

## Contribution of Yoga in Support to the Violence Survivors

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**Abstract:** *Yoga practice influences changes in thinking, behavior and emotions of the practitioner therefore it is very often used in the treatment of stress, anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder in persons who experienced violence. In this paper, we talk about implementation of yoga program in support to the persons who experienced violence. During the period of 8 months in which yoga program has been conducted in the Yoga Federation of Serbia, in work with women victims of family violence, we observed the level of the enhancement of their capacities to overcome trauma and gaining skills for active participation in the community. In this paper, we analyze the effects of yoga practice with the goal to improve the health condition, mood, attention, mental focus, readiness to take the initiative in resolving everyday challenges and finding solutions in women who are in the process of recovering from the experience of family violence. The results show that the yoga program may be one of the efficient instruments of successful empowering and resocialization of women victims of violence.*

**Keywords:** *yoga, victimization, stress, depression, post-traumatic stress syndrome*

### Violence in the family and partnership

Family violence includes, but is not limited to all forms of behavior that happen in the family or partnership against the will of the family member and which endangers her/his spiritual, psychological, physical, working and economic integrity. Every behavior of the family member which has the goal to exercise power and control over the other family members represents family violence (Mezga-Ćurčin, 2008). Violence against women has deep roots. It is specially visible and recognizable when it happens in the public spaces, while the violence that happens in the private spaces less visible. The data from the different resources (SOS hotline, Autonomous Women's Center, Association of Misdemeanor Judges and others) show that 80-90% of the victims of family

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violence are women. Every second woman is the victim of psychological and every third woman is a victim of physical violence. In Serbia, one woman per week is killed by her partner. Violent partners use different forms of violence which make different disorders in the victim's life (Mezga-Ćurčin, 2008). The consequences of victimization may be physical and psychological, material and social. Every victimization effects a person psychologically.

The results of the research conducted in 2001 with the sample of 700 women of age show that almost every second woman (46,1%) experienced some form of psychological violence in the family; in most of the cases, perpetrator of violence is a husband or a partner (63,5%), then father (16,1%) and mother (8,0%), mother-in-law (9,3%) and father-in-law (6,8%); every fourth woman suffers violence committed by more than one family member and every third woman (30,6%) experiences some form of physical violence committed by a family member; in three fourths of the cases, physical violence happens in the marriage or partnership, therefore in 74,8% of cases perpetrator is a husband or a partner, or a former husband or a partner after divorce or separation (4,2%); sexual violence in the family experienced 8,7% of women of age. In 88,5% of cases, perpetrator was husband or partner, and in 8,2% of cases it was former partner. In three fourths of cases, physical or sexual violence happened again, while in a half of the cases we can speak about continual violence because physical, i.e. sexual attack happened more than five times (Mezga-Ćurčin, 2008).<sup>1</sup>

### **Consequences of violence**

The most severe consequences are produced by the traumatic events caused by the human intentional act, like the violence committed by partner. Traumatic event is an event that is beyond usual human experience and which is extremely unpleasant, it can represent serious threat to life or the overall integrity; serious threat to the children, spouse, close relatives, friends, sudden destruction of the house or the whole community, seeing the other person who is seriously hurt or killed in an accident, i.e. violent act, and presence to these kind of events (Arambašić, 1996).

Experience of violence has consequences for the body and mind. The body remembers molestation, and the experienced violence keeps the person between regretting for the past and fear of the future. Even after the traumatic experience is finished, there are the triggers because of which the body reacts as it is in the direct danger. They make the person who experienced violence see potential danger in everything that remind her of the previous traumatic events and it

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<sup>1</sup> The research has been conducted by the Victimology Society of Serbia, about the family violence in Serbia, in 2001.

creates perpetuating of trauma in her inner life. Even when the person is aware that danger doesn't exist, the body is preoccupied by the sensations that it remembered in the situation of violence (Cohen, Tyrell, Smith, 1991). Persons who always feel fear, develop mechanisms in their body by which they protect themselves of this feeling. They are preoccupied by the thought that they will lose control, and therefore they develop muscular tensions that don't allow them to relax. It results in different symptoms of traumatic experience; muscular tension, headache, chronic pains and constant preoccupation by the violations from the past, the feeling of unhappiness, anger and fear (Cohen, Tyrell, Smith, 1991). Disorders that appear in emotions and behavior, which are not treated with the aim to resolve them, are connected to the negative results in the other fields of life like bed marks in school, lack of efficiency at work, poor relationships with other people, unemployment, closing up, substance misuse and suicide (Smith et al, 2011). Practicing yoga techniques, physical postures, breathing techniques, relaxation and meditation, person establishes contact with the content that body remembered, without rationalizations of the mind. The body and mind gain new experiences and insights through the movements, breathing and silence. Breathing connects us with the present moment and empowers us by the skill of self-regulation. Awareness of the inner potentials enables deeper understanding of the processes inside the yoga practitioner and gaining the skills to manage affective, cognitive and creative aspect of life.

