

**The Art of Stretching and Mindfulness:
A Therapy Intensive to Help Improve the Emotional, Mental, and Physical Development of
At-Risk Girls**

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Introduction

Three adolescent girls between the ages of 7 and 13 named Camari, Kanari, and Cheyanne are each talented, intelligent, and very influential amongst their peers at the YMCA Capital View in Southeast, DC. While participating in the creative movement and stretching sessions held every Wednesday, the three young girls are driven to learn and grow but are also affected by outside influences that can lead them in the wrong direction. As their mentor and creative movement and stretch therapy teacher, I notice that my sessions are a way stand in the gap between negative influences of the community and the juvenile justice system.

The juvenile justice system is underserving girls causing them to have longer sentences than boys for low-level offenses. Underserved girls in the juvenile justice system develop unhealthy self-soothing mechanisms to cope with trauma and anxiety that will only cause their state of being to worsen. Thus, a transformative healing approach that focuses on stretch therapy fulfills an unmet need in the current approach to juvenile rehabilitation. Stretch therapy mixed with yoga and regulated breathing techniques will help the youth increase their flexibility, mindfulness, and connection to their bodies, emotions, and minds. Through a series of guided stretches, yoga postures, and breathing practices, at-risk girls will develop healthy self-soothing mechanisms that can improve their state of being and generate long-term effects. Above all, a transformative healing approach that focuses on stretch therapy opens to the door to the positive and long-term effects families and communities want to see in at-risk girls. As at-risk girls learn how to let go of traumatic experiences, positively self-soothe their anxiety and grow in mindfulness and self-awareness, juvenile rehabilitation can be revitalized using these methods.

The thesis project uses qualitative research methods to build the thesis through two detailed sections and an appendix. The first section is broken up in to various parts to bring an

understanding of an at-risk girl's battle with trauma, a few of at-risk girls' stories, the long-term effects of trauma, how self-esteem and self-esteem play a role in their coping mechanisms and overall development, what the juvenile justice system has to offer at-risk girls and what programs meet at-risk girl's needs. The second section expounds of off the first section to describe how stretch therapy, yoga and Coherent Breathing and Resistance Breathing techniques help at-risk girls release trauma and self-soothe in their anxiety. The mind-body connection and meditation are also incorporated in the second section to describe how mindfulness practices work closely together to allow an at-risk girl to increase relaxation and calmness during times of frustration, anger or anxiety. Also mentioned in the second section is the way that the thesis project stands as a mentoring program and how it creates a healing dynamic in the community. Lastly, the appendix section has specific activities for breathing techniques, yoga postures, stretches, and partner activities that create an effective healing intensive for at-risk girls.

Research and Context

The idea for a stretching and mindfulness program derived from my fieldwork at the Young Ladies of Tomorrow (YLOT) in Washington, DC. YLOT is a mentoring program for at-risk girls between the ages of 14 and 17 that organizes activities for girls who are on their way to the juvenile justice system or who have already committed non-violent offences. With my expertise in creative movement and stretching, I created a dance curriculum and worked with a group of at-risk girls who did not like to dance as a group but came together as a whole to stretch their muscles and increase their flexibility. While I utilized qualitative research methods during my fieldwork, I desired to understand further how “[at-risk girls] interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell 6).

In general, at-risk girls are underserved in their communities and often looked over. As a social innovator, my goal through this document is to shed light on the trauma and anxiety that at-risk girls face and use their stories and scholarly information to create an empowering healing intensive. For further qualitative research, I work with a group of girls between the ages of 7 and 13 through creative movement and stretch therapy at the YMCA in Southeast Washington, DC. A few of Southeast Washington, DC’s neighborhoods are neglected and experience violence and crime. Thus, the group of girls I work with at the YMCA are open to learning creative movement and stretch therapy. Although yoga and meditation techniques are not incorporated in my sessions yet, I did gain more understanding of how girls who are considered at-risk and how girls who are not considered at-risk equally have a greater need for programs that give them tools to increase self-awareness and relaxation.

As a social change maker, my role is to act when I see that there is a need for change. A deputy district attorney for the Juvenile Division of the Santa Clara County's District Attorney's office, Kurt Kumli, stated in an interview that “Juvenile rehabilitation might be a lot like taking swings at a piñata. And the more swings you take, the better the chance is that you will hit it right and something will come out” (PBS). Understanding trauma and anxiety to be able to help at-risk girls trust and express themselves through healing, a trauma-informed rehabilitation program is an opportunity to be a social problem-solver and mentor. At-risk girls can be predecessors for change and healing in the community. In a larger picture, mind-body practices are utilized with at-risk girls in the community to show how children and youth as a whole deserve effective programs that can work against community violence and crime. Organizations similar to YLOT and YMCA can also benefit from a healing intensive that can potentially become bigger and stronger program based on the transformative, healing, rehabilitative principles I will present.

