

# Trauma Sensitive Yoga *for* Healing from Sexual Violence



**By Eileen S. Rosete**  
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***Trauma is a fact of life. It does not, however, have to be a life sentence. Not only can trauma be healed, but with appropriate guidance and support, it can be transformative. Trauma has the potential to be one of the most significant forces for psychological, social, and spiritual awakening and evolution.***

**Peter Levine**  
Author of *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma*

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## Introduction

After taking one class in college, I rediscovered yoga during the summer of 2010. Thanks to a great Living Social deal and the encouragement of co-worker, I found myself at YogaHouse in downtown Chicago up to five times a week. I was mesmerized by the effect yoga was having on me physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. Although I did not have the vocabulary to articulate exactly how yoga was changing me, I knew instinctually that I was in the process of healing from the pain and embodied memories of traumatic experiences- much of which stemmed from toxic relationships that included verbal and emotional abuse and sexual violence. As a result of these experiences, I became disconnected from my body and my deep Self. In my own process of healing from trauma, I learned the value of mind-body healing modalities and found a great deal of benefit from a combination of talk therapy, yoga and dance. All these approaches combined helped me to reestablish that lost connection to my body and I began to feel truly alive again.

As I began to reconnect and feel at home again in my own body, I knew that I wanted to help others use yoga as a tool for healing, particularly from sexual violence. With that intention in my heart, I pursued the 200-hour yoga teacher training at Prairie Yoga in Lisle, Illinois in 2011. Throughout my training, I was able to more fully understand *why* yoga can be such a powerful tool for healing and transformation, and *how* to use this tool responsibly to help others. After completing the classroom portion of my training in October, I began teaching yoga at a residential treatment center called Timberline Knolls in November and am still working there to this day. Here I have had the honor of teaching yoga to girls and women who are recovering from a huge range of mental disorders and trauma, including suicide attempts, depression, anxiety, sexual violence, eating disorders, substance abuse, exercise addiction, and self-harm. I also began teaching a gentle/restorative yoga class at Ahimsa Yoga Studio in Oak Park in the spring of 2012. Although my students at this studio do not necessarily come in carrying their trauma on the surface, I will regularly have students who are recovering from physical injuries, invasive surgeries and terminal illness. Generally speaking, my students here do come to class with the intention of healing as well as finding peace of mind. Between these two jobs, I have the privilege every week of living the intention I set for myself when I started yoga teacher training: helping people to use yoga as a tool for healing and as a tool to transform their experiences so that they can move forward in their lives.

Looking ahead, I am committed to continuing to teach yoga as a tool from healing and transformation. In particular, I would like to focus even more on the use of yoga as a vehicle for healing from sexual violence. The sexual component of my trauma history has been one of the most impactful experiences in my life, and I would like to continue developing a strategy on how best to help others use yoga to heal from sexual violence and to transform those experiences in a way that allows them to have healthy, satisfying and pleasurable sexual lives. The connection between sexual violence and sexual pleasure is huge and yet it is still routinely ignored both in anti-rape work and pleasure-oriented sex-positive activism. This thesis project is one step in bridging those issues and moving towards a place of healing and transformation.

## Definitions

The following definitions are helpful in clarifying what is meant by the term “sexual violence” and other related terms used in this project. This is by no means a comprehensive list of terms and definitions associated with the topic of sexual violence but is meant to simply be a starting point for an exploration into the issue as it relates to yoga.

The following definition of the term “sexual violence” is taken from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website.<sup>1</sup>

**Sexual violence (SV)** is any sexual act that is perpetrated against someone's will. SV encompasses a range of offenses, including a completed nonconsensual sex act (i.e., rape), an attempted nonconsensual sex act, abusive sexual contact (i.e., unwanted touching), and non-contact sexual abuse (e.g., threatened sexual violence, exhibitionism, verbal sexual harassment). These four types are defined in more detail below. All types involve victims who do not consent, or who are unable to consent or refuse to allow the act.

- **A completed sex act** is defined as contact between the penis and the vulva or the penis and the anus involving penetration, however slight; contact between the mouth and penis, vulva, or anus; or penetration of the anal or genital opening of another person by a hand, finger, or other object.
- **Abusive sexual contact** is defined as intentional touching, either directly or through the clothing, of the genitalia, anus, groin, breast, inner thigh, or buttocks of any person without his or her consent, or of a person who is unable to consent or refuse.
- **Non-contact sexual abuse** does not include physical contact of a sexual nature between the perpetrator and the victim. It includes acts such as voyeurism; intentional exposure of an individual to exhibitionism; unwanted exposure to pornography; verbal or behavioral sexual harassment; threats of sexual violence to accomplish some other end; or taking nude photographs of a sexual nature of another person without his or her consent or knowledge, or of a person who is unable to consent or refuse.

