WELCOME!

Welcome to Leave it on the Mat’s first newsletter! We are pleased to introduce you to Leave it on the Mat, a Study on the Impact of Yoga on Violence Survivor Well-being. The study is a collaboration of University of Minnesota researchers and the Domestic Abuse Project (DAP). Together, we work with women who have experienced or are currently experiencing intimate partner violence (IPV). Once a week, study participants participate in group therapy and afterwards partake in a 30 minute session of trauma sensitive yoga (combination of breathing techniques, meditation for relaxation, and physical postures).

The overall project aim of Leave it on the Mat is to test the feasibility of a yoga intervention designed to improve the mental and cardio-metabolic health of women receiving group therapy for IPV. Specifically, we are studying the effectiveness of the recruitment process, the level of acceptance of the yoga intervention, and the study participants’ perceptions about the safety and utility of participating in this study. While the study is still too small to detect major differences in participant mental and cardio-metabolic health between intervention and control groups, we are beginning to monitor changes over time to ensure that we can do so accurately and reliably. The mental health outcomes being studied are depressive symptoms, anxiety, and PTSD. The cardio-metabolic outcomes studied are cardiovascular disease risk score, blood pressure, body mass index, waist circumference, C-reactive protein (measure of inflammation), HbA1c (marker of glucose metabolism), and health behaviors.

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA AND DOMESTIC ABUSE PROJECT: CREATING A PARTNERSHIP

Leave it on the Mat was designed using a community-based participatory research approach (CBPR). This means that DAP and university investigators worked collectively to design the study focusing on the strengths that each partner brings to the table. Power and decision making are equally shared. This collaborative approach has ensured that the intervention is well-suited to the environment in which women seek group therapy and
WHY YOGA?

Yoga is a natural extension of existing breathing and relaxation exercises already incorporated in DAP’s group therapy.

Because IPV survivors often struggle to integrate their traumatic experiences into both their mind and body, yoga allows survivors to focus on and reconnect to their bodies.

Exercises are low impact, consisting of light stretching, breathing, and holding postures for short periods of time.

The yoga instructor provides suggestions for modifications to accommodate a variety of physical abilities.

The yoga is incorporated to the final half hour of the group, and provides a space for the women to process the group content emotionally and physically.

Yoga has also shown to have health benefits that are compatible with the goals of DAP such as:

- Improvement in emotional regulation;
- Decreases in perceived stress and symptoms of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); and
- Improvement in feelings of self-efficacy.

Yoga also entails few side effects, is low cost, and requires little equipment making it a sustainable practice for group therapy.

SERVING THOSE AFFECTED

DAP’s approach to IPV is holistic and comprehensive. Its’ approach includes therapy, advocacy, as well as community outreach and education.

Clients come to DAP from a wide array of backgrounds, cultures, and experiences. Some clients come based on the requirements of their Child Protection Services (CPS) worker or Probation Officer (PO), while others are self-referred. Many women attend programming while currently in an abusive relationship, while others are no longer with their abusive partners, and some may have experienced the abuse years ago. Some women have experienced physical abuse, while others primarily report emotional or psychological abuse. The diversity of the clientele represents the variety of ways in which DAP educates the community about domestic abuse as well as the services offered to end the cycle of abuse and help those affected heal from their experiences.

DAP’s mission is to help the whole family heal from the effects of domestic violence. DAP works with men who use abusive behavior, women victims/survivors, and their children who witness the abuse. DAP believes that to truly break the cycle, all those affected should be able to seek support in a safe environment.

FINDINGS TO DATE

The first phase of our pilot was to work with DAP therapists to modify the therapeutic schedule to accommodate the yoga and the questionnaire we are using to monitor participant health. This phase included one control group and one intervention group. For the intervention group, the 40 minute session was led by a certified yoga instructor, after an hour and a half of group therapy. The control group received typical group therapy. Both groups were 12 weeks long.

Questionnaires were administered at baseline and weekly throughout the course of the Aftercare Groups. The questionnaires incorporate validated scales to measure the participants’ mental health, exposure to IPV, social support networks, self-care, and reaction to study participation.

Findings:

- The study successfully recruited 85% (17/20) of those screened eligible (9 control, 8 intervention).
- Loss to follow up was 30% (5/17).
- No one reported emotional or physical harm.
- The yoga was reported to be an appropriate level of difficulty, and a meaningful contribution to group therapy.
- 17% (2/12) thought the study questionnaire raised intense emotional issues for them
- 92% (11/12) would participate again if they knew in advance what the study would be like.
- All participants thought the study was personally and socially beneficial (12/12).