At-risk Girls in The Juvenile Justice System

To indicate whether a girl is “at-risk” or not, programs and practitioners examine certain personal, familial or communal factors that increase the likelihood of her having challenges when transitioning into adulthood. For instance, Child Trends researcher, Kristin Anderson Moore states that “Children have been defined as “at risk” with a variety of different indicators, including having limited reading proficiency, having experienced abuse or trauma, having a disability or illness, or having exhibited behavior problems” (1). Moore also states that “It is critical to note that “at risk” is a concept that reflects a chance or a probability. It does not imply certainty” (3). Adolescent girls in the juvenile justice system between the ages of 10 and 19 are labeled as “as-risk” due to the many different traumas they face. Therefore, as we reflect on at-

risk girls' battle with trauma and their stories and the long-term effects trauma has on their anxiety, self-esteem, and self-perception, the goal of this project is to first shed light on the different challenges at-risk girls face, then how they deserve more purpose-driven rehabilitation programs.

First, at-risk girls who live in crime-ridden inner cities and impoverished neighborhoods are more likely to encounter the juvenile justice system at some point in their lives. Youth violence, gang affiliation, sexual abuse, and family issues are all potential risk factors that can cause adolescent girls to either participate in delinquent behavior or experience trauma or even both. Similarly, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), who are committed to supporting at-risk girls, address the long-term effects of trauma and the juvenile justice system on adolescent girls. OJJDP notes that “Often girls of color and girls living in poverty, they are victims of violence, including physical and sexual abuse. They are typically non-violent and pose little or no risk to public safety. And their involvement with the juvenile justice system usually does more harm than good” (Girls and the Juvenile Justice System 2016). This said, if the juvenile justice system is doing more harm than good, many at-risk girls in the juvenile justice system are underserved.

More importantly, at-risk girls come from diverse backgrounds and histories of trauma but remain underserved. According to Epstein and Gonzalez, “Of over 17,000 adult participants in the [the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE)] survey—who were primarily white and middle-class—21 percent reported sexual abuse during childhood; 26 percent reported physical abuse; and 14.8 percent reported experiencing emotional neglect” (7). Essentially, adolescence is a delicate part of a girl's transition into adulthood that impacts her emotional, mental, and

physical well-being. Adolescence is also a time when girls are expressing their individuality and uniqueness.

As practitioners understand the uniqueness of adolescence, more programs need to be in support of an at-risk girl's emotional, mental, and physical development to help her connect with herself and the world in a new light (Myers 113). Bryant L. Myers asserts that "We are always tempted to "do for" children, not recognizing the potential for transformation that children represent (113). Adolescent at-risk girls who are in the juvenile justice system or have the potential to enter in the juvenile justice system, are talented, creative and intelligent females that can use their strengths in an interconnected way with their healing process. In part, girls in the juvenile justice system struggle with trauma and anxiety; they are also significantly underserved. Therefore, a healing rehabilitation program, incorporating stretch therapy, yoga, and breathing techniques, will empower girls to take charge of their healing in every way to counteract the effects of traumatic experiences and positively self-soothe their anxiety by treating themselves with compassion, kindness, and care. These treatment exercises have yielded positive results in The Art of Yoga Project reported by Rebecca Epstein and Thalia Gonzalez.

Essentially, adolescent girls who are considered to be as "at-risk" can utilize a rehabilitative and supportive program to self-reflect and allow for more self-care to occur to create a stable foundation for transformation and healing. For at-risk girls, a healing intensive will serve as a catalyst event for transformation. Brenda Salter McNeil states that "Catalyst events are vital in the reconciliation process, as they are the primary vehicles for moving people out of old patterns, assumptions, and perceptions and into transformative cycles of change" (36). Despite the risk factors, trauma, and anxiety that work to distort a meaningful outlook on life, adolescent girls already have much of what they need inside of them to heal, grow and fulfill

their life's purpose. As Bornstein and Davis note, "Only if children honestly believe their ideas are valuable will they develop the interest, ability, and self-confidence to be lifelong learners and doers" (82). Hence, breaking down trauma will help to gain a better understanding of why adolescent girls are labeled "at-risk" and how certain traumas impact them in their growth and development.

At-Risk Girls' Battle with Trauma.

Trauma is revealed in many different ways and can affect an adolescent girl mentally, emotionally, and physically. Without effective support programs, at-risk girls can reenter detention centers and increase recidivism, in which the tendency to relapse into criminal behavior occurs (Merriam-Webster). Zeola et al. express that "Providing mental health services to juvenile offenders may help the justice system to recognize and treat underlying psychopathology, improve coping skills, reduce the negative effects of detention, and decrease future costs to society by reducing recidivism" (169). With the high rate of at-risk girls entering the juvenile justice system, the majority of them experience some trauma from risk factors like sexual abuse, dysfunctional families, and poverty. According to the American Psychological Association, trauma is defined as "an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical" (2018). Consequently, trauma derives from negative experiences, but it can also come from certain expectations a girl may fail to achieve for herself.