### **Yoga as the source of support in overcoming the consequences of violence**

Yoga is the method of self-development that appeared at the time the cultures of Aria and Dravids met at the land of the present India. The time and space universality yoga owes to the visible effects of its practice. The results of many researches show that yoga improves human health, influences enhancement of awareness and understanding of oneself and surrounding. We researched if yoga can offer empowerment and higher awareness in every stadium of overcoming trauma. Yoga practice helps a person to connect to their inner experiences, which is of a great importance for recovering of the traumatic experience (van der Kolk, 2009).

Body postures (*asana*) and professionally prescribed breathing techniques (*pranayama*) may contribute to the removal of the emotional blockades that appear as muscular tension. Yoga techniques are to be practiced as long as practitioner feels comfortable, in order to enable the content of unconscious to appear in the conscious part of mind in the amount that the client is able to accept, stabilize and process once at the time (Nikić, 2011). Implementation of yoga techniques in psychotherapy enables approach to the less conscious contents, which keep the certain quantum of energy trapped, and at the same time, it teaches practitioner many useful life principals – focus of attention, presence at “now and

here”, recognition of the feeling inside the body, emotions and mind, engagement within the limits of comfort (Janjušević, Nikić, 2013).

Yoga practice may help in recovering from the interpersonal trauma and to establish the new grounds for cooperation between body and mind. Yoga breathing techniques are unique method for establishing balance of the autonomous nervous system and they have beneficial effects in psychological difficulties connected with stress. Implementation of yoga improves health condition, mood, attention, mental focus and stress tolerance (Brown, Gerbarg, 2005).

Yoga is a safe and gentle tool that helps practitioners to reconnect with their body. Yoga establishes the sense of time again, one notices the things are changing and become aware of the time flow in one’s body, by practicing yoga. Learning relaxation and breathing helps the patients with PTSD to relax when flashback or panic attack approaches. Accent on the self-acceptance in yoga practice is also very important for the victims of sexual violence, among whom many don’t like their body (van der Kolk, 2009).

Possibility to talk about the personal experience of violence enables self-strengthening and shows significant change in the process of recovering from the traumatic experience of violence. Women who talk about violence that they survived are able to relieve emotional pressure that they carry inside, in the safe environment where there is no judging, questioning, ignoring and further victimization by the listeners.

Yoga developed the concept that the body is close and basically connected to the personality and emotions. Physical postures (*asana*) stretch and strengthen the muscles and support the physical pulsation (contraction – relaxation) and help the change in both the physical and mental attitude (relation towards oneself and surrounding). Psychological flexibility and stability is connected with the state of musculoskeletal system. Increasing the freedom of movement and breathing increases the field of self-acceptance and self-satisfaction.

Women who practice yoga show more levels of positive mood, healthier and more positive mechanisms of facing the daily stress, they suffer less of depression and anxiety and they have higher level of energy (Schell, Allolio and Schonecke, 1994; Narayana, Gopal, 2008). In the stress management research results, it seems that combination of yoga breathing and experience of yoga relaxation increases self- awareness and care for oneself and therefore, it enables positive influence in everyday life (Douglas, 2011).

## Method

Instructors of the Yoga Federation of Serbia and International Yoga Academy for years conduct pilot programs of yoga practice with women who experienced violence. During the 2014, there has been conducted the program of yoga education in which participated 12 women who faced violence, with the goal to empower them and to improve their economical position that makes them dependent and doesn't allow them to escape the situation of family violence. All participants were coming from the territory of Belgrade, they were 24 to 54 years of age, middle class. The contact with participants was made through cooperation with the partner organization Network "Women Against Violence"<sup>2</sup>, where the participants were given psychological and legal support.

Twelve participants went through the program of professional training for yoga instructors. They had lectures and they practices yoga methods (physical postures, breathing techniques, techniques for attention focusing, relaxation). Participants were taught in general and professional subject in the field of yoga and sports (yoga philosophy, anatomy and physiology, yoga psychology, methodology and education, yoga intelligence...). There was established individual approach, in accordance with the needs and requests of participants.

