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Healing PTSD Through a New Kind of Yoga

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PTSD sufferers experience extreme stress reactions. An example of this behavior is when a car backfires and the person hits the ground as though they are under attack. I teach them how to retrain their extreme response so that they can befriend and regulate their response into being alert, thus repatterning away from their trauma and into their present reality.

One of the first Forrest Yoga basic moves I teach is active feet. This is especially important for people with PTSD because when in fear, or when triggered, they lose touch with being grounded and lose a sense of their strength. They get thrown off balance, literally. So knowing how to activate their feet helps them to reground and reconnect to the strength of their legs and to the reality that they are not being threatened.

Another major principal of Forrest Yoga is deep breathing. As soon as the triggered person registers that they are triggered -- that they have gone into extreme stress reaction -- their next step, after active feet, is to regulate their breathing, which then regulates and destresses the brain and entire nervous system within minutes. And a steady nervous system is important to repatterning the PTSD response, so what registers is a backfiring car rather than an artillery attack or an IED detonation.

A third vitally important Forrest Yoga move is relaxing the neck. This has a profound effect on the entire nervous system. When a PTSD sufferer is triggered, their neck, jaw and brain get very tight. As soon as they can relax their neck, they are able to move out of that highly adrenalized crisis mode into a relaxed, alert intelligence.

Connecting to the core and strengthening the core is another crucial element to healing PTSD. These are two separate actions. Just having six-pack abs is not what I am talking about here. When you get shocked, you lose your connection to your core. So reconnecting to your core is part of disarming the trigger. There are Forrest Yoga poses specifically designed for strengthening the core and massaging the kidneys and adrenal glands, all of which get over-stressed with PTSD.

Another important aspect of Forrest Yoga is building intelligence through feeling the connections of one body part to another. I call this synaptic bridging. Synaptic bridging helps the brain make more intelligent mind-body connections. This means a healthy person will have a much quicker response and balance and be able to assess a situation accurately to make a command decision. An injured person can build a new neurological pathway from the brain to the injured body part, so it can begin to function again. This includes injuries to the body, the mind and the spirit.

Those with PTSD suffer from shame. When the soldier hits the ground because a car back-fired, he feels ashamed by this aberrant behavior. So part of this healing process through Forrest Yoga is moving the shame out. We must recognize and honor that these very same responses are what kept that soldier alive. Befriending that internal response is important, to recognize it and transform it into something more useful. This will allow the soldier to respond in an authentic and appropriate way to whatever life experiences are happening in the present, instead of overreacting with a hyper-response.

This is a process. It takes time. Every time we disarm a trigger by activating our feet, regulating our breathing, relaxing our neck and connecting to our core, the power of the trigger weakens. This is part of the victory over PTSD. Facing any of our triggers is a big challenge. Learning to disarm our triggers helps us to step into our extraordinary selves.

Forrest Yoga provides tools for active military personnel who regularly work under extreme physical and psychological conditions. Recently, I had the honor of working with members of the 48th Fighter Wing (48 FW) of the USAF. Those working in fighter planes and with bombs need agile hands, so I taught them Forrest Yoga wrist stretches to promote that agility. Wearing body armor and bomb suits -- up to 14 hours a day -- sitting in a Humvee or standing on guard, and carrying up to 70 extra pounds of armor tightens the neck, shoulders, back, hips and pelvis and compresses the core. This results in neck and back pain and intestinal problems. Chronic pain compromises the high quality of attention that soldiers need. Here, Forrest Yoga shoulder shrugs, spinal twists and back releases are invaluable. These poses strengthen, loosen and decompress.

Forrest Yoga does not require strength or flexibility; it only requires a willingness to learn how to feel authentically and respond honestly. I developed Forrest Yoga while working through my own injuries from years of physical and sexual abuse and injuries I incurred while training horses for years. I teach students to use Forrest Yoga to find and cleanse the emotional and mental blocks that dictate and limit their lives and to choose freedom instead. One of the core principals of Forrest Yoga is to actively choose life -- to nourish and cherish our precious life and live in a way that we are proud of. This is crucial to our warriors and every human being on the planet.

Ana Forrest's new book, *'Fierce Medicine: Breakthrough Practices to Heal the Body and Ignite the Spirit'* (HarperOne), is available wherever books are sold. To learn more about Forrest Yoga, visit www.forrestyoga.com.





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