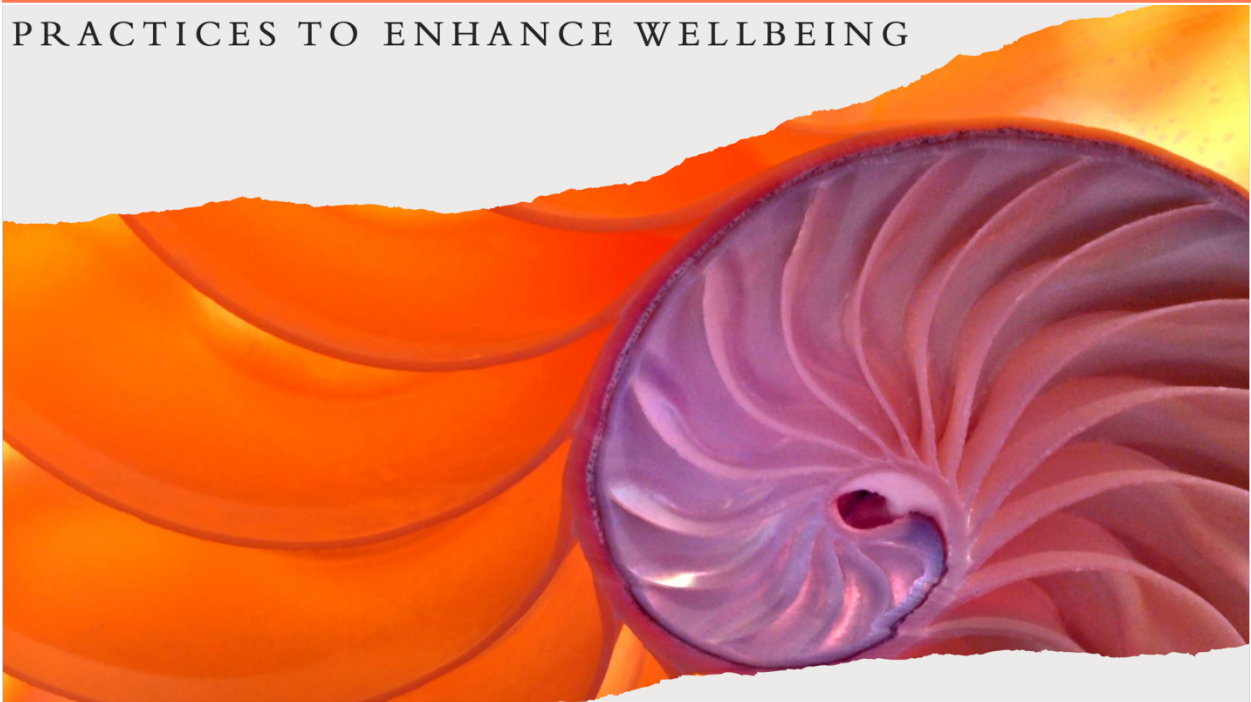


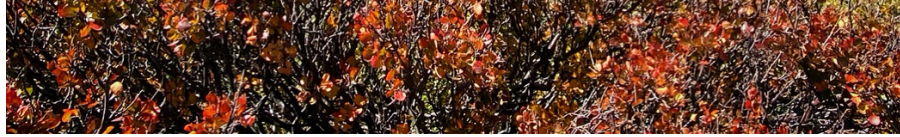
APPLIED POLYVAGAL THEORY IN YOGA:

EMBODIMENT STRATEGIES FOR
TRAUMA RECOVERY, EMOTIONAL
HEALTH, AND PHYSICAL VITALITY

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PRACTICES TO ENHANCE WELLBEING





Applied Polyvagal Theory in Yoga: Embodiment Strategies for Trauma Recovery, Emotional Health, and Physical Vitality

By Dr. Arielle Schwartz

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A Yogic Path for Trauma Recovery



Traumatic events can leave you feeling fragmented, as though you have lost an essential part of yourself. You may have disconnected from your emotions and body sensations as a way to push away difficult feelings and memories from the past. However, pushing away from painful feelings also makes it more difficult to feel positive experiences of love, joy and peace.

Healing from trauma invites you to befriend your body; and this needs to occur at a pace that honors your unique needs. Trauma recovery is often described as occurs in stages. The first stage of healing involves developing the resources to handle challenging emotions, disturbing symptoms, and distressing memories. The goal is help you find your ground through a felt sense of stability and safety. Within the physical practice of yoga, this is cultivated through an experience of steadiness as you tune into a felt sense that the earth is supporting you from below. In time, you learn to trust the predictability of the support that your yoga mat provides.

Your yoga space becomes sacred ground and each time you return is a pilgrimage to your body, mind, heart, and soul.

Eventually, you will develop the inner strength and capacity to attend to your suffering with greater compassion. The second stage of trauma recovery involves turning toward your emotions, sensations, and memories associated with traumatic events. On your mat, you might begin to explore an area of tension in your body while noticing your emotions. As you sense the weight of traumatic events held in your body, you can begin to deepen your experience by following how your body wants to breathe or move in response to what you are feeling. This can bring you into the third stage of trauma recovery in which you release your burdens as part of a grieving process. Ultimately, this process can allow for a new, felt sense of freedom and possibility.

