



Yoga therapy for trauma & PTSD

Guest: Heather Mason

Disclaimer: The contents of this interview are for informational purposes only and are not intended to be a substitute for professional medical or psychological advice, diagnosis, or treatment. This interview does not provide medical or psychological advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical or psychological condition.

[00:00:10] Alex Howard

Welcome everyone to this session where I'm really happy to be talking with Heather Mason. Firstly, Heather, welcome and thank you for joining me.

Heather Mason

Thank you.

Alex Howard

It's always a pleasure. We go back a long way, actually, don't we? And one of the things I really appreciate about Heather and her work is how it continues to evolve. And so I always have a lot of respect for the teachers and practitioners who are always developing in their own understanding. And I think particularly in this interview we're going to be talking about yoga therapy as an approach for working with trauma. But we're also going to particularly focus on COVID and some of the traumas from the pandemic. I think it's a great example of approaches that we've known work for many years, applied in a new circumstance.

To give people a little bit of Heather's background, Heather Mason is the founder of The Minded Institute, a leading yoga therapy training school in the UK. And the Yoga and Healthcare Alliance, committed to bringing yoga into health systems. She has also taught in medical schools educating future doctors in integrating yoga into treatment, and continues to lecture at various universities on this topic.

Heather is a secretariat for The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Yoga in Society in the UK. She also holds MAs in psychotherapy and Buddhist studies, and an MS in medical physiology. I honestly have no idea how Heather has the time to get as many degrees as she does. And has done extensive study in neuroscience.

Heather, I think a really helpful frame for this would just be to explore a little bit of how you got into this work. What was your journey to yoga therapy? And also I know part of your specialism is working with trauma.

[00:02:03] Heather Mason

Yeah. So I know you know some of this because we've had in depth conversations before. It's interesting each time to tell one's own story. I'm intrigued by the way I express my narrative.

So I suffered from depression, anxiety and PTSD, but I should say, Alex, I wasn't actually aware that I had PTSD until much later in my journey. Because although trauma is a very popular word now, as is PTSD, at the time I was experiencing many of those symptoms it wasn't as commonly spoken about. I mean, we know that it wasn't included in the DSM until 1980 and that's after I was born. Although you said I'm looking younger and younger, I've just expressed my age or somewhat close to it.

So I was suffering from depression and anxiety. I wasn't able to cope anymore with my New York life, and I took off to Asia, and I ended up living in Buddhist monasteries for a number of years and doing very intense meditation practice in the Theravada Buddhist tradition. And I thought to myself, okay, I'm going to go to the UK and do a master's degree in Buddhist studies because I want to become a Buddhist nun and shave all this hair off and live that life permanently. But before I do, I want a little bit of clarity because I have different teachers teaching different things. And that led me to be back in the world.

And I should also note that I had started yoga before that. I started yoga when I was 19 years old, but as an ex gymnast, I took it as kind of a competitive practice. I didn't understand what it was until I also had the Buddhist experience behind me. And then I did my psychotherapy training. And what I started to realize is that yoga was a very interesting inroad for me to describe the value of mindfulness to other people without suggesting what I had done in the past when I first left the monastery, which was go live in silent retreat for 3 years like me, and people would just kind of backup.

So I did a degree in psychotherapy and then fast forward, I was feeling like I didn't want to offer the talking cure as the main mode of healing for other people. It didn't feel authentic to my journey. So I took a sabbatical and I trained as a yoga therapist in India. I had already been a yoga teacher for a while. And I decided that I would really place my attention on using yoga therapy in mental health because I knew that. Plus, I was finishing a degree in psychotherapy. And out of that came The Minded Institute and this 8 week course that I developed for depression and anxiety.

And the first cohort that I brought in, I had a woman who had PTSD, and I actually didn't know what it was. I mean, I knew what it was in an empirical way, but I didn't have an overarching label for an experience that I'd had for many years and had used intensive meditation, and also, to a lesser extent at that time, yoga in order to work with. And she said to me, the Boston Trauma Center is delivering the first and only training currently in the world for yoga, for PTSD. I think you need to go there and train. We don't have anyone else in this country with that training. That was 2008.