Ms. Helen Wade, The Executive Director of YLOT, works with several adolescent girls who have severe cases of trauma such as sexual abuse, neglect or community violence. One particular teenager named Shay was committed to the Balance and Restorative Justice Program as her last chance for help. Ms. Wade states that "Shay came into the program with a lot of trust

issues, family problems, and mental health issues. She likes to fight and even told me that she hears voices that tell her what to do. She was sexually abused by her dad and neglected by her family to where she is basically raising herself. I am surprised she opened up to me, but I am glad she did.” Subsequently, there are many girls like Shay, who are seeking help, but because the juvenile justice system lacks resources for at-risk girls, and an increasing number of them are going through their trauma alone which increases their chances of dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder and mental health issues (Epstein and Gonzalez 12).

Furthermore, unreleased trauma can turn into anxiety which can cause a person to develop coping mechanisms to help them soothe the pain or escape reality. In addition, girls in the juvenile justice system report higher rates of childhood trauma than boys. In their *Gender & Trauma Somatic Interventions for Girls in Juvenile Justice: Implications for Policy and Practice* report, Rebecca Epstein and Thalia González, state:

Girls report sexual abuse at particularly disproportionate levels—and are more likely than boys to experience such violence within intimate relationships. Girls are also at greater risk of developing negative mental health outcomes from traumatic experiences. Trauma even has unique physical effects on the female brain. Finally, the multiple layers of girls’ identity—including the interplay among the factors of sex, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity—further shape their experience of trauma. (4)

Because at-risk girls experience trauma at higher levels than boys, they battle with the insensitivity and rigidity of the juvenile justice system. Thus, the juvenile justice system needs trauma-informed, gender-responsive interventions that serve as a development tool for at-risk girls to grow mentally, emotionally, and physically.

Trauma can be detrimental to a girl's life and impact her overall well-being. Furthermore, unreleased trauma can turn into anxiety which can cause a person to develop coping mechanisms to help them soothe the pain or escape reality. As adolescent girls struggle to deal with the realities of traumatic experiences, it can lead to violent behavior. Likewise, Espejo makes this point, quoting Angela Browne of the Harvard Youth Prevention Center to support it:

Another reason many girls turn violent...is because they're either being abused or witnessing violence at home—whether it's at the hands of a parent, a stepparent, or parent's boyfriend or girlfriend. A girl who lives with violence, she explains, is more likely to be violent. "Girls sometimes are violent against other people because they can't hit back against a scary person at home," Browne says. "For them the world isn't a safe place, so they grow up thinking the best defense is a good offense." (Espejo 63)

Feeling as though the world isn't a safe place is a key factor in delinquent behavior in adolescent girls. The challenges at-risk girls face whether both at home or in their community can cause them to lose faith and trust in the world. Many at-risk girls have a critical need for services and rehabilitation that exceed far beyond what the standard juvenile justice system can provide. Not only do these girls need services but they need to feel the sense of security in their community. The adolescent years of a girl's growth and development are a delicate phase that requires emotional support, a sense of security, and the opportunity to grow in an empowered way. Similarly, "Adolescence is a period of fundamental physical and emotional growth... One of the most pronounced effects in adolescents is a decreased ability to self-regulate—i.e., manage emotions, impulses, and behavior" (Epstein and Gonzalez 8). Unfortunately, the juvenile justice system fails to provide at-risk girls with the services they need the most by intensifying the

problems they face (Watson and Edelman ii). Hence, some at-risk girls have stories that will impact the way we view the juvenile justice system.

Stories of Girls in the System

Many adolescent girls who face traumatic experiences end up in the juvenile justice system for nonviolent offenses that could be perceived as coping mechanisms (Levintova). Hannah Levintova, a reporter in the *Mother Jones*' DC bureau, interviewed women in their 20's and 30's and discovered that young women have been arrested and placed in juvenile detention centers for as little as running away from home. Although running away from home as a minor is serious, an at-risk girl can create delinquent behavior. For instance, one adolescent girl named Kierra, ran away from her foster home to visit her biological sister. Levintova reports that "When she was 17 years old, she was arrested on an outstanding warrant and put in an adult jail with violent criminals. She was terrified. 'I was just arrested, no explanation. I didn't even see a judge,' she says" (2016).

Situations like these are common for youth in the juvenile justice system. We can look at another adolescent girl named Sarah who has a different but deeper traumatic experience. According to Levintova, "Another young woman was locked up for almost two weeks at the age of 15 after running away from her home in South Carolina. She'd been molested by one of her mother's many boyfriends and berated for actions as trivial as doodling on notebook paper" (2016). This young woman's traumatic experience has caused her to run away seeking help, security, and love—three things she was not receiving at home. As stated by Epstein and Gonzalez, a "study revealed that 42 percent of system-involved girls reported past physical abuse, compared to 22 percent of boys. An even greater discrepancy was found in reporting of past sexual abuse: 35 percent of girls compared to 8 percent of boys" (9).