A Kripalu yoga practice also has three stages parallel the trauma recovery process. The first stage is referred to as a “willful” practice as it helps you to build both physical stamina and mental focus by moving through postures with an emphasis on strengthening your awareness of your body and breath. During this phase of practice, it can be helpful to give yourself the structure of specific postures or a designated time frame for your practice. I recommend keeping your eyes open during the first stage of practice keep as this can help you to stay oriented to cues in the room that help to remind you that you are safe. It is also fruitful to engage in movement or breath practices that help you to feel empowered and grounded during this stage of your practice. The second stage of a Kripalu yoga practice invites you to surrender to your inner experience. Now, you shift your attention inside by deepening into shapes for longer periods of time and perhaps closing your eyes to sense the subtle movements of your breath and internal sensations. This phase of practice invites an opening of your heart allowing emotions to move to the surface of your awareness so that you can release tension and heal. The third phase of the Kripalu practice is called “meditation in motion” which is an invitation for you to move your body spontaneously as guided by your sensations. Here, you allow your body and your intuition to be your guide as you play in the unbounded energy of the open heart.

A Sacred Space



In order to heal we need to feel safe. However, having a history of traumatic events can interfere with our ability to feel safe, calm, or at ease in mind and body. We recognize that the body bears the burdens of traumatic events (van der Kolk; 2014). Therefore, it is often necessary to connect to the body slowly enough so that you can mindfully develop a relationship with your sensations. To begin, we intentionally focus on orienting to the here-and-now in a way that helps you to feel grounded and resourced. Importantly, even focusing on safety is a choice. It cannot be forced nor do we want to override the felt experience of distress, defensiveness, or tension in the body. There is intelligence in these somatic reactions. What we seek is a safe-enough space that allows you to attend to fear and grief.

Therapeutic yoga for trauma recovery is best supported when you have a calm, peaceful, and safe environment for your practice. You might find this within a class; however, if you are choosing to begin a home-based practice, I encourage you to take some time to create a space that feels nourishing to your body and mind. This healing space might be a room in your home or a corner of a room that is quiet, uncluttered, and private enough for you to move or express vulnerable emotions without feeling inhibited. If you live with other people, explore what boundaries you might need to set in order to protect your healing space. For example, is there

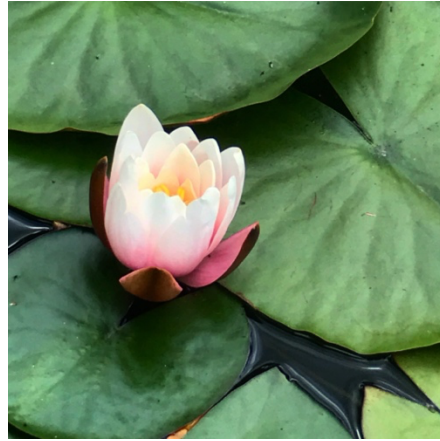
someone who can watch young children or could you put a “do not disturb” sign on a door while you are in practice.

A sacred space, whether it is found in nature or created by humans, provides a sense of solace and respite from the unpredictable or chaotic aspects of life.

You can imagine standing by the ocean or walking into a beautiful place of worship. These places invite us to transcend our fears. A sacred space is a place of beauty that is soothing to the senses. You might even use a small table upon which to place a few well-chosen items that remind you of the healing purpose of your practice. For example, you might bring in items from nature such as flowers, a plant, or beautiful stone, or a seashell. You can also embellish your space through items that have a pleasant scent such as a candle or an essential oil. See if you would like to enhance your space through sound. If you would like, you might include a way to play peaceful music during your practice or perhaps you might enjoy the sounds of moving water by including a small fountain. You might also choose to place photographs in your space such as of yourself as a child as a reminder to send loving kindness to this part of yourself. Or, you might choose a photograph of someone in your life who is or was a nurturing and loving presence.

Ideally, your space feels safe enough for you to relax. This baseline of safety will then allow you to observe your body and mind for patterns of tension or changes in how you are breathing that arise as you release trauma related emotions from your body. If feelings of sadness, fear, or anger arise during your practice, you might choose to direct your attention to sensory details in your space around you by gazing the floor or at your fingertips which can help to decrease awareness of internal sensations. See if you can allow yourself the gift to feel held within your peaceful, calm space.

The Freedom to Choose



One of the defining features of trauma is loss of choice over what happened to you. They can leave you feeling trapped, helpless, or powerless. Therefore, recovery from trauma involves realizing that you do have choices available to you now (Emerson & West, 2015). A therapeutic approach to yoga involves recognizing that you can choose whether or not to engage in any practice and you can end the practice at any time. Throughout each practice, you can decide how to move and breathe. This is especially important if you did not have those choices during a traumatic event. You can decide whether you want your eyes open or closed. Since yoga has a range of practices that can be both grounding and invigorating, you can explore adapting each practice to discover a feeling of balance in your body and mind.

The practice of exploring these choices can also serve as a reminder that you have many choices available to you when you are not on your yoga mat. You can choose how to spend your time and to devote your precious time to people and places that feel nourishing to you. By paying attention to your body, adapt your behaviors to enhance your physical health, relieve stress, and better support your well-being.

***When we do not feel as though we have choices, we can feel trapped.
Our nervous system perceives a threat.***

Focusing on choice facilitates a felt experience of empowerment and this is an especially important resource if you tend to feel stuck in feelings of powerlessness or helplessness. If you are a yoga teacher, it is important to be mindful of the language you use when guiding others through a therapeutic yoga practice. For example, rather than telling your students what to do, you can offer statements such as “See if you would like to lift your arms over your head” or “notice how you feel as you create this shape with your body.”