Consent is another term that is hugely important when discussing sexual violence since sexual violence occurs in the absence of consent. The following is a comprehensive definition of consent taken from the Reed College website.<sup>2</sup> Reed College goes a step further and clearly distinguishes between “effective consent” and “ineffective consent” – the latter term acknowledges various scenarios in which a person is unable to consent and emphasizes that perpetrators of sexual violence are responsible for initiating the act (not the victims).

**Effective consent** is informed, freely and actively given by mutually understandable words or actions that indicate a willingness to engage in mutually agreed upon sexual activity. In other words, to do the same thing, at the same time, in the same way, with each other... It is the responsibility of the person who wants to engage in the specific sexual activity to make sure that he or she has received effective consent before initiating such sexual activity. Consent to one form of sexual activity does not necessarily imply consent to other forms of sexual activity. Effective consent must be obtained by the person who wants to engage in a specific sexual activity before initiating such sexual activity. After effective consent has been established, a person who changes his or her mind during the sexual activity should communicate by using words or clear action, his or her decision to no longer proceed with the sexual activity, at which time the sexual activity must cease. A verbal “no” even if it may sound indecisive or insincere should be treated as a withdrawal of consent. Effective consent is almost always based on an objective standard. Consent is effective and mutually understandable when a reasonable person would consider the words or actions of the parties to have manifested an agreement between them to do the same thing, in the same way, at the same time, with one another. Effective consent may be considered in its subjective sense in the context of long-term relationships where couples have established patterns of communicating consent that generally alter/replace the objective consent concept.

Finally, a discussion about sexual violence would not be complete without the term “rape culture” as it is the environment that allows for the epidemic of sexual violence to continue to exist. The following is a concise definition of the term from Wikipedia:

**Rape culture** is a concept used to describe a culture in which rape and sexual violence are common and in which prevalent attitudes, norms, practices, and media normalize, excuse, tolerate, or even condone sexual violence.<sup>3</sup>

To expound further on the term “rape culture” is a great excerpt from the book Transforming a Rape Culture as featured on the blog shakespeareville.<sup>4</sup>

**A rape culture** is a complex of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women. It is a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent. In a rape culture, women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself. A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women as the norm. In a rape culture both men and women assume that sexual violence is a fact of life, inevitable as death or taxes. This violence, however, is neither biologically nor divinely ordained. Much of what we accept as inevitable is in fact the expression of values and attitudes that can change.

## **When A Yoga Teacher Touched Me the Wrong Way – A Testament to the Need for Trauma Sensitive Yoga**

Before exploring how yoga has the powerful ability to help people heal from sexual violence, I would like to highlight that yoga can also be a vehicle for perpetuating rape culture and yoga classes can act as spaces for sexual violence.

In the spring of 2012, I attended a yoga class taught by a teacher who is well known and highly regarded in the Chicago-land area. Highly lauded for his expertise in anatomy and hands-on adjustments, I was excited to finally take a class with this instructor. Little did I know that this instructor would employ inappropriately intimate hands-on adjustments and exhibit unwanted sexual advances that would not only trigger my trauma history, but create new sources of pain for months to come. (Interestingly enough, this same instructor was quoted in a YOGAChicago article as saying that he initially began taking yoga classes because someone told him it was a good way to meet girls, and he started going to yoga classes that involved a lot of partner yoga.) But as painful as this experience was, it renewed my commitment to the original intention I set for myself when I started teacher training – to help others use yoga as a tool for healing from trauma – and it opened my eyes to the need for yoga instructors to teach from a more trauma-sensitive place.

Below is the email that I sent to the owner of the yoga studio where I took the aforementioned class. I included it below to help illustrate the dangers of yoga when it is used for the wrong reasons – in this case for the egotistical and sexual satisfaction of the instructor. In turn, this email demonstrates the need for more trauma-sensitive training for yoga instructors. Yoga cannot be a tool for healing from trauma if those teaching it are not responsible themselves and do not work towards creating safer spaces for students. My experience also highlights the need for the Chicago yoga community and the yoga community at large to hold its members accountable for irresponsible and dangerous behavior. After confiding to fellow yoga instructors about the incident, several shared with me that this instructor had been exhibiting similar behavior with students in the past. While this information was affirming of my experience, I was also left wondering why more had not been said/done to this teacher before and why he was still allowed to teach if this behavior was continuing. I originally sent this email with the hope that it would help prevent another person from going through what I did with this instructor. By including it here I hope that it can continue to help keep other people from having a similar experience, and to also spark further dialogue about how to make yoga safe for trauma survivors. Please note that the names of individuals and the yoga studio mentioned in the email have been changed.