The goal of the program of professional training was stabilization and empowerment of the overall psycho-physical state, but first of all, gaining the economic independence and sustainability through the professional training for yoga teachers. During this program, participants gained new personal and professional competences.

At the end of the program, participants passed the final exam and they received internationally recognized certificate for yoga instructors of the Yoga Federation of Serbia. This certificate enables each of them to teach group and individual yoga classes, in accordance with the international standards of the Yoga Federation of Serbia, and the law. The outcome of the program has been aimed towards gaining the economic independence of participants through self-sustainability which they should realize by founding their own yoga center and conducting the activities in the field of yoga.

## **Results and discussion**

After they finished the program of the yoga training, there was noticed increased capacity for overcoming trauma in participants; participants in the yoga program gained skills that enable them to actively participate in the community again; there has been noticed higher degree of courage to actively approach resolving their

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<sup>2</sup> The program has been realized with the support of the Embassy of the Kingdom of Norway during 2014.

situation, through the cooperation with the other women and teaching yoga in their closest surrounding. The program also helped them to change the picture that they had about themselves and to throw away the label of the lifetime victim.

The result of the program of yoga education helped to improve the overall health, mood, focus of attention, readiness to take the initiative in resolving everyday challenges and finding solutions. There has been noticed lower feeling of denying and destruction and higher presence of the self-satisfaction, higher level of trust and openness towards the life and other people because yoga directs a person towards the present moment and grounds her in reality (Janjušević, 2011).

The project has been conducted with the title “Women – leaders in the local community”. During the education, majority of trainees participated on the Yoga Federation of Serbia activities: in the action “Practice yoga with us” as assistants and yoga teachers in the “Yoga Park” in Ada, they assisted at the yoga class at Yoga Picnic in Avala, they participated at Yoga Performance in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Vienna and Prague.

At the moment this paper has been written, all participants of the program of professional training for yoga instructors were active in teaching yoga independently.

### **Participants’ experiences**

“As a yoga teacher, I can help women who experienced similar situation as I did...”

“I’m whole heartedly grateful that yoga entered my life, in unexpected and humane way, in the most difficult moment, and enriched it. Something that we aim for, at the same time aims to us...”

“Yoga gave me back belief that it is possible to make nonviolent, tolerant and friendly surrounding...”

“I always felt that there must me way out. I felt yoga very strongly and I realized that this is something that I love and that makes me strong, active and free.”

“Economic independence means a lot to me, and being a yoga teacher makes it possible. It makes the feeling of economic freedom, i.e. material safety stronger.”

“I found myself in a gorgeous vision that I will do something that I love help women who (were) victims of violence... I also got the answer what is the meaning of my existence...”

“I notice the change of perception in many aspects of my life... I feel more self-confidence, I don’t feel anxiety anymore...”

“I am happy that now, as a yoga teacher, I can help myself, but also persons who were in a similar situation as me... I can help them to find peace in themselves, more health, joy of life and meaning...”

“During the program, I gained very important insights. For example, it’s not that all circumstances are important. Yoga taught me to separate important things from those that are not important, essence from the form, and that I don’t play the roles which are not true I.”

## Conclusion

Yoga is more often recognized as the useful method for empowering sensitive categories of population. Yoga is possibility and it relies on nonviolence (*ahimsa*) as the key value. It affirms humane values and creates a certain life philosophy in practitioner which becomes the ground of creating a unique, supportive life style. Practicing yoga method supports development of unique skills present only in yoga practitioners. Yoga intelligence is ability to gain awareness and manage one’s own energy, physiological, emotional, mental, motivational and creative potential with the goal to discover the purpose and meaning. It enables us to measure the effects of yoga practice in different fields of life. Yoga finds its application in helping persons who were victims of violence, giving the new insights in usefulness of its practice. Besides giving practitioners possibility to realize all their inner potentials, the ways they function, it enables them to manage their emotions, mind processes, attention, breathing and therefore their mood, focus and intentional aiming towards self-acceptance and self-strengthening and making the basis for the insight about one’s own social usefulness that will enable psychological and economic independence.

The results of the program of training for yoga instructors encourages because yoga finds one more place of its very important implementation. The greater sample will ensure more exact results which is not simple bearing in mind high sensitivity in the victims of violence.

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