

Healing invisible wounds with yoga

HEALTH HERO HIGHLIGHT

NIKKI PANFIL,
Manager Naperville North
CorePower Yoga, shares her
intimate story of unimaginable
struggle and abuse in her teen
years and how she took back
control of her physical and
mental health through the
healing power of meditation
and yoga.

You speak openly about your journey and battle with PTSD. Can you share some of the background and how you found yoga?

So, I first found out that I had PTSD about a year and a half into the symptoms. At the time I was 18 and attending Illinois State. Doctors, teachers, and school counselors kept telling me that it was my “freshmen” year and this stress was normal. However, no one took the time to actually listen.

I had experienced about 14 years of domestic abuse, neglect, and already at that point in my life had been sexually assaulted more times than I can count. I remember my first flashback, on the Metra going into the city for ▶



work during the summer. I started to have vivid images and sounds take over, and before I knew it I was in the fetal position clutching my head, rocking back and forth to make it go away. I tried to push what I thought were extreme emotions out of my head. Then, the night terrors began where I would wake up screaming and kicking - thinking someone was trying to kill me or hurt me. I stopped sleeping, and started hearing voices. My hair started falling out in large chunks, I couldn't eat, and I would have back-to-back panic attacks from 2am-8am every day. This went on for a long time, with multiple ambulances to the ER thinking I was dying. The doctors told me my vitals were normal, gave me Ativan and told me to go home.

Rewind a little bit further, in my final year of high school I became addicted to hard core drugs to numb out the pain. In college it became worse. I would drink a case of beer and two bottles of vodka by myself everyday — and that was only on the weekdays. I was hooked on 80mg oxytocin and heroin. I wanted to blur out all the pain, the visions, the voices, the fear, the disgust, and humiliation.

After I left Illinois State University it took me another two years to clean up my act. I had handfuls of people die around me from the same drugs. I knew I would either die that way too or I had to fight. I cannot explain how low I was at that point in my life. If you can imagine sitting at the bottom of a very deep well, and looking up only to see how dauntingly high the blip of sun was, changing felt impossible. But I knew I was going to die, I could feel it in every fiber of my being. I also knew, that I was meant for more than this.

One day, I cut off all contact with my “friends”, deleted all social media accounts, left my ex, and moved in with my grandma, who was my one consistent rock in my life. She didn't judge me for who I was or my struggles, and no matter how many times I failed at being sober she would be there to pick up the pieces. I finally found a local therapist, and after many sessions and an examination she asked me if I knew what Post Traumatic Stress Disorder was... I thought only veterans could experience PTSD. It turns out many women and children from traumatic backgrounds experience this as well.

The good news was that I was not schizophrenic or bipolar. I was RELIEVED to find out what it really was



because I had a starting place. I continued therapy and did my best to stay clean, because that was the only way we could monitor my mood swings and cognitive stability.

With enough support, I enrolled at Joliet Junior College and signed up for a few classes. I told myself to start small.

This is where my life changed, I ran into a 65 year old woman named Ellen Roth. She was beautiful, captivating, and a deep thinker (still is). She became my mentor and best friend. I would go stay long periods in Iowa with her, meditating and nursing myself back to sanity. I spent hours sketching large charcoal pictures to get the visions out of my head and hiding in the forest. Meditation was the first time in my entire life where I found peace. Surprisingly enough to me, it also started to decrease the cortisol levels in my body...allowing me to bend my knee past 90 degrees which I had not been able to do in over two years. Meditation gifted me my mobility again.

As my life began to shift I started to realize that “more” was attainable and that I could rewrite my destiny. I began taking accountability of other circumstances in my life where I was also self sabotaging my efforts.

I quit my bartending gig, started working at a spa, tried yoga for the first time, and was introduced to Reiki, a Japanese healing art that involves energy manipulation through laying of the hands. It helps remove emotional and physical blockages in your body, so that you are able to break negative cycles in your life.

After a few sessions, I knew I needed

to become certified. I attained my Usui Reiki I & II levels, and began practicing my Reiki every day. So it seems that I came into yoga backwards, according to the yogic 8 limbed path. Typically it's the body first (asana), then we find pranayama (breath) and dhyana (meditation)...I started at one end and worked my way to the physical body. I always found this interesting, and hypothesize that this could be due to the dissociative states I had with my physical self.

So, yoga was the first mobile activity I was able to do since before my ACL repair. This is important, because when the body does not move, energy becomes stuck, leading to blockages and imbalance in our spirit and life. Even though meditation was a pivotal point for me, yoga saved my life. It gave me meaning, and reminded me who I was. It helped me look at myself in the mirror with a straight gaze, for the first time since I was twelve. I was starting to gather tools to not only survive life, but thrive.

How has yoga changed your life?

Yoga has taught me how to love myself and see my worth. It has also enabled me to use my prefrontal cortex as opposed to the amygdala. Due to the trauma my body has been through, I have a very sensitive fight or flight response; essentially, my adrenal glands are overactive. This would frequently lead to fits of rage, like most wouldn't believe.

Because of yoga I was able to go to school and finish up my bachelor's degree stay out of jail, hold a steady job after being diagnosed with PTSD, ►

and be vulnerable enough to make friends. It also gave me a community of people that let me know it was okay to be who I was, to struggle, and to keep trying.

Another big impact yoga had was developing and understanding awareness of my thoughts. In addition to everything I was dealing with I had developed a pretty severe eating disorder which started when I was 12. I still do not know what my body looks like to other people, but I chose to love myself regardless. Yoga taught me this, this true self love; one without conditions. Through most of high school I would limit myself to a 1000 calories a day and workout for 4 hours....yoga showed me a different view of my body, how it is a vessel that needs to be sustained not ruined and despoised.

