

Stretching the mind // Phoenix Rising sessions link yoga, psychotherapy

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Think of it as the therapist's couch turned yoga mat.

At Free Spirit Yoga in Derry Twp., yoga teacher Stephanie Trump uses Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy to help her clients connect physical feeling with life issues.

A mixture of yoga postures and body-mind psychology, Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy creates a consciousness-centric approach to self-exploration.

"For many, our day-to-day lives are about doing, doing, doing. Yoga gives us the opportunity to simply be ... to be present to ourselves. Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy allows us to be present to ourselves in an even more deep and profound way," Trump said.

Through a series of guided stretches and basic questions, Trump leads participants in connecting the sensations their bodies feel to their emotions and thoughts.

"Our body has been with us through everything we've gone through," Trump said, "We can talk about [our problems] all we want, but our bodies can hold onto that and cause [unease]."

Part of the purpose of Phoenix Rising is to create a greater awareness of the mental issues behind some physical unease.

Participants come for a variety of reasons -- ranging from those going through transitional periods to those searching for clarity and people dealing with health issues.

As an occupational therapist, Holly Dietz of Palmyra was well aware of the connection between physical discomfort and life issues. "I [was] aware that when I'm upset, certain muscle groups would get sore," she said, "So [yoga therapy] made sense."

Though she began with the yoga massage, Dietz soon participated in a Phoenix Rising session. Dietz, who describes herself as overweight, credits an eight-week course of sessions with "tun[ing] me into feeling my body physically and dealing with the weight issue."

A typical session

The process begins with the act of centering. Participants close their eyes and focus on breathing, then an awareness of their physical body, and finally take note of their thoughts.

The practitioner then moves the participants into various yoga stretches, periodically asking the participant what is happening with their body to keep them in the present moment.

All the assisted postures are determined by the participant's responses. "It is hard to explain what happens in a session because each session is unique and personal to the person receiving the session," Trump said. "No session looks quite the same as another because it is all about what is happening with the [participant] in that moment."



Photos by Christine Baker, The Patriot-News

Instructor Stephanie Trump of Free Spirit Yoga in Derry Twp. guides Diane Lenovich of Hershey in a yoga exercise designed to help clients just ... be. (As opposed to doing, doing!) Here, they demonstrate a Leg Lift Pose.

A PRIVATE POSE

You do not have to practice yoga to participate in a Free Spirit Yoga session. The studio is a simple private affair, with relaxing dimmed lighting and large yoga mat. Only the practitioner and participant are present during a session to ensure a safe environment for disclosure.

A DEEP CONNECTION

Free Spirit Yoga stretches can trigger emotional responses. Clients have been known to cry, laugh or yawn in response to yoga positions.

Stretches can trigger emotional responses. Trump has seen clients begin to cry, laugh, and yawn in response to the yoga positions. “These experiences run the range of really making a deep connection to their physical body for the first time, to having a profound awareness and release of things that have been held in their body,” Trump said.

To encourage clients to process their responses, Trump practices emphatic listening -- repeating their verbal responses back to them. She believes that the very presence of another person affirms the revelations clients have during their sessions. “My job as a practitioner is to provide a safe space for the client to have their own experience. I am, in essence, their witness and my presence serves as a way to validate whatever their experience is,” she said.

The final stage of the process is integration, where the practitioner helps the participant trace back through all the revelations they received during the entire process. Sometimes unexpected issues surface or participants are made aware of issues they did not know existed.

“You go in expecting this issue to come up because it’s the biggest issue in your life, but then something else will come up,” Dietz said.

Trump guides clients to an action they can take to deal with the issues revealed during the session. “I lead you through the steps so you can pull it all together and leave knowing ‘This is what I need to do.’” She encourages clients to take time to digest what they have learned through journaling or reflection.

Beyond the yoga session

Trump believes Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy is an excellent compliment to psychotherapy.

“Awareness that is gained in a Phoenix Rising session can be further processed and discussed with the help of a psychotherapist,” she said.

Though the concept of mind and body connection finds its roots in psychology, there is a clear distinction between yoga therapy and traditional psychotherapy.

“Psychotherapists are typically not supposed to touch clients during a session in order to keep the boundary between client and therapist crystal clear,” Trump explained. “Phoenix Rising at its core is a body-centered approach.

“It is all about moving and stretching a person’s body in order to access deeper awareness so we are obviously going to be touching a person when we provide a session.”

Additionally, practitioners avoid asking questions and talking about situations with participants, as a psychotherapist would, and instead focus on keeping the participant cognizant of the moment they are in.

Free Spirit Yoga also offers group sessions of Phoenix Rising as well as yoga massage, reflexology and yoga classes.



Knee Down Twist Pose



Cobra Pose



Modified Locust Pose