*Dear Katie,*

*I am writing to inform you of an extremely upsetting experience I had with Jerry while taking his class at your studio recently. Throughout class he exhibited behavior that was not only inappropriate but invasive and disturbing. More specifically Jerry crossed boundaries many times over with extremely intimate hands-on adjustments in class and by also physically violating my personal space before and after class.*

*Before class started, I introduced myself to Jerry as being new to his class. I also mentioned that we had mutual friends, after which he insisted that we hug. This hug lingered and after he pulled away he proceeded to rub my right arm up and down as he talked to me, much in the same way a close friend would rub my arm if he/she was consoling me. I was slightly taken aback by this initial behavior but thought that he may act this way towards all his students. But as class wore on I began to recognize a pattern wherein Jerry exhibited intense and disconcerting physical attention towards me. As I mentioned above, Jerry performed a number of hands-on adjustments that were very intimate and disturbing. Some that stand out to me include the following:*

- In adho mukha svanasana he came beside me, placed his fingers very close to my buttocks and pressed firmly into my skin to stretch the skin down on one side and up on the other.*
- Also in adho mukha svanasana he came behind me and rubbed my calves up and down several times. And later while in the same pose, he reached his hands very high up the backs of my thighs to pull the skin down - this latter adjustment was incredibly upsetting since his thumbs were very high up along my inner leg lines and close to my private area.*
- During savasana, while I was laying flat on my back, Jerry stood straddling me (one leg on either side of my body) and reached his hands behind my back to pull the skin up and out - at this point my body reacted with a spasm and he said "relax, relax" as he placed the palms of his hands on my rib cage, just barely below my breasts, and kept his hands pressed down on me for several seconds. The moment he walked away I began to cry. I noticed that he made the same adjustment to the woman laying next to me and she had a similar reaction when he straddled her and put his hands behind her back. He also told her to "relax, relax" and kept his hands on her rib cage for a few moments.*

*It did not help that on top of all the intimate physical adjustments, Jerry also made constant grunting noises that sounded very sexual. Once class ended I rushed out of the room as quickly as I could. On my way out I noticed Jerry pulling on his jeans in the middle of the room while talking to a student. This really stood out to me - it triggered for me this impression of him pulling on his pants after having just had a sexual encounter. Once outside the room, I gathered my personal belongings at the cubbies and stood behind another woman, both of us waiting for the elevator to come. Just as the elevator arrived Jerry came up behind me and wanted to give me a hug. Interestingly enough, I could feel his presence approaching me even before I saw him, which makes me feel that he was targeting me in some way (that and he did not try to hug the woman in front of me). I went ahead and hugged him (thinking that the faster I do so the sooner I could leave) but as I was pulling my arms away my hand brushed his penis... I couldn't believe what just happened but once I got into the elevator I turned to look down and Jerry's pants were in fact bulging slightly with an erection. I have never once in my life accidentally brushed a man's penis when pulling away from a hug, and so I can't imagine how my hand came into contact with his erection unless he knowingly turned in a "strategic" way.*



*I made my way home that night in shock of everything that had transpired and I have cried for many days since that class. Jerry's behavior was wrong period, but as a survivor of sexual assault his actions were that much more upsetting and triggering. I felt incredibly violated while in an open and vulnerable position. I did not consent to any of his behavior nor did I reciprocate in any way. Ultimately I felt that Jerry took advantage of me for his own cheap thrills and I can't help but feel anger thinking that he may have done these very same things to other women.*

*Thankfully I have strong support network that has helped me to process this experience and has strengthened me to the point where I can now write to you Katie. I have shared my story with a few close friends who are also yoga teachers, long-time members of the Chicago area yoga community and who have known Jerry for many years. While they were all very upset to hear what happened to me, none of them were surprised to hear such behavior coming from Jerry and informed me of similar past behavior with his students. These same friends have expressed their support in me writing to you and will vouch for my character and the integrity of my story. We all feel that it is imperative that I write to you to let you know what is going on in your studio, and I hope that telling you my story will in some way help keep anyone else from going through what I did with Jerry.*

*I do not in any way want to see or talk to Jerry ever again. And my experience with him makes me unsure of attending another class at Yoga Studio Chicago (the thought of just being in that same room triggers a strong feeling of anxiety). Should you decide to address this issue with Jerry directly I would please just ask that you try to preserve my anonymity as I would not feel safe if he was able to identify me from the details I've shared with you here.*