And so I went. And you know when you have these epiphany moments about something that already occurred in the past and you've kind of resolved and you're like, I totally had PTSD. And not like life PTSD, not like you slightly identify to me. Oh, okay, so those tremors in my neck, that hyperventilation, those panic attacks, the nightmares, like everything. And I was like, wow, I wish that I had had yoga therapy in the past to have offered a more expedient way of working with my mental health. The meditation was very effective. But when you alter the way you're breathing and moving, the impact on brain functioning is more immediate. And I might have had a slightly easier journey towards healing.

[00:06:30] Alex Howard

And it's interesting as you speak because I resonate in different ways, because in interviewing over 100 experts on trauma over the last few years, one of the things that I came to realize is, actually how much trauma I had, that even through a lot of self development, hadn't really been able to name with the clarity that came. But also having worked as a therapist for nearly 20 years, realizing how much difference it makes to have that clarity and that subtlety of understanding. Because as you say, that can be the difference that makes the difference in someone's prognosis.

Heather Mason

Absolutely. And I think that although with many mental health issues, people feel labeled and even a stigma may be associated with it. I think that when people, by and large, receive a diagnosis of PTSD, it's like a relief because there's a context for this group of symptoms that one has experienced and has been just putting down to a host of different potential character flaws. I know that I had. And suddenly you're like, oh, this is a completely normal response to an abnormal experience. And there are pathways for healing and methodologies that are helpful.

So it's interesting to start reflecting on that and go back to the past like you said.

Alex Howard

So let's then touch a little bit on what's been happening in the last, I guess, 18 months, 2 years or so with the pandemic. And also we should say that I think we're talking about trauma in quite a broad definition of trauma. Obviously, PTSD is a specific example, but there's also the more microtraumas and the more subtle traumas people experience. But say a bit about how you see that trauma having increased during what's been happening with COVID.

Heather Mason

Okay. Yeah and I guess other people in your conference probably speak about the difference between trauma and PTSD and all of that, because there's a part of me that wanted to dive in.

Alex Howard

There's a rabbit hole we could go down.

Heather Mason

Yeah. There are two main reasons, and a host of ancillary ones, that we are seeing this significant increase in traumatic stress.

So the first is the isolation component. Steven Porges, whose work I'm sure you're familiar with, talks about...

Alex Howard

He's also on this conference.

Heather Mason

I thought he might be. This would be his bailiwick.

[00:09:00]

So he talks about the Social Engagement Network which is activated in parasympathetic states and activated also in relationship to hearing other people's voice, eye contact, bodily movements and appropriate touch. And this helps us to manage stressful life events and internal experience. And with the absence of that we are left to our own devices and where something may have not necessarily caused the same level of upset in the past because we could co self regulate, that is lost to many people.

And more of us are living as single people, especially in major cities, than ever before. And so you come home or you're home for weeks on end and there's nobody there to help you regulate your nervous system. And even if it's a minor event, like you said, a minor trauma, over time there's a cumulative effect on the nervous system.

The other, and for me, more tragic issue is, unfortunately you do have an increase in domestic violence. And you both have an increase in actual instances of domestic violence and also the inability to get support which an individual, a child or a partner may previously have had access to.

And then there are the things that tap into pre-existing vulnerabilities, like I've lost my job and my way to earn an income. How am I going to survive? And coming up against that deep sense of vulnerability in the world. Or losing somebody to complicated grief. I know because my mother is actually a trust in the State's Attorney, and very sadly, she has had quite a number of clients that died, and some of the children of those clients could not see their parents, not have a proper funeral, really complicated grief leading to quite severe trauma.

So we've seen a 400% increase in much of the developed world of, I'm just going to make a blanket statement, of mental health issues across the board. And we're in an unprecedented period in history. We have faced, as humanity, so many different kinds of challenges, many horrific ones, but never before have we had this global forced isolation, which is in direct contradiction to our needs as a species. As primates we regulate, in part, through communion with others.

