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What Treatment Providers Can Learn From Yoga Instructors

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Introduction

Professionals treating people who have abused often view their work as psycho-educational and/or focus almost exclusively on thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. All too often, we view our communication as primarily informative and neglect the many ways that we can *evoke* new experiences and psychological states within our clients. For example, while many of us get caught up in the daily details of activities such as discussing results of actuarial risk assessments with our clients or challenging cognitive distortions, there remains a world of human communication that occurs without our noticing. For example, a therapist who has prepared a lesson plan for a group therapy session may be so focused on the lesson that he or she doesn't notice the myriad micro-communications that occur from the moment the first client enters the room. This micro-communication might take the form of the client saying hello, becoming aware that the therapist's attention is elsewhere, and interpreting this as a situation in which it is better not to participate fully.



Meanwhile, many professionals in other fields have a deep knowledge of how to increase the impact of their work, employing strategies rarely considered in the treatment of abuse. Politicians are often skilled at compressing their point into sound bites. Many evangelicals delivering sermons on the radio or television know as much about modulating the rate, pitch, and volume of their voice as any professional singer. Advertising designers often know as much or more about social psychology research as the best practitioner (e.g., Cialdini, 2008). Even interior designers versed in the art of feng shui consider all of aspects of atmosphere, flow, and pattern to ensure occupants' comfort in a room. Finally, in other areas of mental health treatment, experiential therapists have developed ways to intensify the treatment process. How is it that people in our field so rarely pay attention to the experiential impact of our actions on our clients?

Members who follow the ATSA listserv closely often become acutely aware that sometimes what one says is not as important as how one says it. As a personal example, I've often wondered whether defense experts in civil commitment proceedings aren't stymied by their own approaches. Most expert witnesses enter the courtroom prepared to explain their evaluations and focus their attentions accordingly. However, the judge or jury's internal experience and/or cognitive schema of the dangerous, violent sex offender will almost always loom larger than our research into ROC curve analysis, the debatable nature of confidence intervals, and diagnostic criteria of Sadism. Explaining scientific findings is one thing; packaging it into something with meaningful impact is quite another.

So where is a treatment provider to turn for ideas on how to deepen and intensify their efforts with clients? Research into how top performers become experts has emphasized the importance not just of practice, but of studying one's craft at both basic and advanced levels, as well as observing how others perform. Unfortunately, in treating abuse it can be very difficult to observe other therapists in action. Just the same, a variety of other professionals outside of our field may provide some excellent ideas for increasing responsiveness and adhering to the responsivity principle of tailoring interventions to the individual characteristics of each client.

Yoga

To be clear, yoga practice is not for everybody, nor should it be. The ideas in this brief article could just as easily apply to other disciplines and areas of human endeavor. For many people, however, some of the principles in yoga can serve as an excellent means by which to observe and study their experience. Before many clients can self-monitor their thoughts and behaviors, it can be important to build their capacities at self-observation, also known as interoception. As such, it can be a useful adjunctive activity that deepens treatment experiences for clients. At present, the author is involved in the use of trauma-sensitive yoga in residential programs for adolescents for the Becket Family of Services. In these settings, yoga is used as a means for adolescents to reclaim and understand their experiences and actions beyond simply develop relaxation skills (Emerson & Hopper, 2011). Important to emphasize is that yoga is only one component of these treatment programs, but it is inextricably linked to therapeutic efforts in that yoga instructors and therapists call attention to the themes familiar to each (i.e., interoception) in order to provide a more solid foundation for treatment efforts (Longo, Prescott, Bergman, & Creedon, 2012).

As with psychotherapy, an important way to study yoga instruction is to study the instructors themselves. As it turns out, they frequently have valuable insight into negotiating group processes and can serve as sources of ideas about what works in the fundamentals of facilitating treatment groups (keep to the basics/we over-emphasize workbooks, etc.). Like therapists, there can be more differences between individual yoga instructors within a particular tradition than there is between the yoga traditions themselves. Both yoga and psychotherapy have practitioners who are more and less effective, and it is therefore no surprise that students/clients form a deeper alliance with some rather than others. The following examples of yoga-teacher practices can serve as reminders of how one can negotiate the challenges of group therapy.

Yoga instructors are often trained to become aware of their own intentions before they begin a class. It's easy to forget the importance of leaving other concerns behind when entering into a treatment session. Sooner or later, clients will recognize it when treatment providers have something else on their mind. Likewise, treatment providers who are even slightly upset, angry, or anxious (whether about their clients or anything else) will not be as effective as those who can remain present with their clients. Yoga instructors frequently have the same experience; many report that they are at their best when they arrive early and get into the mindset for facilitating a class. A key difference between treatment providers and yoga instructors is that the latter's attendance from one class to the next depends on their impact on the client. If a yoga instructor is off his or her game, the class won't come back. This leads to a conundrum for treatment providers who work with mandated clients: If these clients had a choice, would they come back? If the answer is no, what could the treatment provider do that would make the difference?

