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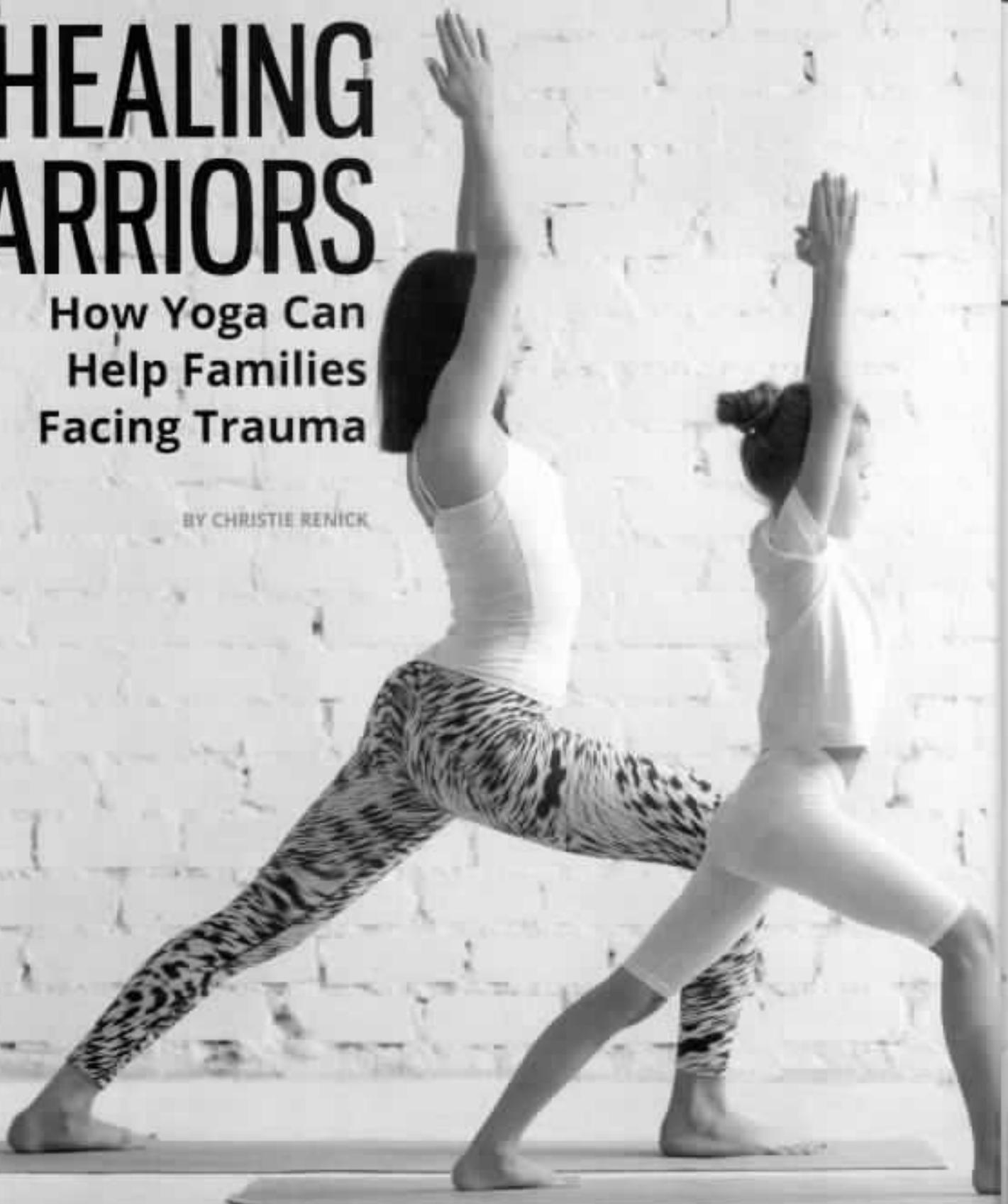
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How Yoga Can
Help Families
Facing Trauma

BY CHRISTIE RENICK



The first thing I noticed in my session with yoga instructor Kirsten Voris was that every movement was presented as an invitation, rather than a command. She encouraged me to consider variations on a movement — rotate my head from side to side, or in circles if that felt right — and to do whatever my body wanted.

Other than the recurring theme of making choices, my session with Voris seemed like any other yoga class. But it wasn't. It was a specific kind of practice called trauma-sensitive yoga, which carries tremendous potential for the field of child welfare.

Voris earned a special certification by doing 300 hours of training through the Trauma Center at the Justice Resource Institute (JRI) in Brookline, Massachusetts, in 2016. Before that, she taught yoga to people enduring secondary trauma through their work with refugees at the United Nations, and she also led yoga classes in jails in the U.S.

The model that Voris is certified in, called TCTSY (Trauma Center Trauma Sensitive Yoga), is the only yoga program listed by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) as an evidence-based practice for the treatment of psychological trauma.

What this means is that TCTSY has been scientifically validated through rigorous evaluation, and the results — its benefits to trauma survivors — can be replicated.

Studies of TCTSY have found that PTSD symptoms were reduced by 33 percent after 10 weeks of the program. Two months after treatment, more than 50 percent of the participants no longer qualified for a PTSD diagnosis. And

many study participants who had histories of childhood abuse reported an overall sense of peaceful embodiment after completing the TCTSY program.