For Kierra and Sarah, and like many others, are very vulnerable and may be acting out. However, in most cases, the adult is a harsh police officer or an unfair judge who are locking adolescent girl and teenager away by the dozen—this information is alarming. In addition, “Consequently, it has been well documented that incarcerating young people for small infractions increases the chance that they’ll get into more serious crimes as they age. Even a brief period in detention can lead to mental and physical health issues, higher unemployment rates, lower lifetime earnings, and substance abuse” (Levintova 2016). The more girls and young women that are arrested for nonviolent offenses that resemble coping mechanisms the more likely they will face the long-term effects of trauma without proper treatment or rehabilitation.

Long-term Effects of Trauma

Thus far, we have discussed trauma and have looked at two stories of at-risk girls in the juvenile justice system who have faced traumatic experiences. The juvenile justice system treats adolescent girls as unimportant and in need of restraint and punishment. Essentially, girls learn and grow from their environments. If the environment is full of violence and instability, it is possible that a girl can become a product of that environment. Additionally, Rich et al. expresses that “Abuse trauma in childhood and adolescence has a long-term impact on the quality of one’s life...these victimized youths may turn to alcohol and drugs in an attempt to cope with the trauma of their abuse” (194).

As we can see, trauma has long-term effects. For at-risk girls, the long-term effects of trauma derive from feelings of hopeless, neglect, depression, low self-esteem, and abandonment. As an adolescent, one can have a hard time the overcoming hardships of life without needing guidance or mentorship. Christine Watkins, a juvenile justice expert, states that “At ages 16 and 17, adolescents, as a group, are not mature in ways that affect their decision-making” (32). So,

when a sixteen-year-old begins to act out or demonstrate delinquent behaviors, those around her should be concerned because she may be experiencing a trauma or the effects of one that she has never revealed before. Also, in most cases “adolescents often lack an adult ability to control impulses and anticipate the consequences of their actions” (Watkins 32).

When a girl faces situations that trigger negative emotions she will usually go into survival mode. Each person has survival techniques that allow them to “respond to stress and danger in particular ways” (Desai and Briscoe-Smith 2016). Juvenile justice advocates, Neha Desai and Dr. Allison Briscoe-Smith affirm that:

With chronic exposure to stress and danger, we develop survival mechanisms based on our evolutionary responses. These survival techniques include hypervigilance: constant scanning of the environment for threat; exaggerated startle: moving to action quickly; dissociation: a means of trying to cope with overwhelming stimulation; and distrust of authority since the majority of trauma happens at the hands of authority figures. (2016)

For the most part, the survival techniques such as smoking and drinking alcohol are commonly seen coping mechanisms amongst those who work with at-risk girls. Although both at-risk boys and girls exhibit the same behavior, at-risk girls are more sensitive to trauma, the juvenile justice system, and the need for trauma-informed service and empathetic therapy/counseling. Without transformative, healing rehabilitation, at-risk girls will continue to suffer from depression, mental health issues, low self-esteem, and lack of trust in themselves and the world. In part, “Because girls experience and respond to trauma in complex and distinct ways—especially during adolescent development—the design of trauma-informed interventions must account for these differences to be effective” (Epstein and Gonzalez 18). When an adolescent girl fails to face that trauma and release it, can develop mental health issues, health issues, become addicted to drugs

and alcohol and consciously and energetically feel stuck in the same place. Rich et al., also state that “While there has been extensive literature on causal factors for declining male delinquency, ironically, girls are increasingly becoming more involved in the juvenile justice system” (195). Hence, during her time in the juvenile justice system, an at-risk girl can learn to view herself in a positive light and learn how to release trauma and positively self-soothe her anxiety. In the process, she can step back and gain a new hope for the future because “stepping back, therefore, is not a retreat from the world of brokenness but an invitation to receive God’s imagination for the world” (Katongole & Rice 45).

Self-Soothing Anxiety and Self-esteem

Many at-risk girls who have battled with trauma most likely battle with anxiety. Trauma and anxiety are key components of each other that allow a girl to experience depression and anxiety and its long-term effects. In her article, *The Five Element Meridian Release Technique*, Lynne Namka expresses that

Some experiences in life strongly affect how you see yourself. Negative events that are upsetting can distort your identity. Excessive emotions and their accompanying beliefs and muscular reactions became associated with a threat to your sense of safety or your self-esteem during an upsetting event. (3)

Essentially, we must be aware of how emotional and physical experiences affect our health and ability to connect with our bodies and minds. Since trauma and anxiety can be harmful to a person’s mental, emotional, and physical well-being, one must develop positive coping mechanisms.

Similarly, Meredith Elzy et al. states that the “long-term consequences of childhood trauma exposure include substance abuse and dependence, depression, severe obesity, other severe/chronic physiological diseases, and premature death” (763). Thus, it is important that youth become aware how to connect their trauma to their behaviors. According to Elzy et al., “One goal of treatment for children who have been maltreated is to interrupt the relationship between the traumatic experiences and the development of emotional and behavioral problems” (765). In part, self-soothing anxiety is key to helping an at-risk girl release her trauma. The way she self-soothes is a reflection of how she perceives her life, herself, and her community. Thus, positively self-soothing anxiety and self-esteem work together to help at-risk girls reach their fullest potential. It is unfortunate that many adolescent girls experience sexual abuse, neglect, low self-esteem, and abandonment.

