



Yoga Helps Heal Addiction

According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health about 20.4 million adults in the U.S. needed substance use treatment in 2015. Additionally, abuse of tobacco, alcohol, and illicit drugs costs our nation more than \$700 billion annually in expenses related to crime, lost work productivity and health care.

INTERVIEW WITH ELIZABETH PERRY BY JENN BODNAR

Many don't understand how addiction works. They believe it's a choice by the morally irresponsible who simply lack will power. Wikipedia describes addiction as a medical condition characterized by compulsive engagement in rewarding stimuli, despite adverse consequences.

The recent and rapid evolution of yoga is steering the practice into diverse and unexpected places. Once only celebrated for its mind-body benefits like flexibility, toned muscles and reduced stress, yoga is now becoming standard treatment for numerous conditions like arthritis, chronic back pain, cancer and addiction.

"A former patient explained that he never would've imagined that yoga would be so critical to his relapse prevention," says Elizabeth Perry, Director of Yoga Therapy at Sober College, "but he understood that yoga had connected him with spirituality and a higher power. He said he used yoga as an opportunity to say his prayers because he felt less distracted and more focused in child's pose than he did at church."

Elizabeth Perry has been at Sober College since 2013. She earned her master's degree in depth psychology with emphasis in somatic studies from Pacifica Graduate Institute and is currently attending Pacifica in pursuit of her

Ph.D. Elizabeth has obtained yoga certifications in Power Yoga, Pre/Postnatal Yoga, and has a 500-hour Yoga Therapy Certification. She considers herself a guardian of the process of helping patients make a mind/body/emotional connection that helps to heal trauma, regulate nervous systems, and aid in addiction recovery.



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Jenn Bodnar: How do patients feel about yoga as treatment for addiction?

Elizabeth Perry: Every patient has a different feeling about yoga as treatment for addiction, because every patient has a different experience. Robert Pfeifer, founder of Sober College, told me from day one that young adults are the most challenging. He explained that these patients can sometimes act entitled or think they know what they need to stay sober.

However, once they experience a session, patients say things such as, 'wow, I didn't know I could be so aware of my body.' I recently had a client express to me, 'Elizabeth, I just want to feel. I've been numbing myself with drugs for so long, I'm not even sure I know how to feel anymore.' I find that people are ready to be on a more conscious, healing path; they just need some guidance.

My favorite patients insist they hate yoga and would not benefit from the practice. The reason I love clients like this so much is I realize that they are the ones who are often the most fearful of overwhelming sensations. It's my job to intertwine principles of Somatic Experiencing along with yoga therapy and Ayurvedic principles to help slow down and stabilize their bodies without re-traumatizing them.

For a patient who is terrified of yoga, I spend a lot of time orienting them with their environment. I

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ask them to feel their feet on the ground, notice the mat underneath their back, think of a pleasant image that brings them comfort or joy, open their eyes and turn their head left and right until they can find an image that is interesting, or look at something they are curious about. Usually this process of orientation helps the body stabilize as the parasympathetic nervous system activates. Then, I ask them to observe how their breathing changed and they often notice something different, like it becoming more fluid. I explain that by sitting down, talking with me, and observing their breath, they're already doing yoga. People usually feel relieved that I don't expect them to dive into content about the most awful thing that ever happened to them or contort their body into some sort of an impossible pretzel.

Even though patients sometimes think yoga isn't for them, they're usually more open to the positive aspects when they learn they can take any bit of what they enjoy with them, and I'm okay with that. Every patient feels differently, and we are committed to working with each individual until they're able to find a part that can serve as a resource to aid in regulating their nervous system.

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JB: What is the biggest obstacle in overcoming addiction?

EP: The biggest obstacle in overcoming addiction is stubbornness. Unfortunately, young adults in recovery think they can stay sober without support. People get stuck in a mindset that it's one person against the world, that is simply untrue. I can offer the best yoga therapy in town, but if someone isn't open to trying it, they'll never have the opportunity to enhance their physical and emotional wellbeing.

We offer an entire treatment team to aid in every client's road to recovery. Creating the safe container of a yoga class, or living in a nice house near campus, or having a mentor that truly cares are all part of the support system that Robert created when he founded Sober College. What tends to happen in therapy sessions is that people cognitively learn that they have support, but it takes their bodies a while to catch up.

In traditional psychotherapy, many processes are cognitively unraveled or uncoupled to some degree. We rec-



ognize that it's critical to include the body when working with dual diagnosis clients. If a client doesn't learn how to use their body to cope with anxiety or depression, the healing won't be complete. This is why people can have a wonderful psychotherapist and eventually hit a wall. Trauma is stored in the body and if it's not released, a person may feel hijacked by grief, sadness, or anxiety. As long as a client is open to receiving our support, we can help them receive an abundant amount of strength and support.

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JB: What causes addiction?

EP: Robert described addiction as a brain-based disease when he was alive. I would agree that genetics play a role, and I would elaborate to describe addiction as being a lack of connection. When I hear the stories of people that arrive to treatment, I realize that they were oftentimes doing the best they could with what they had to work with.

