is a place for me to go.*” Yoga created a safe and sacred space for participants, a space similar to home. Mike shared, “*yoga is about creating an environment of sacred space.*” Lucia said: “*my yoga mat is my place, and it’s just mine, and I can still feel it, and I love I love coming back to that place. I’m open to new experience.*”

Anne shared that she was like lost, and yoga brought her home, she explained: *“Yoga brought me back home to myself.”* Similarly, Rachel described that yoga helped her in *“finding the quiet place”* where she found *“peace.”* She also explained the vital role yoga played in making her safe and at feeling home, she described her trauma of not having a home and the significance of yoga in providing her a sense and feeling of a home. Rachel explained:

A feeling of, as I said coming home, and I was sent out of my home at 17 and so as sense of home is a huge thing and that’s why it keeps coming up. A belonging, a sense of this is where I meant to be right now, and so this is quite huge. I still have nightmares, where I am hiding and I can’t find anywhere to live, so that sense of being home is a very comforting one. (Rachel)

Lara also shared her experience of how yoga helped her be in a safe space, *“I felt like I had to create a safe space for myself and that became extremely important to me that I had a Yoga room at that time.”* Amy added *“I think it is a safe place, you know, it’s a place where it’s your yoga mat, it’s your practice... It gets you to a place where it’s a safe place, like it’s a very safe place, and you have to allow it to be.”* Lara described the role yoga played in bringing back the connection to her body taking care of it as well as feeling innocent again after the effect of trauma that robs the innocence of the individual:

Yoga teaches you coping mechanisms to help you to set up a little safe sanctuary for yourself, whether in part it could be a physical thing. It’s about respect for yourself and for your body so you keep that space clean, you keep it fresh, you keep it natural, you bring things into that space that are positive that are real, you know affirming, that are comforting, and so it’s giving yourself permission to when control has been taken away from you and you’ve been robbed of that or robbed of your innocence. (Lara)

Rachel shared how unsafe she felt when she could not see her hands; through her yoga practice she started feeling safe again:

I could never lie on the floor or be in a posture where my hands were not in front of me to protect me, I couldn't do wheel because my hands were behind me. I wasn't protecting myself. I couldn't put my arms under the blanket, because I wasn't gonna be able to protect myself. And there was a day when all of a sudden it was okay, I was safe and I didn't need to be afraid. (Rachel)

Connecting to spiritual and sacred energy through a yoga teacher.

The yoga teacher provides support and guidance through offering safe, nurturing and a rich yoga experience. The yoga teacher acts as a connection to spiritual and sacred energy, allowing participants to experience the deeper spirit of yoga. Mike said: *"I have practiced yoga under the guidance of really cool yogis that have helped me understand a little bit more about systems of yoga that offer meditation in motion."* Sally confirmed the important role of a yoga teacher saying: *"I think that the teacher is crucial, really crucial"*, she also shared one of the phrases that her teacher said in class: *"one pointed attention, that affected me and still affect me, it slows me down, it causes me to pause and think, it causes me to be more discerning."* Sally then described an experience with another teacher that stayed with her for years and years when he told her: *"this is how you live your life, this is how you deal with anything, you do yoga."* Sally then shared an experience with another teacher:

I remember when he [yoga teacher] said 'no where to go, nothing to do' I cried... it's like actually I can give myself permission to just focus on this just for one moment? Like I am allowed to do that? Someone has given me permission, that was a huge ah ha moment, I was laying in Savasana as he prepared us to do yoga Nidra. (Sally)

A number of participants shared it is more important for them that the yoga teacher brings more depth and spirituality to the practice than just teach the physical alignment of the poses. Lara shared that some yoga teachers do not have enough experience and they move fast in the class not allowing enough focus on breathing, she explained:

I feel like some of the ways people work in Yoga right now are they are too fast, they don't take you into each breath or into each posture to the extent that you maybe would need to go to really do that deep healing and again it's so much about the instructor's experience and I wanna say wisdom to a certain extent, and if they understand that so it's not aerobics [laughs]. (Lara)

Susan shared that: *"I've had quite a few different instructors. And it's been interesting to see how uniquely everyone's approach is, and I do love the subtle use of words sometimes that the instructors use sort of encouragement or coaching."* She explained the importance of the spiritual aspect yoga teachers bring into their teachings, where participants can take this into their own life beyond their yoga practice, she said:

Each instructor brings a lot of variety in themselves, each has a different approach. You can tell some are more, let's strengthen ourselves physically or concentrate more on the upper body as opposed to flexibility or lower legs, whatever. I just find it brought more versatility and I think it's helped me realize what all you can get out of yoga. The strength, the flexibility, the meditation, certainly I do have a preference for instructors that I can tell it is really a spiritual connection for them as well, because... obviously they all have a certain degree of training, but I think for some you can feel when its more than just an exercise practice. For somebody it really is their way of life in many ways, I find that inspiring for me because I think when you hear that coaching and approach within them, it helps me to carry it beyond just that hour in which I am practicing on the mat, it helps me carry into other elements of my life. (Susan)

Similarly Sally described the significant role the yoga teacher plays and how important it is to her that the teacher is not just teaching a yoga class but takes it beyond just postures:

The yoga teacher... is very important, oh huge, the classes where I couldn't tell you the name of the teacher were less important to me... they were the teachers that blew me out of the water, I think the teachers are profound and in my mind it helps if it's more than just an exercise class to the teacher themselves, if it means something to them, of how they are attempting to live their lives and I don't even care if they are good at the poses as long as they are aware of what it is about, it is not just an asana, it's your attitude to life, it's breathing in and breathing out, and letting go more with every out breath... I think that the teacher is crucial, really crucial. (Sally)

Sally continued stressing that it's not about the yoga poses, it's far more than that. She described her experience with her teacher:

She [her yoga teacher] is an older woman and she has all sort of body pain and things like that and it's lovely, that's actually a reminder of health, it's better than having a 21 year old that can do Dancers pose without blinking and it's wonderful. It's not about that, it's not about the perfection of the pose, it's about the breathing and doing what your body can do right now and that's all. (Sally)

Dreamer also emphasized the idea that it's not just about the yoga poses, adding that it's more about the energy in the classes. She described this energy as coming from God through the teacher to practitioners:

People come to yoga because they need that emotional support, they come often traumatized, they come with grief or having lost a relative, or after being ill. And they come because they need often to be healed, everybody comes with their own issues and their own problems and if the yoga teacher cannot feel that or relate to that, I don't think you have done your job. It is not just about the poses, it's not just about teaching someone how to do Warrior 1 properly. I think if you are really, really, good

yoga teacher, there is an energy to the class. You don't specifically have to do therapy on that person but I think when you teach everyone senses your energy and if your energy is balanced, I think you help heal that person. It is an indirect thing, it's not you in specific doing it, it's the energy doing it. I think you can't take credit for it, because there is an energy that is created in the class. And I believe the energy comes from God and from many enlightened beings, and this energy just becomes present. And you are just a vehicle; you are helping that energy flow. (Dreamer)

Dreamer further explained:

If you go to yoga and find the right teacher that stresses the emotional and spiritual aspect of it, it's like going to church. For me it's very sacred... there is a lot of richness in the yoga teachings... there is wonderful life lessons in the teachings. (Dreamer)

John shared the role of his yoga teacher in expanding both his yoga and meditation practices:

There was a deep understanding and she [his yoga teacher] really helped me with creating a deeper interest in both the physical yoga practices and also teaching the meditation side, I think she took me to the next level, such as she made it a deeper connection between me and my meditation... I belong to a path where the Guru which really means someone who takes you out of darkness into light. A Guru is important in while we feel individually we are capable of achieving anything, I think the more profound truths into our lives is something that really comes through a teacher who experienced and lived that experience. A yoga teacher is important. (John)

Sharing energy and acceptance without judgment in Sangha.

Most participants remarkably expressed the significant role the Sangha (yoga community) played in their healing journeys. The Sangha not only became like a family offering and providing support and comfort, but also developed a sense of shared purpose and meaning. The energetic sense of bond and community were key in the participants' healing

journies. Mike explained: *“Yoga is about creating an environment of sacred space where there’s a deep seated feeling of warmth and family where everyone is accepted no matter what... a Sangha.”* Both Rachel and Dreamer emphasized the role of *“like-minded people”* present in the yoga community in feeling the bond and connection. Rachel said:

One of the things about belonging to a studio and a Sangha of people of like mind. I have friends who said that they tried talking meditation with their friends and people thought they were crazy. And so how refreshing it is to come to a place where people are open-minded and there are many, many, reasons that people come to yoga, and there are as many answers. It fits, for everyone there is an answer, and it’s there for them to find it... people are missing that feeling of community, the Sangha, they are missing it. (Rachel)

Dreamer described the strength she gets from her yoga community, comparing it to a church community:

The community aspect of yoga, the people because you really do find like-minded people, it’s like you go to church and you have a community, the same things develops with yoga... so you really get a lot of strength from that community and bond of all those people... doing yoga at home isn’t the same like having a class to go to really energizes me... for me the people aspect of it was really an important factor and motivating factor... I really like the social aspect of it too, you meet wonderful people. It tends to attract really sincere people, really beautiful people. (Dreamer)

In relation to healing, the yoga community provided a sense of bonding, purpose, and acceptance without judgment. This provides a deep connection and attachment that could not be easily found outside this community. John spoke of the important role his yoga community played in in his healing journey:

There was a sense of community and a sense of purpose in that community... sense of bonding, sense of acceptance, sense of feeling a part of a community where you are

accepted and you are not judged, there is no radical. This aspect which is very humane and enduring really whereas as in my day-to-day social interaction with other people including guys at golf, it's more superficial it's something that you enjoy it for that moment and then carry on. There is a deeper attachment in this community... without some of the extremely good kind-hearted people that I have met at that time, somehow it is like a lens focusing, all of a sudden there have to be this community and teachings and practices, everything that came together to basically hold my hand during this traumatic time, the spiritual and meditation practices. (John)

Susan shared how she feels a special kind of connection, bond, and energy with others in her yoga classes:

It's nice to see everybody. It is nice to feel this collective energy without looking at somebody; you could feel it... It is a different kind of connection... I think there is something about being connected when you are not interacting... I do have those moments where the silence and the stillness and the power of everybody, especially in the flow movements, it does almost give you tingles sometimes. So there is an energy that I can't quite describe or explain that I wouldn't say, I have really experienced in others like team sports settings or anything like that. (Susan)

Louise lost her sight after removing a brain tumor. Louise explained the vital role of being part of a yoga group in her healing journey:

Just being able to be a part of the yoga class with other people and so many times people would say how can you do that when you can't see?... it is important being around other people and it seems to be that they wanna be there for the same reason... the more I go and the more people are nicer to me and offer help and it's like I wasn't alone. (Louise)

Althea had a profound experience to share about the group energy in the classes she attends and how this acted as a support to her:

I've been in a group where we have shared body energies and experiences and have been able to open up, it is so important to be able to have that and I even noticed in the yoga classes that I was going to quite consistently, again it was the right kind of class for me, and I noticed that there was enough of us who would come on regular basis that we then created a supportive environment that even just that recognition and the smiles and the acknowledgment of their presence was really positive healing environment. So yes, absolutely I think that it can be incredibly wonderful. (Althea)

Paul described the role of the people and yoga community in his healing journey and how his yoga practice made him more open to others:

I don't think I would have opened myself to some of those experiences if I wouldn't have had the yoga experience in my life. I think I would have been a little bit more closed-minded about it. I became more aware of who I am and that there are people out there that can help you and it was great for me to meet those people. I made some wonderful, wonderful, friends through the yoga community. (Paul)

LETTING GO INTO YOGA AND RETURNING TO EMBODIMENT OF SELF

"I think the integration of the mind, the body, and the spirit, it's that aspect of Yoga that is so powerful, because it feels like it is such a union, well, that is the word yoga" (Lara)

In this essence participants described how yoga brought about a synchronicity of breath, body, mind, and spirit. Being absorbed in the timelessness of yoga, a sense of letting go of competition and being patient, the body became a container to which they returned, a container for breath and spirit once the mind moved toward more silence and stillness and in that stillness reconnection with spirit and inner wisdom arose. Anne explained this synchronicity beautifully:

It is the mind, body and spirit connection, because in yoga you are working with the three elements of breath, movement and concentration and that equates with body as the movement; concentration as the mind; and breath as the spiritual element of prana. So when you are working to coordinate body, mind, and spirit through breath, movement, and concentration, you get the integration and the union that they call yoga. Bringing the 3 aspects together, and that's what creates the harmony and the balance and the feelings that you feel when that integration happens. And that integration only happens through practice, you can think about it till the cows come home, and it's only through the practice. (Anne)

Louise said: “yoga is both, it's how I feel about my body, inside and out, physically and mentally.” Dreamer shed light on the various aspects of yoga:

Yoga is wonderful, there is meditative aspect to it. It really teaches you to slow down. It really teaches you to be aware of your body. It really helps you to be aware of your breathing, and to breathe in a healthier fashion. It is great for your flexibility. It is great for overall conditioning and health. (Dreamer)

Aspects of this essence are described in more details in the following paragraphs.

Being absorbed in timelessness.