Self-esteem is the center of an adolescent girl’s will-power and sense of who she is. According to Merriam-Webster dictionary, self-esteem means “a confidence and satisfaction in oneself; self-respect.” An adolescent girl with a high level of self-esteem does well in school, attains youth employment, applies to colleges, and desires to be a productive social member. However, low levels of self-esteem increase feelings of dis-connectivity and insecurity which would lead to risky behaviors. Firdevs Savi Çakar et al. also note the importance of an adolescent girl’s self-esteem and the potential life-long effects low self-esteem can have on her behaviors. Savi Çakar et al., states that

“Low self-esteem is related to a variety of psychological difficulties, including substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, academic failure, criminal behavior (Leary, 1999), as well as risky behaviors, such as aggression, irresponsible sexual behaviors, or being a member of

a deviant group (Leary, Schreindorfer, & Haupt, 1995), with levels of risk engagement.”
(861)

Hence, trauma, anxiety, and self-esteem are all factors to look for and examine when working with at-risk girls. These factors also open doors for much need self-care and self-reflection. In his book *Reconcile*, Lederach states that “The capacity for self-acceptance and care, coupled with practices for self-reflection, nurture the elements necessary for a compassionate presence” (51). Above all, the core of the project is to increase at-risk girls’ self-esteem and self-perception to reflect on the beautiful and positive things in life through mindfulness and mind-body connection practices. As Lederach writes, “positive change requires a willingness to create new ways of interacting, to building relationships and structures that look toward the future” (36).

What Does the Juvenile Justice System Offer At-Risk Girls?

The juvenile justice system was originally a system for boys. In other words, during the time the juvenile justice system was designed, it was a way to detain delinquent males who committed nonviolent offenses. Erica Green with the Baltimore Sun affirms this statement and the state of the current system as she states that:

Juvenile boys are afforded more options, including reporting centers where those awaiting court dates can check in and get job training and a meal; youth centers where there are no fences and community college courses are taught; and a boarding school that offers intensive treatment, vocational programs and the chance to graduate from high school with college scholarships. (2016)

Girls do not have the same options as boys. As Estudillo, also a juvenile justice system expert notes that “the juvenile justice system was originally created to provide individualized

rehabilitation to offenders of minor crimes such as truancy, shoplifting, and vandalism”, the system has made changes throughout the years (17). Moreover, in the case where the seventeen-year-old girl was arrested on an outstanding warrant and put in jail with violent adult criminals, we notice that the juvenile justice system began to enforce a tougher punishment system.

Estudillo continues to express that “in order to provide justice to victims and their families and to prevent more and more juveniles from committing violent crimes, the United States must hold criminals accountable—regardless of their age—and impose a tough punishment system” (17).

Green also states that “programs are unsuccessful in rehabilitating girls in about half of the cases. This can mean that juveniles are failing to follow the rules or finish the treatment plan. Many girls are recycled through the system, placed in different programs” (2016). Over the years, the juvenile justice system has simply become a tough punishment system that can be insensitive to the needs to of adolescent girls. However, when it comes to the law, researchers such as Richard E. Redding, believe that “it is important to examine whether [at-risk girls] are aware of transfer laws, whether this awareness deters delinquent behavior, and whether they believe the laws will be enforced against them” (58). In the healing intensive, at-risk girls can benefit from self-examination practices highlighted by Marjorie Thompson called “examination of conscience” which “sharpens our awareness of both positive and negative aspects of our attitudes and behaviors (91). Helping at-risk girls become more self-aware of their actions and their consequences can is one of the first steps to creating a healthy foundation for the future.

Home-life can also create anxiety and trauma for at-risk girls. Fagan, states that “Broken or dysfunctional homes are the main factors in determining if a child will grow up to be violent. Without the proper parental role models, a child will grow up in an atmosphere devoid of love or empathy” (54). Girls who grow up in a broken or dysfunctional home can witness trauma,

anxiety, violence, and with the likelihood of becoming at-risk. Importantly, the United States is one of the most individualist societies. Hofstede et al., notes that “Individualist societies include one-parent families in which role models are incomplete or in which outsiders perform the missing function” (153). Importantly, the juvenile justice system was not designed to be a second home for an at-risk girl but a way to teach her that her actions can lead to more serious offenses and the consequences. For instance, Jamari Paul, an at-risk girl who was committed to YLOT’s mentoring program, comes from a single-parent household and has a criminal record at the age of fifteen. However, she seeks to rise above her challenges through her ambitious heart. Paul states that she wants to go to college to be a lawyer and help her mom pay her bills and take care of her sisters. She also wants to help other girls who have trouble with the law. Despite her challenges with the law and other financial barriers, Paul is determined to be a mentor and a successful lawyer because she believes in herself and focuses on her strengths rather than her challenges.