*Thank you for your time and consideration Katie.*

# Sexual Assault 101

## Statistics

Sexual violence, particularly sexual assault, is an epidemic plaguing our society and the yoga community is not immune to its effects. As reported by RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network) – the nation’s largest anti-sexual violence organization – the statistics for sexual assault in the United States is staggering. **1 out of every 6 American women** has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime and **17.7 million** American women have been victims of attempted or completed rape, with **15% of those victims under the age of 12**.<sup>5</sup> Also, women and girls are not the only victims of sexual violence. Men and boys are also victims of sexual violence and it is estimated that **1 in 33 American men** have experienced an attempted or completed rape in their lifetime.<sup>5</sup> What is important to keep in mind is that statistics like these can never fully account for the rates of sexual assault since oftentimes such crimes go unreported. So the rates for sexual violence are in fact higher. According to the Justice Department’s 2006-2010 National Crime Victimization Survey, **54% of rapes/sexual assaults are not reported to the police**.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, of those that are reported to police, **very few sexual assault cases result in the perpetrator going to jail for their crime**. To better illustrate the appalling prosecution rates in cases of sexual assault, please see the following chart created by RAINN<sup>5</sup>:



Another important statistic is the fact that sexual assault is more likely to be committed by someone the victim knows. According to the U.S. Department of Justice 2005 National Crime Victimization Study, approximately **2/3 of rapes were committed by someone known to the victim** and **73% of sexual assaults were perpetrated by a non-stranger**.<sup>5</sup>

These statistics are made possible by the rape culture within which we live – a culture that promotes strict male gender stereotypes of hyper-masculinity and the suppression of emotions, while simultaneously condoning violence against women and the blaming of victims for their own sexual assaults. And this is the culture within which the yoga community is situated. To return to my personal experience with Jerry – it is rape culture that informs men like him to feel that it is okay to cross boundaries with complete disregard for consent. Additionally, what all of these statistics point to is the

likelihood that there will be a sexual assault survivor in any given yoga class, especially since yoga classes are still predominantly attended by women (although the number of male yogis is increasing). Additionally, with 1 out of every 6 women being affected directly by sexual assault, it is likely that there are students in yoga classes who are indirectly affected by sexual assault (i.e. they know of or are connected to someone who is a survivor). As such, it is imperative that the yoga community acknowledge these statistics and their effect on the community. More specifically, these statistics show that there is a clear need for yoga teachers and studios to act from a trauma informed place and to create spaces that are sensitive to trauma survivors.

### **Effects of Sexual Assault**

Not only can the act of the sexual assault itself be traumatizing, but the consequent physical, emotional, mental and spiritual effects are heartbreaking. Effects of sexual assault include increased risk for post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, substance abuse, suicide ideation/attempts, self-harm, Stockholm Syndrome, sexually transmitted infections, pregnancy, flashbacks, borderline personality disorder, sleep disorders, eating disorders and psychosomatic symptoms.<sup>7</sup> In his book Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma, Peter Levine explains that trauma occurs when the body's instinctive responses to threat (e.g. fight, flight, or freeze) is disrupted/uncompleted and the nervous system is "burdened by undischarged energy and fear."<sup>8</sup> In her book Healing Sex: A Mind-Body Approach to Healing Sexual Trauma, Staci Haines explains what exactly it means for this natural response system to be disrupted:

"After the danger passes, our brains and bodies are designed to return to balance, or a nonhyperalert state... Our biologies inherently know how to do this. Through a process which often includes shaking and trembling, sweating, crying, and yawning, we release the increased chemicals, return the breathing to normal, relax the mobilized muscles, and if dissociated, sink back into our own skins... When restoring balance is allowed to happen fully – and even better, when it is supported by others – there are usually few resulting symptoms of PTSD..."<sup>9</sup>

Haines' quote also highlights an important factor: support. She explains that unfortunately, the natural healing process following a traumatic event is not socially familiar or even acceptable. Common phrases that are quite emblematic of American culture come to mind such as "get over it," "just let it go" or "out of sight, out of mind" – expressions that embody a societal norm to suppress difficult experiences rather than thoroughly process them and actually acknowledge the feelings and emotions associated with them. As a result, this suppression lives on in the body: "traumatic experiences may be pushed out of conscious view into the more unconscious realm of the body, where the survival reactions, contractions, and somatic 'shaping' continue to impact one's life."<sup>9</sup> So in order to heal from sexual assault, a survivor must look to the body and help her/his body to complete its natural survival response process. Because the healing process is so intimately tied to the mind-body connection, yoga is perfectly situated to be a tool for healing from sexual assault.

