

Yoga: A breath of relief for Hurricane Katrina refugees

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Stress-reducing programs relieve trauma symptoms, perhaps by stimulating the vagus nerve.

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Hurricane Katrina survivors need help rebuilding their mental health as well as their homes and lives. That's why 17 teachers trained in a disaster-specific yoga breathing intervention traveled South just days after the storm.

Yoga-based trauma relief programs are a cost-effective way to rapidly relieve posttraumatic stress symptoms and depression in populations affected by disasters. Experience from the 2001 World Trade Center attacks and December 2004 tsunami show these programs can help patients of all ages, with minimal risk.

This article describes two programs shown to ameliorate anxiety, depression, insomnia, hyperarousal and re-experiencing (flashbacks) in survivors of war, terrorism, and natural disasters. We present a neurophysiologic model to explain how yoga breathing could have these effects.

Box 1

Yoga breathing: Disaster teams aid hurricane victims, many others

Two world-wide, nonprofit, humanitarian organizations that originated in India—the Art of Living Foundation (AOLF) and International Association for Human Values (IAHV)—have provided disaster and stress relief programs in 146 countries.

Among Hurricane Katrina survivors, AOLF volunteers were offering courses for adults and children in Baton Rouge, LA, Houston and Austin, TX, when this article went to press in mid-September. Child evacuees who took a yoga breath course Sept. 7 at the Austin convention center said they felt less tense and less aggressive by the second or third day of the course. Their sleep and energy improved, and their writings reflected a more positive self-image.

Sudarshan Kriya yoga (SKY) and Breath Water Sound (BWS) teachers are setting up programs in other cities receiving large numbers of evacuees, including San Antonio, TX, Miami, FL, Washington, DC, Perth Amboy, NJ, and St. Louis, MO.

A history of helping. SKY and BWS courses are taught by yoga instructors trained and certified by the AOLF, which offers programs in most major U.S. cities. Fees for regular courses and private donations support the free programs offered to disaster survivors and impoverished populations.