At-risk girls must have the necessary resources and rehabilitation services if the juvenile justice system desires to see the recidivism rates decrease. For example, the state of California became the first state to “try a new approach and focus on rehabilitating youth instead of punishing them” (Fagan 54). In other words, “Juvenile justice experts believe that individualized treatment, education, and life-preparation programs will have a positive impact on youth so that they will return to their community as productive citizens” (Fagan 54). Educational programs and rehabilitation programs work to prevent and reduce recidivism are cheaper in the long haul.

Moreover, a transformative approach to juvenile rehabilitation can potentially prevent recidivism by providing at-risk girls with creative confidence and life-skills that give them a chance to become productive social members. Consequently, punishment is a way of temporarily

restricting a girl based on behavioral issues, but rehabilitation is a long-term predecessor to sustainable, long-lasting change in an adolescent's life.

What Kind of Program Meets At-Risk Girls' Needs?

Neha Desai and Allison Briscoe-Smith urge others to be trauma-informed in the way at-risk girls are criminalized. Desai and Briscoe-Smith express that:

Our current criminalization of trauma-linked behaviors has shown no evidence of healing or transformation; instead, it serves to pull these girls deeper into systems that are inadequate to meet their needs and that may exacerbate underlying trauma even further. We must develop alternatives that promote resiliency so that youth who experience childhood abuse and/or neglect can heal and thrive. (2016)

An alternative that can promote resiliency for adolescent girls who have experienced trauma and need to learn how to self-soothe their anxiety is a therapeutic approach to connecting them with their body, mind, and emotions through stretching, yoga postures, and breathing techniques.

Girls are more likely to engage in an activity if they connect with it which creates active participation. Ernest T. Stinger notes that "Active participation is the key to feelings of ownership that motivate people to invest their time and energy to help shape the nature and quality of the acts, activities, and behaviors in they engage" (31).

A mentoring organization such as Young Ladies of Tomorrow (YLOT) in Washington, DC, is sustainable due to consistent government funding and building relationships within the community. Moreover, "organizations that work with at-risk girls need a better structure to fit everyone's needs" (Pham). Victoria Gonzales, the assistant program coordinator at YLOT also states that "the rate of change is slow, so we don't really know who's learning from the program

and who isn't." It is important that programs for at-risk girls generate appreciative inquiry to focus on more positive experiences, thoughts, and behaviors. Appreciative inquiry expert Sue Annis Hammond states that, with appreciative inquiry, "instead of applying analysis to problems you examine success" (6). Therefore, in order for the girls to reach a safe place to release trauma and self-soothe their anxiety, stretch therapy, yoga, and breathing techniques will help them discover their successes and strengths rather than their mistakes and weaknesses. When designing a therapy intensive for at-risk, it is imperative that practitioners are trauma-informed, compassionate, flexible, and aware that these girls can heal while at the same time allowing them to feel empowered and confident in their future. Many at-risk girls come from underserved communities but, through a transformative and healing rehabilitation program, more at-risk girls will be more self-aware and conscious of their thoughts and behaviors to make better decisions in the present and future.

Stretch Therapy, Yoga, and The Power of The Breath

How stretch therapy works and its benefits

Rehabilitation for at-risk youth needs a more transformative, healing approach, an approach which understands that trauma and anxiety affect girls on physical, emotional, and mental levels. Juvenile rehabilitation should focus on trauma-informed and empathetic objectives, which allow at-risk girls to reach their true potential. Stretch therapy provides one set of techniques that do just that. It is beneficial to the body and mind and can also increase flexibility. Essentially, a stretching practice causes one to come to terms with the tensions and aches in her body while helping her to be in a calm and relaxed state.

Stretching and therapy coexist. According to Laughlin, “stretch therapy (ST) is a comprehensive system that includes stretching, fascial remodeling, strengthening, neural re-patterning, and relaxation” (2017). Stretch therapy is an effective way for people of all ages to increase flexibility and relieve tension in the body. Stretch therapy also consists of some poses, postures, and techniques to improve the “Range of Movement (ROM) of the body; nerves, fascia, and muscles are used as ‘gateways’ to change the brain” (Laughlin, 2017).

Stretch therapy is safe and effective. Practitioners such as Laughlin carefully assess each exercise out of the 100 or so that he and his team have to ensure that the safety constraint is fulfilled. In other words, a beginner who is new to stretch therapy will not have to perform extended, challenging poses. Also, “effectiveness is assessed with respect to the over-arching goal of increasing flexibility and is measured by *results gained for time spent*” (Laughlin 10). With any new skill, one is trying to develop; she must practice it at least once or twice a week. In stretch therapy, increasing flexibility is learned and developed over time.