## Trauma Sensitive Yoga as a Tool for Healing from Sexual Assault

Yoga has the potential to not only be a tool for healing from sexual assault but for transforming such experiences so that they strengthen rather than hinder survivors. Unfortunately, Western approaches to healing trauma focus on talk therapy and medication, and is sorely lacking in its ability to address the body more fully. As Peter Levine explains “trauma is not, will not, and can never be fully healed until we also address the essential role played by the body. We must understand how the body is affected by trauma and its central position in healing its aftermath.”<sup>8</sup> Sexual assault can cause survivors to disconnect from their body and their emotions and true healing cannot be done without the body. Luckily the field of somatics is gaining traction- somatics being an approach to healing that “views the mind, body, and spirit as one integrated whole... [and] treats the body as an essential place of change, learning, and transformation.”<sup>9</sup> Yoga is very much a part of this somatic movement in the way that it helps survivors reestablish connections between their mind, body and spirit. In her article “Transcending the Trauma of Sexual Violence With Yoga,” Molly Boeder Harris, founder of The Breath Network – an online resource of holistic healers for survivors of sexual assault- expresses exactly what I felt intuitively but did not have the vocabulary to articulate at the time.

“Yoga provides an accessible, personalized practice that can engage survivors in safely processing sensation... In practicing yoga, we link movement with breath and a presence of mind, offering a welcome inner quieting and a release of tension that foster expansion. Yoga creates a unique environment where survivors can explore inside with kindness and inquisitiveness and develop attitudes that allow for compassionate responses. Honoring the body as a sacred space after surviving the violation of rape demands tremendous, consistent effort, but the integrated healing it provides remains unparalleled.”

But it is not enough to just teach yoga and expect it to heal sexual trauma. As my experience with Jerry demonstrates, yoga studios and yoga instructors need to create a safe environment where healing can occur. More specifically, yoga instructors need to know how to teach from a trauma sensitive place in order to facilitate healing. An integral part of creating a safe space is making consent a cornerstone of the class. Survivors of sexual assault had their ability to choose taken from them during the assault, and thus it is extremely important to give survivors back that power by allowing them to choose what happens to them in class. For example, Jerry repeatedly took my power away each time he laid his hands on me without first getting my consent.

In their book Overcoming Trauma Through Yoga: Reclaiming Your Body, authors David Emerson and Elizabeth Hopper do an amazing job explaining how to design and implement trauma sensitive yoga classes. The book outlines how to create a safe environment and how teachers can develop qualities necessary to work effectively with trauma survivors thereby reducing the risk for retraumatization. Since the body itself was the location of the trauma, the battlefield per se, “the body, instead of being an ally on one’s road to recovery, becomes the enemy... [and] the real problem is that [survivors] do not feel safe inside – their own bodies have become booby-trapped.”<sup>11</sup> Through their work with trauma survivors, Emerson and Hopper found that yoga “could

provide one way to help traumatized people relearn to inhabit their tortured bodies” and develop a more compassionate relationship with the site of their trauma.<sup>11</sup> I read this book cover to cover and not only gained new insight and techniques but found affirmation for things I had already been doing in my own effort to be trauma sensitive. This book was immensely helpful in the way it explained how to match yoga-based strategies to goals for clinical intervention and I immediately implemented their strategies into my classes with much success. Below is a list of trauma-sensitive techniques from this book as well as my own experiences teaching at a residential treatment center:

### **Space**

- Make sure that the space in which you are teaching yoga is clean and that props are neatly organized. This helps to imbue the space with a feeling of order and communicates to your students that you care about creating an inviting environment.
- If there are large windows in the room that allow for outsiders to see in, to the extent that you have control to adjust the blinds (if there are blinds), either check in with students to see if they are comfortable with them open or closed or just close them before students arrive. This will help keep students from being concerned about being watched.
- Right before savasana, check in with students to see if they would like the lights turned off slightly or completely or if they would rather keep the lights on. Since a dark room can make it difficult for students to see what is going on around them, turning the lights off can be triggering.
- Try to always be within sight of the students so that they know where you are and always approach students from the front (not the back) so that they can see you approaching and are not taken by surprise.

### **Intention**

- While I typically invite students to set their own intention for their practice, I emphasize throughout each class that an important aspect of the practice is for students to learn to tap into their bodies, to listen to what their bodies need in that moment, and to honor their bodies abilities and limitations that day. One way I help to develop students’ ability to listen to their bodies is by guiding them through a particular form of a dynamic movement (e.g. cat cow) for a few breaths, then I invite students to listen to their bodies and explore the possibilities of the movement (e.g. moving faster or slower or pausing longer at certain points of the movement). As I mentioned earlier, it is important to provide students with opportunities to choose what kind of experience they would like to have and in doing so help empower them to move towards a place of healing.