Importantly, therapeutic yoga focuses on the internal experience of your body in any shape rather than the outer shape of a pose. This can be reparative for many who have experienced yoga classes as competitive, overly focused on perfecting a pose, or unwelcoming to a wider range of body types or physical abilities. In contrast, therapeutic yoga focuses on posture as an opportunity to get to know yourself. Ultimately, yoga is about create a safe enough space to be vulnerable and awaken a true connection or union with yourself.

Awareness through Practice:

Choice and Freedom

Let's look at some examples of statements that encourage choice in a yoga practice.

- No person looks the same in any yoga posture
- The outer look of the shape isn't our goal
- You have permission to adapt and change how you move your body at any time
- If you would like, you might choose to explore this (yoga posture, breath practice, meditation practice, etc)
- Your eyes can be open or closed
- See how you want to breathe in this shape
- See how it feels to make this shape your own
- Allow yourself to tune into your inner experience
- How would you like to move your body now?
- Let your sensations be your guide
- You can take breaks as needed
- See how it feels to focus your eyes on one thing that helps you feel calm and peaceful
- Explore moving your hands into any position that helps you to feel grounded in the present moment

Know-Thyself



One of the primary benefits of having a regular yoga practice is the development of self-knowledge. The Sanskrit word *jnana* and the English word *know* both have etymological roots in the Greek word *gnosis*. Inscribed upon the entrance to the ancient Greek temple of Apollo at Delphi were the words, “know-thyself”. This phrase can be thought of an invitation to study your own character; both your limitations and your strengths. Rather than ignoring your personal limitations or vulnerabilities, you can compassionately cultivate self-knowledge as a way to best attend to your emotional, mental, and physical health. One way that you can cultivate *jnana* or self-knowledge in therapeutic yoga for trauma recovery, is through observing your own nervous system states. This will help you to recognize signs of imbalances so that you may respond in a caring manner that enhances your wellness. With a history of trauma, you may be more likely to experience times when you feel anxious, panicky, restless, shaky, or irritable. You might also be prone to feeling fatigued, lethargic, helpless, heavy, depressed, shut down, or numb. Self-knowledge of your nervous system can allow you to respond to these varying emotions and physiological states by engaging in practices that either re-energize or relax your mind and body.

The term vagus is Latin for “wandering,” which is an apt descriptor for a nerve that extends from the brainstem down into the stomach, intestines, heart, lungs, throat, and facial muscles.

Your brainstem, vagus nerve, and digestive system all play a central role in your emotional and physical health. The vagus nerve, or tenth cranial nerve, is like a bidirectional communication highway between your body and your brain. Approximately 85 to 90 percent of vagus nerve fibers are afferent which means that they bring sensory information from your body to your brain. The most recently evolved neural circuitry of the vagus nerve is called the ventral vagal complex which has nerve endings that connect to the muscles around your eyes, mouth, inner ear, larynx, pharynx, heart, and lungs. Dr. Stephen Porges calls this circuitry the *social engagement system* because it connects to the parts of your body that are primarily involved in helping you feel socially connected and safe in the world. For example, you express your emotions through your eyes, facial expressions, and voice tone.

We also have an evolutionarily older circuit of the vagus nerve called the dorsal vagal complex which descends through the diaphragm into our digestive organs, including the stomach, spleen, liver, kidneys, and small and large intestines. The gut is often called our “second brain” because it is capable of producing the same neurotransmitters found in the brain. These neurochemicals are communicated between your digestive system and brainstem via the vagus nerve. Nerve fibers within your stomach and intestines not only regulate digestion, peristalsis, and elimination; but also produce the same neurotransmitters found in the brain.

Within the autonomic nervous system, the sympathetic nervous system can be thought of as a metaphorical gas pedal which mobilizes the body for the purpose self-protection through the fight or flight response. Both the ventral and dorsal vagal branches of the vagus nerve function as

a “vagal brake” which subdues or stops this defensive mobilization. The ventral vagal complex allows you to slow down in a smooth manner which facilitates your “rest and digest” response. However, if you have experienced a highly threatening event and were unable to restore a sense of safety then the dorsal vagal complex serves as an abrupt brake. This is a hard-wired survival response in which the body immobilizes as a form of “feigned death.” When this occurs, you might feel weak, fatigued, dizzy, or nauseous. Why does this happen? Digesting food is costly from a metabiological standpoint, so emptying the digestive tract, slowing down the heart rate, and reducing respiration allows the body to survive threatening situations for longer periods of time.

At times, your body might react to a stressful event even before you are aware of the trigger. Even without conscious awareness, your brain and body have released a cascade of stress chemicals such as cortisol and adrenaline. This is one reason why you cannot simply think your way out of the symptoms of trauma; rather, you must work with the body to maximize healing, and a regular yoga practice can play an instrumental role in this process. Dr. Porges coined the term neuroception to reflect the process by which the your vagus nerve is communicating internal and external cues about whether situations or people are safe, dangerous, or life threatening. Your nervous system will find these cues within the body, in our external environment, or in the body language, facial expressions, or voice tones or other people. For example, changes in heart rate or subtle shifts in muscle tone impact your sense of self but you might not be aware of these changes as they occur. You might be reacting to the sound of your partner’s voice without even realizing why you are feeling this way. Without awareness of these changes, we might be prone to reacting defensively. Sometimes what we perceive via neuroception does not accurately reflect our circumstances. We might have anxiety or react defensively in situations that are actually safe. Conversely, we might not protect ourselves because we miss cues that indicate when situations or people are actually dangerous.

