

Professional Development

New Possibilities for the Practice of Yoga Therapy in the Mental Healthcare System

By Karen M. Armand

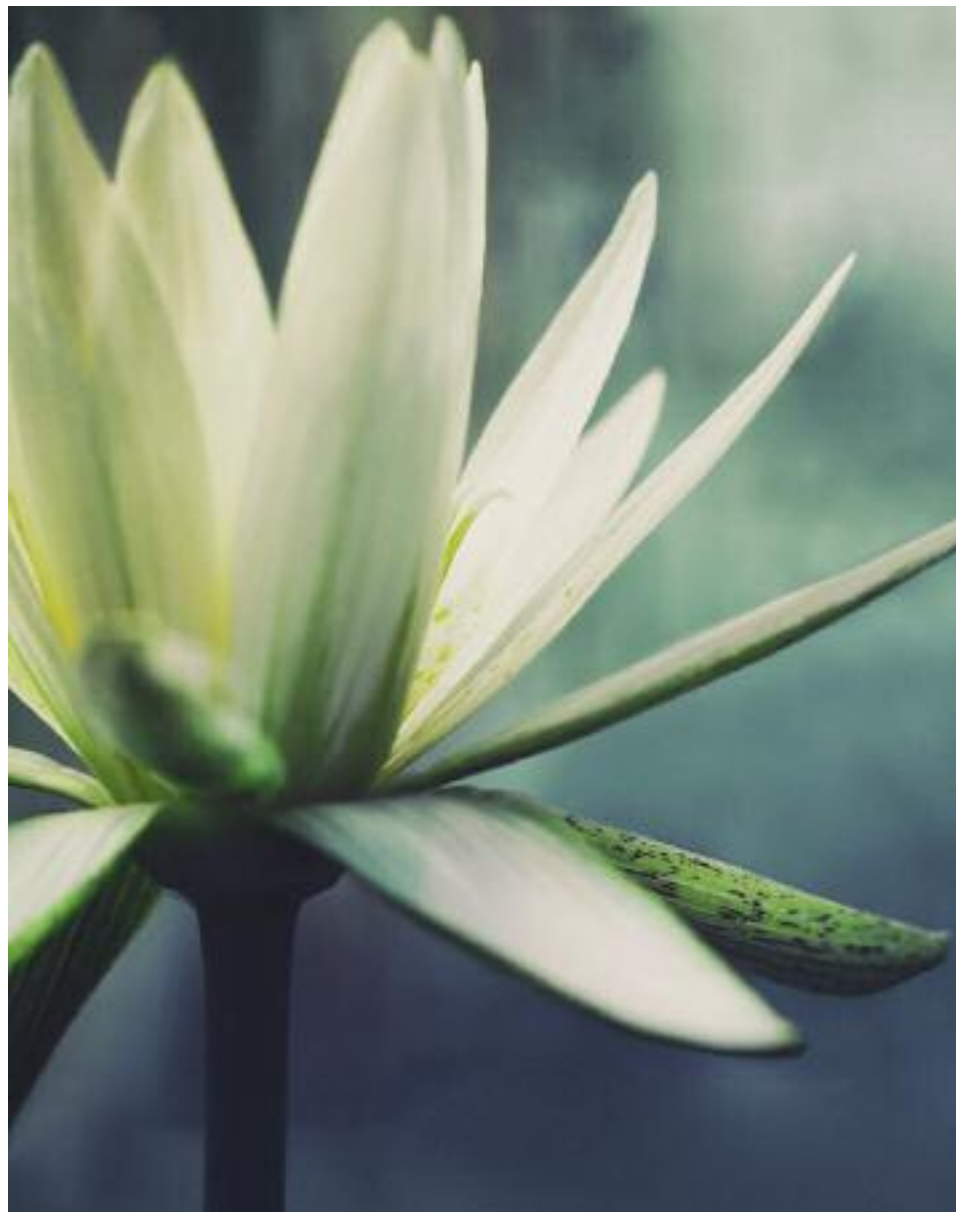
In 1996, after 18 years of yoga practice, I realized that my journey was going to include service to others by combining yoga with mental healthcare. During those 18 years, wherever I practiced yoga, I observed that most people practicing with me were from the middle or upper socioeconomic classes. This observation inspired me, when I became a yoga instructor and then later a yoga therapist, to serve the underserved.

When I decided to pursue a master's degree in clinical mental health counseling and then a PhD in transpersonal psychology, my goal was to bridge the fields of mental health and yoga. Both my professional and personal experiences over the years strengthened my conviction that one of the most effective ways to treat the whole person is by including the body in the healing efforts, not just the mental aspects. My own suffering had been unmitigated by years of talk therapy, but I found a new sense of wellbeing once I found and integrated yoga practices into my life.

Now 20 years later, with the help of the Affordable Care Act, which expanded mandated coverage of mental health and substance use disorder benefits, it is possible for healthcare providers to reach a more diverse audience for all mental healthcare services. Mental healthcare professionals who carry a state license are now able to participate in insurance panels of the carriers offered through the Affordable Care Act,¹ and mental healthcare professionals who are also yoga therapists can offer somatic practices as part of reimbursable treatment. Therefore, it is possible to serve individuals who have never before been offered yoga practices as part of an integrative mental healthcare approach.