NEXT STEPS: BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS

At present, we are building partnerships to expand the pilot to up to two additional sites. These partnerships will be necessary to ensure that we can scale up the study and include participants throughout the Twin Cities Metro Area.

We have recently completed a 12 week intervention group at Alexandra House. Alexandra House is a non-profit located in Blaine, MN, that works to end domestic and sexual violence. Their services include a shelter, group, and individual therapy, as well as advocacy.

Alexandra House therapist, Lauren Robbins, MS, LPC, LADC, teamed up with DAP therapist, Hannah Michel, LGSW, to facilitate the domestic violence group on-site at Alexandra House. Jessa Walters, a professional yoga instructor, led the yoga activities at the end of each session.

The group consisted of Alexandra House clients, but utilized DAP’s Women’s Group Manual for psycho-education curriculum in order to closely align with previous groups conducted within the study.

We have very recently begun a collaboration with Cornerstone, to replicate the intervention group at their Bloomington facility. Cornerstone is another non-profit committed to ending domestic violence, and has several locations throughout the Twin Cities. They have a wide array of services, including emergency services, a crisis line, therapy, education, advocacy, housing resources and legal resources.
In 2006, 36,010 women and children received advocacy services for battered women. Office of Justice Programs, Minnesota Department of Public Safety.

MN deaths due to domestic abuse in 2013: 25 women, 7 men, and 6 family members/friends. MN For Battered Women 2013 Femicide Report.


UPCOMING EVENTS

April 25, 2014: Workshop Integrating Yoga into Group Therapy for Trauma for the International Association of Social Work Groups.


May 14, 2014: Project update to Therapy Team at DAP.

June 26, 2014: Presentation at Centro on Trauma-Informed Yoga.

September 9, 2014: Presentation Integrating Yoga into Group Therapy for Trauma: A Healing Path at the 19th International Conference & Summit on Violence, Abuse & Trauma in San Diego, California.

MEET THE TEAM

Cari Jo Clark, MPH, ScD (co-Principal Investigator of the study) is Assistant Professor in the Department of Medicine, and Adjunct Assistant Professor in Division of Epidemiology and Community Health at the University of Minnesota. Dr. Clark’s research interests are both domestic and global. Her program of research focuses on the linkages between psychosocial stress and chronic disease, with a special emphasis on the long term health effects of exposure to violence. Dr. Clark is committed to community engaged research as an effective means of translating science into health-promoting action.

Angela Lewis-Dmello, MSW, LICSW (co-Principal Investigator of the study) is the Associate Director of Therapy Services and Supervisor of Youth Services at Domestic Abuse Project. At DAP she has provided group and individual therapy to children and adolescents who have witnessed domestic violence and adolescent and adult men who use abusive behavior. Angela also provides clinical training and supervision to staff and intern therapists. Angela is a Community Adjunct Faculty member at the University of Minnesota School of Social Work and Chair of the Social Policy Action Network Committee through the Minnesota chapter of the National Association of Social Workers.

Deena Anders, MPA (Co-Investigator of the study) is the Director of Operations for the Domestic Abuse Project in Minneapolis. She also is the Project Director for the Fourth Judicial District Domestic Fatality Review Team, a collaboration of private, public and non-profit organizations charged with developing recommendations for improvements to policy and practice that enhance identification, intervention, and prevention efforts. Anders holds a bachelor’s degree in English from the University of Minnesota and a master’s degree in public affairs with a concentration in human rights from the Humphrey School.

Anne Archbold, MSW, LISW (Group Therapist) is the Supervisor of Women’s Services and is a women’s group therapist at DAP for the yoga study.

Hannah Michel, MSW, LGSW (Study Coordinator) is a Women’s Therapist at DAP and is currently co-facilitating a women’s group with Alexandra House for the yoga study.

Margie Weaver (Yoga Instructor) is a local full-time, self-employed yoga instructor with a bent toward bringing the many benefits of yoga to those who might not otherwise have access.

Jessa Walters, MA, RYT (Yoga Instructor) has a background in Somatic Experiencing (SE), and offers yoga/meditation instruction in the Twin Cities and guides an annual Yoga and Writing for Self-Discovery Retreat in Bali each February.

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