Alex Howard

And I think it's also worth just speaking briefly to, I know you're heavily involved here in the UK, you're involved in setting up The All-Party Parliamentary Group, and looking at how there can be an influence on government policy, that a lot of the enormous amounts of money that have been spent at the pandemic have been very much crisis management. Have been things like testing, have been the furlough scheme, whatever else, but it hasn't even touched the sides of the mental, emotional and the other impacts. Maybe just say a few words about, in my opinion, we're only really seeing the beginnings of the impact on that level.

Heather Mason

Yeah. And actually I do think that the governments of the world are aware of this. Unfortunately, I think that the mental health crisis, in terms of its long-term impact, is far going to supersede the impact that we see directly from COVID related problems.

We already were in a situation where we had pandemic levels of mental health. What is the latest statistic that I saw, which was published in 2017, was just below a billion people, that's many more people than have had COVID.

[00:12:59]

So I do recognize that they are in a crisis management state and you might have seen yesterday there was a statement made that there's a few billion pounds more that is going to be made available on the front lines of the NHS dealing with this situation. But I do think that governments, the UK included, recognize that they are going to have to scramble to find funds.

And I'm really concerned about this because they have used up resources in a way that they haven't in the past. I mean cancer has been often used as an example for this. People have not gotten proper cancer care because the health care systems are stretched, again at unprecedented levels. So the question is, where is that money going to come from that is vital in the health of individuals in the nation?

You might be familiar as well with Lord Layard and his work in health economics and demonstrating that the mental health of a nation is economically really important. And as a result of his report IAPT was created, the improved access to psychological therapy. So I think there's a really strong economic case as well for supporting the mental health of the nation, but we can't make money out of thin air. And I'm concerned, as our many organizations, about where that's going to come from.

Now without going too much down a rabbit hole here, Matt Hancock, before his exit, should we call it an exit?

Alex Howard

For those that live outside of the UK, the British Health Secretary was caught in a somewhat compromising position with the colleague which meant that he exited his job. Is that a polite way of putting it?

Heather Mason

Yes. And you can look at the news if you want to see more about it.

Alex Howard

If you want to see the hand placement which brought particular humor to our office.

Heather Mason

But he was responsible for at least putting his stamp of approval on a plan focusing on more integrative health care. And that was in part influenced by the pandemic. And he's saying that all services need to be more short up around mental and physical health care being offered to patients throughout their journey.

So I think that that came in a very timely place in history. It was influenced by it as well, so it's not just a spontaneous arising. And also Hancock had said, because I was on an All-Party Parliamentary Group where he was speaking before his exit, where he actually said that the need to move to more digital technologies for health care during this pandemic and the vaccine program have led to a level of expedited evolution that we've never before seen. And we should be able to use these advancements to manage some of the other crises we will face. And I really hope that that's going to be possible.

[00:16:01] Alex Howard

So then coming to the potential for yoga therapy to be part... And obviously these things are always a jigsaw of different pieces that are important and that's part of the message that we're very keen to drive with the conference is that different things are important to different people in different ways. But certainly my personal experience and my observation is that yoga therapy is, for many people, the potential to be a very important piece of this jigsaw. Say a little bit around some of the research, and then we can come to some of the mechanisms of how yoga therapy can play a role here.

Heather Mason

So just to clarify, Alex, research has all been done on yoga, not yoga therapy. And I would love to see it done on yoga therapy, but it's more challenging because you're speaking about a more bespoke approach that can be really individuated, and as a result, it's harder.

But in terms of yoga, and also the caveat, I think if we looked at yoga therapy the outcomes would be even stronger. But what we do see across the board in the yoga research around PTSD and/or trauma is improvement in affect regulation, improved quality of life. We see people reporting often improved social interactions as well, which is incredibly important. Trauma often happens within the context of interpersonal interactions. And an overall sense of greater interception, body awareness, and an increased willingness to tap into body sensations and to use that as a mode to understand one's needs better and attend to them.

