

Community

MOUNTAIN LAKES

Psychologist uses yoga to combat obesity and PTSD

BY LISA KINTISH
Staff Writer

A quick perusal of the Internet under scientific studies on yoga includes articles from such notable institutions as the Mayo Clinic and Harvard University. There appears to be growing evidence that mind-body practices may alleviate stress, anxiety, and depression, which in turn can benefit our physical health.

A Denville-based psychologist incorporates yoga as a tool to help obese people better appreciate their bodies, get insight into their feelings, and truly experience the present.

Dr. Beth Haessig, a Mountain Lakes resident, received a grant from the Kripalu Center in Stockbridge, MA, and will teach yoga at St. Michael's Health Center in Newark this fall. These classes are a way to assist people in attaining body self-awareness, self-acceptance, and self-compassion.

She said, "Yoga and psychology are the perfect mental health intervention for obesity. Yoga removes the stigma around psychotherapy so more people will be comfortable receiving the services."

After earning her doctorate from Rutgers Graduate School of Applied Professional Psychology, Haessig spent six years training in body-oriented psychotherapy. Current president of the United States Association for Body Psychotherapy, Haessig noted that her "somatic" approach allows people to "engage the body's energy, through breath and movement," in order to "feel their feelings rather than to just talk about them."

Haessig became involved in somatic psychology 12 years ago, after she first experienced it for herself.

"In traditional talk therapy," she explained, "the assumption is that one finds the ability to change by insight gained through talking and problem-solving. Since the body's feelings are an expression of the mind's thoughts, feeling those feelings lead us to uncover our unconscious assumptions, beliefs and myths about life, formed when we were very young. Body psychotherapy is an experiential, present-moment psychotherapy that helps you to embody your feelings and sensations with non-judgmental awareness.

"With body psychotherapy, I am interested in the language of what your body is 'saying' in the present moment – not talking about something that happened in the past. I help people notice how their bodies habitually contract against feeling certain emotions. Through movement and

breathwork, people gain access to deep feeling states that they had to shut down years ago. When emotions get stuck in our bodies, not only does disease develop, but we lose access to important information about what we want and need."

Yoga and body psychotherapy are two different things, but Haessig brings them together because as a yoga enthusiast for more than 10 years, she has found it changed her life.

"I know and feel its potential so that is why I'm now bringing it into my work," said Haessig.

When asked why yoga specifically and not another mind-body practice such as Tai Chi, Haessig said, "There are 'eight paths' involved with the practice of yoga and doing postures is just one way to do yoga – the other paths involve everything from the practice of ethical standards, to breathwork, meditation and more. With those suffering from obesity, I will be teaching self-compassion, self-awareness, and relaxation through postures, meditation, and breathwork, which are all 'yogic practices.'"

Offering the scientific point of view on yoga's benefits, Haessig noted, "The Science of Yoga by William Broad includes a whole chapter of the research on the benefits. Dozens of yoga studies are now under way at medical institutions around the country, including Duke, Harvard, U Cal at SF. Some are funded by the National Institute of Health. Highlights include, its effect on chronic pain, sleep problems, reduction of inflammation-promoting immune cells, boosting immune system functioning, reduces anxiety and depression, (by increasing GABA levels), spine health, reduction in the risk factors for heart disease (blood pressure, high cholesterol, high blood sugar), joint mobilization, helps healthy weight maintenance."

Haessig pointed out that "yogic intervention" does not hold the "stigma" associated with psychological intervention, even though, as she said, "There is no difference. Both are helping people experience their goodness, their value, and their hearts."

The Kripalu form of yoga, according to Haessig is about practicing "self-compassion and embodied mindfulness" which is "awareness without judgement."

She elaborated, "This practice teaches you how to listen to your body, yourself, feeling your breath go in and out of your nose. It's learning how to be in the very present moment without the filter or commentary of the mind. It's an experiential exploration of what it feels like to be in one's



PHOTO COURTESY OF BETH HAESSIG

Beth Haessig of Mountain Lakes will teach yoga classes at Saint Michael's Health Center in Newark and donate the fees to the Newark Food Pantry.

body, right now. By moving ourselves from the mind, to the body, we take a big step toward living in reality, for the mind is always a step back from the true experience. For example, to know an apple, you need to eat one – thinking about one is not knowing an apple. Yoga helps the person to be and live in their life more, rather than to be in their thoughts about life. The thoughts about life are often patterned conditioning from the past, and tend to obscure our experience of what is."

Haessig continued, "By meeting life without the mind being in charge of deciding what is, we become more available to life more, which is constantly unfolding before us. Often those who suffer from obesity don't feel comfortable in their body, so they have cut off their loving-listening relationship with their bodies. Yoga is a great tool to heal that relationship with the body-self."

The benefits derived from yoga seem to have a lasting impact.

Haessig said, "We're changing the body, and therefore changing the mind through the process. As long as people keep doing it, the change is progressive, cumulative, and continues to unfold."

Haessig also uses yoga, among other techniques, to help veterans work through PTSD. She offers it pro bono, but finds that veterans are reluctant to get treatment. In an article from fall 2011, "The Body Remembers Traumatic Events," Haessig wrote that veterans make the mistake of believing time will help them forget, however, the body continues to remember, making the trauma "an undigestible experience."

She goes on to note, "If the body's neurochemical response of protection (in the form of fight/flight/freeze) does not work itself out of the body after the precipitating event is past, the physiological experience of the trauma events remain in the cells, thus giving the body the incorrect message that danger is still alive."

This can cause such symptoms as numbness, hopelessness, helplessness, rage, terror, and depression.

The answer is not just to talk about the trauma, which can actually serve to stir things up again no matter how far removed from the incident, but to incorporate "body-based interventions such as yoga." The goal is to help "survivors experience their sensations, rather than dissociate from

them," noted Haessig.

She offered that while there is "trauma sensitive yoga," in PTSD cases, yoga can only do so much. Haessig said that while a yoga practice can support treatment and reduce symptoms, it "may be insufficient treatment on its own."

In referring to the yoga classes for obesity, Haessig said, "Yoga is so much more than physical exercise. It's a practice that helps you find inner peace in a crazy world. I want to help people find their self-love. For some that means healing trauma. For others it's about changing self-talk and for others it's balancing their moods. We all need to do this... in whatever body we have."

Haessig's yoga classes at Saint Michael's Health Center, fourth floor annex, begin Sept. 16 and run every Monday from noon to 1:30 p.m. The cost is \$10 for four classes and proceeds go to the Newark Food Pantry.

Currently, there are no classes in her Denville office, but anyone interested in seeing this be made available may send Haessig a note at Beth@bethhaessig.com. For more information, visit Bethhaessig.com.

Email: kintish@northjersey.com