### **Language**

- Again, consent is key to creating a trauma sensitive yoga class. Incorporate invitational language throughout the class that promotes exploration (rather than “right” or “wrong”) and that encourages choice and control. This includes wording

such as: notice, allow, be curious, explore, and experiment. Moreover, phrases such as “when you are ready,” “when your body is ready,” or “if you like” also help students feel that they are in control of their experience. As I often say in my classes, only the students themselves can truly know what is best for them and they should listen to their bodies, even before my own instructions. I also tell my students that they are in full control and if anything causes pain or discomfort, they have the ability at any time to ease out of a pose or movement and come into a resting pose of their choice.

- Be mindful of not only the words you use but of your tone of voice and inflection. It is important to use your voice in a way that helps students slow down and be in the present moment. Try to use a slow and soothing voice to create a calm atmosphere that can facilitate healing.
- Also be mindful of your choice of words. Although it is impossible to know every word that is triggering for your students, it is helpful to stay away from words that obviously has more potential to be a trigger. In terms of creating a sexual trauma-sensitive yoga class, avoid using words/phrases such as: arouse, erect, spread your legs, and caress.

### **Music**

- Based on student feedback, I have found Native American flute music to be highly effective in helping create a calm and grounded ambiance for trauma-sensitive yoga classes. I have also found that trauma survivors respond well to such music playing during savasana since silence can be triggering. The music can help students to feel more comfortable by allowing them something to anchor themselves to if they are triggered.

### **Adjustments**

- Prior to my experience with Jerry, I was cautious about making any hands-on adjustments because I was a new teacher and did not feel knowledgeable enough to make helpful assists in this way. Directly after the incident with Jerry, I completely turned away from hands-on adjustments for a while. I was terrified about making someone feel the way that Jerry had made me feel. But it was during this time that I learned to develop stronger visual and verbal adjustment techniques. Even now I limit the use of hands-on adjustments and if I do, it is usually for students who I am very familiar with already. Additionally, I make a concerted effort to 1) start *every class* by saying that I may make hands-on adjustments but will be sure to ask first and 2) ask students if they are okay if I touch them (and I specify the location) *every time* I offer to make an adjustment.
- It is imperative that teachers think about their intention before they place their hands on their students. Are you trying to help your student correct an alignment issue, are you helping them to find a deeper articulation of the pose, or are you touching them for a selfish and inappropriate reason (e.g. Jerry)?

## Exercises

- The asana practice should constantly work towards the goal of helping survivors reconnect with their bodies with compassion and curiosity. Be mindful of the pacing and posture progression of the class – both of which can be instrumental in creating a calm and grounded environment.
- Hip openers can be both hugely triggering and incredibly healing for survivors of sexual assault. It is helpful to offer variations of a hip opener and to remind students that they are in full control and can come out of a pose if they are feeling triggered or uncomfortable in any way. Creating safety around the poses can help dispel any anxiety a student may feel. I have personally made a decision to avoid using happy baby pose in my classes. Through my experience working with trauma survivors, I have learned that students typically find this pose to be awkward (jokes abound when students go into this pose and such comments can be triggering for other students) and highly triggering as it is a very open, vulnerable pose. Instead I find a way to stretch the same muscle groups with other poses. Two hip openers that have been consistently well-received in my trauma sensitive classes are Supta Baddha Konasana while laying flat on the back with hands wrapped around the ankles or feet and legs are elevated, and restorative versions of Supta Baddha Konasana (with the support of a bolster behind the spine and the bolster either laying flat or supported with blocks for a less intense stretch). I believe one of the keys to healing from sexual trauma is in doing hip openers, but such physical movements need to be approached with sensitivity in order for them to facilitate healing.

## **A Call to Action**

As I mentioned before, I teach yoga at a residential treatment center for women and girls. Every weekend I see the profound impact yoga can have in helping the residents with their recovery process. After the re-traumatizing experience with Jerry, I thought about the residents I have worked with in the past and those I currently teach. I thought of the residents who have found deep healing and transformation through yoga – many of whom had never done yoga before or only had limited exposure to it. Then I thought of these women and girls going out into the world after discharging and looking to continue their yogic journey. I felt intense anger, worry and sadness at the thought of them meeting instructors like Jerry. Immediately after that incident, whenever I saw someone walking with a yoga mat, I wondered if they were taking a class with the same instructor or someone similar. And I thought of my younger sister and my mom who have shown an increased interest in yoga since I became an instructor. Would they ever have to deal with irresponsible instructors like Jerry?