Stretch therapy is great to do in a group setting with a practitioner or teacher is present, with supportive objects for everyone to use for particular stretches. The reasoning behind choosing a stretch therapy for a group setting is because it is important that at-risk girls increase relaxation and motivate and support their peers through solo and partner stretches. Stretch therapy for at-risk girls will improve their awareness of their physical self to recognize that stretching is therapeutic. With this said, Laughlin highlights that “Stretching is one of the most effective ways of exploring ourselves and our inner states” (19). Not only will at-risk girls learn to move their physical bodies with ease, but their emotional and mental state will also improve. Neiman can attest to this as she states that “Brain Body Tools are strategies for helping kids to gain confidence, relaxation and self-knowledge” (1). Thus, the core objective of the stretch

therapy component is that once the session is over, the youth will experience “a feeling of balance achieved, a kind of deep satisfaction” (Laughlin 19).

Another important part of stretching is the brain and what one believes she can do and how far she can go in stretching. Essentially, stretch therapy is designed to push a girl beyond her limits. Thus, a girl is not only stretching her body but is also stretching her mind. Laughlin notes that “The brain is a major part of what we ‘stretch’ when we do stretching exercises” (19). Further, “Accordingly, while you still generate tension in the muscles, the brain and the nervous system impose the significant limitations on how far you can stretch” (18). As the saying goes—mind over matter! For at-risk girls, training their brains to relax in stretching can increase the likelihood of a deeper stretch. With one of the girls in my group, Kanari Jones was determined to improve her splits. Jones states, “I’ve been practicing my splits almost every day, but I’m still not reaching the ground.” I instructed her to take deep breaths while she stretched, and we instantly saw an improvement. As Jones demonstrates that she can commit to practicing something and sticking with it to see positive results is more likely to be in control of stresses that trigger to feel frustrated or discourage when trying to do something new or improve in an area. Ultimately, she in stressful situations or when she is angry, she can remember that taking deep breathes not only help to improve her stretches and splits but relaxes her mind so that she can now see that whatever she is trying to achieve is possible.

Stretching also increases flexibility and strengthens her muscles. Moreover, participating and enjoying stretching will be relaxing for at-risk girls. Relaxation is an anticipated outcome of stretching, but the mind must be prepared to go into a state of relaxation to decrease the contraction of the muscles (Tsatsouline, 31). Stretching also becomes therapeutic and a type of therapy when Laughlin combined flexibility and strength to change the way people perceive

flexibility and the way they go about achieving it. When one combines regulated breathing and brain power to increase flexibility, she not only increases physical strength but emotional strength as well. Chappell affirms that "...becoming flexible physically is one of the best ways to acquire emotional strength, too, and when we feel good about ourselves, we are more likely to be understanding of others" (Laughlin ix). Therefore, stretch therapy will be a fundamental form of physical, mental, and emotional therapy to break those confidence barriers the girls have about themselves and their situations, by moving them into a safe space where they have more control over what they feel.

Connectivity through yoga

The mind-body connection and yoga

At-risk girls in the juvenile justice system experience trauma and need an alternative route when choosing coping mechanisms to soothe their anxiety. In this section, we will discuss the mind-body connection, its linking to yoga, and how it can remedy at-risk girls with trauma and anxiety. Neiman, a practitioner, and mind-body connection expert states that "In an environment, where children and adults are risking becoming disembodied by lifestyles and screens, yoga and mindfulness is an anchor back to physical and mental health" (1). The goal of the mind-body connection is to help at-risk girls learn "from "the inside" in an experimental way" using the breath and movement (Neiman 1). Interestingly, the mind-body connection is a conscious way to connect with one's physical, emotional, and mental state through breathing techniques and yoga postures.

Similarly, yoga impacts youth in a dynamic way. Initially, "yoga can be used to stimulate, calm and reduce anxiety" (Neiman 2). Yoga will be used to help bring and at-risk girls

into a relaxed and meditative state through a series of postures and poses. Similar to stretch therapy, yoga can increase physical strength and flexibility. However, to allow children and adolescents to become more comfortable and relaxed, “yoga can affect a shift in the nervous system...to the calming parasympathetic branch” (Neiman 2). In other words, the parasympathetic nervous system is one of the three autonomic nervous systems. According to ScienceDaily, the parasympathetic nervous system, “Sometimes called the rest and digest system, the parasympathetic system conserves energy as it slows the heart rate, increases intestinal and gland activity, and relaxes sphincter muscles in the gastrointestinal tract” (2018). This more relaxed state introduces an atmosphere for girls to begin to deal with their trauma.