Yoga instructors greet each student as they come through the door. As mentioned above, if a student doesn't feel welcome in a yoga class, they won't return. The more successful yoga instructors know to greet their students in a warm and friendly manner before each class. All too often in our field, it can be easy for treatment providers to become distracted or believe that we have enough of a relationship that we no longer need to maintain polite formalities with our clients. From the client's perspective, the absence of a friendly greeting can signal that they are about to have an unpleasant experience. Being in treatment is hard enough; one might as well ensure the client's comfort. What Robert Frost once said about poetry can apply to sexual-offender treatment: "A poem should enter with delight and exit with wisdom".

Yoga instructors have predictable rituals for starting and ending classes. Yoga students have some idea of what's going to happen even in a new class. There will be a greeting, some relaxed movement with breath-work, followed by warm-ups, and then all manners of stretching. The class will almost certainly end with some kind of meditation or mindful resting. So it can be with treatment. In the past, our group treatment often began with a "layout" or other ritual in which a client stated what he had been convicted of, or what his worst act of violence had been. One cognitive skill-based curriculum required each client label to label themselves with the term "irresponsible thinker" after their name. The logic was understandable: each client should cut to the chase and be honest about why they were in the room. It may make more sense, however, to use opening and closing rituals to establish a sense of safety and cohesion, as well as a predictable routine. These elements appear more closely related to the elements of

a successful treatment group (e.g., cohesion) than starting out with the most shameful aspects of a client's life. Like a yoga class, musical composition, or a good book, a treatment group can benefit from the person in charge thinking in terms of introduction/middle/end rather than immediately getting down to business.

Yoga instructors are able to speak to a group of people and the individuals within it at the same time. It can be painful to admit, but some treatment providers are simply more effective at reaching their clients than others are, just as some yoga instructors are better at teaching a class than others. An area for self-improvement for all individuals working with groups of people can be in figuring out how to work a room and connect with as many people in it as possible. This is where providing treatment becomes much more art than science. A good yoga instructor is aware that he or she is speaking to an entire room full of people and is still able to focus on individuals one at a time, providing assistance as needed. Likewise, effective group therapy involves a kind of choreography that is integrally tied to the facilitators' leadership abilities. A problem in sexual offender treatment is that some providers can view treatment as a privilege in which each client must progress according to a pre-determined timetable, or in accordance with their own beliefs. Ultimately, groups of people and the individuals within them advance at their own pace; a good treatment provider needs to be aware of the progress of each. What never seems to help is blaming the client for their lack of progress. At some point, treatment providers need to own their responsibility. As a colleague, Scott D. Miller, once observed, "If a comedian goes out on stage and no one laughs, he can't just say that the audience was in the pre-contemplative stage of humor."

Yoga instructors evoke experiences within their students. A key area of focus in any yoga class is to notice what is happening in the student's current experience. Experiencing one's self, one's breath, one's body, one's progress, and the subtle changes that occur throughout a class are how the student's learn and advance themselves. Experiential therapists across many decades have understood the importance of using client experience as a vehicle for change. Certainly, cognitive-behavioral approaches (CBT) have good scientific support, but it seems foolish to try to change the thought patterns of people who are only minimally aware that they are thinking to begin with. With research showing the cognitive rigidity of people who are in trouble with the law, it makes sense also to include therapeutic structures for observing one's momentary experience as a platform for true self-monitoring. Traffic problems may serve as an example. Disputing one's own thoughts after another car has cut us off on the highway (and produced an automatic thought of "that idiot just did that on purpose") can be more effective when someone is skilled in observation ("that person just cut me off. This is when I typically get angry. Hey look, there was an angry thought"). In this scenario, the observation made changing the thought far easier. This is not a criticism of CBT as a whole, but rather an observation that treatment providers often rush to the thinking before fully attending to the experience. In yoga, the reverse is true. The experience can long precede any changes one decides to make to one's life.

Yoga instructors seek to deepen the experience and impact of their activities. A common saying is that, "if it hurts, it's not yoga". Yoga is about stretching, not strife. Instead, one advances through experience and practice. This is in sharp contrast to the no-pain-no-gain mentality that can dominate much of western sports. Clearly, the experience of being a client in sexual offender treatment is not intended to be easy, but it is most likely more effective if the treatment provider views this as an experience in which understanding, changing, and enacting a new life takes place at an increasingly deeper level than they have lived before. Likewise, it can be most useful to advance in small, calculated steps than all at once. Treatment is not about going through difficult experiences because that's the expectation or because it's the only way to appreciate the harm of their actions.

Yoga instructors emphasize commonalities as well as differences between people. A colleague's motto is "yoga for every body". This play on words, and the class itself, emphasize that each body is different, even as every person is moving through similar actions. All too often, sexual offender treatment emphasizes the difference between clients and the rest of society (i.e. deviance) and not the commonalities between all human beings. Understanding these commonalities is vital; after all, these commonalities provide a roadmap for reintegration.

