How is the yoga industry helping survivors of trauma? Olivia Hubbard finds out.

Over the course of a lifetime, many people will experience traumatic events, for example road traffic accidents, assaults or natural disasters. After the trauma, they will feel distressed and may experience symptoms of insomnia and anxiety. Although symptoms will sometimes go away, they can persist and some individuals go on to experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This can be a severe and disabling condition, characterised by flashbacks, nightmares, avoidance, numbness and hypervigilance. PTSD is often co-morbid with other mental health disorders, including depression and substance misuse.

The Yoga Clinic in London offers classes and treatment for those individuals who are looking for a safe environment to work out in. What do we mean by safe? According to The Yoga Clinic, there are a number of things that could make a yoga class feel unsafe:

- Class size is too large and people are close together
- Instructor dresses in revealing clothes
- Being touched without being asked
- Sessions always involve partner work
- Students are singled out with compliments and criticisms
- Students are expected to wear tight yoga clothing
- Little understanding of the triggering or dissociative potential of yoga props (straps and blocks) and language (‘stand like a tree rooted to the ground’)
- Instruction can be commanding in tone, rather than invitational
- Emphasis is placed on achieving an ideal, externally judged shape

In trauma-informed classes, teachers will be informed about triggers, dissociative states and overwhelming emotions, they will make space for you to step out of any practice or class, they will attend to the dynamics of safety (especially as they might affect trauma), and have contact details of reputable therapists. Class participants will not be expected to share their stories or memories of trauma.

Who offers this style of teaching?

Since 2003, The Trauma Centre in Brookline, Massachusetts has been offering a very particular form of yoga to a variety of complex trauma survivors, including war veterans, sexual assault survivors, and at-risk youth and survivors of chronic childhood abuse and neglect. The practice is called Trauma Centre Trauma Sensitive Yoga (TCTSY). TCTSY is now recognised on the National Registry of Evidence-based Programmes and Practices (NREPP).

“For many of the individuals who attend TCTSY sessions, their body has been controlled or manipulated by someone,” begins Jenn Turner, assistant director of yoga services at the Trauma Centre. “In the aftermath of trauma, survivors learn how to disconnect with their body. Teachers aren’t then getting access to trauma in its raw content if individuals only talk about and write about their trauma.”

The classes focus on introspection – the act of feeling what’s in your own body and within your own skin. There is also a focus on choice and empowerment in the classes. Compared to other yoga practices, the teacher may invite the attendee to move, but it’s not directed; attendees aren’t told what to do with their body.

I spoke to yoga teacher Amanda Wright, who delivers a yoga class for individuals who have experienced trauma and mental health problems at triyoga in London. “I have noticed with a lot of my clients that they breathe how they wish to breathe. One woman I work with has obsessive compulsive disorder and she sighs a lot. I don’t force my suggestions. I think ‘shapes’ is a nice word to use instead.” Wright continues, “I don’t touch, I help them verbally, and I don’t promise a result.”

“Students often call out during a class if they are feeling a sensation in their body”

Yoga for domestic violence survivors

Exhale to Inhale (ETI) is a charity that aims to transform the lives of and empower those affected by domestic violence and sexual assault. ETI uses the healing practice of trauma-informed yoga, as well as helping communities to develop their skills and knowledge to support them. Most of the teachers (who are all volunteers) have at least 200 hours of yoga teaching certification and have undergone advanced coursework in trauma-informed yoga in areas such as language to use and avoid; how to set up a room to create a safe space; how to conduct yourself as a teacher; and what to do if a student is triggered.

“Domestic violence isn’t just a women’s issue: It’s a human issue, a community issue, a business issue and a public health issue,” says founder of Exhale to Inhale, Zoë LePage.
Amy Tobin, Exhale to Inhale board president, adds, “The classes typically begin with simple movement and breathing actions. We meet our student where they are. Many of the classes take place in domestic violence shelters, agencies and rape crisis centers. Some women come to classes with injuries or physical limitations and do some of our classes entirely from a chair. We ask our students to track sensation in the body and make their own choices. We don’t have yoga props – we ask our volunteers to work with what they have available to them. The class highlights awareness of breath rather than any particular pattern of breathing.”