You can learn to pay attention to neuroceptive cues by consciously observing signs that your body is responding to a threat. For example, you furrow your brow, tighten your jaw, grip your hands, or clench your buttocks. You have an opportunity to practice neuroceptive awareness every time that you engage in a yoga practice whether you are moving in asana, resting in savasana, practicing pranayama, or seated in meditation. Neuroception can be thought of as a form of self-study (*svadyaya*). This process can help you to perceive changes that indicate you are reacting to stress. During any yoga practice, you can bring conscious awareness to your sensations, movements and breathing patterns which allows you to use this information to better take care of yourself.

Importantly, there is no state of your nervous system that is bad, wrong, or damaged.

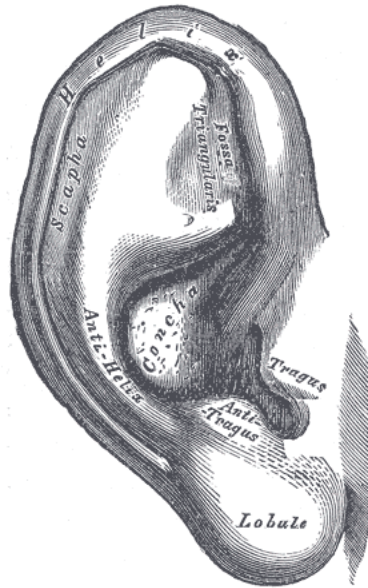
I invite you to recognize that each nervous system state gives you access to different emotions and sensations. For example, you might notice that your heart rate increase because you can feel your pulse in your chest or you might notice that your breath has become shallow. Once you increase your perception of these sensations, you can then begin to discern whether the autonomic response you are having is a reflection of an area in your present-day life that is leading you to feel unsafe. If indeed, you are in a situation that feels threatening, you can best determine a course of actions that help you to protect yourself. For example, you might explore setting a boundary with someone who is being disrespectful or choosing to end a relationship with someone who is harmful to you.

On the other hand, sometimes these nervous system states are connected to memories of difficult times in the past. Keep in mind that, you may not yet have the capacity to turn toward these feelings and memories; however, you can build that capacity over time. As needed, you can choose to look around your space and realize that there is no current threat. This can allow you to let go of unnecessary defensive reactions by finding a posture that helps you release emotional

tension or you might connect to your breath in a way that helps calm down your nervous system. If at any point your journey toward embodiment feels overwhelming, know that you can seek out the support of a psychotherapist trained in the treatment of trauma and/or a trauma-informed yoga teacher. In truth, most of us benefit from the caring and compassionate presence of another person to help us turn toward our pain.



Listening and your Vagus Nerve



In his book entitled “Listening with The Third Ear,” psychoanalyst Theodor Reik discusses the importance of listening for the emotional meanings conveyed by the speaker which increases our ability to hear what is not being said. He encouraged attending to the tone of voice, the inflection, and pauses between words and phrases as a way of gathering a feeling for what the other person is saying. Listening with the third ear is dependent upon your ability to listen to yourself; your emotions and sensations. In other words, your inner responses deepen your understanding of what someone is saying. Your sensations are cues to the emotions that are being expressed. By knowing yourself, you have the tools necessary to understand others.

When we look at the science of how we process sound, we realize that the act of listening is quite a profound process. Sound consists of waves that vibrate the air, enter your auditory canal, and pass through your tympanic membrane or eardrum. These waves proceed to move three bones within your ear, the malleus, the incus, and the stapes which is the smallest bone in your body. The sound vibrations then move the fluid of your inner ear which bends tiny hairs and charges

molecules to create electric patterns. The vestibulocochlear nerve or 8th cranial nerve not only helps to transmit these electric signals to your brain but the inner ear also helps you to find balance and coordinated movements.

Your vagus nerve also plays a key role in communicating information about the sounds that you hear to your brain and body by either tightening or relaxing the stapedius and tensor tympani muscles of your inner ear. Having tension in these muscles reduces sensitivity to high and low frequency background sounds. When you hear threatening sounds such as the low growl of an animal signaling danger or the gruff voice of someone who is angry with you, there is an immediate full body sympathetic nervous system response which engages your self-protective defenses. Likewise, high frequency sounds in nature such as the screeching of monkeys or birds is a way that animals communicate to each other about a potential threat. Thus, the brain is hardwired to interpret these high and low frequency sounds as dangerous. However, your nervous system is also hardwired to respond to the soothing sound of the human voice such as when a mother is soothing her infant. These sounds of safety awaken the social nervous system facilitates and full body experiences of ease.

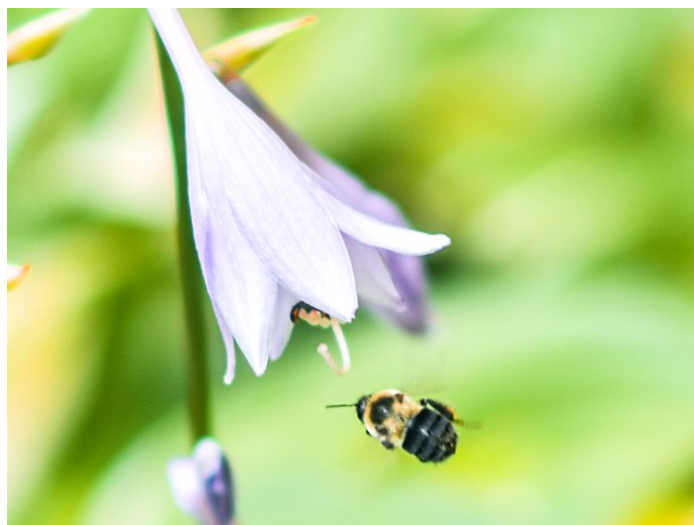
Your vagus nerve communicates the felt sense of safety by relaxing muscles around your larynx and pharynx in your throat which in turn gives your voice tone to develop greater prosody through a gentle rising and falling in your speech. When you speak in this manner, you come across as less threatening to others which can reinforce a shared, relational experience of safety. Your vagus nerve also changes the tone of the muscles of your face and head which creates greater social engagement and warmth through your eyes. In addition, when you hear acoustic cues of safety, your vagus nerve sends signals to your heart to slow down your heart rate. Moreover, this neural circuit creates a mini feedback system back into the muscles of your inner ear which allows them to dampen out low frequency sounds so that you do a better job attending to the regulating sound of the human voice.