Yoga instructors are acutely aware of the changes in psychological state that their students experience in classes. It is easy to forget how many psychological and experiential changes a client can go through

during a group therapy session in sexual offender treatment. For example, a client might reflect on their life, coming to understand it slightly differently, during a group that otherwise focused on another participant. Likewise, another client may move slightly closer towards a more complete understanding of the harm of his actions towards others. It is ironic that treatment providers can view their clients as unready, unable, or unwilling to change when in fact their psychological states can change quite often during the course of an hour. Treatment providers understandably look to their clients to make dramatic changes to their lives, yet when this doesn't happen as fast as possible, it is not difficult to neither notice the changes they are in fact making. Worse, it can be easy to blame the client for not changing at a faster rate. By contrast, yoga instructors deliberately call attention to the subtle changes that take place during a class, often calling attention to the fact that human beings are in a state of near-constant change. Progress in yoga and psychotherapy can each proceed more meaningfully when the participant focuses attention on the small as well as the larger changes.

Yoga instructors practice the same activities they teach. Yoga instructors can't teach effectively without practicing the movements themselves. Many yoga teachers demonstrate a remarkable understanding of their students simply because they've lived the same experience. While sexual offender treatment providers clearly should not engage in antisocial behaviors in order to understand their clients, it makes perfect sense to pay close attention to how they and others manage their thoughts, emotions, behavior, lives, and implicit theories about the world. By understanding the common goals and frustrations of all human beings, treatment providers stand a better chance of reaching and joining up with their clients.

Yoga instructors are aware that much of human communication is non-verbal. Professionals treating people who have abused quickly learn to pay attention to signs of escalation into difficulty managing emotions. Much of this involves client statements and tone of voice, and involves some degree of body language. Yoga instructors notice different signs of stress, including shallow breathing, difficulties with balance, and the lopsided movement of someone experiencing discomfort. Treatment providers often don't know to look at some indications that a client is upset. Paying attention to changes in breathing (which shallows when a person is anxious) and hunching of shoulders (which indicates stress or anxiety) can be helpful indicators of a client's current status. Likewise, simply shifting one's position in a chair often occurs in tandem with a shift in one's psychological state.

Yoga instructors facilitate processes in which empathic attunement occurs. While so much of the fields of treating violence and abuse have focused on empathy, it's easy to forget that there is more to helping people reach goals than being empathic. Certainly, the best treatment providers are not only able to understand the perspective of their clients and how they feel, but to express this understanding accurately. Yoga instructors can be more or less empathic (the capacity for empathy, after all, varies between all people), but there are many ways that they can establish an alliance with their students and foster an alliance between all people in the room. The very fact that everyone in the room is engaged in the same activity helps build a cohesive atmosphere. Yoga instructors not only talk about the subject matter at hand, they can model it, demonstrate elements of it, talk people through movements, and generally facilitate a sense of shared purpose thanks to the fact that everyone is doing the same thing. Accurate perspective-taking is one thing; sharing purpose, action, and state of mind is something else altogether.

Yoga instructors emphasize compassion and acceptance. Many professionals treating violence and abuse view their work as imposing values and limits on their clients, and one state has codified this into their standards (Texas Department of State Health Services, 2010). One author/practitioner (Jenkins, 1994) has asked at what point treatment for abuse becomes abusive itself, and offered suggestions for working with shame without becoming shaming (Jenkins, 2006). While it is clear that violence and abuse are unacceptable, the question of how treatment providers can best remain accepting of and compassionate towards the client in the room remains difficult for many to answer. Depending on the type of yoga they teach and practice, many instructors make acceptance and compassion a mission, and infuse discussion of it into their classes. Unfortunately, research on psychotherapists in general (e.g., Miler, Duncan, Wampold, & Hubble, 2010) and sexual offender treatment providers specifically (Beech & Fordham, 1997) has found that professionals often believe themselves to be more helpful to their clients than their clients do. Perhaps it is time for treatment providers to actively move past talking about subjects such as empathy and respect and seek new ways to demonstrate and model them.

Conclusion

Yoga instructors and professionals treating abuse and violence ultimately share many commonalities. The success of a class or treatment session is ultimately their responsibility and how they interact with their clients can determine much of the success or failure of their efforts. Yoga teachers are easy to dismiss as naïve, hokey, or out of touch with reality. Treatment providers are also easy to dismiss by people who (correctly) point to the chaotic state of outcome research, even as those who complete programs re-offend at lower rates than those who don't. Ultimately, both fields straddle a curious line between art and science.

The high stakes of treating violence and abuse can take their toll on professionals, who often seek out the most recent information on specific treatment techniques rather than how they can best create meaningful impact with their clients. Part of this toll is the fact that it can be difficult to discern whether what the professional is doing is meaningful to the client in building a better life. After all, whether right or wrong, many treatment providers view their clients' feedback with suspicion, as attempts at manipulation or collusion, or as evidence of risk factors for re-offense. Yoga instructors on the other hand, receive immediate feedback from clients, in the form of gratitude, praise, injury, or attrition. Perhaps it is time for treatment providers to find ways to collect ongoing, structured feedback (Prescott & Miller, in preparation; Duncan, Miller, Wampold, & Hubble, 2010).

Finally, all professionals can improve their performance by studying what works elsewhere. The best musicians listen to performances that their own audience would likely disdain. Advertisers study social psychology to create more effective messages. Watching yoga teachers at work is only one of many ways that treatment providers can develop ways to intensify client outcome and experience.

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