As a community, we need to hold instructors accountable for unprofessional and disrespectful behavior, and in such a way that safe spaces are created for reform and transformation. We have a responsibility to our students to do so. As a teacher at a residential treatment center, I want to know that the residents I work with are safe walking into a yoga class when they return to the outside world. And as a daughter and sister, I want to know that my family members are safe in a yoga class. The following is a list of ideas for action items that can be implemented to help prevent sexual violence from occurring in the yoga community.

### **What Yoga Students/Survivors Can Do**

- Tell an instructor before class or when they approach you that you are not comfortable with hands-on adjustments. It's okay to do that.
- Set up your mat close to the door so that you can easily leave if you are not comfortable staying.
- Listen to your body; if you a certain pose causes discomfort or pain, you can choose to come out of the pose or modify (i.e. use props).
- If you are triggered, turn to an anchoring technique such as belly breathing to help you stay present in the moment while allowing the sensations of the trigger pass.
- Ask family and friends for recommendations for trauma-sensitive yoga instructors.

### **What Yoga Instructors Can Do**

- Learn more about sexual violence and trauma by reading books, attending workshops, etc.
- Incorporate trauma sensitive techniques into your class.
- Ask yourself what your intention is when you approach a student to offer an adjustment.
- Do not chase students down after class for a hug or other intimate gestures. Allow students to approach *you* after class.



- Be mindful of other teachers and if you notice inappropriate behavior report it to the studio owner (e.g. via an email or grievance form).

### **What Yoga Studios Can Do**

- **Create a Grievance Policy:** A grievance policy will allow students and staff to submit feedback/complaints and can serve as a vehicle for creating as safe of a space as possible. Post the grievance policy and form in an easy to see area in the studio, on the studio website, and even highlight it in a future e-newsletter.
- **Educate Staff:** Studios can help make safety a priority by educating its staff on how to be trauma sensitive (e.g. offer a handout with basic trauma sensitive information, have a staff meeting and go over what it means to incorporate trauma sensitivity into classes, encourage teachers to read the book Overcoming Trauma Through Yoga by David Emerson and Elizabeth Hopper, and/or bring in someone to lead a workshop on trauma sensitive yoga).
- **Incorporate Trauma Sensitivity Into Teacher Training:** Go a step beyond Yoga Alliance and incorporate trauma sensitive yoga into your teacher training program (e.g. include the book Overcoming Trauma Through Yoga by David Emerson and Elizabeth Hopper as part of the training reading list, or require trainees to attend a trauma sensitive workshop as part of the training).

## Conclusion

I began my yogic journey using yoga as a way to heal from my trauma history. Yoga helped me to reconnect with my body after years of dissociation, and allowed me to align my physical, mental, emotional and spiritual selves once again. During that period of self-exploration and healing, I experienced an intuitive tugging to pursue yoga teacher training so that I may help others also use yoga also as a tool for healing. In turn my constant hope for myself and others has been for that healing process to then lead to a transformation of the trauma into strength and wisdom that would inform a renewed sense of aliveness. I have walked this path and have had the honor of witnessing others do the same. I believe wholeheartedly in the power of yoga to fight rape culture, the power of yoga teachers to create safe spaces for consent and healing, and the power of yoga students to use this healing art to support themselves in their process of transforming the trauma of sexual violence into a powerful source of positive energy and compassion. I also believe in the collective power of yogis as a force for a much larger social movement that works to end sexual violence within its own community and beyond.

I look forward to continuing this research on the benefits of trauma sensitive yoga as a tool for healing from sexual assault in the future. Furthermore, I would like to expand each section in this report to be more comprehensive of all the complexities of the issue and to be able to draw even more connections between sexual violence and trauma sensitive yoga.

Finally, I would like to send much gratitude to my main teachers, Christine Cipra, Tricia Fiske, and Linda Troutman – all of whom have played such an instrumental role in my healing and yoga journey. I would not be the yoga teacher I am today and able to do the work I do without your constant support. You have inspired me to listen to my intuition and live from a place of gratitude and passion. I am also incredibly grateful to everyone who supported me through the incident last spring. I could not have written that email to the studio owner or this thesis without your love and support. I was originally terrified to share my story, especially as a new yoga teacher calling out the actions of a veteran teacher. But all of you believed me and believed in me, and for this I will be forever grateful. Special thanks to Livia Budrys who took a chance on me as a new yoga teacher, and helped bring me to Timberline Knolls. The experience I have gained through my work there has deeply informed my commitment to teaching trauma sensitive yoga. And last but certainly not least, thank you to my partner Roland who has supported me on this yogic journey from day one. Our shared joys and challenges have enriched my life and inspire me to follow my bliss.

Namaste.