It's like you are floating with no sense of time, when I do the relaxation part of yoga, I go very deeply into it, which is, I think is, keeping me alive. (Sally)

Time was not just experienced by minutes, seconds, or even years that passed by. For many participants, yoga practice provided *absorption in the timelessness*; allowing individuals to be *mindfully present in the now*; to experience the *pause in the pose*; and to be patient and know that benefits of this practice will manifest *slowly but surely*. Susan shared the importance

of practicing yoga frequently; she felt a spiritual transformation, lighter, and calmer when her practice was more regular:

When I was able to get to go probably 5 at least days a week for a while there I was making it a real priority and I was really feeling sort of this spiritual transformation on some level not quite felt before. I don't know if it was all because of yoga but I certainly that it played a major role and it's hard to describe... and I don't even know how I would specifically describe what was different, but I did feel different, I felt lighter, I felt calmer, I just felt like a new way of being and I wouldn't say I have lost sight of that but, you know time moves on, you get busy again and you still get back to yoga, but I felt like my level of distraction in my mind has been up again and I am sure that's ebb and flows of life. I really wanna get back to that feeling because I just felt I was able to tune in both to myself and my surroundings in a stronger way and clear my mind more easily. Lately I have had a bit more trouble clearing my mind again. I just know it is the practice, I think the frequency does play a role. It was sort of kind of exciting feeling I guess because it was something new. (Susan)

Anne shared her experience of being totally absorbed in the timelessness and how her practice unfolds:

The timeless ultimate connection is made when you can take that clock and you can put it down and you just practice, let the movement come, let the breath come and you just practice. You get to a point where it is just like the body is not moving with the suggestions of the mind. The body is moving with the pranic energy carried on the breath that moves the body. The mind is at rest, and the pranic energy is moving the body, this is when it becomes timeless, totally timeless... let it roll, let it move, let it breathe, and when it is done, it is done and you may look up and say holly smokes, this is like 2 hours, wow, you just go and you just let the rhythm happen. It is beautiful. (Anne)

In spite of having a good sense of time, yet during her yoga practice Lucia found it difficult to keep track and have sense of time, she explained:

The time is very relative because sometimes it feels very short and sometimes long you never know. Sometimes it just goes by and you can't even believe that it was one hour, and sometimes it drags itself... it's interesting because as a teacher I have an excellent sense of time, and I can usually tell what time it is and with yoga is hard to tell... I need to look at the clock because I never know [laughs]. (Lucia)

Dreamer described her timelessness experiences during her yoga practice and how *high* she feels:

When I started to do yoga every class pretty much, I would get into flow state and it would seem like oh God, it's over already? [laughs] and the class would be an hour or an hour 15 minutes but it would seem like 10 minutes, 15 minutes tops. And I would get into this, I don't know how to describe it, where I would feel high, I would feel, yeah high, it's like a natural high... I guess the equivalent would be if you had a couple of drinks or you are smoking marijuana or something and you have a buzz or a high. That's the beauty of yoga... you can with meditation too achieve that state naturally. And then once you start doing it, the easier it is to sort of you just drift in that state. (Dreamer)

Susan also shared her experience of totally being absorbed in her practice and not aware of her surroundings and not being able to keep track of time:

When I am in the midst of my yoga practice, sometimes I like that felling at the end, at the end savasana when you suddenly realize, oh I am in a room full of people [laughs]. I find, for me it's almost, I don't know, success is the right word, I am pleased when I've been able to kind of lose sight, I am not that is the right word either. I always think, "oh wow, you actually were quite present with yourself if you were relatively unaware of the fact that you are in this room surrounded by tons of people. Beyond that there is a full working gym right beside you, there is a pool with screaming kids down there." Not that I am not conscious of it at all, but I am always amazed like "oh yeah right!"...yoga, out of anything I hope for more time, but I find I don't keep track of time as much. (Susan)

Both Rachel and Sally shared their experience of losing sense of time in their yoga practice and not as much in their meditation, Rachel said: *“time flies when I am practicing... time passes quite quickly on the mat but not always when I am sitting meditating.”* Sally added:

It is easier for me with yoga than meditation, I stop thinking of time, it’s like I shift gear pretty radically when I am doing yoga... when I do yoga I lose the sense of time, it’s a lovely experience for someone who is very scheduled and over scheduled at work life. It’s like you are floating with no sense of time and when I do the relaxation part of yoga, I think I seem to be able to go very deeply into it which is, I think is keeping me alive. So yoga I lose the sense of time, in meditation it totally depends [laughs]. (Sally)

Slowing down to be mindfully present in the now.

Most participants shared different experiences and occasions where they were slowed down, more present, and more mindfully aware. Dreamer said that: *“yoga gave me permission to slow down”* and she described her experience:

I really enjoyed the fact that everything was slow, that you can just relax. And I loved the meditative part of yoga. And I have had meditation before and I had done courses in meditation, but this was really wonderful because it was another different way to incorporate meditation into my life. (Dreamer)

Sally explained that: *“Yoga helped me slow down, it really helped me slow down and be in the now, and this is something I didn’t have a lot of experience in.”* Sally continued: *“it a lovely, lovely, feeling to slow down and actually live in the now... it’s like you let go of all sort of things and you discover all those other lovely things.”* Sally then shared how her mindfulness practice and yoga helped her to slow down and be more present:

Slowing down was my holiday the last few weeks ... I gardened and I paced myself and I breathed and I went to yoga and went to exercise classes and I walked with a neighbor of

mine. Slowing down, noticing your breath, noticing the colors, noticing the textures, all the sensory awareness, I just find it changes life. (Sally)

Lara described her experience of awareness and being present and what happens in this experience:

The quality of relaxation, you know, the ability to relax, the awareness of where you're holding tension in your body. You can't have those awareness without being present, so it's when you catch yourself always projecting, doing your grocery list in your head, you know, moving on to the next thing before you finish what you are on... it's the gift of knowing that's what is happening and pulling yourself back to okay, just take a little moment here to look at this and to be present, and drop your breath, improve your posture, whatever, whatever, whatever. (Lara)

Anne also shared that her yoga practice allowed her to be in the present moment, and explained the meaning of bringing awareness to the present moment:

The practice of bringing awareness to the present moment, learning how to be in the present, because it is so amazing to think about that your life doesn't happen anywhere else other than where you are at the present moment. So actually bringing awareness to the present moment is a little bit obscure, because we think 'present moment', grab the 'present moment', but the present moment all it is, is the past and the future flowing so there is nothing really any present moment. You are always either in the past or the future kind of moving along that continuum. But it doesn't happen anywhere else at that point in that continuum [laughs]. (Anne)

Susan expressed that yoga is her means to getting centered and back to herself. She explained:

I think the far more central part for me now is trying to get centered and present and let go of fear of the future and all my insecurities and trauma from the past and just really try

to be again and bring all those stress levels down and being present. I use yoga as tool to get back to myself. (Susan)

Yoga helped many participants to make the connection between being more present and mindfulness in daily life. Sally described her experience where mindfulness allowed her to be present surviving an experience of a near death:

Mindfulness helped the awareness of being in the present in a non-judgmental way. You could be dying and you could be mindfully aware and I have lived through that, and later sure emotions come in, the body has to integrate it sure but it helped me get through what other people may not have been able to. (Sally)

Sally also shared her experience of being non-judgmental and non-reactive during her cancer treatment, she said: *“I used a lot of mindfulness during that treatment and all of the tests you do countless times aren’t pleasant and nasty, you don’t wish them on your worst enemy and I’d breath into it and just be present.”*

Amy explained the benefits of the time spent in yoga and that allowed her to see the bigger picture, look with a different perspective and to start realizing other things going on in her life, she said:

It’s very nice to have that half an hour or up to an hour just getting back and putting everything back into perspective and realizing this is not the only thing that is going on in your life I find it very beneficial in that sense. (Amy)

John described his awareness through his yoga and meditation practice allowed him to be aware on a deep level and get back to himself. John explained he felt connected to his body through mindfulness: *“it comes down to becoming aware through mindfulness and that mindfulness is not only about your emotional state or such but also your body and everything*

around you. John further described that through mindfulness he was connected to some deeper awareness:

Through the mindfulness meditation and through I guess the awareness that yoga and tai chi, I guess I am more aware of being aware. I don't get immersed in anything where I lose consciousness of the fact that I am aware, I always try to maintain that so that's why I don't become too in passion about many things in life. It seems that there is an observer in me. I think this has been cultivated over the 40 odd years of meditation practices that I have been doing... there is this awareness that that there is something deeper somewhere, it's always there. (John)

Letting go of competition.

Participants shared that their yoga practice evolved from being a competitive practice to a more mindful one. Lara shared her transformative experience:

I have always done Hatha Yoga but, I used to be more competitive about Yoga it was more, you know, I wanted to do the splits, and I wanted to do you know handstand or headstand or whatever the heck it was and you know I would crank my body into these poses and now it's the opposite of that, it's I don't care about the poses so much as what is going on inside, you know, what's leading towards the pose. (Lara)

Yoga allowed participants to be non-competitive both with others and with their own selves. They became present in their own bodies, finding their own edge not competing with others in the class. Lara shared her experience where her yoga practice allowed her to be neither competitive with herself nor others. Lara described her experience:

Climbing back into my body and saying oh okay, it feels safe and here it feels like I don't need to compete with myself or with anybody else... I liked that yoga was non-competitive... I can be competitive but I don't like myself when I am competitive [laughs] like I don't like that aspect of myself and so what resonated about Yoga was is that you

can drop all that stuff but have all the benefits of you know moving your body in different ways and exploring movement so, and I liked the spiritual aspects of it too. (Lara)

Louise shared that the more she got comfortable with their yoga practice; a sense arose of not worrying about what other people in the class think. After removing a tumor in her brain, Louise lost her eyesight and became very aware of, and sensitive to, how others look at her and judge her. She shared her experiences of how yoga made her feel comfortable and how she shifted to not worrying what other people think of her. Louise described her experience:

I am nowhere close to competing with anybody, so I just have to do it for myself, and to improve my own physical and mental needs... I had to get relaxed in my own self to know that other people aren't watching... the first thing that I used to think, that I must be doing a lot of stupid things and people are probably judging me... but I listen to the instructor, you and everybody else always say, it is not a competition. So not worrying about what the other person see or think. Just do what you have to do. And I am much, much, much more relaxed about it now. At first I was always tensed, but now I am okay, I am really really okay with it now. And I find the more you relax into it, the more you feel confident, the better you get. I feel more benefit from it... I think that is something that you have to develop for yourself, it's that confidence. (Louise)

Amy shared how yoga practice can become frustrating if the individual approaches it with a competitive attitude:

If you go in with a negative attitude, if you go in with the idea that this is a competition. If you go in with the idea that okay, everyone will be looking at me and everyone is going to be judging me, then yoga is very intimidating, because, you know, you have somebody in the practice whose so fluid and so graceful, like oh my gosh, I am never going to be like that. And I think that's when a lot of people kind of get intimidated, you know especially when you are watching positions, how is she doing this? [laughs] so, I think

that's why, until you get past that, that this is your practice, it's hard. It's frustrating.
(Amy)

When Paul started practicing yoga, he shared that he was competitive both with himself and with others in the class, coming from an athletic training background. With time and the help of his yoga teacher, this changed. Paul explained:

When I first started yoga, I looked at a lot of people in the class and I thought I will never be able to do half of what those people are doing, and it was very painful to try and learn the poses, learn the flow, the breathing, it was painful, but the instructor was crucial in helping me understand that you don't have to, it's not always pain no gain, because this was mentality in the training before, and getting to understand that sometimes you do little less and you still get a lot out of it, and it always amazes me how quickly your body changes even from day to day, if I don't do yoga one day, I could feel the next day. (Paul)

Susan shared her experience and how yoga allowed her to be non-competitive with her own self, more patient, and accepting herself, she explained:

I was always an athletic person, as a young person growing up and somewhat competitive, and it's nice to attempt to leave the competitiveness part out of yoga practice. And I mean competitiveness within myself. In the past I would often think if I would just push myself, I can achieve this. Yoga is very different; it's not you don't push yourself, you still challenge yourself, but it does force you to be patient and accepting of yourself because if you try to strain your way through something, it hurts or you may injure yourself or your body resist. Whereas if you just breathe and accept and be patient, suddenly more opportunity opens up to you and you can achieve what you were hoping to achieve. (Susan)

Mike added how his yoga and meditation practice and experiences helped him let go of judging himself: *"I was able to step outside of myself and look at myself from a place that is*

non-judgmental, that was witness consciousness and I could observe how my intellect was reacting to stimulus that was around me.”

Mike explained how frustrated he was when first started practicing yoga where the pace was too slow for him however, with time and years of practice, he realized that yoga was more than just bringing his body in postures. Mike described his experience:

I remember in the first few classes thinking to myself yoga is supposed to be easy, they are holding us back somehow, I was frustrated with how slow it was being presented. Years later though I realized that there was great wisdom in the way I was first taught and I actually adhere to much of those principles when I am practice and teach yoga, so that was an interesting experience to have had my first yogic experience quite authentic, used as a way to act as healing as opposed to what’s the next greatest contortion I can wrap myself into. I started to realize years later that that is important. (Mike)

Mike further explained his experience:

When I was first doing yoga, I wasn’t really doing yoga, cause I didn’t really understand what is was, I guess I was stretching, I am not really sure what I was doing, it didn’t have the content... I had to go about the process of healing myself with yoga that was sensible, in a step-by-step kind of way... the repeated practice led me to a softer place, a place that wasn’t going to cast judgment on myself or blaming myself or the things that were out of my control. (Mike)

Patience, practice, and taking care of self.