Many people haven't discovered their body's wisdom. They don't know how they feel and our society and culture fosters a more addicted or disconnected way of being than we like to admit. Whether it's a smartphone or a deadly drug, many people are addicted to something or someone, and do not know what to do about it.

In my opinion, our society breeds addiction. The media tells us that all we need to feel better is a quick fix of some sort. We are not getting the messages that we need to slow down, become more conscious, increase somatic mindfulness, and be

“Patients Learn How to Use Their Bodies as Resources to **Help Them Feel Better Rather Than Being Storage Traps** to Hold Grief, Pain, and Trauma.”

with our whole self. People do not always have the coping mechanisms that are necessary to deal with upsetting emotions and would rather check out as quickly as possible than move through the sadness and into joy.

Yoga is a perfect practice to help a person connect with the necessary resources to overcome addiction. Gaining skills in mindfulness and somatic intelligence can ultimately lead to greater self-control and acceptance. If people are relieving physical tension and stress from their bodies, they can potentially become more open to receiving benefits from all kinds of therapies in a more receptive way.

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JB: What type of yoga practice do patients participate in?

EP: Patients are offered virtually any style of yoga that appeals to them. Yesterday, I taught a group class that consisted of three styles of yoga: restorative, therapeutic, and power yoga. I don't believe that one style is appropriate for everyone, and even if a class is doing the same style, with all of the modifications for injuries and emotional states, it's going to look a lot different than a typical yoga studio class.

For example, yesterday there was a young man in a class of six people with a neck injury; he was barely able to hold up his head. I put him in a restorative posture with support under his neck and a bolster under his knees. By the end of class, he was more relaxed, in less pain, and breathing easier. He was shocked to learn that laying in a really comfortable posture and relaxing was his yoga practice for the day, and I told him he's welcome to do that any time he is hurting. While this young man stayed in restorative postures for the duration of class, the other five men in class were practicing different postures and breathing techniques that were appropriate for them.

My primary teaching style is Gary Kraftsow's viniyoga therapy. What people don't understand about yoga therapy is that it can still be a fun vinyasa flowing yoga that links breath with movement. However, it's more gentle than the hip-hop yoga styles being practiced in studios.

Patients often arrive and get clean and sober only to discover that they're in pain. Abusing alcohol and drugs often leads to accidents and injuries that were not properly rehabilitated or healed. It's my job to offer gentle approaches to movement and stillness that will allow healing and stabilization rather than causing harm or injury. I'm always working with clients to help them learn how to take care of their bodies.



Sometimes people want power yoga and I'm happy to offer that as well. Teaching someone to do sun salutations or go upside down in a handstand for the first time can build confidence. For a person to overcome fear and self-doubt by attempting an uncomfortable posture, it might be what it takes to help them overcome their fear of sobriety. I'm always very proud of clients who step out of their comfort zone and try something new.

We also utilize meditation to help clients slow down and arrive in the present moment. I lead many guided meditations and work with individuals to help them find a meditation practice that works for them. The most important piece of information that clients are relieved to learn is that meditation can be anything for any amount of time. They love it when I say things like, 'You don't need to meditate for days in the wilderness to have a meditation practice. A 60-second meditation is a great start.'

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JB: Why do you think yoga is a good tool for overcoming addiction?

EP: Yoga is an essential tool for overcoming addiction for many reasons. The first has to do with impulse control. When a person becomes more aware of the way they feel in their body, their personal levels of discipline are increased. I've had so many clients tell me that they do things without realizing they are doing them. Just the other day someone told me they get in the car and drive places all the time and don't remember how they got there. When personal awareness and somatic mindfulness levels are increased, choices can be better thought out rather than impulsive.

Another reason yoga is critical to addiction recovery is because it allows for a person to learn to feel the support provided by their very own body. It's truly a miracle for someone who has been resuscitated back to life after a heroin overdose to be in yoga therapy. Our bodies are resilient and have an incredible ability to heal.

Sometimes patients with legal problems, strained family relationships, or even having survived periods of homelessness. I have had them tell me that they have ruined their life. I respond to them by saying we are going to take the recovery process one breath at a time. I explain that as their yoga therapist, I am part of their support system and they are not alone.

Patients learn how to use their bodies as resources to help them feel better rather than being storage traps to hold grief, pain, and trauma. On the simplest level, when a person feels better, it decreases the chances of relapse. Practicing yoga also helps a person live more in the present moment versus dwelling on past mistakes or where the future is going.

On a deeply personal level, I believe that Robert Pfeifer is one of the best things that ever happened to the treatment of addiction. He realized that therapy extends beyond a typical clinical setting, and he knew that the only way to stay sober is to support the mind/body unification and psychosomatically address and tend to the brain-based disease of addiction. I love my clients, and I love the work that I do at Sober College. We are doing our best to make a positive difference in the world, and we get to see the transformations on a daily basis in the work that we do.