

The healing art of yoga

Elisabeth Steuble-Johnson is a licensed professional counselor and has worked in the mental health and addictions field for the past 15 years. I was immediately intrigued after learning that she has explored yoga as a treatment intervention alternative for depression and anxiety. She is passionate about the mind-body connection and the integration of yoga in the healing process.

Danielle Irving: What led to your initial interest in the counseling profession?

Elisabeth Steuble-Johnson: I have a background in public health, and my interest was always in health education, illness prevention and wellness. I believed that this field would give me the opportunity to integrate some of those areas. I always liked to work with people. I was also aware that I would be able to get a license, which would qualify me to go into private practice.

DI: Was there a specific influence that led to your specialty in the field?

ESJ: All through my counseling career, I was exploring different additional treatment interventions, especially for people who suffer from mental health problems. Working in community mental health has become quite challenging at times, and I often felt that the clients needed more than just talk therapy and medication. I was always interested in a holistic approach to therapy and became more and more aware of the importance of including the mind-body aspect in the process.

After hearing about yoga at a trauma workshop and then reading Amy Weintraub's book, *Yoga for Depression*, yoga has become an important focus for [me and] also for my work as a therapist. This influenced me to incorporate some of the techniques into my work. The more I started to explore this area, [the more] I became aware how well psychotherapy and yoga really complement each other.

Eventually, I decided to become a yoga teacher.

DI: Describe your background in counseling as well as in yoga.

ESJ: I am a licensed professional counselor with an M.S. in counseling psychology and human services, and I have worked for the past 15 years in the mental health and addictions field, including community mental health, private practice and in an outpatient addictions center. I took my first yoga class probably over 30 years ago and have practiced and attended diverse classes throughout my entire life, [but] never with the idea that this would become part of my professional life. I attended the LifeForce Yoga practitioner-1 training and started to incorporate yoga techniques in the treatment process. I am now a registered yoga teacher — 200 hours. I am teaching workshops in the community and a yoga class in a community recovery center in Philadelphia.

DI: Can you provide a brief description of what yoga is and means?

ESJ: Yoga goes back to ancient traditions and is known to unify body, mind and spirit. One interpretation of the word yoga is "to unite, to come together," and it means "union" or "yoke." The Yoga Sutras, written by Patanjali between 500 and 200 B.C., describe the concept, the eight limbs of yoga. This is like a guide or plan for living.

There are many types of yoga disciplines. A yoga practice helps us to build strength, endurance and balance. It focuses the attention on the breath, which helps us to live in the moment and brings relaxation. Meditation takes us inward, calms the mind and improves concentration. Yoga helps us get to know ourselves better, and it teaches us compassion and love toward others and ourselves. The focus is on self-examination, spiritual growth and the increase of self-awareness. These practices impact the emotional and mental balance.



Elisabeth Steuble-Johnson

DI: How is yoga used to successfully complement psychotherapy?

ESJ: Yoga works on establishing more equanimity so people are better equipped to deal with the challenges of life. It works on improving self-awareness, which helps people to better access and release their repressed emotions. Through a regular yoga practice, symptoms of depression and anxiety can decrease. Self-regulation is another area that can be affected. All these factors are valuable and can complement talk therapy.

DI: Which yoga techniques have proved to be most effective with clients?

ESJ: A very effective technique is *pranayama*, which means "control of breath" or "life force." We have clinical research today which confirms that the yogic breath can impact the stress response, and teaching some of the techniques to our clients can be very valuable. The yogis believe that we are able to regulate the breath, which then helps us to date or calm our mood. This is helpful for the treatment of depression and anxiety. Other effective techniques are the use of meditation, sound, mudras, mantras, visualization and, obviously, the yoga poses.

Now of course, most of us are counselors and not yoga teachers, but I firmly believe that we as therapists are able to integrate some of the mentioned techniques into the treatment process. I would highly recommend Amy Weintraub's book *Yoga Skills for Therapists: Effective Practices for Mood Management* [to those interested in using] some yoga interventions in therapy sessions.

DI: How is yoga beneficial to the client and the client's mental health?