## Notes

1. Visit <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/sexualviolence/definitions.html> and <http://www.rainn.org/get-information/types-of-sexual-assault> for more information on types of sexual violence.
2. For more information visit [http://www.reed.edu/sexual\\_assault/key\\_terms/consent.html](http://www.reed.edu/sexual_assault/key_terms/consent.html).
3. Wikipedia offers a great definition and overview of rape culture at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rape\\_culture](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rape_culture). For another explanation of and illustration of what rape culture looks like visit <http://yesmeansyesblog.wordpress.com/2009/07/23/this-is-what-rape-culture-looks-like/>.
4. Visit <http://www.shakesville.com/2009/10/rape-culture-101.html> for more information about rape culture and a fuller illustration of what rape culture actually looks like.
5. For more statistics about sexual assault visit <http://www.rainn.org/get-information/statistics/sexual-assault-victims>.
6. For more information about reporting rates visit <http://www.rainn.org/get-information/statistics/reporting-rates>.
7. For more information about effects of sexual assault visit <http://www.rainn.org/get-information/effects-of-sexual-assault>.
8. *Waking The Tiger: Healing Trauma* by Peter A. Levine (North Atlantic Books, 1997).
9. *Healing Sex: A Mind-Body Approach to Healing Sexual Trauma* by Staci Haines (Cleis Press, 2007).
10. "Transcending the Trauma of Sexual Violence With Yoga" by Molly Boeder Harris (YOGAChicago, November-December 2011).
11. *Overcoming Trauma Through Yoga: Reclaiming Your Body* by David Emerson and Elizabeth Hopper (North Atlantic Books, 2011).

\*Cover photo from: <http://lindsayyogadotcom.files.wordpress.com/2012/06/buddha-hands.jpg>

## Resources

### Online



#### **RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network)**

<http://www.rainn.org>

RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network) is the nation's largest anti-sexual violence organization and was named one of "America's 100 Best Charities" by Worth magazine. RAINN created and operates the National Sexual Assault Hotline (800.656.HOPE and [online.rainn.org](http://online.rainn.org)) in partnership with more than 1,100 local rape crisis centers across the country and operates the [DoD Safe Helpline](#) for the Department of Defense. RAINN also carries out programs to prevent sexual violence, help victims and ensure that rapists are brought to justice.



#### **The Breathe Network**

<http://thebreathenetwork.org/>

The Breathe Network is a resource and referral network that educates survivors of sexual violence and the general public about the unique benefits of holistic approaches to healing and connects survivors to practitioners who offer trauma-informed, mind-body-spirit oriented treatments in order to support integrated, sustainable healing. We encourage our practitioners to offer sliding scale services to make information about holistic healing and resources for such treatment accessible to all survivors and provide local communities with interactive, educational opportunities to learn more about the specialized treatments offered by the practitioners connected to our network.

### Books

*Healing Sex: A Mind-Body Approach to Healing Sexual Trauma* by Staci Haines (Cleis Press, 2007).

*Overcoming Trauma Through Yoga: Reclaiming Your Body* by David Emerson and Elizabeth Hopper (North Atlantic Books, 2011).

*Waking The Tiger: Healing Trauma* by Peter A. Levine and Ann Frederick (North Atlantic Books, 1997).

## About the Author



Eileen fell in love with yoga in the summer of 2010 when she began taking classes at YogaHouse in Chicago. It was then that she found yoga to be an incredibly effective tool for healing and transformation, and knew that she wanted to help others find the same benefits through yoga.

Upon the urging of Christine Cipra - one of her first yoga instructors and a good friend- Eileen pursued the 200-hour teacher training at Prairie Yoga in Lisle, IL in 2011. There she had the honor of studying with Tricia Fiske and Linda Troutman, and also found affirmation for her desire to teach yoga as a tool for healing from trauma.

Since November 2011 Eileen has been teaching trauma-sensitive yoga at Timberline Knolls - a women's residential treatment center in the Chicago suburbs – and gentle/restorative yoga at Ahimsa Yoga Studio in Oak Park. She is passionate about helping empower her students to find peace and strength in their minds and bodies through a combination of restorative, gentle, hatha and vinyasa yoga styles and meditation. Eileen compliments her yoga training with a background in anti-sexual and domestic violence volunteer work which began in 2008. This includes completing the 40-hour Illinois Coalition Against Domestic Violence training through Sarah's Inn and the 56-hour crisis intervention counselor training through Rape Victim Advocates. Additionally she is currently a Steering Member for a Chicago-based advocacy group called SHEER (Sexuality Health Education to End Rape) that works to promote enthusiastic consent and pleasure as a way to combat sexual violence.

Eileen's latest adventure is pursuing her Masters degree in Marriage and Family Therapy at Northwestern University, and she is excited to continue healing work that honors the mind-body-spirit connection.