Research suggests that music is one of the most powerful ways to stimulate the vagus nerve. In part, this is because the act of listening many parts of the brain including both left and right hemispheres, the amygdala which processes emotion, the cerebellum involved with movement, the sensory cortex responsible for awareness of bodily sensations, and the hippocampus responsible for memory. With this in mind, Dr. Porges developed the Safe and Sound Protocol (SSP) which he refers to as an acoustic vagal nerve stimulator using musical cues of safety that engage the social nervous system. This program functions in the same way that a baby is soothed by a mother's lullaby.

In the yogic tradition, attending to sound has been a central part of many practices. *Nada Yoga* is the yoga of sound which is a practice of receptive listening to the sounds around you. For example, you might explore a listening meditation while sitting by the seashore, deeply immersing yourself in the sounds of the waves. Yoga also offers mantras which are words, sounds, or extended chants that evoke an intention or serve as a prayer. For example, many yoga teachers invite you to chant the sound of *OM* as a way of connecting to a sacred intention while opening or closing your practice. Yoga also incorporates sound meditations such as listening to the sound of singing bowls or gong to create a sound bath. In addition, *bhramari pranayama* which translates to “honeybee” or “humming bee” breath, is a humming meditation which can produce a calming effect on your nervous system. This breath creates a vibration in your eardrums which appears to have a nourishing effect on your vagus nerve as measured by an increase in heart rate variability. This next practice invites you to explore Bhramari pranayama for yourself.

Awareness through Practice:

Honeybee Breath



To begin, find a comfortable and supportive place to sit for your practice. Begin by simply exploring how it feels to hum. You might adjust the tone higher or lower. As you explore these various humming sounds, notice where you feel the vibration of the tone in your body. Is this feeling centered in your chest, your throat, or in your face? There is no right or wrong tone. The goal of this exploration is to find a tone that feels good for you today and this tone might change over time. You could also explore humming a tune or song that has brings up positive feelings or memories. Traditionally, Bhramari pranayama involves placing your palms over your ears with your fingers facing down which will amplify the feeling and sound in your ears. Try this and see if it enhances or detracts from a feeling of connection with your heart. The goal is to cultivate a feeling of sweetness and a sense of connection to your heart, so continue to adapt the practice until it feels good to you. Continue this breath practice for as long as you would like and when you are complete, take some time to notice your experience.

Building Resilience and Vagal Tone



The practice of yoga awakens the spiritual heart *and* the physical heart plays a key role in this process. Your heart harbors an intrinsic nervous system that can produce and secrete hormones and neurotransmitters including oxytocin and dopamine. Within your upper chest, you have a massive convergence of major arteries, veins, and nerves that is called the cardiac plexus. These nerve fibers include the vagus nerve, coronary nerves that innervate the heart, pulmonary nerves that extend into the lungs, and laryngeal nerves that connect into the throat. Recall, that that approximately 85-90 percent of the vagus nerve fibers are afferent, which means they communicate information from the body to the brain. Moreover, there are extensively more afferent nerve fibers from the heart than from any other major organ in your body.

The breath plays a key role in your health in part because the vagus nerve extends into the smooth muscle of the lungs and heart. The nerves connecting to the heart and lungs have both sympathetic and parasympathetic functions. The sympathetic nervous system is associated with

quick, intense breaths into the upper lungs, a condition often referred to as over-breathing or hyperventilation. During times of stress, your nervous system initiates the release of cortisol via the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis (HPA-axis) to mobilize your self-protective defenses through an increase in heart rate and respiration. When this continues overtime, rapid upper chest breathing leads to over-breathing or hyperventilation which is associated with panic attacks and anxiety.

While changes in breathing happen automatically in response to stress, we also have the ability to alter our physiology through conscious, mindful changes in our breath rate.

Long, slow exhalations engage the vagal brake and the parasympathetic relaxation response slows down your heart rate. This process also increases the amount of carbon dioxide in the bloodstream. The vagus nerve communicates changes in the heart rate and bloodstream CO₂ levels to the medulla oblongata, which is a part of the brainstem that helps regulate your autonomic nervous system. These physiological changes initiate a built-in physiological reset within your respiratory system called the Hering-Breuer reflex which inhibits over-breathing and restores a felt sense of safety.

