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Catching Our Breath

The Yoga of Recovery

BY LAURIE SEARLE



ur world is evolving at warp speed. We can now be connected at a moment's notice via smartphones, Skype, email, and Facebook.

Yet this constant "connection" leaves us little time to adjust to the rapid pace of these technologies. We are overwhelmed with all we need to accomplish and are bombarded by messages that tell us to do more than we can, want more than we have, and be more than we are. With these messages, it is difficult to intuitively follow our desires. We become outwardly focused on our appearance, work, and status updates. Despite all our "connections," we have disconnected.

So it's no wonder that eight million people suffer from eating disorders—the leading cause of death among mental illnesses. And it doesn't affect only young girls: one million men report having an eating disorder, and according to a *The Today Show* report, one treatment center has seen a substantial increase in women over 35 seeking help for eating disorders. Very few people get help for this disease, leaving a large segment of our population suffering.

Eating disorders are a disconnection be-

tween mind and body, a coping mechanism to help control anxiety and depression, and a way to escape from pain and other negative feelings. An eating disorder can cause a deadly downward spiral if help is not found.

Fortunately, resources such as counselors, nutritionists, and the integration of yoga can help reconnect the mind and body by turning down the noise of the outside world and turning up the volume of one's inner needs.

Yoga is different from many other forms of exercise in that it does not create the cycle that often accompanies the goal of losing weight: burn calories, lose weight, feel bad about our-

> selves after indulging in a glass of wine or a cookie, then begin the cycle again.

> Yoga is a nontraditional therapy for increasing self-awareness, introspection, and the ability to nurture oneself. Many experts integrate yoga as a potential recovery tool, as it creates new patterns of thinking. It reduces the fight-or-flight response by reducing cortisol levels and allowing us to be more present and calm with our feelings and experiences-to simply let go. Relaxation and stillness is imperative in recovery. Recent research reveals that body-based therapies like yoga can make a positive shift in our relationship

with ourselves, making us more receptive and open to healing.

In a yoga class, we learn to shut out the distractions of the mind and look inward. That can be terrifying for someone with disordered eating behavior. Even the most seasoned yogi can find this challenging because every day, our body tells a different story. Depending on how we sleep, what we eat, and how we spend our time, the practice of yoga adapts to our story. One day we can achieve a pose only with effort, and some days it is effortless. While in the yoga class, we hear teachers encourage us to listen to the cues of our own body—resting it if we need to during a sequence or challenging our body if that's what we align with in that moment.

Yoga is the practice of letting go of negative thoughts attached to our daily challenges so we can rebuild our relationship with ourselves. Challenging practitioners to stay in the present moment, yoga can help students flow through the pain associated with their disorder so they may work through it.

Yoga reconditions the mind to work in tandem with the body so that fear, judgment, and expectation can be discarded. It helps us break the cycle and listen to the heart of what we need. It strengthens the body while at the same time strengthening the mind to handle internal or external challenges with focus, calm, stillness, and balance.

A 2005 study from *Psychology of Women Quarterly* states that individuals who practice yoga "reported less self-objectification, greater satisfaction with physical appearance, and fewer disordered eating attitudes compared to non-yoga practitioners."

By slowing down and connecting with our bodies, we no longer look in the mirror and see a distorted vision of who we are, but rather we experience a renewed awareness and confidence about what our body needs and wants. Our senses become increasingly heightened the quieter and clearer we become, and the practice of listening to our needs becomes more loving and healthy.

Many people are led to the practice of yoga because we are told it will make us fit. However, after many sessions the real practice shows up. The ancient practice stimulates and opens points in the body (nadis and chakras) that allow the proper flow of energy and spiritual power in the body, promoting physical and mental well-being. Pranayama (breathing) invites us to reach deeper into the lungs, stretch and open the places that have been closed off, and rework the body on a cellular level. People from different walks of life come to the mat with a common need: healing pain by replacing it with openness, compassion for whatever our struggle may be, and embracing the success that comes on the path of recovery.

The only way to do this is to listen to ourselves first, not the distracting music pulsing in our headphones or the sensationalized TV images at the gym while we're exhausted on the treadmill, pushing ourselves to points that can injure our bodies and wound our self-esteem.

Yoga, in tandem with the proper therapy and treatment program, can be rewarding for the eating-disordered individual. One can recover and gain a trust in the self that cannot be found anywhere else—neither in the approval of others nor in self-destructive behavior.

The yoga mat, the class, the support of others offer us a place of community to feel freely, safely, and in the comfort of others who understand the struggles of addiction.

Laurie Searle has been a certified yoga and fitness trainer for over a decade and leads teacher trainings in the LA area through her school, Sphota Yoga (SphotaYoga.com). She founded FED Fight Eating Disorders (FightEatingDisorders.org), a nonprofit offering help to eating disorder sufferers.