Alex Howard

You touched a little bit on some of the mechanisms in terms of affecting the nervous system, say a bit more about then the ways in which, and also you spoke to a bit earlier in terms of regulation and how, in a sense, when we're isolated we don't get that, but of course, one can learn to self regulate, so speak a bit to that.

Heather Mason

So actually, that was a big thing that I was focusing on during the pandemic. How can we activate the same kind of social engagement network in the absence of other people through yoga practice? But that's also relevant in a moment when we're with somebody else and we feel overwhelmed.

So one of the cornerstones of PTSD, from a nervous systems perspective, is a high level of sympathetic arousal. Less commonly is too much parasympathetic activity where somebody is in a free state.

So the ways that yoga can help would be a day long conversation with you. So I'll try to be concise here. Slow controlled breathing, which is generally my go to, and you might know that Alex, has a profound effect on the vagus nerve, the major nerve of the parasympathetic system. And it is this nerve that, when under active, we find much more sympathetic arousal. Slow, controlled breathing activates that nerve, and it has pathways that both descend down from the brain to the body, thereby impacting things like our heart rate, and also ascending pathways, in fact more of them. Whereby if we control our breathing, or we hold a movement for a length of time, messaging is sent back up to the brain that can influence brain functioning and help to downgrade a state of anxiety, fear, and potentially freeze as well.

[00:19:38]

And Chris Streeter has even hypothesized, she's one of my favorite yoga researchers, following her research on GABA, a major inhibitory neurotransmitter of the brain, that by activating the vagus through slow controlled breathing, and through holding positions, that we increase the level of GABA we send to the brain, which down grades our fear response.

And she also hypothesized, and there's more validity that's been led to her ideas since she put them fourth in 2012, that actually increasing GABA in the brain repeatedly, actually leads to change in brain structures that may be aberrant in their activity in PTSD or potentially even underdeveloped. Notably the insula cortex, which is responsible for our perception of our body, and how that relates to our sense of self and our prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for our capacity to downgrade threat when we are actually not in an injurious situation.

So that is one of the ways. The other thing is that one of the primary things we see in PTSD is that tapping into body sensation causes retriggering. And yoga allows for the gradual movement into body sensations, and it provides a very clear template for why a sensation is arising, so there can be a decoupling. And the example I classically use is, let's say, very sadly, one has been held against their will down, and somebody had their hands on another person's wrists and they couldn't escape. When the hands are lifted up overhead and there's a throbbing in the wrists as a result of change in how the heart needs to work, it needs to pump much harder, that could trigger a trauma response, a memory of that sensation.

But through yoga you can recontextualize it, and you can say something like, as your hands are up overhead, you might notice a pulsing sensation in your wrists. That is due to the fact that the heart magically assimilates to changing circumstances, and it's not used to pumping blood that high up, so it's needing to work harder. And that sensation you feel is your heart demonstrating its potency and service of your body.

And so we do stuff like that. I mean that was a verbose way of describing it, I wouldn't do that. What happens is the body becomes a new landscape, and over time can also become, not just a vehicle of neutrality, but of safety.

Alex Howard

I think also, just to make a contextual point around this I think as well, that you mentioned in your story that you realized that talking therapies alone weren't really enough to deal with the impacts of PTSD or trauma. And I think one of my observations, as someone who works a lot with talking therapies, is the danger can be that people go round and round in their mind and they understand more cognitively, they can reframe things, but until one actually learns to come into their body and work with the body, you're not dealing with, in a sense, the place where a lot of that is held.

And often, as you put very eloquently, that people's sensations can themselves be a trigger. And so that embodied approach, it strikes me as being very important, but it also requires quite a lot of skill to be able to work with it.

Heather Mason

Yes. Which is why if you do want to work with somebody with trauma, you should have more training. And if you yourself have trauma and you want to use yoga, you should go to somebody that has a

certificate in yoga trauma sensitive or trauma informed or whatever it is, training, and you should have an initial phone call with them and make sure that it feels safe, that initial interaction.