ESJ: Yoga is quite beneficial because it really incorporates the body-mind-spirit aspects. The more we know about how experiences are stored not only in the mind but also in the body... It is so great to have a tool to offer that helps clients to

release some of the pain that possibly is not released with just talking about the experiences.

DI: Are there specific diagnoses for which yoga serves as a great treatment alternative?

ESJ: Well, we know that yoga is used in the treatment of depression, anxiety and trauma, and we have research studies that show that yoga does improve the symptoms of those illnesses. It is important to understand that using these practices requires patience and consistency. Improvement comes over time; this is no magic intervention. This aspect can be a problem for some of our clients.

DI: If counselors were interested in incorporating yoga techniques within their counseling practice, what would you recommend they do to begin?

ESJ: I would recommend they read about some of these techniques and try them on themselves first. There is plenty of literature available. There are also workshops and seminars that could be a good start. I am sure there are yoga classes in every community, and it is worth exploring several. They can be quite different from each other. There is no one-

size-fits-all yoga class. The needs are very different when it comes to mental health issues.

DI: There are more than 54,000 ACA members. Have I left out anything that you want our readers to know about you and your work?

ESJ: Yoga is a valuable intervention, and I am personally very enthusiastic and optimistic about its use in therapy, but it is not always easy to convince clients, colleagues or agencies of the benefits. Too often there are still some myths connected to yoga. But I believe that yoga will remain part of my daily life, will eventually reach many of our clients and will become a helpful treatment alternative for those suffering from mental illness. *Nemaste.* ♦

Danielle Irving is the project coordinator for ACA's professional projects and career services department. Contact her at [dirving@counseling.org](mailto:d Irving@counseling.org).

Letters to the editor: ct@counseling.org

ACA THANKS OUR SPONSORS!

AON

Bio-Medical Instruments, Inc.

California University of PA

Capella University

CounselingInternships.com

HPSO Insurance

Liberty Mutual

Loyola University Maryland

Research Press Publishers

TherapyNotes LLC

ThriveWorks

University of Phoenix

Walden University

SOULDRAMA®

The International Institute of Souldrama®
Connie Miller, NCC, LPC, TEP, ACS • 800-821-9919
www.souldrama.com • connie@souldrama.com



SOULDRAMA® is a therapeutic technique which combines group and individual therapy, psychodrama and transpersonal therapy. The main objective of Souldrama is the psychological and spiritual development of the person. Souldrama can be applied to all aspects of recovery including the 12 steps, relationships, grief, divorce, corporate, career and money issues. Participants will learn action based interventions for individual and group psychotherapy, basic psychodramatic and sociodramatic tools such as doubling and role reversal and how to put spirituality into action. Special attention will be paid to creatively working within a group and discovering the group issue. If you desire training at your facility, we will gladly come to you.

ONGOING

Training and Supervision in Action Methods, Spring Lake MI. For addiction counseling and mental health professionals in group action methods. These workshops can be used for personal growth and/or training. • 6 CE Hours Each

Fourth International Souldrama Workshop

Choose Either or Both — Tinas, Greece June 23-28, 2014 25 Hours • Puglia, Italy June 30-July 5, 2014 25 Hours

December 7, 2013

Bloomfield, NJ

"Moving On-Letting Go" • 6 CE hours

Jan. 10-18, 2014

St. Petersburg Beach, Florida,

Healing the Heart • 50 CE Hours

Starve the Ego: Feed the Soul. Souldrama: Ignite Your Spiritual Intelligence! Now published in Romanian!

The International Institute for Souldrama® is an NCC approved continuing education provider (577) and may offer NCC approved clock hours for events that meet NCC requirements. The ACP is solely responsible for all aspects of the program. Hours of certification in psychodrama, group psychotherapy and sociometry as approved by the American Board of Psychological Examiners in Sociometry, Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama. Souldrama® is an internationally registered trademark UK 903

Just published!

Connie Miller (2013): *Integrating Two Models for the Treatment of Addictions: Souldrama and 12-Step Recovery in Action*, *Journal of Groups in Addiction & Recovery*, 4:2, 81-111

A new action model