The health of the autonomic nervous system is measured through vagal tone and vagal efficiency. Vagal tone is measured by changes in heart rate in relationship to the breath. Vagal efficiency refers to how quickly the vagus nerve helps you adapt to postural changes such as transitioning from laying on the floor to sitting and then standing up. The heart rate typically increases on each inhalation which reflects a subtle engagement of the sympathetic nervous system and decreases during each exhalation as the parasympathetic nervous system re-engages. The relationship between your breath and these changes in heart rate is referred to as heart rate variability (HRV) or respiratory sinus arrhythmia (RSA). Your heart rate is a measure of the

number of beats per minute, whereas HRV and RSA measure the intervals between your heartbeats. Having higher vagal tone means that you have greater variability between the number of heartbeats on the inhalation as compared to the number of heartbeats measured on the exhalation. HRV and RSA are considered indicators of vagal tone as they reflect our ability to respond to our environment. Simply put, vagal tone is measured by your ability to move between stress and relaxation efficiently and easily. You can think of this as the physiological basis for resilience which allows you to flexibly respond to inevitable challenges of life. Furthermore, having higher vagal tone is associated with improved immune system health, as well as reduced anxiety, depression, and PTSD symptoms (Seppälä et al., 2014).

Conscious breathing or pranayama can help you to cultivate nervous system flexibility which means that you can tolerate a range of different arousal states while responding effectively and efficiently. There are many different breathing patterns taught in pranayama. Each serves us in different ways and we can draw upon different strategies of breathing at different times to facilitate our wellbeing. Some are energizing, some facilitate relaxation, some are cleansing, and some create a balanced mind and body. Most importantly, you need to know your body and your signals of nervous system health.

***One of the most efficient ways to create a calm body and mind is
through changing how you breathe.***

Awareness through Practice: Half-Smile with Balanced Breathing



Engaging a “half-smile” is a valuable way to change your mental state and cultivate a serene feeling in the moment. Since the vagus nerve extends into the muscles of the face, you can increase vagal tone by relaxing the muscles of your face and then slightly turning up your lips. As you smile, imagine your jaw softening and a relaxed feeling spreading across your face, your entire head, and down your shoulders. Notice the subtle changes in the quality of your thoughts and emotions.

Bring awareness to your breath. Notice the length of your inhalations and exhalations. Notice the transitions between the inhales and exhales. Notice if you are feeling any physical, emotional, or mental distress or tension. I recommend bringing one or both hands over your navel and focusing each inhale into your lower lungs by expanding this area like a balloon and exhaling as you draw your navel back toward your spine. When you are ready, begin to create a measured length of your breath with a count of four on each inhale and a count of four on each exhale. You can easily tailor this breath to meet your needs by increasing or decreasing your count.

Trauma and the Body



Within yoga for trauma recovery, our goal is not to perfect any external physical shape. Instead, each shape provides an opportunity to explore your sensations, emotions, and thoughts. A therapeutic approach to asana invites you to listen to your body and to meet yourself on the mat where you are. You have an opportunity to explore how it feels to breathe into sensation. Cultivating awareness of your sensations helps you to access an internal source of wisdom that guides the healing process. In time and with repeated practice, postures will begin to feel familiar. Each time your return to a shape, you will notice subtle nuances which will allow you to deepen your sensory experience of the internal landscape of you within the shape.

As you embark upon your journey toward embodiment, I invite you to see this as an active process of self-discovery that is renewed and strengthened through repeated the practice of attending to the your sensations, emotions, and movement impulses in the present moment (Fogel, 2009). Importantly, embodied self-awareness cannot be forced. With a history of trauma, any embodiment practice can be a vulnerable undertaking. We cannot deny the impact of unresolved trauma on the body. It is often said that our issues are in our tissues and they impact

how we move and breathe. We carry personal wounds as well as collective and cultural wounds. Perhaps you are a member of a group who has suffered from racial oppression, discrimination, harassment, and threats. Maybe your country and government have failed to provide you a safe haven of protection. Perhaps your somatic self-protective or defensive patterns may continue to be necessary if these threats remain chronic and persistent. However, ideally it is possible to find temporary relief from these challenges when stepping onto the relative safety of the yoga mat. Perhaps there is an opportunity to find respite through gentle practices that invite your own reclamation of embodied presence.

You might find that your relationship with your body is complicated by feelings of self-loathing or a negative body image. Unfortunately, this can be exacerbated by yoga images in the media or when attending yoga classes that emphasize perfecting the look of a pose instead of focusing on how you feel in the pose. You might find relating to your body difficult if you look at yourself critically or believe that you are too fat, too skinny, lumpy, or ugly. For some, relating to your body is further complicated by gender dysphoria in which you feel a mismatch between your physical body and the felt sense of your own gender identity. If you find that relating to your body brings up difficult beliefs or emotions then you might benefit from focusing on what your body is capable of doing rather than what it looks like. For example, you might say to yourself, “my body is strong!” or “my body is wise!” Within any yoga practice, you can enhance embodiment by removing mirrors from your practice space and asking yourself what your body needs from you rather than trying to change or control your body.

There is a strong connection between our physical posture and our sense of empowerment. This idea was popularized by the Ted Talk of Dr. Amy Cuddy whose Harvard based research focused on the psychological implications of setting in an expansive posture or “high-power pose” as compared to a “low-power pose” such as sitting in closed or guarded manner such as crossing your arms or legs while leaning forward (Carney & Cuddy, 2010). The individuals who sat in the high power pose reported feeling more empowered, performed better at tasks, but also had

measurable changes in their body chemistry with less cortisol and higher testosterone in both men and women. In other words, these power postures help you to feel more assertive, confident, and less reactive to stress. One of the goals of her research is to empower women and minorities through simple nonverbal techniques that could enhance their performance in job interviews. Power postures typically involve sitting or standing with the legs slightly wider than your hips with your hands on your hips, behind your head, or up in the air.