Yoga practice requires time and dedication, slowly but surely the practice blossoms and manifests in patience and a reconnection with body. Susan shared her experience with the yoga practice where she started to be patient, she explains: *“maybe you can achieve what you were hoping to achieve, if you don’t this time, maybe next time you will. I guess it’s an ah ha moment in sense of patience, it’s not always a race, patience with myself.”* Lucia shared her experience

how yoga helped her be more patient with her gardening where she used to be very impatient, but through her yoga practice she started accepting things the way they are, she explained:

In my garden I planted and I have to wait for it to grow, you know and I used to be so impatient, that I put the seeds too early, then you know they wouldn't grow, and now I'm learning to be patient and wait for the nature to give it and accepting the way things are, that the seasons will go and not be angry at winter as much as I used to be. Okay you know it's happening, spring is gonna come, and there is place for everything, and there is a place for me. (Lucia)

Rachel described her experience with her yoga teacher when she showed interest in getting into the yoga teaching, and her teacher replied that: *"it takes a long time."* Rachel added *"she [her teacher] knew that I had so much to learn, not just about yoga, but to learn about myself before I could take it any further."* It took Rachel 5 years of dedicated practice until the same teacher thought Rachel was ready and asked her to join the teachers' training.

Rachel explained that is a very funny and lighthearted way:

It took me about 5 years to figure out where my hands and feet went [laughs]. And from there to figure out what my hips were supposed to do, and then after all of that I realized that the physical part was just a tiny piece, just a tiny piece. And there was much more. (Rachel)

Anne shared her experience of how her yoga practice was very slowly coming along and how this brought back the connection to herself, she explained:

The practice gradually began to pick up again not right away very slowly, very slowly. I began exploring again, working back into myself, and it was like bringing back into myself things that I had lost and given away into this crazy relationship. (Anne)

Dreamer explained how yoga became a central part of her life's work:

Yoga made me realize the importance of slowing down, it is difficult for people to do that in the beginning but then the more you do it, the more you love it, the more you crave it... It takes a long time; it takes a real long time. But I think the longer and longer you practice it, the better you become. It becomes like it's your life's work. (Dreamer)

Rachel also explained the need to be patient and that yoga whether in the form of a practice, mantra, or simply a breath allows for change and transformation, only if participants keep practicing and practicing, she said:

I think people who are suffering from posttraumatic stress are searching to stop the broken record in their head. And that's why so often they turn to drugs and alcohol. It's something too dull because it keeps coming back and back. If they can find some breathing exercises, if they can find a mantra, if they can find a sequence of postures, if they knew that these things work and that it was a healthy alternative. What a gift, what a gift... because there is so much trauma, in any class you see them walk in, you see them walk out and if they're lucky, if they stay long enough to see the change, and the change is amazing, it's amazing. (Rachel)

Susan mentioned that yoga “is an ongoing” practice, “and it is really a practice in the sense that it's an ongoing sort of relationship and commitment to yourself.” Susan explained the importance of being connected to yoga even when she is busy and has no time she returns to her practice:

I have faith that when things quiet down, if you just keep your connection to it even if its not frequent as you'd like it to be, keep connected to it, you will come back to where you wanted to be and hopefully experience that again so, that's the biggest take away thing I have with yoga. Keep my foot on the door, keep connected to it, even when you feel like you've become more distant than you'd like to be, you can return to it. (Susan)

Susan also shared that she used to think that she had to dedicate a certain period of time for her practice. With experience she is valuing the benefits of even 5 minutes of yoga practice

to help her “recuperate”, take care of herself, and how she can go back to her busy schedule more focused and with less worry. She explained:

In the past and still I am often, if I can't devote an hour or whatever it is, then it [yoga] is not worth doing. I think that sort of exercise mentality, unless you give a certain amount of time, it's not worth doing. I have more recently try to say, even if I have 15 minutes to just stop, stretch and breath, it's amazing, how much tension that releases... ideally I would take an hour, and hour and a half every single day, whether I make it to a class or not, and that's not always possible so I am trying to realize that even sitting in child pose for 5 minutes, it's amazing how much you can let go of and really its time well spent, because even when you have your deadlines and all these things, it seems so important, you can return to them with more focus and less worry if you just give that time for yourself to kind of recuperate. (Susan)

Sally described her experience of being in touch with the power of healing through yoga and meditation, allowing the realization of the importance of taking good care of herself:

I don't think I would be alive right now literally, I don't think I would have recovered from cancer to the extent that I did because I had very aggressive cancer... I remember saying to many people that getting cancer is what I had to experience in order to force myself to know how to take better care of myself, and I often say don't be like me, don't wait that long, don't wait till there is a devastating thing and take care of the rest of the world, you know don't validate your own needs to, don't wait, don't keep waiting and waiting and waiting 'til you get sick. Because you can live right now and you can do what you have to do to change your life, and of course we all slip back into our habits, all of us do and I am no different but, every time I do yoga, every time I meditate, every time I can hear Jon Kabat-Zinn's voice in my head saying: “drop down into yourself.” Every time I hear another yoga say: “nothing to do, nowhere to go” just before yoga nidra when we are in Savasana. Certain phrases are sort of a wonderful trigger to me to go to the whole kind of physiological state of mind and of body. (Sally)

Experiencing the miracle of breathing.

The breath is a profound tool of awareness, sensing the whole body breathing, observing the natural flow of the breath, and feeling every breath as flowing energy coursing throughout the entire body. Observing the natural flow of breath flowing through the nostrils, throat, rib cage, and the abdomen rising and falling allows new sensations to arise. Lara explained the inter-relatedness between yoga and breathing: *“If you can breathe, you can do yoga.”* Susan shared that in her yoga practice she focuses on breathing: *“the breathing is something that I have really tried to concentrate on more.”* John explained the role of breathing: *“[Yoga] did open up my awareness and specially with the breath too.”*

Louise acknowledged that she realizes the importance of deep breathing, however she only does this in yoga classes:

I like the deep breathing, because I don't normally do that. I know we are supposed to practice that all the time, but I seem that I only do it when I go to yoga classes. You know, just taking those deep breaths then just feel like you have a load off your mind or body at the time when you take those next deep breaths. (Louise)

Many of the participants described a connection between the breath and shifting their stress responses. Paul described the importance of breathing for managing his stress, dealing with his trauma, and deepening his yoga practice:

Breathing is the foundation of yoga... I do feel that it helps me. Many times when I had the trauma, when I tensed, I just did some breathing and it has been really, really, helpful... breathing helped me to relax and deal with the aches and pains and get rid of stress... I found that I get very deep in the posture where I have never been before and this is a result of the breathing. (Paul)

Susan described that she could manage her stress by focusing and connecting with her breath:

Breathing alone without any stretching or any poses, the breathing alone I've tried to use, I literally could feel my anxiety built up with me sometimes, or stress. I will try increasingly to use breath to kind of bring that down again. And it is effective, now sometimes obviously I am more receptive to it than others, but sometimes you go with your stress, but when I do take the time, it works almost all the time. (Susan)

When Amy was asked about the role of the breath, she replied “oh, huge huge, absolutely.” She added: “You think of breathing, oh I breathe every day, you know this is something natural, everyone breathes. But then realizing how you breathe and how shallow your breath can be, that I found was kind of neat.” Amy shared how she maintains her connection with her breath: “the breath, really does kind of ground you. When you just take that time to be like, I am breathing in, I am breathing out, I am breathing in.” She further explained:

I just focus on the breath, focus on the breath. And then you kind of really realize that that is all you are focusing on, you are not watching the cars go by, you are not thinking of you know what's to do in few minutes, so it really helps. (Amy)

Althea shared her profound experience of her breath taking her to a more spacious state of being:

On a deeper level there's those moments where you really get a glimmer of the experience of beyond just the physicality of the practice, where you get a glimmer of the power of the breath and the movement taking you away from the immediacy of being in the moment and into a more expansive state quality of being and those are precious. (Althea)

Lucia explained that the more she practices yoga, the more she synchronizes her movement with her breath, the more breathing becomes natural and her body can effortlessly and naturally breathe:

I've learned from doing yoga repetitively, I've learned to connect with my breath and that is the biggest thing, to be able to move with your breath and in the beginning it was challenging, it didn't feel natural to breathe in this particular moment and now, it just goes so naturally, I don't think about it anymore. So this made realize how much I am connected with my body when I know when my body needs to take a breath in and a breath out. (Lucia)

Lucia shared her experience of how deep breathing elicits a sense of calmness and relaxation and helps her manages stressful negative situations: *"when I sometimes get stressed out and very nervous, I take some deep breaths and try to relax to get rid of that negative like tightness."* Lara explained that yoga allowed her to be more aware of her breathing:

The emphasis on breathing and focusing on the breath keeps you present and just the awareness of the breath, I mean how many times do we go through, how often do we look at our breath during the day? Certainly now I do more than I ever would have if I hadn't been exposed to yoga. (Lara)

Both Lara and Lucia explained how they could relax and feel calm through connecting with their breath. Lucia said: *"when I sometimes get stressed out and very nervous, I take some deep breaths and try to relax to get rid of that negative like tightness."* Lara expanded:

When you understand about breathing you can give up the fight-or flight response because you are able to drop your breath, you are able to calm yourself and without all this adrenaline rushing through you, it feels safer. I mean the fight-or flight response is so important if you are in that situation where you are being abused or you're being traumatized, but you don't want to maintain that. (Lara)

Dreamer shared the understanding that the quality of her breathing changes depending on how she feels, she explained:

There are so many types of breathing that I do in yoga. One of the things that is important to learn is how when you are stressed and your breathing is high up in your chest and is very shallow. And that when you are relaxed and more mindful, your breathing comes from deep into your diaphragm, so one of the things I like to do is to play with the breath and see how deep I can have it go. (Dreamer)

Returning to the body.

Yoga is about movement of the body and energy moving in the body. Almost all participants expressed experiencing connection and awareness with their bodies. Dreamer expressed how in the west we are disconnected from our bodies: *“the wonderful thing about yoga you learn in the western culture that we are so disconnected from our body, we are just disconnection period. And then once you start doing yoga... you start to learn so much about your body.”* Trauma manifests in disconnection and shutting down from the body. Anne shared her experience:

With the experience of the trauma, there was no way I wanted to go into the body, there was no way. It was just like ‘you want me to do what?’ [laughs]. And it didn’t really occur to me that getting back into the body would help with the healing, I can share that now... It was like no man’s land [laughs], just don’t go there. (Anne)

Paul also shared a similar experience. Through time and breathing, his body started to let go, he explained:

Grief is very physical specially in the early stages and its very, very, tough to work through, like sometimes the body just won’t do very simple things, it kind of shut down, and there is a lot of built-up tension. I guess that is very, very, painful and very constricting I guess it

grabs you. I found that yoga for me was a very good release of that and after a while I felt I didn't have to force myself to do it, it just would happen, when I really get deep into my breathing, it released a lot of tension...Yoga has made me feel better about my body, I am able to do a lot more things than I was able to even 5 years ago. (Paul)

Mindfully connecting and engaging with her body was brought up by Althea, she said: *“yoga provides an environment that I can fully engage in the moment on the mat with my body so to me it's one more experience of opportunity to engage with the body in a very mindful way.”* Lara expressed new awareness and familiarity with her body as opposed to feeling strange and unreachable:

Yoga gave me a sense of not being a stranger from certain parts of my body, so you bury some of your memories, some of your traumas and there is a sense of a strangeness or blackness, so I felt like when I did the Yoga as a way of helping me to heal that, that's what vanished. I don't feel like there is any part of my body that I couldn't put my attention to, that it doesn't feel safe or it feels trapped or feels blocked... it doesn't feel unsafe or unnatural or restricted to go to anywhere in my body and put my intention there and see if I can, you know get in get into the nooks and crannies with the breath or whatever, with movement. So I feel that I regained energetic pathways. (Lara)

Lara shared her profound experience when she realized that being in a yoga posture requires more than just the physical aspect, it's about feeling the openness in her body as well:

I started to be able to understand that going into wrapping your legs around your head wasn't about wrapping your legs around your head, it was about all the openings from the shoulders to the hips, from the ankles to the heels, you know, all that other stuff going on in your body is like a little orchestra playing that was what mattered, you know, it doesn't matter how long your legs are. (Lara)

Connecting to the body physically is the foundation and comes first, and then individuals can taste the true teachings of yoga according to Rachel. First, individuals need to connect and feel good in their bodies, and then be introduced to true essence of yoga, Rachel explained:

I think with most people, you have to give them the physical first, in our western world anyway, you have to give them the physical first, for them to start feeling good in their bodies and then you start slipping in [laughs] the good stuff. (Rachel)

Lara continued the concept of the need to connect to the body through yoga poses after disconnecting from the body due to trauma exposure:

I remember doing a lot of standing poses because they are about survival and standing on your own two feet. Just feeling like you are connected with earth, you know, because it is very easy to get way up, you know, when you leave your body, when you experience such an extreme trauma and you leave your body, it's a really healthy coping mechanism but it doesn't serve you well for your whole life and so it was the yoga that helped me to understand that, under stand that [laughs]. (Lara)

A sense of reclaiming the body arose as Althea said: *"there is this sense of 'yay body it's nice to have you', to be responsive, there is an energy that goes with that and there's a joy that goes with that, so that is a good experience."* Lucia shared her experience of how yoga helped her connect with her body after a history of eating disorder and body dissociation, she explained:

I definitely hated my body and developed eating disorder quite early. I was bulimic and throwing up then eating, and binge eating, starving myself and stuff like that. I struggled with weight my whole life... yoga definitely helps me feel good in my body, even when I look at the reflection of the mirror, I see it differently... yoga makes me feel good about my body... when I am practicing and connecting with every little part of it. (Lucia)

Yoga allowed a sense of wholeness, integration, and connection with every part of the body as well as increased levels acceptance and connection with the body. Lucia shared her experience: *“yoga makes me feel good about my body when I am in it, and when I am practicing and connecting with every little part of it.”* Lucia also shared her experience struggling with her body image, since her childhood and how yoga helped her feel good in her body:

I struggled with weight my whole life. It came from the fact that my dad was often teasing me about me loving to eat and making me feel bad about that, because he’s super skinny and his whole family is very skinny and I was always on the chubby side. I was a big girl. My dad used to say she’s really big for her age. It’s just something that makes you think about it being self-conscious. I hated my body... So yoga definitely helps me feel good in my body, you know what, even when I look at the reflection of the mirror. (Lucia)

Amy shared an interesting experience when she feels a sense of wholeness when doing yoga, a feeling of integration between the various parts of her body, whereas in exercise the body does not feel connected:

I think in some exercises you feel like you are almost pieces, where in yoga you feeling whole. You feel like every part of your body is working. You know from your hands to your fingers, you need everything to make a posture work. (Amy)

Sally added: *“Yoga for me was relaxation technique; it helped me get in touch with my body because I am very much in my mind a lot and it was lovely.”* Sally shared her trauma experience *“there were lots of losses in my life, a marriage, 3 significant deaths that year and I was diagnosed with cancer... arthritis and Neuropathy after the chemo that stayed for a long time... so there were a lot of losses.”* However, Sally explained her poignant experience of being

aware and mindfully connected to the sensations of her body during her first chemotherapy treatment:

During my healing journey in my very first chemo ever, sitting in the cancer treatment room with all the lazy boy chairs, the nurse is putting the IV in and this first mixture the Cyclophosphamide and the other one Adriamycin. Adriamycin is red and the nickname for it is 'the red devil', if this miss your vein, and it goes through your tissue, it will burn you badly, very badly, it's a very toxic chemo and I knew that because I like to know things... I am sitting there and watching her put the IV in for the very first chemo in my whole life and it's this thing that I have heard and I am thinking, hmmm if she misses I am going to be permanently scarred [laughs] and badly burnt and wouldn't be a good start. So she is putting it in and as the liquid starts to go through my veins, I remember till now, the sensation that I never had it before or after other than the chemo with the Adriamycin, it was cold, I could feel cold going through my veins and I was fascinated by that, I said wow, it feels cold, I wasn't worried, I found that interesting and it was just that clarity of this is going to prevent anymore cancer from developing, I have made an informed decision and it's very cold, I stayed with that sensation so it's also a bodily awareness.
(Sally)

Sally also shared her experience with her yoga teacher at the end of the practice when she can totally relax parts of her body:

[Her yoga teacher's name] with yoga nidra would bring the awareness to each part of the body and it fascinates me to this day. He'll say 'be aware of the neck' and something will release in the back of the neck, I am not trying to do anything, I bring awareness to it and it eases with no effort, I still find that fascinating. (Sally)

Rachel explained how the body could affect the mind: "we practice asanas postures to find harmony in our bodies... to help us find peace in our mind." Amy described her experience of harmony between the body and mind:

I found it was just that break from my mind. At that time my mind wasn't exactly the greatest place, so it was very nice to have that, you know 30 minutes to an hour to an hour and a half of just pure relaxation, where I kind of felt like my body and my mind were working together, versus trying to destroy each other which was very much like at that time, that they were kind of enemies or one or the other. You know my brain and my body were not interconnecting and they weren't you know, working towards a common goal of health or wellness. They were kind of, you know, it was very almost like a battle every day. And that hour of yoga was so relaxing and peaceful and puts back things in perspective for me. (Amy)

Dreamer shared her experience managing her physical pain from her trauma through yoga. She explained: *"I always had severe, severe, migraines; it's something that I've had from childhood. I was always in a lot of pain and trying to work through pain that was horrible... with migraines it's really very difficult because it impairs your memory, it's very difficult."* Dreamer continued sharing further trauma she encountered:

I was badly burnt in a fire, I had a 3rd degree burn. So my arm and my limbs were, I had to have skin grafting. And with skin grafting you lose the elasticity and normal functioning of your limbs and it gets tighter and tighter, and tighter and tighter as you get older so I had to be constantly stretching and if I don't, I completely lose the flexibility in my limbs.
(Dreamer)

Dreamer then explained how she deals with and manages her pain through her yoga practice, she explained:

What I discovered with yoga was, I am usually, always, in pain, and when I do a yoga class, the pain pretty much goes away. It is such as good as any medication. Unfortunately, as soon as I stop doing yoga, the pain comes back. I would get relief from the pain as long as I was doing yoga. It's just sort of took me to a different place and the

pain would go away. The pain did not go away immediately, it would take about 15-20 minutes. But I would get to a point where the pain diminishes considerably. (Dreamer)

Susan also shared her experience of connecting to her body and handling her physical aches through her yoga practice:

When I find that I haven't got to it for a day or 2, I feel the need to get back to it. You can almost fall out of practice I guess. I miss yoga when I don't get to it. And I notice I am far more aware now than I used to carry around in terms of aches and pains and stress and tension. I became normalized after a while, I have been aware of the fact, I may have been uncomfortable and this hurts or whatever but I just carried it, whereas now after doing yoga, I think my tolerance for it ironically has gone down or maybe that is not ironic. But I need to stretch it out and get rid of that tension because I just can't carry it the way I used to, like physically I have to get rid of it and spiritually as well. (Susan)

Susan continued describing the physical sensations and awareness she experienced during her yoga practice:

This is one thing I have found, yoga has helped me be aware of but you literally block the flow of, and I am not a doctor or even spiritual expert, so I don't have the names or what I am experiencing. But I can feel blockage of whether it is blood flow or oxygen or all of the above. And when you are holding your breath in apprehension or worry, tension or trauma, you can't heal your body the same way, let alone your mind. Again, I don't know if it's energy flowing or all of the above, but it just don't travel through the body the same way, it gets blocked literally that's sort of how I experienced it. (Susan)

Lara explained the role yoga played in establishing safety and providing opportunity to return to body:

Yoga helped me to bring the safety that I felt when I could be disconnected from it all back into my body... Yoga gave me a basis for coming to the ground, it gave me a safe place to be, it gave me the sense of the sacred, and the importance of bringing things around you that feels safe and that have meaning for you. (Lara)

Stilling mind and returning to peace and wisdom within.

The pause in yoga poses allows the mind to focus, relax and be at peace. Stilling the mind doesn't mean the nonexistence of life, energy, or existence; it means the being in harmony with thoughts, self, and totally present. This state allows listening with softer ears to the waves within, experiencing the truth about the self, and experiencing the true nature of being. Yoga is a vehicle of moving into stillness. Finding peace and letting go of the voices within her head was how Rachel demonstrated receiving a greater gift, Rachel described her experience:

Yoga was not about exercise. Yoga became more than that. Yoga was about peace, it was about stilling my mind. It was about not trying to figure out all the voices in my head. It was about stilling my mind and giving myself time away from myself, if that makes sense. It was finding the quiet place, and if you can give somebody this peace, if you can share this moment, it has to only be very, very, small in a day... and there is no greater gift.

(Rachel)

Rachel shared her experience of using different aspects and focus in her yoga practice direct her thoughts and then being able to take to her daily life, realizing the deep powers she has within:

I learned specific techniques through yoga, to take me away from that thought; I don't have to stay there. It felt like a train and I was holding on with my fingernails, not to get pulled down into the hole and into that place of dark thoughts. But I learned through breath, through mantra, through focus that I didn't have to follow that train and have to stay there, that I can think of something else, I can change the direction of my thoughts. I could have no thoughts for just a moment, for just a moment. But it takes work and it takes work. It doesn't just happen. You know lay on the mat, and say okay focus on the breath, I am not going to think, you have to keep going back, going back saying no, I am

not going there and come back again. And then you learn to do that on the mat, and then you learn to do it when you are walking and then you learn to do it throughout your life. But I don't have to go down there. I don't have to let that define my life, because I am more, I am more than that. (Rachel)

Yoga helped participants connect to the essence of their being and become more present with their current emotions and feelings and more at peace with themselves. Amy shared her experience:

Like everyone in the room tends to disappear and you are focusing more on yourself, you go in versus going out, which I quite like. That sense of, you know you can kind of hang up the day, which I really like. If I have had a really stressful day at school, that doesn't come into my practice. I can leave that out at the door and for that hour you know, I can just be at peace with myself. (Amy)

Rachel also emphasized being at peace with herself, through the postures that allows stilling the mind:

The postures help find peace in the mind, to still the noise, the chitta vritti; the fluctuations of the mind, and then go inside because it's there, it's there in everyone. It's faith, it's belief, and it's allowing yourself to be who you were meant to be and not to try to fit in anyone's little box. (Rachel)

Amy used mantra (a repeated word or phrase) that changed her self-talk. She shared her experience of how she was able to replace her own negative thoughts with a different kind of self-talk. Amy explained:

Changing my self talk... like just saying mantra in my head, I am breathing in and breathing out, you know eventually to the point where you are not saying anymore and all of a sudden, you know your bell is ringing and you are ready to go and wow that's just happened, clearly something would change. So I think self-talk even when you don't believe in it first, it really really can help you. (Amy)

Lara also acknowledged the power of listening to the waves within, to the wisdom of her inner-voice:

Listening to what your own body and your own wisdom is telling you, it's the best guidance that you can have, not that you are not wanting to be opened to what others have to offer but in the end, you know we have to go through passages of birth and life and death on our way so, why wouldn't we want to turn to that internal voice and listen to it? (Lara)

Lara then shared how her yoga practice allowed her to dig deep inside and to ask questions, she explained:

I think one of the things that it [yoga] opened me to was the possibility, even with this trauma experience, that I had to ask myself questions like is it possible or plausible or important that maybe because abuse is about power and control, it is not about sex, so is it possible that I had another life time where I abused my power or was too controlling with people? I may be too controlling in this lifetime?, it's a different kind of hmmm, it's not, I don't want to do it in a guilt kind of way but just is that a possibility? What can I learn from that? And you know, I think it opens you to ask different kinds of questions and not be tied to anyone's particular belief system. (Lara)

Rachel described how stillness and going deep inside manifests in finding peace and wisdom within saying:

Yoga means survival, it reaffirms my truth, it reaffirms who I am, it allows me to make those choices, it teaches me to go inside and know that it will be okay, that I will be okay and that the answers are there, that when I am still enough, I will find them. (Rachel)

Susan shared her experience emphasizing the major role stillness played throughout her healing journey and through her yoga practice she was able to just notice her thoughts in such a freedom, that she remains present in the moment then able to return to those thoughts later

and deal with them peacefully. I thought Susan has beautifully described her experience, thus I am sharing it through her own words:

The stillness, for me a big part 'specially when there is all this reasons, all these demands. Sometimes I think I feared stillness in my day-to-day life because it forced me to almost confront all the stuff that was overwhelming me sometimes emotions, whatever it may be. Yoga, I find allows you to have that stillness that our bodies and our minds need, and sometimes those thoughts and worries still come in, I wouldn't say I have practiced to the point where I can sit there completely thought-free, but I have gotten better in allowing them to pass in and then pass out. So, when I feel my thought and emotions processing through me as I lay there and stretch and breathe, it's easier to observe them as almost a third person and let them go. And it doesn't mean that I am not gonna return to it, or that I am ignoring them, it's more of yes, that's something that is on your mind and something that you have to deal with, it's an awareness but there's a certain freedom to it that allows you to, almost take your inventory but not in a critical way, but yes, this is a concern to me, I don't have to solve that problem right now, I am here for myself, but I can return to it later and giving myself that stillness in time in a more peaceful way as opposed to a fearful way. I think gives me better strength and clarity when I do have to deal with those things later on. (Susan)

Most participants shared their experiences in Savasana - Corpse pose or relaxation pose in other words, where they let go of any thoughts and just focus inwards. Sally said: *"just the letting go in savasana was a revolutionary revelation to me."* Rachel added: *"in savasana I say you don't have to follow that train, you know you can witness your thoughts and then move on, you don't have to get stuck... to learn that you have a choice of where your mind goes."* Amy explained her experience of finding moments or peace:

It's almost like your body and your mind decide at the specific points in your yoga practice, when it wants to do something. And it's almost waiting for you to okay, let go

of your mind and you will be able to do it. You'll fight it for a little bit and then you would be like okay, I'm ready to release my mind. Be like kind of, let my body do what it wants to do. And then when you get in the position, and you know it's unplanned and unexpected and so it's that feeling of, you know enjoyment and excitement, without like charts, like here I have to do this and have to do this. So I like that aspect of it, and it's that moment. I find that yoga gives you that moment of just peace. (Amy)

Lucia also shared her experience where relaxation pose (savasana) became both important and easier for her. It also became an escape for her from her busy life without feeling the guilt, she explained:

Savasana is very important to me. It used to be hard, but now it's my escape from everything and it's one place for me right now where I can just be thinking about nothing, my family, my responsibilities, anything and not feel guilty. I'm actually encouraged by people to do that, so it's not selfish it's, I can do it and this is the place to do it. (Lucia)

Susan explained the importance of relaxation pose (savasana) in making her yoga practice complete and how important it became for her, she explained:

Savasana actually, that's one thing that I would say have been different since I have started... now I see, to pull yourself out of your practice without doing that is almost disruptive I find, it allows the blood to flow and the air to flow and the restoration and the mind to quiet. I think the savasana really helps you to take it away with you, when you get up and leave the mat a little bit more. I do notice even when I am walking or driving home afterwards like I feel different, and I think that the savasana helps to, again I don't think reinforces is the right word but it helps complete the practice maybe or bridge the practice. (Susan)

Moving inward to trust the truth of self and spiritual awakening.