Somatic work in the form of yoga therapy is a logical addition to other forms of somatic psychotherapy, such as Neuro-Affective Relational Model or Somatic Experiencing, that are presently being offered as clinical interventions, as well as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (and variations such as Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Behavioral Therapy), which include somatic components and have been successfully applied to various clinical populations.

In the last decade, mindfulness practices have become popular in the field of mental healthcare. These practices are helpful as self-awareness and self-regulation interventions for clients and as self-care tools for clinicians. Mindfulness practices can be impactful to one's lifestyle in very significant ways, although those of us who are eager to share mindfulness practices with our clients sometimes overlook or are unaware of the essential ingredients of steady practice, continuity, contin-



1. To participate, a licensed practitioner must be in private practice (or with a group of therapists) and be accepted by a particular medical insurance provider, such as Regence Blue Cross.

ued guidance, mentorship, and community. Granted, these elements are challenging to include in the usual clinical setting. Nonetheless, the addition of a broader view of mental health through the inclu-

As a clinician, I have found that it is not always necessary to label the work that I offer as somatic, or mindfulness, or yoga. I simply offer practices or interventions that I think will be the most appropriate and helpful for an individual dealing with a particular challenge.

sion of mindfulness is influencing the field of mental health in some profoundly valuable ways.

Personally, I do not think it is necessary to hitch our wagon to the mindfulness trend so strongly. Unfortunately, the term “mindfulness,” which is derived from the Buddhist tradition, as a result of its secularization in the mental healthcare field, has tended to lose some essential elements, especially the spiritual aspect. I suggest that we may better serve our clients by staying true to the eight limbs of our yoga tradition.

Integrating Yoga into Clinical Mental Healthcare Practice

Those of us who integrate the different yogic practices as therapeutic interventions in mental healthcare realize that there are many creative and effective ways to weave together the ancient spiritual practices and the more modern psychological discoveries. As a clinician, I have found that it is not always necessary

I have found that yoga practices almost always enhance the psychotherapy healing process when they are included in treatment; clients are often able to access parts of themselves that are unavailable to them through talk therapy alone.

to label the work that I offer as somatic, or mindfulness, or yoga. I simply offer practices or interventions that I think will be the most appropriate and helpful for an individual dealing with a particular challenge. The client and I collaborate during this process, both observing if a practice is welcome and feels correct and beneficial, then we adjust or modify as neces-

sary. Biofeedback assessment tools are sometimes helpful, but I usually rely on client self-report.

A few of the yoga practices I apply are *asana*, body scanning, breath retention, chanting, visualization, witnessing, and the *bandhas*. It is important to receive professional training both as a clinician and as a yoga therapist in order to skillfully apply such practices in the clinical treatment process. In my private practice, I have gravitated to working with eating disorder, dissociative disorder, depersonalization disorder, and bipolar disorder, as well as other more general disorders such as depression and anxiety. I have found that yoga practices almost always enhance the psychotherapy healing process when they are included in treatment; clients are often able to access parts of themselves that are unavailable to them through talk therapy alone. The benefits of practicing yoga—including improved physiological balance, increased self-awareness, enhanced connection to self and others (including the therapeutic alliance)—all seem to play a role here to varying degrees.

An important professional consideration is that working as a yoga therapist

who focuses on mental health issues means that you need liability insurance that covers the field of your licensure and yoga therapy. If you are integrating these modalities you must be prepared for those inevitable complex cases that show up; you will be called upon many times to practice both psychotherapy and yoga therapy within a given therapy session,

With the efforts of yoga researchers, yoga instructors, many healthcare providers, and all yoga practitioners, the general public now realizes that there are many benefits to practicing yoga. In my experience here in the Pacific Northwest, I'm finding that an increasing number of people are seeking the services from professionals who combine psychotherapy and yoga therapy. In my private practice, I now receive an approximately equal number of requests for psychotherapy as for the combination of yoga therapy and psychotherapy.

I feel honored to be a part of the growing wave of mental healthcare providers who use yoga therapy in their practice. I view the inclusion of yoga therapy in the mental healthcare field as part of the evolution of healthcare in general, and I believe thoughtful preparation is needed for a new paradigm of mental healthcare practice that incorporates the body. Therefore, it is appropriate that the credentialing process is occurring in the field of yoga therapy. We will do well, though, to keep our hearts and minds open to what yoga is always teaching us and to engage in the efforts of self-regulation as a field with as much integrity as we engage in our own self-regulation through deeply engaged yoga practice.

We are presented with an exciting opportunity now that we have growing support from third-party payers. With this support, we have ample space within the mental healthcare system to offer these healing practices to a wider population. As therapists, we can take steps towards bringing the gifts of yoga and yoga therapy deeper into the realm of emotional and spiritual healing. Our purpose is to ultimately understand the nature of the mind through first our own practice and then through serving others. **YTT**

Thanks to Kelly Birch, *Yoga Therapy Today* editor, for much help with this article.



Karen Armand, PhD, is a transpersonal psychotherapist, clinical mental health counselor, and yoga therapist. She is also an adjunct faculty member at Bastyr Center for Natural Health.