Likewise, within yoga, standing postures such as warrior pose can help awaken your connection to your inner strength allowing you to cultivate mental focus and physical vitality as you engage in a willful practice. You can think of this as the courageous path of the spiritual warrior in which you develop the discipline to keep showing up for yourself. You assert a commitment to self-love even in the midst of anger, fear, hurt, and shame. You are willing to stand up for your worthiness to be loved, cared for, respected, and protected, for this is your birthright. This next practices invites you to experience one of these yogic “power poses” for yourself as you awaken the spiritual warrior within.

Awareness through Practice: Awaken your Spiritual Warrior



Bring your feet wide enough so that you can come into a lunge shape for a warrior two pose. I'll guide you to start on your right side by turning your right toes toward the short side of your yoga mat, in line with your knee, and allowing your left toes to angle forward. Explore how it feels to bring your arms parallel to the ground as you explore this lunge shape. Allow yourself to find a depth to this shape that works for you knowing that you can adjust the position of your feet and legs until it feels right to you. Remember, the feeling of the posture is more important than what you look like from the outside. For this practice which is focused on steadiness and strength, I invite you to keep your eyes open as you gaze toward your right fingertips. You might notice that you have lost your connection to the earth. If so, bring your attention back to your feet. Continue for about 5 breath cycles and switch to the left side by turning your feet and legs in the opposite direction. When you feel complete, come back to standing with your feet beneath your hips.

Spinal Flexibility and Nervous System Health



Polyvagal theory also provides insight into how posture contributes to the health of your body and mind. Many of us have tendencies to tilt the pelvis forward, back, or to the side. It is also common for the head to reach out forward of the body placing strain on the neck. Spending a lot of time on the computer or looking at your phone can also exacerbate this “forward head position.” These common spinal misalignments place strain on the nervous system which can reduce the health of your body’s vital organs. In contrast, creating spinal alignment can enhance your overall health. For example, Dr. Porges and colleagues studied how improvements in pelvic tilt and resulting spinal alignment led to an increase in HRV and improved autonomic nervous system functioning (Cottingham, et al. 1988 as discussed in Rosenberg, 2017). In addition, in his book, *The Healing Power of the Vagus Nerve*, Stanley Rosenberg discusses the role of craniosacral therapy in restoring health to the spine and autonomic nervous system (Rosenberg, 2017). In addition, he offers simple exercises to enhance physical posture in order to revitalize the vagus nerve. For example, he guides his readers through eye movements and physical postures that release tension in the muscles along the sides of cervical vertebrae in the neck to improve bloodflow to the vertebral arteries and vagus nerve. Likewise, yoga practices often focus on improving your physical and emotional health by enhancing spinal flexibility and correcting common spinal imbalances.

Postural shifts also influence blood pressure receptors called baroreceptors which send signals to your brainstem. These signals will either increase or decrease your vagal tone in order to regulate your heart rate. For example, sitting or standing up quickly will temporarily decrease vagal tone which will increase your heart rate and a visceral feeling of activation. Ideally, this is followed by re-engagement of your ventral vagal complex which allows you to return to a calm and relaxed state. Tolerating postural changes such as moving from laying down, to sitting, to standing, can provide a good measure for resilience of your nervous system. Yoga practices often involve moving through postural transitions in a repeated, rhythmic manner that allow you to alternately increase and decrease your heart rate. You might think of this as strengthening the resilience of your nervous system in addition to the physical endurance required in these actions.

Awareness through Practice:

Cat and Cow



I invite you to begin in a table-top position on your yoga mat. Take some time to orient to this shape. If you would like, begin to move your spine with your breath. Inhale as you lift your tailbone and head which will lower your belly. As you exhale, lift your spine as you curl your tailbone and head forward. Continue moving back and forth with your breath as feels right to you. Feel free to pause in flexion or extension of your spine or change how you are breathing in this shape.

Focusing Inward



Focusing inward invites you to gently soften or close your eyes so that you can notice your internal sensations. For example, you can pause while reading this and bring your awareness to the sensations of your body as you make contact with your chair. Or you might notice the feeling of your belly rising and falling with your breath. From a yogic perspective, you can think of this process as directing your life force energy toward yourself. Ideally, this can be offered as a way to nourish yourself with self-awareness.

Our world is full of distractions. You might notice times when you feel overwhelmed by sensory experiences such as sights or sounds. Watching the news or scrolling through social media can fill your mind too much data. Simply put, we have access to more information than most people can process on any given day and this can interfere with your ability to feel connected to yourself. Furthermore, post-traumatic stress can lead to hypervigilance in which your senses are heightened. You might feel jumpy, sensitive to loud noises, or highly reactive to crowded spaces. You might scan the people around you by reading their facial expressions, voice tone or body language. Or, you might be scanning your environment for potential signs of threat or an exit

strategy. Drawing your senses inward can be challenging when you have had a history of trauma. You might find it difficult to let go of your vigilance because you fear that you will not be able to protect yourself without it. Or, if you do let down your guard, your body might begin to relax which gives you greater access to your emotions. Letting go of your defenses can feel vulnerable.

One way to build your capacity to focus your attention inward is by cultivating dual awareness. Dual awareness involves noticing environmental cues that let you know that you are safe now which allows you to safely attend to uncomfortable sensations or emotions for brief periods of time (Rothschild, 2010). You can pace yourself during your yoga practice by directing your attention toward and away from any uncomfortable sensations. For example, you might oscillate your attention between focusing your eyes on cues of safety and bring your attention inward toward your body. As with all yogic practices, focusing inward is a choice.

