Therapeutic Yoga and Mental Wellness

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"I never tried nothing like this before. My problem is I think too much, my brain never slows down. Yoga--gives me the power to slow my mind down. It does what the drugs would do--like the heroin--without the devastation. So...thank you so much for coming out here." - Jacob (student in Community Yoga Austin's prison program at TCCC)

"Tell me, I'll forget
Show me, I'll remember
Involve me, I'll understand"
-Chinese proverb

Our life experiences occur in and through a physical body. Everything we perceive, feel, think, and do emerges from a direct, organic, and physical process occurring in a physical body. As obvious as these two statements might sound, it has only been within the last decade that research advances in both neuroscience and the physiology of mental experience have really begun to shape our understanding of the role that physical biology plays in mental health, mental illness, and treatment.

With our increased understanding of the interaction between physical and mental experience, we have begun to look for ways to include more holistic interventions. As a result, therapeutic yoga has become a rapidly growing movement in the field of mental wellness.

Therapeutic yoga incorporates these physical and experiential activities within a larger process that involves education, mindfulness training, and group discussion around specific social emotional skills. All of this work occurs in a context where students feel safe, in control of their experience, and comfortable expressing their needs.

Incorporating yoga as a mindfulness practice has benefits on multiple levels, including decreased stress, anxiety, and depression. Learning to pay embodied attention to the present moment without reactivity directly trains the parts of the brain involved in executive function and has been consistently shown by research to improve attention regulation, impulse control, and intrapersonal/interpersonal awareness.

Neuroscience research into mindfulness training indicates that it enhances executive function, self-awareness, and working memory by activating and thickening the prefrontal cortex, the insulae and hippocampus, while reducing activation in the limbic system. This activation trains the parts of the brain that we use to pause, pay attention, control our impulses, recognize feelings in ourselves and others, tolerate uncomfortable experiences, and cultivate positive interpersonal states like empathy and compassion.

The physical practice, combined with a mindful and spacious attention to the flow of sensations, feelings, emotions, and thoughts as they arise in the present moment helps to heal the disassociation, and dysregulation of trauma by giving students the tools they need to reconnect with their lived experience in a safe and concrete way.

Shawn Kent is a licensed practicing counselor, and a certified Yoga instructor. Shawn has spent the last fourteen years researching and applying mindfulness to treatment for youth and adults. He spent six years as a counselor at Austin Child Guidance Center where he developed and ran mindfulness based yoga therapy groups for adolescents. Shawn is currently the clinical director and director of youth services at Community Yoga Austin, where he runs mindfulness based yoga therapy groups in Austin high schools. He also teaches weekly mindfulness based relapse prevention groups to teens in outpatient rehabilitation.