The methodology of teaching at ETI does not use touch assists. ETI believes that “touch” can be healing but, given the trauma history of their students, it is not included. Students in an ETI class are said to be more talkative than your average yoga class. Students often call out during a class if they are feeling a sensation in their body – ETI doesn’t enforce the silence of a typical yoga class. The class offerings are currently being delivered in New York City, Westchester County, Connecticut and Los Angeles. The charity has also just started to offer public trauma-informed classes at community centres and yoga studios. The students who attend the sessions typically have a therapist or case manager at the facility where the class is held.

**So what have the volunteers gained from delivering the classes?**

“The experience of feeling safe in a yoga class was part of what inspired me to leave a physically abusive relationship. During the Svastosana pose after a vigorous flow at my local studio, I had such a powerful feeling of comfort, and it occurred to me that this was the first time in as long as I could remember that my body felt safe and cared for. I had forgotten what it was like to feel at home in my own body and I told myself that I would never lose that feeling again. Years later, I’ve kept that promise to myself. Every class I lead is an attempt to show my gratitude for the practice that may well have saved my life. If I can help one woman feel more like her body is a safe place that she is in charge of, I’ll have fulfilled my purpose as a teacher. In a trauma-informed class, watching students make their own choices for their own bodies is the best possible progress,” says Sarah Yurch, a volunteer teacher.

For several years in a row, Exhale to Inhale has partnered with the Times Square Alliance in its solstice in Times Square – an all-day, donation-based yoga event in the heart of New York.

Some instructors teach up to 20 classes a week so they can make a living from group fitness,” says Jane Walker, FITPro co-founder and director. “They may not have a choice, but they just don’t know what else to do. This can be a real problem for instructors, especially as they grow older and their body starts to feel the effects. They may wish to reduce their classes to a more sustainable number, so having a second income is a sensible way to go.”

Liam Rodgers is a physiotherapist and Pilates clinician at TEN Health and Fitness. He says, “If you are any fitness instructor, teaching up to or more than 20 classes a week has a major impact on your physical and mental health. Unfortunately, there is next to no evidence out there to back up our claims but it is a well-known fact within the community. You will often find trainers have more injuries than their clients. Trying to balance our own exercise goals, having enough energy and enthusiasm for class participants, and then saving some energy for your own personal life is a tough act. Only a few people I have met could survive for a long-term period and unfortunately it seems many instructors burn out. Having grateful and supportive employers, colleagues and clients can make all the difference though.”

The majority of fit pros are people-orientated, vivacious and engaging. They’re used to controlling a situation and giving direction with confidence. They have developed some exceptional communication skills in their years of experience, which may give them opportunities to move into other areas in the industry or successfully transfer their skills to another industry.

Jane took a five-year sabbatical from teaching group X when her children were young and the family moved back to Australia, but she wanted to continue to use her skills in an industry that was positive and dynamic like the fitness industry. After attending her niece’s wedding, Jane recognised a number of skills used by the celebrant/wedding official that were also second nature to her as an experienced group X instructor, controlling a crowded, positive body language and eye contact; strong voice with good diction and intonation; and use of a microphone, among many other skills instructors use without even thinking about it. Jane trained as a civil marriage celebrant and discovered that her skills as a group X instructor were completely transferable. “While everyone else on the course struggled with addressing a crowd, making eye contact and using a mic, to me it was second nature,” she says.

Another instructor who has realised the transferable value of her skillset is Maria Hocking, who was diagnosed with hip dysplasia in her mid-thirties. “When I returned to my fitness career after surgery, I decided to teach lower-impact classes. The dance-style classes were always my passion and, although I love Vinyasa flow as it’s a long-term injury; unfortunately it sees many instructors burning out. Having grateful and supportive employers, colleagues and clients can make all the difference though.”

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Maria pursued a career as a life coach and realised she had a wealth of health and well-being knowledge she could use in her new role. To other fit pros looking for an additional income stream, she asks, “Could you teach simple, low impact workouts instead? Could you educate others on the importance of health and well-being? Could you blog about your experiences to help other instructors? Could you run a business support service for newly qualified instructors to help them make a success of their business?”

Both Jane and Maria show that the key to finding a way forward is to recognise the skills that are second nature to you. Analyse what you’re brilliant at and think about how you can transfer those skills if the time comes for you to cut back on your classes.

**Above: Class participants feel a sense of belonging at the classes offered by Exhale to Inhale**

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