From a yogic perspective, the root cause of our suffering is not knowing the truth of who we are. With a history of trauma, it is common to believe that those events define us and our future. However, yogic wisdom suggests that we also have a capacity to connect to a deeper; unwavering sense of self. In time, I hope that you can sense the nourishing benefits of focusing inward as a practice that helps you connect to the deepest truth of who you are that resides at your innermost core, beneath the wounds of the world. This next practice invites you to focus your attention inward while in a child's pose. For some, the name "child's pose" brings up discomfort because it evokes memories from a vulnerable time. If this is the case, you can choose to rename this pose giving it a new meaning for you. For example, you might call it "wisdom" or "resting" pose.

Awareness through Practice:

Child's Pose



Begin to settle your hips toward your heels. There is no single right way to create this shape. Take your time to adjust your shape until it feels supportive for you. You might place your knees close together which will allow your chest to rest on your thighs or, if you widen your knees, your chest might soften closer to the floor. You might prefer to have a folded blanket or bolster between your hips and your heels to reduce pressure behind your knees. You might choose to rest your forehead on the floor in front of you or on a soft pillow. You can also explore whether you prefer to have your arms outstretched in front of you alongside your head or resting back beside your torso.

Child's pose is a forward fold that naturally draws your attention inward. Your belly and vital organs are protected in this shape. How does your mind respond as you slow down? As you allow your forehead to make contact with the floor or on a blanket see if you can allow the muscles in your neck to relax. This inward turn, invites you to soften your vigilance and let go into a sense of support and safety. Take a few more deep breaths and whenever you feel ready to come out of this shape, place your hands underneath your shoulders and slowly press into your hands to lift your spine until you have returned to sitting up.

Resilience and Post Traumatic Growth



Resilience is defined as an ability to flexibly adapt to challenging, adverse, or traumatic life events. This ability to “bounce back” from traumatic events is deeply connected to having the opportunity to work through difficult life experiences. Resilience is not a trait that you either have or do not have; it is a set of strategies that can be learned and practiced (Schwartz, 2020).

Resilience is both a process and an outcome that involves practices help you to build a sense of strength and self-confidence. The deep, inner work of healing from trauma eventually allows you to emerge back into the world with your gifts—your unique contributions to the world. You might feel a yearning or longing to fulfill your potential by expressing more of your heart, sharing the knowledge you have gained, and bringing your gifts out to the world.

As a process, resilience involves engaging in behaviors that support your wellbeing each and every day. For example, in addition to committing to your yoga practice, you might go to therapy, learn to meditate, write in a journal, take daily walks in nature, or develop a creative practice. You have an opportunity to realize that feeling and expressing painful emotions is part of a path of self-discovery.

Being resilient does not mean that you won't experience difficulty. Rather, it means that you can cultivate the skills needed to respond effectively to difficult experiences. You learn to break down overwhelming experiences into smaller, more accessible chunks, which allows you to gradually process painful events. You learn to attend to difficult life events of your past without allowing your history to define you. In this way, you expand your lens to focus on possibilities instead of just problems.

Most importantly, you can support your resilience with the belief that your choices and behaviors make a difference in the outcome of your life. This gives you the confidence that you are in charge of actively creating opportunities that allow you to overcome barriers in your life.

One of the most powerful components of a transformational journey into post-traumatic growth is that it allows you to take personal responsibility for the narrative that defines you and your life. By consciously attending to the voice or narrator of your personal story, you can discover whether your story is one of hope and optimism, or if it is a pessimistic story full of disappointment and resignation. You get to write the script. You are allowed to revise your story until you arrive at a satisfactory conclusion, one that supports your growth after trauma. This does not mean that you can change what happened in your past. However, you can work through the pain of your past until you find resolution in the here and now.

The deep, inner work of healing from trauma eventually allows you to emerge back into the world with your gifts. Post-traumatic growth provides an opportunity to shift your focus away from yourself by exploring how you might give back to others and the world. We become more human when we focus on loving another person or serving a cause that is greater than ourselves.



“It can be difficult to imagine a future that is different from your past or present. Although you can’t change the landscape of the past, you can take a new path now. How would you like things to be different? What has previously stopped you from making these changes? Is there anything that frightens you about making these changes now? Imagine being successful in making these desired changes. How do you think you will feel? When you set goals for your future, you illuminate your path forward.”

~Dr. Arielle Schwartz from *The Post Traumatic Growth Guidebook*

About Dr. Arielle Schwartz



Arielle Schwartz, PhD, is a clinical psychologist, internationally sought-out teacher, yoga instructor, and leading voice in the healing of PTSD and complex trauma. She is the author of six books including *The Complex PTSD Workbook* and *The Post Traumatic Growth Guidebook*, and *Therapeutic Yoga for Trauma*. Dr. Schwartz is an accomplished teacher who guides therapists in the application of EMDR, somatic psychology, parts work therapy, and mindfulness-based interventions for the treatment of trauma and complex PTSD. She has a depth of understanding, passion, kindness, compassion, joy, and a succinct way of speaking about very complex topics. She is the founder of the Center for Resilience Informed Therapy in Boulder, Colorado where she maintains a private practice providing psychotherapy, supervision, and consultation. Dr. Schwartz believes that the journey of trauma recovery is an awakening of the spiritual heart.

Learn more at www.drarielleschwartz.com



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