Participants shared experiences of connecting with their inner beings where they trusted their inner truth and got in touch with their spirit and higher consciousness. Yoga helped participants to connect with and realize hidden powers inside them. Dreamer emphasized *“yoga is the only discipline when you are working all three, body, mind, and spirit, which makes it quite unique and quite special.”* Amy described her experience of realizing the power that resides deep within and how her yoga practice makes her feel:

Realizing what I can change and what I can't change, I think has been huge. Knowing my limits, knowing what my body is asking me to do and what it's not asking to do, I think has been very helpful. Just day-to-day and just that more, you know, I think it just makes things, it makes the day more enjoyable when you can just. I find myself when I leave a yoga practice I am more calm, I am more ready to take on, certain tasks. I can put them into prospective a lot better than when I have done a yoga class. It allows for that release of energy, which I sometimes need. (Amy)

Lucia shared her experience where yoga become a place to get in touch with her own self, allowing self-acceptance and connection:

Yoga is this 'me place' where I can go and I am with myself and I feel good about it. Then I can connect with and accept myself for who I am and that is the hardest part for me because I hated myself my whole life... I feel connected with a calmer me and it's very therapeutic, it's very, its taking me back to me. (Lucia)

Rachel emphasized she is not just a physical body and explained: *“I am not this body, my spirit is so much bigger than this, and that's what I've learned from yoga and through teaching, through practicing.”* Susan described the release in various aspects her yoga practice provides, where it feels as if she is resetting herself:

Yoga releases me absolutely, in a very physical, mental, and spiritual way. I think that's my biggest draw to it. I do feel the buildup of life and much of that is posttraumatic stress at times, compounded by everyday challenges and yoga helps me realign, it's almost starting over again or resetting myself. (Susan)

Susan then explained how her yoga practice evolved spiritually where she became more thankful:

Yoga has become a far more central part of my life especially on more spiritual level. I think in the past I always on a superficial level knew that I need yoga to help me relax... my spiritual self has developed a lot. I think my focus on breath has improved a lot. I have lots of thought just about universal consciousness and where my place is within that, I think about that more. And I also think that the other thing I try to be mindful of is that sort of humility to those around me and to be thankful to myself. (Susan)

Anne shared her experience with awakening and realizing the powers that lies within her and started to connect with her true self again, she explained:

There was a sense that started to grow inside of me, a sense of knowing that the people who were caring for me in the hospital couldn't do anything for me that I couldn't do for myself and that was a gradual awakening, gradual kind of coming back...The practice gradually began to pick up again, not right away very slowly, very slowly. I began exploring again, working back into myself, and it was like bringing back into myself things that I had lost and given away into this crazy relationship. (Anne)

Rachel illustrated how her relationship with herself has developed throughout her yoga experience; she described how yoga helped her build skills:

I think that I am learning to trust myself and that I have a voice and I have value. I learned that we are all unique and we all follow a different path. I learned that it's okay to be different and that we all have trauma in some way and it's what you do with that, how you deal with it and how you try to find the positive or the lesson so you don't have to do it again. So many many ways... I learned to listen with a softer ear, with a more

compassionate ear. I hope that one day I will be easier on myself, and I think the lessons of yoga teach these things... I have changed in many ways, many ways. I would say I have become who I am, and it has helped me to find my purpose... in so many ways, in so many ways. (Rachel)

Rachel also shared her personal emotional experience of how yoga helped find her truth and deal with her mother's illness:

My mum is quite ill and she is in the hospital and the other day I sat down with a list to write what I have learned from the experience. So instead of getting wrapped up in the emotion, well the emotion of course is still there, but instead of getting lost in that trauma, yoga was allowing me to ask questions and say, what if I weren't? Have I been true? Have I been true to myself? Is this my truth? And that as long as I give my mother my truth, the same as in my yoga classes, as long as what I give is my truth, no one can ask for any more, [silence] and so that single idea that this is all I have, it is my being, who I am, my essence. (Rachel)

Mike reflected a sense of increased awareness of the true nature of himself versus the self that he made up for himself due to the effect of the trauma he encountered. Mike explained:

Yoga helped me to recognize who I really am and try to look at myself from that point of view as opposed to looking at myself from some storyline I have made up for myself. At the time of the trauma I guess it will be the wallowing in the self-pity of the tragedy of the losses... I don't think I necessarily would have found myself where I am at, had I not done it through yogic ties. It wouldn't have been possible if I was doing it through some of the other avenues that I was on. (Mike)

Paul shared his story of losing his son to an accident, and how his yoga practice helped him be the person he wanted to be. Paul explained his profound experience:

In my yoga there are moments of comfort that are there and helped me to be the kind of person that I wanted to be and that I am. My experience is when my son died, it was a fairly well-know story in the community, he was a professional hockey player, so I ended up doing a lot of speaking over the years about forgiveness... one of things that I've learned, that I seem to able to convey to people was that there are things that you can't control in your life, and for me that trauma was something that I couldn't control at all. I had no way of preventing it, no way of protecting my son, so it came to be that my only choice is that the driver of the car was the one that I forgave... yoga helped me look at myself, and I was never able to do that and have never done that before. I just observed my mind and I started to see more clearly how I was affecting others by doing that. Yoga was a whole part of that experience, it helped me to communicate better with others and led me to be the kind of person that I am... yoga introduced me to some people that were really helpful in my healing journey. (Paul)

Paul added that the speeches he gave were inspired from his yoga practice and readings. He got great feedback from people that allowed him to see his trauma as a blessing, where he was able to help and affect others through his speeches honoring the soul of his son. Paul explained:

Some of the things that I read along the way came a lot out of yoga... I still get lots of really great feedback about that kind of attitude helped other people, so that is very fulfilling...Yoga really opened my mind to how grief could be a blessing and that's hard to wrap your head around I think, but it [yoga] did help me to see that there some things that were coming to, it is not as dramatic as it was 9 years ago. (Paul)

Spiritual connections and awareness were experienced through the yoga practice. Not just a religious connection per se, but also an awakening to a sense of belonging to a higher consciousness. Lara explained: *"the spiritual aspect I think has given me a broader perspective"*. A salient awakening arose, where Lara realized that it is okay to have doubts and unanswered

questions. She shared that when she was young she needed answers for all her questions, however yoga helped to accept things as they are. Lara explained:

Yoga has helped with helping me to understand that nobody has all the answers, no person, no religion, you know, if they did then the world will be probably a different place, so its ok to have doubts and questions... what I feel connects me with Yoga more is that it isn't about Religion as much as the spiritual aspect of things and so, it doesn't put as many labels on things, you know, compartmentalizes, it doesn't do that. (Lara)

Lara also shared her profound experience of being more aware of things happening around her; more aware of messages from above sent her way:

The wonderful thing about it all was how the synchronicity, all these little things just appeared as I needed them and because of the Yoga I was probably more aware that they would be there for me, like that's why they were presenting themselves, you know, it's kind like the book falling off the shelf when you need to read it... and so you see magic in life at a time when you are feeling the most vulnerable and the most raw but it's like a salve that just presents itself for you, it helps you to get better. (Lara)

Lara continued describing the spiritual awakening she experienced through her over 40 years of yoga practice:

What happened to me was what I call 'gift of grace' I just had a whole series of little awakening things that happened that they were partially religious experiences, they were certainly very spiritual experiences, they were hmm, they were the most amazing thing like, they were things like if you told most people they will think you are really wacked [laughing] and they were just hmm, like I knew that I was going to have help through the process so it took away a lot of the fear, a lot of the hmm, I think because of my Yoga practice before I could accept it this was what it was and that is why it was here and why it was presenting it this time and I was going to be fine. (Lara)

Rachel's also described spiritual aspects of her experiences. She shared: *"yoga gives you a connection to God... it allows you to see yourself as connected. And that you don't have to change, you don't have to do anything at all but just be, and be connected to the Divine."* Rachel also shared how yoga thrives and awakens the connection to God:

God is here, he is here, and we are all connected and that's yoga, that connection and believing in being connected, that we don't need somebody in between us to get us there, each of us has to be, you just have to be yourself, your true self. Let down the walls, peel away the layers, forget what other people have told you. Forget what people may have done to you, connect with who you are, 'cause it's beauty. (Rachel)

Rachel also shared her profound experience during her yoga practice and how she started tasting bits of the connection to God, in spite it was just a brief moment yet made her realize that the connection is there and that she can back to it and let it grow, all what she needs is to come back, she described her experience:

So you are there for a while, you come out, and the first time you may not stay, it might be a fleeting moment, but once you have experienced that fleeting moment, you know that it is there, and you will find it again and then you can let it grow. Take the chance, know that what's inside you is connection to God to the Divine, to infinite wisdom, to light. (Rachel)

As a result of her yoga practice, Lara shared a profound and poignant experience of awakening where she became more aware of experiences happening to her:

I was driving through this little village, not even a town, and on the outskirts there was that farmer's field and this tiniest little Chapel there and I just pulled the car, the car just pulled over and I got out and I stepped inside, there was like one little bench, it was just for people who wanted to just have a private moment and there was a bible sitting out and it was at the exact page it needed to be at [laughs]. And I came out from that

experience and it was that one of those magical moments where you know when the universe unfolded as it should, and I felt so much a part of everything out here and yet totally in here as well, and it was just like WOW and I got to my meeting and it was really hard to concentrate because I just had a profound experience, it's like when your babies are born, you know, the whole energy like the whole planet shifted or something, it was just awesome and so those little experiences kept happening to me when they weren't little they were massive. Again I think if it wouldn't have been for the yoga I wasn't sure if I would have noticed or responded to them. (Lara)

John shared a profound experience he encountered in one of his spiritual retreats during a practice called 'aura balancing' where he experienced energy shifts, awakening, and openings.

John described his experience:

I had that profound experience where my heart chakra just opened up and all of a sudden I went to another realm, I was totally conscious of what was happening. I knew my body was on this table stretched out while other people were sitting around me and somehow I just tend to feel the spirit or whatever thing you wanna call it, transcend to different realms and I had this experience of watching this particular teacher with this profound look of love on his face, not only on his face but his eyes and his whole body somehow represented this absolute, absolute, love. I was taken in by that and when I came back to my body, I found out when we were discussing this, I found out that everybody else had that profound experience that I felt of this feeling of love and compassion, and transcended anything that have ever heard about or read about, or dreamed about, or talked about. (John)

John continued when he came back home, his wife said: *"what happened to you, there is a certain quality about you that I don't understand, look at you, you look so calm, so peaceful there is so much love around you."* John explained:

It was the way the animals reacted to me. Like I go walking down the street and cats and dogs would walk across and come and wait for me and roll around and wait to be touched

and petted etc. It is such an amazing feeling and that was probably the most profound experience in my life... and every once in a while I still get that, but it's not as profound as when the heart chakra opened up, it's just the most amazing feeling in your life. You experience love that you never understand. (John)

John also shared the importance of his spiritual beliefs, meditation, and his Guru's teaching in finding peace and accepting the suffering of trauma, he explained:

Had it not been for my meditation, had it not been for my spiritual beliefs, had it not been for me finding that particular Guru at that time, watching somebody you love die is a very, very, tearing experience, it just tears your whole life and your whole heart, and to see that and yet find that sense of peace and acceptance really the acceptance of this awful, awful, suffering. I could not have done that without my spiritual beliefs, without my meditation. (John)

Through yoga, Lara was able to find the strength and power to face her trauma and not allow it define her life, she explained:

Through yoga I was able to say that the trauma had happened, happened in the past and I have survived it, so I am not a victim, I am a survivor and that was the worst of it, if I have lived through that you know at that young age and survived that then this is just the processing of that it's not that, it is the processing of that, it is not going to define my life even it will have ramifications and you know things that I can take from it but it's not me and I don't have to feel the shame and all the stuff, you know, that can go along with could I have done something differently to prevent it, all of that stuff. (Lara)

EMBRACING CREATIVITY AND CONNECTION BEYOND THE MAT

Yoga stretches and extends beyond the yoga mat. Participants shared their experiences where they could take their yoga practice to their daily life beyond their yoga mat. Lara explained how yoga made her feel connected and aware of life, nature, and everything around

her: *“because yoga is multidimensional, that’s how I have experienced it, and it is this sense of connectedness with life and with what’s around other people and with nature and there is a real completeness about it.”*

Anne explained that the yoga practice allows the individuals to be intimate with themselves that will extend to others leading to bond in life. She described her experience as:

I think what can be groomed from the practice is a certain degree of intimacy. Intimacy with yourself, and really the whole point to practice is to be able to take your practice and integrate it into your daily life, so if the whole point to practice, let’s say is intimacy and becoming very intimate with yourself, then you naturally extend that intimacy to the people around you and when you can establish that intimacy with the people around you, the bonds in life and the relationships in life become like amazing, they like really come together. (Anne)

Rachel shared a influential experience where she started realizing that she had a voice, value, and being able to take that from her mat to the world:

I began to have a voice, that I began to feel that I had something worth saying, that I didn’t need to hide, that I had value. And that was a long time coming. And then to take that from the mat in my own practice to the outside was enormous, because not only I had something to say, but I had something to share. (Rachel)

Dreamer also explained that her life became like a big yoga mat where she practices yoga in each and every aspect of her life:

I realized that there doesn’t really need to be a separation or isolation that ideally you don’t ever leave the mat, you incorporate what you learn into your entire life. Every moment can be meditative as long as you are aware. If you can try to keep this awareness, and that mental focus and if you allow yourself not to be rushed and to slow down and you know you are always moving or you are always sitting. I usually sit in lotus position because it the most comfortable position for me, so I sit in a yoga pose. Even

when I am gardening, I am slowing down and making it more mindfully and aware of the body and how it is moving and not moving in a way that would hurt the back. A lot of what you learn in yoga, in the philosophy is about relating to other people with compassion and awareness, and I think that is the most important thing. You take into the world, we need to listen to people, to be present for them, to be compassionate, to be understanding, there is not enough of that in the world. Yeah, I think ideally you try to practice yoga in every aspect of your life. (Dreamer)