As my practice taught me compassion, I was able to reconnect with others and have a greater tolerance towards those who hurt me or misunderstood me.

How do you think your life might have looked if you hadn't found yoga?

I honestly believe that I would be dead. Yoga = life. I know that is said by most of us as a joke, but for me it's reality.

I still struggle with bouts of PTSD episodes, especially during stress. I also battle my eating disorder and body dysmorphia as well as cravings to numb my emotions.

If I didn't have this tool, I would relapse. Sometimes the pain is too much, but I think of the rest of the world in pain, the lives that I have touched and that have touched my spirit, and for them I simply can't give up.

I believe that I would be a very hurt, guarded soul, wasting my potential.

Tell me about your passion around the discussion of self-worth and the negative or limiting self talk we are all guilty of.

Self worth and self talk are important elements in my life, because I was completely unaware of these concepts outside of psychological textbooks. I want people to understand, these words are not cliché.



Nikki Panfil with her stepson.

The world and reality we live in, was created by our thoughts, which means there is a greater responsibility to be mindful of our conscious and subconscious streams of thinking.

Self worth empowers me to no longer allow other people or life events to control how I feel or think about myself. For years I was told I was ugly, a piece of sh*t, a fat slob - the list goes on. Basically, I was told I can't or I am not good enough. So, when I would go to attempt something like going to college or trying out for sports or buying a prom dress I would shut myself down. Why get my hopes up? I wasn't good enough, right? No.

There is not one person in this world who knows your truth, better than yourself. I am passionate about sharing this with people around me, because I want them to understand they hold the power. It does not matter what names you are called, who people think you are, it matters what you do.

Negative self-talk, that is catalyst to poor self worth. It used to hold me back from trying new things, from dancing to my favorite song, from achieving what I felt I could have been capable of. On my mat, it's me and my thoughts, and I listen to them as I move through class. Every time I pick up on self deprecating internal comments I stop, shut them down,

and make myself do the opposite of what those thoughts are saying. My yoga proves that I can change how I talk to myself and how I view myself.

What motivates you?

I have a few motivators. Internally, there is an essence that has been guiding me through most of my life. A sensation of a greater purpose. However, before I met my fiancé and stepson, I never followed that pull, because I didn't believe in myself. I would say my biggest motivator is my stepson. I want to show him what it is like to be a good person, and to follow your dreams. I want him to understand how amazing, intelligent, and capable he is. Mostly, I want him to have the type of life I never had a chance at, especially in childhood. Therefore, what pushes me past my fear, is the want to be a positive role model in his life. My fiancé is just as important to me, he has loved me despite the scars and baggage. He has been there for some of my darkest, most humiliating moments. Both of these men believe in me, and I think that's what I needed most in this life, for someone to believe in me.

What's one lesson you learned in life you would share with others and why?

I have learned a lot of lessons these past eight years during healing...maybe the one that sticks out the most is what you think you are, you are. If I think I will fail, I will; self-fulfilling prophecy. It is okay and normal to have doubts and fear, but true strength and courage is moving forward despite those emotions. For a long time I thought of myself as violent, worthless, impulsive, ugly, fat...you get the point. Now, even in moments of doubt I imagine myself to be loving, accepting, contemplative, understanding, and beautiful. It is never too late to change the way you think of yourself or to re-draw boundaries in your life to make people respect your needs.

If I could tell every young girl out there to stay strong, no matter what they feel is crushing them, and to keep in mind there is always more to life. Never settle.

We talk a lot at Ask Dr. Nandi about how having a tribe of friends, family and a community of like-minded people affects your health and happiness. What impact has your tribe had on your journey?

Ahh, my tribe - CorePower Yoga. I love these people to death. My mentors ▶

allowed me to be imperfect, and helped cultivate my personal growth. My fellow teachers and all my students are so loving, caring, and open that it gives me the daily inspiration to live my truth. Before I found this place and community of people I thought I would never tell a soul about:

- being a drug addict
- my eating disorder
- my PTSD
- my past

And yet, I now share these things often, and with strangers. I am able to love my full self, because of these people. Not just the good parts, the well-behaved parts, but the entirety of what made me, me.

The greatest impact, is that I no longer feel shame for my pain. I feel accepted.

Tell us what you are up to now?

Well, I just graduated last weekend and am thoroughly enjoying managing the CorePower Yoga Naperville North studio. I am planning my wedding for the fall, and really focusing on enhancing my personal life. I have been so focused the past four years on my self-set challenges, and now that this cycle is coming to an end, I am looking forward to another new journey. I am still leading our teacher training programs, which is one of my greatest passions. Soon, I will be embarking on my 500 hour certification, and leading retreats. I still hold reiki workshops, but most of my work is nonprofit.

I am not exactly sure of the next step, but I trust the universe and myself, so I am listening and keeping my third eye open.

What are you most looking forward to as your story unfolds?

I am looking forward to the adventure. I want to travel, help heal others, and continue to create connections. I am looking forward to peace, happiness, and fulfillment. I cannot wait to marry my twin flame and go through these exciting changes together. I think about the little girl I used to be, and how I would imagine my life at different stages. At 18, I thought I had let that little girl down forever, but today she could not be more proud of who she has become. I still do the same imagery, and I see myself making a difference. I don't care what path I take to get there or if I am a piece in a bigger puzzle. I just want to contribute. ■

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