

MIND & BODY

KAREN MITCHELL HAD JUST EXPERIENCED A SERIES OF UNTHINKABLE TRAGEDIES, INCLUDING THE DEATH OF HER PARTNER OF ALMOST 20 YEARS, AND FELT HERSELF IN A FUGUE STATE.

Then she tried an increasingly popular form of yoga, developed to help people recover from trauma. The class helped her start a path towards healing.

“I think it has a lot to do with listening to your body. Your body will tell you the truth,” she said.

Therapies like the trauma-sensitive yoga class Mitchell participates in are used alongside traditional talk therapy to help treat mental illness and other symptoms in survivors of trauma. Despite a lack of definitive research, these approaches are rising in popularity. A team of UNI experts, including Assistant Professor of Social Work **MATTHEW VASQUEZ**, is helping healthcare professionals understand how these supplemental therapies may help trauma survivors.

Vasquez came to UNI in 2017, drawn to the strength of the social work program, and has found great support for this cutting-edge approach to trauma therapy.

“I was very excited to come to UNI, specifically, because I’m really passionate about my research and teaching focus on trauma,” he said. “[The department] was very welcoming of my research and the courses I wanted to teach.”

Since 2013, UNI’s Master of Social Work (MSW) program has offered a specialization in trauma-informed care. At the time, it was one of only three such programs in the country and is still the only in the state of Iowa.

“There’s a lot of interest in it, so much that we started a distance education program in 2016 to help fulfill the demand,” said Department of Social Work Head **CINDY JUBY**. “We hired Matt because of his expertise on trauma-informed care. He’s really leading this specialization and helping us take it to the next step, so that we are getting the message out about its importance. He’s actively working with community agencies, helping them switch over to trauma-informed practices.”

One of the ways Vasquez is helping promote data-driven therapy is through a new study. It came about after he met **TRACI LUDWIG, '97**, a mental health therapist who had been leading trauma-sensitive yoga classes for her clients since 2015 but saw the need for formal research.

Ludwig, who works at Mercy One Behavioral Health in Cedar Falls and is a UNI adjunct instructor in social work, pitched the idea to Vasquez and the two set to work. Their study, currently in progress, tracks outcomes for both trauma-sensitive yoga and a Chen Style Tai Chi class, led by Mercy One therapist and social work alumnus **JOHN UPSHAW, '95**, aimed at helping trauma survivors.

Vasquez enrolled participants and developed testing instruments, working closely with Assistant Professor of Sociology **ASHLEIGH KYSAR-MOON**, to create pre- and post- surveys for study participants.

Participants take a pre-test assessing their mental health, then are randomly assigned to participate in trauma-sensitive yoga or Tai Chi, alongside talk therapy, for 12 weeks. The control group participates in traditional talk therapy only.

“Overall, there were fewer depression, anxiety and trauma symptoms in all three groups,” Kysar-Moon said of the results to date. “One of the things that’s come out really strongly in our qualitative data are the stories the [participants] are telling about how they’re feeling more connected with their body, or how they’ve been able to feel like they could connect more socially with other participants in these groups.”

That’s been the case for Mitchell. Participating in a trauma-responsive yoga class with Ludwig helped Mitchell acknowledge and come to terms with her trauma, which has had a profound impact on her life — mentally, physically and professionally.

“What I’ve noticed since doing the work with Traci is how much more present I am. I had not been fully present in my body in that way in any other exercise class. It’s also allowed me to calm down and not be so anxious about everything.”

It’s also affected her job. Mitchell is a professor in UNI’s department of communication studies and she said she’s seen a change in her students, as well.

“I think [my students] sensed a change in me over the course of the semester,” she said. “As I was becoming more open, more vulnerable, more willing to take risks, I think that came through in my teaching.”

The yoga classes are designed to help participants ease into movements, and allows them to modify or withhold from making moves based on their physical or emotional comfort.

“Because I’ve had first-hand experience instructing the groups for the past several years, I’ve been able to tailor our approach based upon a great deal of client-centered feedback,” said Ludwig. “I want to extend the reach to those that need it the most, whom in all honesty would never step foot into a yoga studio.”

The approach worked for Mitchell, a self-described “unapologetic big, beautiful woman,” helping her to not only feel comfortable in the class, but push herself further than she’d imagined.

“These are all people who have been in therapy for years that wasn’t working. They needed to actually do something to feel the power, to actually feel like they could do things in their body that they didn’t know they could do before,” said Vasquez. “That began to promote some rapid transformation. In trauma-sensitive yoga, there’s this sense of, ‘I can connect with myself and I accept myself,’ and in Chen Style Tai Chi we’re seeing, ‘I have so much power in my body.’”

For Vasquez, that is what is at the heart of this study — seeking to prove there are ways to treat trauma and mental illness beyond traditional therapy.

“In the long-term, my hope would be that we could stop this whole idea that ... our physical health and our mental health are two separate things,” he said. “How your body feels affects your mind, and what’s happening in your mind is going to affect your body.”