Yoga allowed an increased sense of connection with others. Rachel explained the positive effect of yoga on her relationship with her husband:

Yoga has deepened my relationship with my husband, because it has allowed us to ask questions and share very serious ideas about what is God. About what and how we want to share this with our child. What do we give him from what we've learned? (Rachel)

Lucia described becoming more patient with her interaction with her family and others. She said: *"being patient with my kids and you know my husband and not being so fast in judgment and not being so fast in response."* Yoga helped Lucia to be present in the now and to engage more mindfully and thoughtfully in discussions and to engage differently with others, she explained:

Yoga helped me to calm down and be present, and less hectic, less nervous. Yoga helped me to listen and not interrupt people when they're talking and just be there in the moment and not have to prove anything. (Lucia)

Anne also shared her experience with her ex-husband and how her yoga practice allowed her to connect with him in a different way:

I think that yoga has helped me with that relationship, with the relationship of this man that I was married to for 21 years. I was able to see him in maybe a little different light... I think yoga has helped me, I might also say it's the teachings of the Buddha. (Anne)

Lara said that: *“I felt that I needed to have lots of time for me, I was pretty clear about that.”* She also shared how slowing down and being present through her yoga practice, allowed her to have a clear mind and being less reactive toward others and thus have more ability to relax. Similarly, Susan described how yoga and in particular the yogic breathing helped to be calmer when connecting with her son:

I am trying to use yoga and breath to remind myself that if I want my child to calm down, then I need to approach that in a calm way. Because there is no way, I can come out with a frantic stressed out mind and body and expect that a calm a young child down. (Susan)

Lucia is an immigrant who didn't have a lot of friends, however she started connecting with others through yoga. Lucia encouraged a friend to practice yoga with her, she explained: *“this actually helped me to connect with her more, because we realized we have so much in common and we were both into this more spiritual connection... so yoga actually helped me connect with this particular person.”* John also added that he did not feel the need to have a lot of friends; however, his family became important to him:

All I wanna do is live my life in state of meditation that is being aware, quiet, calm... overtime I guess I've become more solitary really I don't have a lot of friends as such and I don't want friends... I know for many, many, many, years now basically all what I wanna do is really be myself or be comfortable with myself. The important things in my life is my wife, my extended family in terms of my grandkids and my nieces, nephews, brothers, etc. and trying to have a non-confrontational relationship with other people as such. (John)

Participants also described that yoga allowed participants to dig deep into the inner landscapes of their creativity and artistic space, and to harmonize with nature. Lucia was an artist who *“went to art high school”*, during our interview, she realized how she took yoga

outside the mat and how yoga influenced her art and painting. I will let Lucia explain it through her own words, as she realized that during our interview:

Yoga is influencing my art too, you just made me realize, I've never thought of that w, I have a thing, big thing for curly lines, flowing lines. All my paintings and pottery is flowing and curling and I think it has to do with yoga, and that's why I really enjoy all that moves of arms and body and it's all connected. I never thought of that. Last week I was doing that project for grade 9, they were doing the initial of their letter and they were supposed to put things about you. And the first initial is [her initial], so I made an [her name's initial] and an owl in the top and a fox in the bottom and of course everything was flowing lines, trees and branches. Someone might say it's not yoga but you know maybe it's not, but for me it is connected. (Lucia)

Lucia also shared how yoga helped her to be more patient in her painting:

Yoga influenced my art too, I always wanted the results, like I want to finish quickly quickly, and I want to see how it looks like my paintings were quick and jerky. I would never have the patience to sit down and down a Celtic knot; I would just drive myself crazy. Now I was able to work for several hours just doing Celtic knot, and I did it perfectly on both sides of my eye. And I think the patience also comes from yoga, the patience, you know, that I never had, I was so impatient. (Lucia)

Mike shared his experience with art and how his yoga practice made him more aware that the art he was doing since he was little was nothing but a manifestation of meditation. Mike was absorbed in his artwork and now realizes that it was a form of meditation, he explained:

When I started looking to life through the eyes of yoga, it dawned on me that when I was a young boy doing a lot of artwork, cause as I said we are a family of artists that I was meditating. I didn't even know that I was meditating, but I absorbed right into the artwork, I mean I wasn't there a lot of the time. I have heard that from musicians and from people who like to garden. (Mike)

Susan also shared the role of yoga in her connection with nature and music where she feels universal connectedness and awareness to the universe, she explained:

Nature and art specially music particularly have always been big parts of my life, like they are very special to me... I think those are other mediums where I feel aware of universal connection and consciousness, so yoga reinforces that for me and I think allows me to feel more when I am in those settings. Which actually that was the other thing I started seeking out more after everything happened with my son and was almost one of the ways where I could hopefully start to connect with people again was through music, because trauma is an isolating experience especially with some of your most close relationships sometimes. (Susan)

Susan further described her intense and prevailing experience of connectedness with nature during her yoga practice, she even thinks of her yoga mat as earth. Susan described her experience:

I really wish we had an outdoor yoga class... I connect with nature and yoga and I am sure will be more powerful if I practice more regularly outside. I think of my mat as earth and rootedness and connection in place and space and nature often helps facilitate that same feeling for me. So even when I know I'm on the 2nd floor of some concrete building, I do try and visualize still how we are rooted and connected in place and space and in nature. For whatever reason that is comforting for me on some level. (Susan)

Lucia also described that the yoga space could be anywhere, wherever she is, she can find and connect with that place as her yoga space:

Yoga is a place for me to go, it's a place to visit. It can anywhere, that's the beauty of it, because it could be in the middle of the woods, it could be in the field, it could be in the house, in the streets. And you always go back to the same place, that's the beauty of it. (Lucia)

Amy shared the influence of her yoga practice in allowing her to get in touch with nature and be more attuned to the present moment and not wander around, she explained her experience:

In the summer I do go out west as much as I can. We went to the Pacific Rim, my boyfriend and I were looking over the ocean and you know the sun is setting and this beautiful pose and it's just so gorgeous and I think that's sense of just, being there, being present in that moment, feeling the sand, feeling nature under you, feeling just the water hitting your face just that dew. It's that sense of, it's not necessarily the need to be in a yoga position, it's just this sense of ah and wonders. The thoughts just disappear and I think that the yoga practice certainly helped me be able to do that, be able to look at something, focus on such a beautiful site and not have my mind wandering off to another place. So I think that is where I have noticed it the most. It's just that calming effect that you need to realize when you are holding your breath, to realize when you are kind of drifting away and being able to bring yourself back. Sometimes it's just that sitting in a different position or changing my posture or just touching something like grounding myself and that's when I find it very beneficial. (Amy)

Lucia then shared her experience of yoga in nature and how nature affects her practice and choice of poses. She also became comfortable with her outdoor yoga practice and not caring what others think, she explained:

There's a lot of yoga, the nature is the biggest thing, like I love nature and so I always look at the trees and outside when I go for a walk or even in my garden and I do some poses you know and breaths and I often do you poses like Sun salutation during the day. I used to be so, so, shy to do it in public, but now I just don't care if I need a stretch I am gonna do it and I just don't care what people think. (Lucia)

Mike shared that he did not need to be physically outdoor to connect with nature, he can find this right on his own yoga mat. His yoga practice helped him appreciate nature and not vice versa. He describes his experience:

Now I can live in nature. I don't have to go outside and have this refreshing walk because I kind of getting the same kind of thing on the mat... I could really appreciate nature whenever I am in it because of the yoga practice. It had more to do with going from the mat and the appreciation of the mat into nature than drawing something from nature and bringing it to the mat. (Mike)

Paul beautifully explained how he became more aware of nature and connected the constant change in nature to changes in his body. I will let Paul explain his experience:

Nature is a lot more important than it was 10 years ago, very much. Yoga has made me more aware. My wife is very aware of that, she loves to grow things and this has been a big part of what she does, but now I participate a lot more than I did, in gardening and even just walking, enjoying nature where probably I wouldn't have taken the time to see things. I think it's the connection, the same like the connection to the body when I said earlier, it has always amazed me how much my body changes constantly from hour to hour, and from day to day. And if you are watching, that's what nature is about too, the flower looks different an hour from now than it did before. It's a constant process, it's a constant flow, and I think it has made me aware of that where I had no idea before. (Paul)

Finally, Paul shared how people that are close to him noticed the impact of his yoga practice on his life, he said:

I am happy yoga is in my life, it made a big difference and I know that yoga has helped me a lot because I know that other people noticed, people whom have known me a long time noticed. (Paul)

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

This phenomenological study explored the meanings and experiences of yoga for trauma survivors. Thirteen participants with a past history of trauma were interviewed to explore their yoga experiences in relation to the following research questions: *What is the nature of the yoga experience? What meanings do people who have experienced trauma make of these experiences? What happens in the yoga experience that is healing?* Participants' stories and experiences revealed *moving from the darkness of trauma into the light of yoga and living*, where yoga impacted their lives. While practicing yoga or as I call it, *living yoga*, often involves hard work and dedication, participants explained that slowly but surely their yoga practice started to blossom and manifest in a more positive connection with their body, mind, and overall life. They all continue to engage in the practice that became part of their lives.

Based on the participants' lived experiences of yoga, four key essences emerged and described in chapter four: *moving from the darkness of trauma into the light of yoga and living*, *entering into safe and sacred spaces*, *letting go into yoga and returning to embodiment of self*, and *embracing creativity and connection beyond the mat*. This chapter discusses the lived experience of healing and transformation experienced through the yoga practice extending understanding of these essences drawing from the relative research literature. At the closing of the chapter, I then discuss the implications of phenomenology as the methodology used to explore this phenomena, I also explore possible limitations of this study, offer considerations for future research, and a conclusion.

INTEGRATION OF FINDINGS AND RESEARCH LITERATURE

The findings suggest yoga acts as the light that brightens up the darkness of trauma. Participants' yoga stories and lived experiences revealed that yoga allows them to move from the darkness that trauma brought into their lives. Through their own words, participants explain their trauma experience as dark and sad, words like "*dark place*" (Lucia), "*a period of darkness*" (Anne), and "*everything was black, grey, and sad*" (Mike), and "*darkness into light*" (John). Herman (1997) explains that trauma affects individuals where they are "continually buffered by terror and rage. These emotions are qualitatively different from ordinary fear and anger. They are outside the range of ordinary emotional experience, and they overwhelm the ordinary capacity to bear feelings" (p. 42). Briere (2005) explains that trauma may lead individuals to anxiety, depression, somatization, and cognitive distortions, that could result in altered self-capacities, cognitive disturbance, mood disturbance, and overlapped avoidance responses. Bass & Davis (2008) explain that trauma-healing strategies include grieving and mourning, as a way to honor the pain, let go, and move into the present. Reconnecting with, and expressing anger – the backbone of healing is pivotal to healing and a powerful and liberating force (Bass & Davis, 2008).

Through yoga experiences, participants describe being able to deal with and find the light in the aftermath of the agony and darkness of their trauma partly through entering into safe and sacred space, letting go into their yoga experience and returning to the embodiment of self (the second and third essences). Herman explains in the third stage of trauma healing, *reconnection*, individuals learn to take "power in real-life situations through a conscious choice to face danger" (Herman, 1992, p. 197). After individuals come to terms with trauma

experienced in the past, they can now start reconnecting or learning various levels of tolerance and emotion in everyday life. Herman (1992) adds that at this stage in recovery, individuals have come to understand their post traumatic symptoms are a “pathological exaggeration” (Herman, 1992, p. 197) of what a normal reaction to danger is, and they have grown to become aware of their feeling of vulnerability regarding even the tiniest threats or reminders of their trauma. Here, individuals decided to face their fears instead of having a passive response to them. Participants also described embracing creativity and connection beyond the mat. They were able to take and connect with their yoga practice beyond the mat, to their daily life, and embrace a sense of creativity and connection. Levine (2010) explains healing includes reconnection of the body and mind. As he describes people who have experienced trauma:

In their healing journeys, learn to dissolve their rigid defenses. In this surrender they move from frozen fixity to gently thawing and, finally, free flow. In healing the divided self from its habitual mode of dissociation, they move from fragmentation to wholeness. In becoming embodied they return from their long exile. They come home to their bodies and know embodied life, as though for its first time. While trauma is hell on earth, its resolution may be a gift from the gods (p. 356).

As Bass and Davis (2008) describe, healing following trauma is both a process and continuum where “the healing process is a continuum. It begins with an experience of survival, an awareness of the fact that you lived through the abuse and made it to adulthood. It ends with thriving” (p. 55). Bass and Davis (2008), explain returning to joy and creativity in the aftermath of trauma, that healing exists between survival and thriving, where healing is not a random process; there are ‘recognizable stages’ through which all survivors pass. They explained that healing is not linear, rather it is an integral part of life. The healing process is like

a *spiral*, where individuals go through the same stages again and again, traveling up the spiral, passing through them at a different level, and with a different perspective

Discussion of Entering safe and sacred spaces

Coming home to a safe and sacred space is established through yoga, where participants shared various experiences of being safe through their yoga practice describing a “*safe place*” (both Lara and Amy), “*I was safe*” (Rachel), and feeling safe through her yoga experience that “*brought me back home to myself*” (Anne). Establishing safety is the foundation and key for trauma healing (Herman, 1997; Levine, 2010). A safe and supporting environment is necessary to support the sense of feeling at home within oneself (Herman, 1997; Emerson & Hopper, 2011; Levine, 2010; van der Kolk, 2006). Herman (1997) explains, “recovery can take place only within the context of new connections” (p. 133). People who experienced trauma require incorporation of some sort or form of somatically oriented therapy to acquire a sense of safety and mastery over their bodies and to heal the disconnection that results from trauma exposure (Levine, 2010; Ogden, Minton, & Pain, 2006; van der Kolk, 2003).