[00:23:39]

And I just want to pick up from something that you said, Alex. It's partially about getting into contact with those sensations and recontextualizing them. And the other piece is around yoga's potential to physiologically alter what's happening in the body and thereby the brain, so that the triggers don't arise in the first place. Because structures like the amygdala, which is high up on the fear cascade, can have a reduction of activity, or we can inhibit their actions.

And in talking therapy or in cognitive approaches, it's very difficult to do that. Whereas information that's sent out from your body that leads to neurochemical changes is by and large more effective. And Bessel van der Kolk said this in his seminal paper, I think published in 2006. The cognitive approaches do not align with the neurological evidence coming out about what is necessary to shift responses to triggers. You do need to use the body.

I'm great at having insights myself. I went to therapy when I was quite young, and it made absolutely no difference to the shaking and overwhelm I would feel when I got triggered and then my inability to deal with the situation. I could speak very eloquently about it later, but so what.

Alex Howard

You're also speaking to approaching, both from a practitioner point of view, but I think also within one's own internal landscape, approaching things with a gentleness, a sensitivity with a respect for what's arising and what's coming up. But maybe just speak to why that's so important?

Heather Mason

Absolutely. And I will speak to why that's so important. And also just say, one of the most important parts of yoga is nonviolence, and we take that very seriously, this kind of loving, gentle approach.

So why is it so important? People's bodies have been compromised and they need to very slowly feel this sense of agency. It's like you're dipping your foot into the water to see if you're going to get burned or not and very gently and slowly determine that it's actually safe to get in there and enjoy and wash yourself, to move forward with the metaphor.

Whereas if you're just faced directly with your body and sensations, you can become, again, retraumatized by that experience. And if somebody else is guiding you, you're in a yoga class and they insist that you move in particular ways and then guide you to experience sensations in your body in specific ways and you're not ready, it's almost like once again, your autonomy is being taken away from you, and that can be quite dangerous.

I actually think that it is incumbent upon the yoga world, the yoga professional world, to have trauma sensitive training at some level. Because about 8% of the population in most developed countries have PTSD, diagnosable PTSD. And an average yoga class has a higher preponderance of people with mental health issues than the population at large. So maybe it's 12% in any given class.

[00:27:09] Alex Howard

It's interesting also, I notice as we're talking about this, we're talking about less of the what to do, like the postures and the asana practice of yoga, and more about the overall, the how, the place from which it's coming from.

And I think it's interesting that for people that perhaps are less experienced in what we're talking about, may be quite surprised because they would be expecting an interview talking about yoga and trauma, that we'd be talking about specific postural practices and sequences. And of course, that's part of it, but actually these pieces, in a sense, if you haven't got these pieces in place first, as you say, you're actually in danger of perpetuating the cycle of trauma as opposed to freeing from it.

Heather Mason

Yeah. And I'm really happy you brought up that point because it isn't like there's any kind of specific pose that an individual can do that's going to resolve their trauma. There are poses that are likely to be more vulnerable for the vast amount of people that have trauma and PTSD, and you might steer away from those. But it really is the sensitivity that you hold, the empowerment factor that you're putting forth for your languaging and supporting exploration, and then the integration of tools throughout the postures and whatever else you're doing, in order to help people regulating their nervous systems.

And for me that's breathing more than anything else. Although I don't introduce breathing with people with PTSD in the very first instance, and I'm making that specific statement, PTSD rather than trauma, because the power of breathing is so vast, and a shift in the nervous system so quick, that sometimes people get frightened, or suppressed memories suddenly percolate up to the surface before there's more grounding.

But I do feel, like you said, that it is those aspects which are vital and the postures are in some way different shapes. And what shape you take isn't as important as the overall bigger canvas.

Alex Howard

Like the place from which you take the shape, almost.

Heather Mason

Yes. That's better.

Alex Howard

For someone that's watching this that has PTSD, obviously the recommendation is to find a trauma informed yoga therapist that can work with them, but if someone doesn't have that person or if someone doesn't feel ready to make that reach out, where could they start to use some of the principles and some of the practices from yoga, at least as the beginning point?