"A lot of yoga teachers can be really focused on how a pose looks, rather than how it feels in your body," Voris said. "This is the opposite of that, and it's what yoga is really all about."

Over the past 15 years or so, the practice of trauma-sensitive yoga has been quietly building in the background while yoga has grown in popularity.

For those caring for kids with abuse and neglect in their histories, "trauma-informed" (or "trauma-sensitive") is a common descriptor for a variety of resources and institutions. Experts have different opinions on what trauma-informed means on a clinical level. But generally it's an awareness of how trauma may have impacted a person's cognitive development, and then making adjustments in how a person is treated in order to account for that impact.

Experts studying how people can heal from trauma have identified movement as a key component, so the prospect of using yoga to help kids is especially promising.

Survivors of abuse often learn to dissociate from their bodies as a means of escape during times of distress. It's a natural flight response when they can't physically get out of harm's way. This can later make it difficult for them to feel sensations like hunger, thirst, pain or even the outside temperature.

Trauma-sensitive yoga encourages people to be present in their bodies and gives them the freedom to make choices, not follow commands, about how to move.

As Voris and I worked through a sequence of poses for about 30 minutes, the only sound was her voice, coaching me along, and a fan to keep the air moving around us.

One of the practitioners to develop TCTSY back in 2003 was David Emerson, a social-worker-turned-yoga-teacher who was curious about how trauma manifests in the physical body and began offering yoga to veterans as well as other groups and individuals.

Emerson later partnered with psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk (also author of "The Body Keeps the Score") at the Trauma Center to begin studying yoga as a trauma treatment.

In 2009, the Trauma Center research program earned the first grant given by the National Institutes of Health to study yoga for adult women with histories of childhood trauma in the form of physical and sexual abuse.

Emerson also co-authored a 2011 book on trauma and yoga called "Overcoming Trauma Through Yoga." In it, the authors discuss how the body, for trauma survivors, can be disconnected from the self, and how the body can even feel like a dangerous place because ultimately it failed to keep the self safe. In this framework, Emerson said, we have to figure out how to make yoga tolerable, how to be present with that sense of danger without fighting against it.

For older trauma survivors who may have lived for years with the idea that something is wrong with them, or that they are broken in some way, learning to understand that their response to trauma was normal can be liberating — and healing.

"It's learning to live in a body that you don't trust in a fundamental way and not pathologizing that. [Understanding that] it's a response, it's normal behavior for an organism to survive. The research is there to support this understanding," Emerson said about the behaviors we develop in response to traumatic stress.

"What we can do is actualize the 'this is normal' non-pathology narrative for a few minutes a day," he said. This is what makes trauma-sensitive yoga so powerful.

Emerson and his associates have worked with children and youth and they have found that offering trauma-sensitive yoga in short, one-on-one sessions, seems effective for this population, according to Emerson.

There are about 200 TCTSY-certified practitioners around the world offering trauma-sensitive yoga, a number of whom are also therapists. TCTSY-certified practitioners follow a strict code of ethics and only work with clients who also have the support of a therapist.

Unless a practitioner is set up to accept health insurance for payment, there's no easy way to cover the cost of yoga for children and families healing from trauma. The price tag per hour is somewhere between the cost of a private yoga session and a therapy session, Emerson estimates.

But motivated caregivers might be able to complete some form of TCT-

SY training themselves, even if they are not clinicians or yoga instructors. And soon, Voris will publish a deck of yoga cards specifically designed to enable adults to do trauma-informed yoga with kids of all ages, following the TCTSY model.

"The deck for kids will include information on how to facilitate so that grandmas, neighbors, all the natural supports a child has can be involved in healing for them," Voris said. "So then it's not just 'Oh, we have to go to the therapist today.' You can, in your house, play a game and it's helping the child. It's a healing modality and you don't have to be a Ph.D. to use it."

This can be especially beneficial for foster parents and kin caregivers looking after children with challenging backgrounds and behaviors.

"It's about doing something together where there's no right or wrong way to do it," Emerson said. "No one is right, both participate, and your experiences are equally valid. The kid can facilitate, too, and ultimately the facilitator is not in charge of the other person."

North Atlantic Books is publishing Voris' kid-friendly yoga deck, and it's expected to be released sometime next year.

A new federal law might also open up more funds to help child welfare agencies deliver the TCTSY model directly to youth, birth families and fos-

ter families. The Family First Prevention Services Act, passed in February of this year, allows states to use federal dollars for evidence-based services that help keep families together, and it lengthens the amount of time states can use federal funds to support family reunification.

Since so many birth parents have their own traumatic histories, a model like TCTSY could help them work through those issues and avoid having their children removed in the first place. But if their children are placed in foster care, TCTSY could help the parents achieve the benchmarks set by the courts to get their children back.

More importantly, it can facilitate healing between the parent and child, potentially helping them build stronger bonds while arming the parent with more internal resources to withstand life's challenges.

"It will be frustrating but you have to try not to control the outcome," Emerson said about caregivers and children doing yoga together. "Being willing to share this vulnerability together is healing for you and the kid."

Caregivers can learn about TCTSY training opportunities and locate TCTSY-certified facilitators online at www.traumasensitiveyoga.com.

Christie Renick is the southwest editor for The Chronicle of Social Change. She's also going through the process to become a licensed foster parent.



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