Participants experienced *a connection to spiritual and sacred energy through yoga teacher*, where some experiences were religious and others were just spiritual with a higher consciousness. The yoga teacher acted as a connection to spiritual energy, allowing participants to experience the deeper spirit of yoga practice and united mind, spirit, and body through breath and postures to cultivate equanimity and connectedness. Findings suggest that yoga teacher provides support and guidance through offering safe, nurturing and a rich yoga experience allowing a connection to spiritual and sacred energy, through the own words of the participants. For example the yoga teacher is “*important*” to “*create a deeper interest*” in the

practice (John), after her yoga teacher gave her “*permission to just focus*” on the present now, that was “*a huge aha moment*” (Sally), and that the yoga experience is about the teacher’s “*wisdom*” (Lara). Dreamer explaining yoga is not just about teaching the poses, it is about “*the energy in the class*” that “*helps to heal*” individuals, as “*people come to yoga because they need that emotional support... they need to be healed*” and the yoga teacher does not play the role of a healer or a therapist, but acts as a connection to “*energy from God*” where the teacher becomes the “*vehicle*” that is “*helping that energy flow*” (Dreamer). Herman (1997) suggests that for people who have experienced trauma, the first principle in recovery is that the trauma survivor is the “*author and arbiter of her own recovery*” (p. 133) where others may offer “*assistance, affection, and care, but not cure*” (p. 133). Herman (1997) is reflecting on the relationship with the therapist, however many participants shared that their yoga teachers had influence on their journey, through sharing their wisdom, understandings, safe space, and connection to sacred energy. As Emerson & Hopper (2011) explain yoga teachers’ qualities include being safe, predictable, present, positive, welcoming, approachable, and consistent. The yoga teachers do not take the role of a therapist, however, they do provide support in opening another door for healing to take place. For example, Sally shared that her yoga teacher helped her by teaching her to live her life, and how too “*deal with anything*” (Sally).

The sangha, yoga community also provides a support for healing. Participants describing experiences of *sharing energy and acceptance without judgment through their yoga communities (Sangha)*, bringing the qualities and feelings of a family or a support group and offering comfort, safety, acceptance, and a non-judgmental space. Herman (1997) explains that traumatic events “*shatter the sense of connection between individuals and communities that*

creates a crises of faith” (p. 55). Through words like yoga community acted as a “*environment of sacred space*, provided a “*feeling of warmth of a family*” (Mike), getting “*a lot of strength from this community*” (Dreamer), and “*sense of acceptance*” (John). Bass & Davis (2008) describe the importance of a support group in the healing process where group work is particularly useful for dealing with shame, isolation, secrecy, and self-esteem. Herman (1997) describes that isolation is the core experience of trauma and the importance of reconnection with others for healing. Herman (1997) also explains that the core experiences of trauma are “disempowerment and disconnection from others” (p.133). Herman (1992) suggests that a trauma survivor’s entire being, self-worth, and humanity is determined by others, this is why group therapy can be of help. Group therapy plays a role in turning around the isolating effect that trauma produces:

the solidarity of a group provides the strongest protection against terror and despair, and the strongest antidote to traumatic experience. Trauma isolates; the group re-creates a sense of belonging. Trauma shames and stigmatizes; the group bears witness and affirms. Trauma degrades the victim; the group exalts her. Trauma dehumanizes the victim; the group restores humanity (Herman, 1992, p. 214).

After a traumatic event, which fully confronts people with their existential helplessness and vulnerability, life cannot easily be the same. The traumatic experience becomes part of the individual’s life. Sharing one’s reactions and sorting out what happened with others can be of great deal of difference in one’s eventual adaption, and forms a foundation for regaining trust and comfort, and knowing that others feel the same way and even went through a similar traumatic experience (Bass & Davis, 2008). Griffin and Arai (2008) explain how sense of the group not only connects the trauma survivor with self, but also promotes a sense of belonging

with others where “engaging in healthy leisure choices promotes not only a healthy relationship with self but also the opportunity for group members to know themselves in relation to other people” (p. 46). Healing from trauma is a long journey. According to Herman (1992), although recovery is never final and complete, “it should be possible to recognize a gradual shift from unpredictable danger to reliable safety, from dissociated trauma to acknowledged memory, and from stigmatized isolation to restored social connection” (p. 155). Herman (2001) also highlights the significant role group-bond can play in the healing journey. She explains that with the isolating effect trauma produces “the group can re-create a sense of belonging, where trauma shames and stigmatizes – the group bears witness and affirms” (p. 214). She adds that, wherein trauma degrades the survivor, “the group praises them” (p. 214), and wherein trauma dehumanizes the survivor, the “group restores humanity” (p. 214). The group context helps normalize symptoms, increases therapeutic opportunities, increases generalizability of skill acquisition, and improves self-esteem by allowing members to help one another (Bass & Davis 2008; Yalom 1985).

Discussion of Letting go Into yoga and returning to embodiment of self

After establishing safety and moving into sacred space, participants are able to let go into their yoga experiences and return to the embodiment of self. Participants explain that in their yoga experience the awareness to their breathing, connection with their body through the yoga postures, and being mindful and present in the moment, being absorbed in the timelessness, slowing down, and stilling the mind and returning to the peace and wisdom within contributed to a safe and supportive space to journey both inward and outward. This allowed for the return to the embodiment of self as a manifestation of letting go into yoga.

van der Kolk (2000) explains trauma traps individuals in their past where the trauma happened, being unable to be present to realize they have already survived the trauma. Herman (1997) also explains that individuals are trapped in the past as if the trauma is repeatedly happening. The essence, *slowing down to be mindfully present in the now and absorbed in the timelessness*, describes participants mindfully being present in the now allowing them to step out of past trauma. A goal of mindfulness is to connect with the body, focus and be absorbed in the present moment, and be aware of sensations, emotions, and feelings (Kabat-Zinn, 1993). Participants' describe being able to know that life only happens in the "*present moment*" (Anne), and slowing down "*changes life*" (Sally). Griffin & Arai (2008) describe creating an understanding of personal behavior patterns through mindfulness is an important step towards being able to make positive and meaningful changes in life. van der Kolk (2006) suggests that trauma affects or interrupts the individual's ability to absorb current experiences. By acquiring patience through yoga practice, participants start being more aware to their experiences with acceptance and not rushing results. The essence, *patience, practice and taking care of self*, describes how through yoga participants find their way to being patient and not rushing results. Words like yoga teaches patience where "*it is not always a race*" (Susan), and "*accepting the way things are*" (Lucia). Whether holding a challenging yoga pose, being present in the moment, or sitting through a traumatic re-enactment *experiencing the miracle of breathing* is the essence that then describes the importance of the breath in cultivating awareness. Yogic breathing allows participants to "*open up*" their "*awareness*" (John), where "*breathing is the foundation of yoga*" (Mike), and is the core of the yoga practice where "*if you can breath, you can do yoga*" (Lara). Breathing, *prana* or life force and energy,

exists in all beings and flows body, breath, mind, and transcendent states of pure consciousness, where neither can be divided nor separated. As described in the second chapter of the Yoga Sutras written thousands of years ago and translated by Desikackar (1999): “An entirely different state of breathing appears in the state of yoga. Then the breath transcends the level of the consciousness (Sutra 2.51)... and the mind is now prepared for the process of direction toward chosen goal (sutra 2:53)” (p. 182).

van der Kolk (2003) describes that after being exposed to trauma some sort or form of somatically oriented therapy is required to acquire a sense of safety and mastery over the body and to heal the disconnection that results from trauma exposure. Disconnection from bodily experience occurs because individuals learn from past experiences that it might feel better to separate themselves from this unsafe place (van der Kolk, 2006). They become frightened of bodily experiences and sensations, thus they “recoil from feeling them” (Levine, 2010, p. 352). When Individuals are asked to focus on inner sensations in the body, they become overwhelmed with trauma related perceptions, feelings, and emotions and may even experience a lack of integration physically with some parts of their body, or a sense of disembodiment or emptiness (van der Kolk, 2006). According to Levine (2010), healing from trauma requires reconnection with the body as a result of trauma exposure.

Participants were able to establish a connection and to return to their body through their yoga practice and experience, as described in *returning to the body*. Findings suggest that yoga supported participants to reclaim a connection with their bodies that had been lost from their trauma exposure. Most participants sharing reclaiming their bodily awareness and connection after being lost due to trauma exposure, for example Paul saying that through yoga he is able to

“feel better” about his body after his body *“shutting down”* as a result from his trauma experience. Also Lara explaining that her yoga practice brings her a sense of *“not being a stranger”* from her body and through her yoga experience no parts of her body *“doesn’t feel safe, or feels trapped or blocked.”* As Finaly (2011) explains, the body is the vehicle of existence and the world is perceived through it. Participants describing after being mindfully present in the now, and experiencing the miracle of their breathing, and getting a sense of connectedness with their bodies, they became more aware to various sensations and embodied responses, as described in *Stilling the mind and returning to peace and wisdom within*. Participants describe yoga as more than just an exercise, it’s about *“peace and stilling the mind”* (Rachel), and through yoga it is possible to *“change the directions of the thoughts”* (Rachel). Rachel describe her experience using the exact words of the 2nd Sutra of the Eight limbs of yoga, that yoga practice is allowing her to still the noise *“chitta vritti”* translating as the fluctuations of the mind. Through stillness in yoga practice, participants experience a return to the wisdom and truth of self.

In another aspect of this essence, trust that is central to both trauma healing and yoga was described. *Moving inward to trust the truth of self and spiritual awakening*, describes how through yoga practice participants were able to move inward to reconnect with their inner beings and trust the truth of self. Rachel saying that yoga *“takes me back to me”* and *“I am learning to trust myself”* (Rachel), and Anne explaining that yoga is *“bringing back into myself, things that I had lost”*. Similarly, others described yoga helps *“realign”* or *“resetting myself”* (Susan), yoga allows to *“look at myself”* (Paul), through yoga *“[I] recognize who I really am”* (Mike). Herman (1997) explains in the second stage of trauma healing (reconnection), the need

to reconcile with and gain possession of oneself to repudiate aspects of the self that were imposed by the trauma. *Trusting and accepting self* is one of the benefits of yoga (Arpita, 1990; Iyengar, Evans, & Abrams, 2005) where yoga's physical postures are not for physical benefits per se, but also manifests in a more connection, acceptance, and awareness of the body (Desikachar, 1999). Many trauma survivors experience poor and low sense and awareness of inner self (van der Kolk, 2006). However, findings show that yoga allows participants to move inward to trust the truth of self. Participants saying that "*I can connect with and accept myself for who I am*" (Amy), and yoga is a way of "*allowing yourself to be who you were meant to be*" (Rachel). Through their yoga experience, participants were able to clear spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical blocks which allows the creative life force to move fully and freely and leads to harmony with the inner being in alignment of the higher purpose. Participants described their thoughts and emotions manifesting in bodily awareness and sensations, and how they were able to delve more deeply into layers of awareness, and open the door to a more blissful existence.

The final aspect of this essence captures an aspect of healing in which participants experience *spiritual awakening* and a deeper sense of connection to higher consciousness through their yoga practice. Participants described a shift in their experiences through words like "*my spiritual self has developed a lot*" (Susan), yoga "*opened my mind to how grief could be a blessing*" (Paul), yoga allows "*spiritual experiences*" that "*I call gift of grace*" (Lara), and yoga is a "*connection to the Divine*" (Rachel). Levine (2010) explains the role of spirituality in healing trauma saying: "I have been struck by the intrinsic role and wedded relationship between trauma and spirituality" (p. 347). This spiritual awakening allows the experience of life with an

expanded awareness in the aftermath of trauma. Bass and Davis (2008) explain that one of trauma healing stages is have a greater spiritual sense of power than oneself, which can be found through religion, meditation or a support group, which can be a real asset in the healing process.

Discussion of Embracing creativity and connection beyond the mat

Yoga stretches beyond the yoga mat where participants, through their yoga practice, sharing experiences of increased connection with others and with their creative side. Herman (1997) explains that trauma leads to isolation and disconnection with others. Experiences such as *“sense of connectedness with life, people and nature”* (Lara), and *“yoga deepened my relationship with my husband”* (Rachel). Herman (1997) explains that recovery and healing from trauma can only take place within the context of relationships and cannot take place in isolation where the psychological faculties that were damaged or deformed by the traumatic event is re-created.

Yoga means ‘union’ and findings show that participants experience getting in touch with the creative side of their being whether through nature, art or music and that a deep connection arises. There is a relation and connection between yoga and nature that allows immersion into the realm of higher consciousness and connection with the universe. Even in the yoga postures, with tree pose with its balancing aspect and grounding foundation; the eagle pose and sense of focus and wisdom; half-moon pose when the heart open and the arm spreads like wings reaching the sky; the sun salutation and the freedom and fluidity in the body’s movements. Participants using words as, *“I could really appreciate nature because of the yoga practice”* (Mike), and *“nature is a lot more important... yoga has made me more aware”*

(Paul), and *“I think of my mat as earth”* and having firm roots (Susan). Bass and Davis (2008) suggest some grounding exercises for healing from trauma where individuals imagine they are a tree sending its roots deep into the earth, feeling they are firmly planted, to get a sense of connection. Bass and Davis (2008) also explain the role of nature, such as taking a walk on the beach or the woods, looking up at the stars or trees can give trauma survivors a sense of perspective.