Heather Mason

Well, firstly, I would recommend that they do some reading. So before just saying go and do yoga, I would say there's a book or two from David Emerson on yoga for trauma, and also my book *Yoga And Mental Health*, which is a compilation from different authors of different mental health conditions. There's an interesting chapter on trauma but it's quite technical.

[00:30:14]

Then I would say maybe, loads of people like *Yoga With Adriene*, and actually during the pandemic I did it a few times. She has some great YouTube videos, and even though she's not specifically trauma sensitive, her videos are very gentle and basic. I think she is a good place to start. And I would suggest that you do a few practices with her where you're actually just feeling the touch of your feet on the ground or whatever part of your body is in touch with the ground in every practice. That's a clear sensation and it'll keep the mind a little bit lower down so that you're not ruminating as much. And I think it can be helpful. And she also does short sequences which means that you're not doing too much of a deep dive.

I am probably going to start filming a bunch of things specifically for trauma and anxiety in the next 6 months so you can also look out for that. But in lieu of that, I really like *Yoga With Adriene*. I think there's a reason she's so popular.

Alex Howard

Interesting. And also, I'd love just to speak to, when you and I first started doing... When I first started doing yoga 23 years ago or something, I think you've kept up your practice more than I have in recent years. But back in those days, a yoga class, I'd often be the only guy in the class. I'd often be the only person below 40 in the class. And one of the things that's great that's happened in the last few decades is that there's a massive popularization of yoga. One of the things that's really bad that's happened to yoga in the last few decades is there's been a popularization and a dilution, in a sense, of yoga.

So I think sometimes people can have a sense of, oh, if I'm going to go to a class, for example, I won't have the right clothes or I'm too fat or I can't do this. And there's often quite a lot of self judgment that can arise for people. What would you say to someone in that situation as an invitation and a reassurance that those things are not important?

Heather Mason

Well, I mean, they're not important, I would just say that. But I think that it can be really useful to find a teacher, to just look online and ask if you might be able to speak to that teacher. I can say everything in the world about how body shape doesn't matter, how sangha is lovely, how people are there with the best of intentions, and everybody's going to hug you or ask for hugs if you feel like you want to be touched. But I think really connect with a teacher and see if you feel safe. And when you express to them that maybe you have trauma, or maybe you're just hesitant to come to yoga and nervous, if their responses are indicative of somebody you would feel confident guiding you.

I think the teacher is so much more important to everybody listening than the style. You can have the most brilliant teacher teaching almost any kind of yoga, and they set the tone for the entirety of class. And a good teacher will have students that are more likely to be compassionate, warm, chat after class, and that will just be in the energetic context. You'll feel it in the air, so to speak.

But yoga has never been about gymnastics, and yoga is not about perfectionism. It is a path to connect you more with your body and mind, yourself and the universe and your greater sense of purpose. None of that within it has judgment.

[00:33:53] Alex Howard

I'm really glad you said that. And I'm really glad you said what you said about it's not so much the methodology, it's the teacher because I think the same is true with therapy. It's the therapist that is more important than the therapy that they're practicing.

Heather, I'm mindful of time, but for people that want to find out more about you and your work, tell us the best way to do that.

Heather Mason

So The Minded Institute, you can go to my website, themindedinstitute.com

I also have a [YouTube channel](#). I haven't uploaded any videos recently, but throughout much of the pandemic I was doing these breathing classes almost every other day, and those are freely available for people if they want to practice with me.

And also, I think people may want to check out my book, *Yoga For Mental Health*, which is a compilation that I put together with Kelly Birch with various different leading yoga therapists and psychiatrists in this field.

And for those of you interested, I have now on demand a, what is it? Yoga, the brain and neuroplasticity course or, no, *Trauma And Neuroplasticity*. And another short course that's going to go up in a few weeks on *Yoga For Trauma*, and that's more of a professional training piece. And then I'll be offering a 5 day course, probably after the winter, which I do every 6 months.

That's probably it

Alex Howard

Fantastic. Heather, it's always a pleasure. Thank you so much for your time today.

Heather Mason

Thank you, Alex.