

Yoga and Talk™: Therapy Groups for Girls

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"Yoga and Talk" is a therapy group for middle school and high school girls that combines yoga with a more traditional group therapy approach. The idea for "Yoga and Talk" came out of our personal experiences and professional training in both yoga and psychotherapy. In coming together to discuss our experiences with each other, we discovered several exciting similarities in our personal processes. Both on the yoga mat and in the psychotherapy patient chair, we had experienced the profound gifts of being both safely held and soothed (equanimity) and gaining greater insight (awareness). We each described a powerful shift that occurred with the addition of yoga to our lives. It was as if our yoga practice highlighted and activated previously hidden inner resources. In particular, it increased our ability to approach our "issues" with curiosity and compassion. Our self confidence and self acceptance grew. It was a tool for self-soothing and awareness that began to affect all parts of our lives (Cope, 1999).

As yoga teachers and psychotherapists ourselves, we feel a deep curiosity about the similarities between the processes of psychotherapy and yoga practice as a means for healing, growth and transformation. As often "insecure girls" who had grown up to be "more secure women", we hoped to create an experience for girls and young women that promoted greater equanimity (feeling accepted, grounded, centered, and able to self-soothe), increased awareness, and which placed a value on creating wholeness rather than perfection. We wanted to be a part of supporting girls in discovering and nurturing their true selves.

Various therapy models speak in one way or another about the qualities of the true or real self. We are fascinated by the similarities between these definitions and the yogic view of the Self. James Masterson in his book, *The Search for the Real Self*, includes the ability to experience a wide range of feelings deeply, to maintain self esteem, to self-soothe, and to express and experience creativity and intimacy as qualities of the real self. Richard Schwartz (Internal Family Systems) lists the qualities of "Self" Leadership as: calmness, compassion, confidence, clarity, curiosity, creativity, courage and connectedness. Yoga teaches specific practices to aid individuals in discovering these very capacities within themselves. Yoga

philosophy describes the True Self as "resting in one's own essential nature (Yoga Sutras)," encouraging the practitioner to look within for the answers to who they really are.

The practices of yoga and psychotherapy help increase one's capacity to bear psychological and/or physical discomfort. Both teach methods of paying attention to yourself and your patterns - encouraging the use of awareness to open up to new and alternative ways of being. They have the potential to support people in transforming their lives. We have found that consciously combining these approaches can fuel the positive benefits of both.

As women, we know the difficulty of developing and maintaining a sense of self that reflects a value of inner worth rather than outer beauty. In our work with girls and women, we have often seen the painful results of trying to be what someone else thinks you should be, rather than who you really are. Yoga philosophy addresses this misperception by redirecting the practitioner over and over again to her own inner world, the "home" of the true self. Yoga helps you develop trust in yourself and your own inner experience, magnifying the positive effects of psychotherapy in creating a healthy sense of self.

A variety of authors and researchers have reflected on the fact that girls' confidence in themselves and their abilities begins to decline as they approach adolescence. (Pipher, etc). Yoga and Talk attempts to creatively address the need to support girls in feeling confident about their abilities and about who they really are.

We have found that facilitating groups for pre-teen and teen girls is an adventure worth having. Every week we are challenged, touched, and amazed at the beauty of their struggles to get to know themselves and each other. Each group begins with 30 minutes of hatha or kundalini yoga. The group is an opportunity to address themes particular to the developmental concerns of the participants. These include relationships with peers and family, school pressures, sexual development, and concerns about drugs and alcohol. The group aims to give experiences and tools that help girls increase their ability to tolerate and discuss a range of sensations and emotions, instead of avoiding or acting out feelings.

We consciously plan the yoga practices (postures, breath work, meditation, affirmations) to serve the needs of the individual or the group as a whole. For example, we might do postures or exercises that promote a feeling of confidence and greater openness, or calmness and safety. We also do specific practices for addressing depression, anxiety, intensifying attention, or softening impulsivity/addictive behavior. The combination of breathing exercises and postures results, both immediately and cumulatively, in the experience of deep relaxation and well-being. Other benefits include a lessening of negative self-talk and a quieting of the mind.

After yoga, during final relaxation, the girls are covered with blankets as they listen to relaxing music. Then they move into the therapy room. The yoga and relaxation appear to greatly reduce anxiety and defenses in the girls (and the leaders!) allowing us to start the talk therapy with relaxed bodies, calmer minds, and mutual attunement. This sense of equanimity enhances and promotes feelings of safety and trust more quickly than we've seen in other groups. From this place of well-being, it's easier to know your own feelings and deal with other people. This is not to say there has not been conflict in the groups. As the defenses relax, the core feelings of anger, sadness, joy, and fear have more room.

Sometimes group members express feelings about the yoga, both positive and negative. Many have reported using different asanas or breathing exercises in their daily life, buying yoga mats, or signing up for additional classes on their own - in other words, incorporating its benefits into their daily lives. We believe all the girls have the valuable experience of changing their internal state in a healthy way.

Our own process of creating a business relationship and a co therapy relationship has been shaped by our yoga practice. In the beginning, we committed to meditating together before our meetings regarding the groups. The act of joining together in a yogic practice fosters commitment, calmness, creativity and compassion between us. In developing and facilitating the groups, we receive the opportunity to make mistakes, acknowledge them, and tolerate the shame and fear of loss related to not being perfect. Witnessing the parallel process as it occurs with the girls is inspiring - as they struggle with their own feelings of vulnerability, desire for connection, fear of shame and learning to tolerate these without dropping into old defenses. When the girls show bravery in group by being direct and honest with their feelings, we sit with them, knowing how hard that can be.

Finally, yoga celebrates both feminine and masculine characteristics with equal importance and value. Thus, it has encouraged us to embrace our qualities of softness, nurturing and creativity, while strengthening parts of ourselves that can take initiative and make things happen. Yoga teaches the balance between effort and surrender. It helps us learn when to let go (of how we think our projects should go, or what we think the girls should focus on in the group); letting go allows the process to unfold. We, like the girls, are learning to move through the resistance we feel when life presents us with something hard. Breathe, focus, try it again, and one day you're balancing on your head or your forearms, or you're standing up for yourself in a group, or you've just co-written your first professional article!

References and Resources:

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Yoga and the Quest for the True Self by Stephen Cope, published by Bantam, 1999

Anita and Kelly are in private practice in South Austin. In addition to the Yoga and Talk groups and their regular therapy practices, they provide weekly Yoga for Therapists classes (Kundalini or Hatha).