Participants' words such as *“you don't ever leave the mat, you incorporate what you learn in your entire life”* (Dreamer), and *“yoga is multidimensional”* where it is *“this sense of connectedness with life”* (Lara), explain that yoga practice does not just happen on the mat. Experiences beyond the mat became a way of living. As Sri Aurobindo describes in his book, *The synthesis of Yoga*, *“all life is yoga”* (1999). Iyengar (1993), explains that yoga touches the life of individuals at every level, and makes life purposeful, useful, and noble.

POSSIBLE LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

As I reflected on this study, I started asking myself questions about the possible limitations to the study. Given the sensitive nature of the study, participants might have felt vulnerable about discussing some experiences or meanings to those experiences. However they were not asked about their trauma experience, but were asked about their yoga experience during the trauma. Also maybe some participants avoided remembering or sharing some experiences.

There might have been some sampling limitation where the study interviewed only thirteen participants; maybe results would have changed if more participants were interviewed. There might have been also some gender limitations where only 3 of the participants are men.

Three of the participants practiced yoga with me at a certain time; so maybe this also affected the experiences they shared with me and made them focus more on the positive side of their experiences. Participants knew that apart from being the researcher, I am also a yoga teacher and understood my passion and belief in yoga and might have assumed that I am biased about yoga, so that might have made them share the positive side of their experience.

CONCLUSIONS

Trauma interrupts or disrupts individuals' relationship with their bodies. Following experiences of trauma, individuals may not experience their bodies as belonging to them or under their control, being in the body may feel unsafe leaving an experience of disembodiment or emptiness. Healing from trauma requires some sort of somatic and bodily connection and awareness as individuals live in their bodies. The study was rooted in phenomenology to capture participants' perception of their lived experience of yoga and to allow them to plunge deep into the nature of being. As van Manen (2001) describes, phenomenology begins with the question: what is it to live the experience? Phenomenology involves embracing a mindful wondering about a project of life, of living, of what it means to live a life (van Manen, 2002).

Findings reveal that yoga practice that supports participants to enter into a safe and sacred space, let go in the practice and return to the embodiment of self, and live this yoga experience beyond the mat, contributes to the healing journeys of trauma survivors. Yoga was like the light that brightened up the darkness that trauma brought into participants' lives. Yoga helped participants reconnect with themselves, be present in the moment and not stuck in the past where the trauma occurred. Getting in touch with the stillness inside, allowed participants to realize they are far more than the trauma they experienced. Darkness is nothing but the

absence of light. The light that yoga brought into the darkness of participants' lives allowed them realize and be in touch with the light within them, reclaim their connection with self, feel safe again, reconnect and befriend their bodies while being present in the moment and realize the trauma has already happened, they do not have to stay there. There were lots of tears throughout this journey, some bitter and sad and others of joy. Louise who lost her eyesight and encountered several other traumas said that *"Yoga made me feel [pause] proud"* with tears of joy rolling down her face. The wounds of their trauma are still there, their yoga experience provided them with buoyancy and resilience to accept it and move on. This was vibrant in Lara's words. Lara struggled with shame and disconnection with herself for years, she explained her yoga experience, *"Through yoga I was able to say that the trauma had happened, happened in the past and I survived it, so I am not a victim, I am a survivor. I don't have to feel the shame."* The light of the yoga experience brightened up the darkness and dimness that participants experienced due to their trauma, and allowed them to reconnect with the light within them, the light of themselves. Participants reclaimed a sense of safety and trusted themselves and those around them; a self and connections that had been lost in the darkness of the trauma. Participants also experienced positive changes to their self-perception and connection with themselves, to how they value relationships with others, and their perspective on life. Yoga is an ancient system and a way of living meant to address human suffering, particularly in the body where suffering lives, allowing light to shine into a deeper level of being. People who experience trauma do not have to live in suffering; yoga allows them to remain present, to tolerate and accept certain experiences, and reconnect with their bodies. Yoga has a ripple

effect on emotional and mental health, relationships with others and on one's experience of living in the world.

Future research is essential for understanding the specific benefits of alternative healthcare practices that claim to improve physical and mental health and well-being. Further research needs to explore and understand the multiple layers of yoga, not just focus on one layer such as meditation, postures or breathing. Further empirical research is needed to understand the impact of different styles of yoga in healing from trauma. Another area is to investigate whether trauma-sensitive, or trauma-informed yoga that is focused only on people who have experienced trauma will show more effective results. Further research can also explore experiences of healing from trauma among individuals who decide to deepen this experience by becoming a yoga teacher, how this deepens yoga knowledge and healing, and how this influences an ability to support healing for other trauma survivors.

With this in mind, future research that explores trauma healing in relation to post-traumatic growth will be fruitful. According to Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004), posttraumatic growth is the possibility of individuals to grow psychologically and achieve positive change arising from the challenge of difficult circumstances or the aftermath of trauma. The understanding that suffering and distress can be possible sources of positive change is thousands years old, and some of the teachings of Hinduism and Buddhism contain elements of the possible transformative power of suffering (Tedeschi & Calhoun, Trauma and transformation: Growing in the aftermath of suffering, 1995). In the developing literature on posttraumatic growth future research can focus on the possibilities of yoga practice resulting in posttraumatic growth.

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Appendix A: Definitions of Terms

Asana: Yoga posture

Chakra: The word chakra means wheel. Chakras are energy centers in the body that and can explain the way energy is processed within existence.

Guru: Yoga teacher or master

Mantra: Repeated sacred word or phrase

Pranayama: Prana= life force, ayam=expansion. The practice of pranayama is the expansion of life force by controlling the movement of prana through the use of breathing techniques

Sangha: Yoga community

Savasana: Corpse posture or relaxation posture.

Yoga Nidra: A state of conscious deep sleep for extreme relaxation and subtle spiritual exploration.

Appendix B: Interview Guide

Turn on audiotape.

Interviewer: *The purpose of recording the interview is to explore your words and experiences with yoga. Thank you for your time in participating in this interview. The interview is part of my Master's thesis, which is exploring the meanings and experiences of yoga for trauma survivors. I am neither looking to find the 'right' answer to any of the questions nor trying to prove anything. I only looking to share your experiences and thoughts that you would like to share. Any and all of your insights you provide during this interview will be of great assistance to my study. If you have any questions at any time of the interview, please share them with me. As we move through the interview, please let me know if there are any questions you do not wish to answer, or if you wish to stop the interview at any time. Also if you feel the need to take a break at any time, please let me know and we can stop for as long as needed.*

Do you have any questions before we start? Shall we begin?

1. Can you talk about your yoga experience?
2. What does your yoga experience mean to you?
3. What styles of yoga have you practiced before?
4. How would you explain your connection and relationship with your body?
5. How has your experience changed over time? How do you experience time during a yoga class?
6. Has your relationship with others changed during or after your yoga experience?

7. Can you think of a time when you took your yoga experience to the real world outside your yoga mat?
8. If you were to recommend yoga to others, what would you say to them about yoga?
9. If you would explain your yoga experience in few words, what would those words be?
10. Is there anything else about your yoga experience that you would like to share?

Interviewer: Thank you again for your time and participation. Once I have transcribed your transcript I will send it to you by email and ask you to verify and ensure that I have accurately captured our discussion and conversation.

University of Waterloo

Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH IN YOGA

We are looking for participants to take part in a study of:

**Exploring Meanings and Experiences of Yoga for People
who have experienced Trauma**

Participants in this study need to have been practicing Yoga for at least 5 years.

Your participation would involve 2 one-on-one interviews sessions, each of which is approximately 75 minutes.

You will only be asked about your Yoga experience, not a trauma experience.

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study, please contact:

Rasha Salem

Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies

Tel.: 519-500-0498

Email: rsalem@uwaterloo.ca

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the Office of Research Ethics, University of Waterloo (File# 18828).

Appendix D: Information Letter

(Printed on University of Waterloo Letterhead)

(Month), 2013

Dear (Name),

This letter is an invitation to consider participating in my study. My name is Rasha Salem and I am conducting a study titled, *Exploring Meanings and Experiences of Yoga for Trauma Survivors*, as part of my Master's degree in the Department of Recreation & Leisure Studies at the University of Waterloo under the supervision of Dr. Susan Arai. I would like to provide you with more information about this project and what your involvement would entail if you decide to take part. The purpose of this study is to understand the meaning of yoga experiences of people who have experienced trauma and are engaged in yoga, with focus on what it means to mindfully connect their physical body with their mind and soul, and sheds the light on a holistic approach to healing.

Research is showing promising and positive results and abilities for non-traditional mind and body therapies. Yoga has been supported by a number of studies as a therapeutic intervention for both psychological and physiological ailments. There is a growing support in research ratifying and recommending yoga for people who have experienced trauma and resulting in positive results. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to understand the meaning of yoga experiences of people who have experienced trauma, with focus on what it means to mindfully connect their physical body with their mind and soul. I believe that people who have experienced trauma require incorporation of some sort or form of somatically oriented therapy to acquire a sense of safety and mastery over their bodies that have become disconnected as a result of trauma exposure, not solely cognitive therapy. Therefore, I would like you to be involved in my study.

Participation in this study is voluntary. It will involve 2 interviews of approximately 75 minutes in length each, to take place in a mutually agreed upon location. You may decline to answer any of the interview questions if you so wish. Questions will be about your yoga experience, not a trauma experience. Further, you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences by advising the researcher. With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded to facilitate collection of information, and later transcribed for analysis. Shortly after the interview has been completed, I will send you a copy of the transcript to give you an opportunity to confirm the accuracy of our conversation and to add or clarify any points that you wish. All information you provide is considered completely confidential. Your name will not appear in any thesis or report resulting from this study, however, with your permission verbatim quotations may be used but in place of your name a

pseudonym will be used to protect your identity. Data collected during this study will be retained for 2 years in a locked office in the University of Waterloo. Only my supervisor and I will have access to this information. There are no known or anticipated risks to you as a participant in this study.

If you have any questions regarding this study, or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation, please contact me at: 519-500-0498 or by email at: rsalem@uwaterloo.ca. You can also contact my supervisor, Dr. Susan Arai at: 519-888-4567 ext.: xxxxx or email: sarai@uwaterloo.ca.

I would like to assure you that this study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Waterloo (File# 18828). However, the final decision about participation is yours. If you have any comments or concerns resulting from your participation in this study, please contact Dr. Maureen Nummelin in the Office of Research Ethics at 1-519-888-4567, Ext. xxxxx or maureen.nummelin@uwaterloo.ca.

I hope that the results of my study will be of benefit to individuals who have experienced trauma, therapists, yoga teachers, as well as to the broader research community.

I very much look forward to speaking with you and thank you in advance for your assistance in this project.

Yours Sincerely,

Rasha Salem
MA Candidate
University of Waterloo
Recreation & Leisure Studies
rsalem@uwaterloo.ca

Dr. Susan Arai
Associate Professor
University of Waterloo
Recreation & Leisure Studies
sarai@uwaterloo.ca
[519-888-4567 ext. xxxxx](tel:519-888-4567)

Appendix E: Informed Consent Form

(Printed on University of Waterloo Letterhead)

Date: (Month), 2013

By signing this consent form, you are not waiving your legal rights or releasing the investigator(s) or involved institution(s) from their legal and professional responsibilities.

- I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Rasha Salem under the supervision of Dr. Susan Arai, Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies at the University of Waterloo.
- I have had the opportunity to ask any questions related to this study, to receive satisfactory answers to my questions, and any additional details I wanted.
- I am aware that I have the option of allowing my interview to be audio recorded to ensure an accurate recording of my responses.
- I am also aware that excerpts from the interview may be included in the thesis and/or publications to come from this research, with the understanding that any quotations used from my interview will be made confidential through the assignment of a pseudonym in place of my name.
- I was informed that I may withdraw my consent at any time without penalty by advising the researcher.

This project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Waterloo. I was informed that if I have any comments or concerns resulting from my participation in this study, I may contact Dr. Maureen Nummelin in the Office of Research Ethics at 1-519-888-4567, Ext. xxxxx or maureen.nummelin@uwaterloo.ca.

With full knowledge of all foregoing, I agree, of my own free will to participate in this study: YES NO

I agree to have my interview audio recorded: YES NO

I agree that Rasha may contact me to verify the quality of my interview transcript: YES NO

Participant Name: _____ (Please print)

Participant Signature: _____

Participant email/ mailing address _____ (Please print)

Witness Name: _____ (Please print)

Witness Signature: _____

Appendix F: Appreciation Letter

(Printed on University of Waterloo Letterhead)

(Month), 2013

Dear (Name),

I am writing to thank you for your participation in my research study *Exploring Meanings and Experiences of Yoga for Trauma Survivors*. It was indeed a pleasure meeting you. The insights from your participation have been rich and insightful.

To ensure that I have accurately captured your thoughts and opinions, I have enclosed a copy of the transcript from your interview for you to review. Upon reading your transcripts, you may clarify any of your responses or expand on the discussion that arose during the interview. All additional information you provide will be treated with the same confidentiality as your interview.

If you have any questions regarding this study, or would like to make any clarifications, please contact me at: 519-xxx-xxxx or by email at: rsalem@uwaterloo.ca. You can also contact my supervisor, Dr. Susan Arai at: 519-888-4567 ext.: xxxxx or email: sarai@uwaterloo.ca. Any questions about the ethical nature of the study and the rights of participants can be addressed to Dr. Maureen Nummelin in the Office of Research Ethics at 1-519-888-4567, Ext. xxxxx or maureen.nummelin@uwaterloo.ca.

Thank you again for your participation in the study. Your time and insights are appreciated.

Yours Sincerely,

Rasha Salem
MA Candidate
University of Waterloo
Recreation & Leisure Studies
rsalem@uwaterloo.ca

Dr. Susan Arai
Associate Professor
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