Creating a safe space for at-risk girls to feel comfortable and relaxed in is the core of the thesis project curriculum that will be outlined later on in the appendix section. Furthermore, Neiman also highlights how yoga is a threefold experience for children and adolescents. She describes this therapeutic experience:

Yoga offers a threefold experience, slow movements that release tensions and are calming for the mind, *Pranayama* breathing that is regulating by tapping into the parasympathetic nervous system and asanas (postures) that are focusing. Performing deep breathing allows a gentle somatic experience of the body. When a child feels safe in a space, and the pace of the session is comfortable, he or she can feel relaxed. (2)

Thus, this threefold experience is a gateway to a calmer state of mind and being that should be encouraged for at-risk girls to witness and embrace. A mindful, trauma-informed rehabilitation program is strongly encouraged for at-risk girls to experience. Utilizing this threefold experience to create a holistic therapy program gives at-risk girls the ability to explore their creative confidence. Creative confidence experts, Tom and David Kelley affirm that “Creative confidence

is a way of seeing that potential and your place in the world more clearly, unclouded by anxiety and doubt” (11). Essentially, yoga postures that increase the mind-body connection is a great way will help the girls to feel safe, trust themselves and allow their creative energy to flow.

Trauma-Informed Yoga

Historically, yoga is known for helping a person calm their mind and body or self-regulate. In their article, “Trauma-Sensitive Yoga: Principles, Practice, and Research,” David Emerson et al., state that “More recently, research has shown that Yoga practices, including meditation, relaxation, and physical postures, can reduce autonomic sympathetic activation, muscle tension...and emotional distress, and increase the quality of life” (2009). In general, yoga is an effective way to aid at-risk girls with trauma and anxiety. Also, trauma-informed yoga is designed specifically for those with trauma, and in this case, an at-risk girl who show high disproportionately high rates of trauma caused by sexual abuse. Epstein and Gonzalez also note that “trauma-informed yoga can help improve girls’ sense of agency” (23). Meaning that, “trauma-informed yoga can...improve women’s and girls’ interoception—the sensory system that facilitates awareness of one’s inner sensations, sometimes referred to as the sense of self” (Epstein and Gonzalez 23). Trauma-informed yoga teaches also the participants that whatever is uncomfortable to them, they can come out of it and return back to mindful breathing (Emerson et al., 127). The central focus of trauma-informed yoga is to make the experience completely comfortable and relaxing for at-risk girls in which it lets them know that practitioners acknowledge that their trauma is real and the service they wish to provide can be beneficial to them.

Jamila Daniel, the writer for the New York Amsterdam News, writes about how inner-city youth in New York were taught self-awareness and self-development through the ancient

practice. Daniel states that “The program’s two primary objectives are to help young people stamp out negative emotions such as anger, frustration, depression, and grief; and to promote positive feelings of self-worth, inner strength, and clarity to function successfully in their lives” (20). Since many at-risk girls have experienced some injustice, police brutality, or racism, it can be difficult to cope and survive in an environment where they feel as though the world is unjust and unfair. Thus, trauma-informed yoga can help an at-risk girl find her inner safe space away from the social disparities.

Trauma-informed yoga is also sensitive to the environment trauma survivors may reside in, thus, bringing trauma-informed yoga programs to inner-cities is another way to reach at-risk girls. Daniel also quotes Krishna Kaur, when she states that “Our inner-city youth are not always going to feel comfortable walking into a yoga center where people don’t look like them or feel strange to them. So, we try to take it to them” (20). The great thing about trauma-informed yoga is that it can work in communities where some at-risk girls are to aid in their healing process to help give them more control over the way they respond to the stress of trauma and anxiety. When an at-risk girl learns how to calm their body and mind through mindfulness practices, their self-control increases. Rocsana Enriquez, a yoga instructor for The Art of Yoga Project, explains how yoga helped her remain calm when she felt angry. She states that “We used to do yoga, me and my roommates, and I used it for when I used to get angry. I was always an angry person and I used to do the breathing, and I remembered the kind words—the cuing of the teachers that was so calming—and it made me relaxed, and it made me watch the words that I use, and how to think before I jump into action” (Epstein and Gonzalez 22).

The benefits of breathing techniques and the meditative state of mind

Coherent and Resistance Breathings

In both stretch therapy and yoga, regulated breathing and meditation are essential tools for both activities to be effective. Being conscious of her breathing and the way she breaths will provide many benefits. Before at-risk girls can learn to relax into their stretches, and be strong in their yoga postures, they first must be aware of their breathing. Paul and Patricia Bragg, eloquently state the beautiful connection between yoga and rhythmic breathing:

Yoga teaches that deep, rhythmic breathing attunes one to the rhythm of the universe – in other words, one lives in rhythmic harmony with Mother Nature. Prana, the Sanskrit word for breath, also means absolute energy or vital cosmic energy. According to the teachings of yoga, when we breathe correctly, we store this energy in the solar plexus.

Furthermore, meditation and breathing practitioners Brown and Gerbarg state that “Throughout history, great healers discovered the power of breathing to enhance the physical, mental, and spiritual well-being of their being” (1). Also, with the many body tissues we regenerate daily, our human bodies have “the power to heal itself from the cellular level up” through breathing practices (Brown and Gerbarg 1). With the many benefits our breath holds, an at-risk girl can utilize conscious breathing to remain calm in situations that cause her to feel anxious or angry.

Essentially, breathing techniques will allow at-risk girls to connect with their body in a healing way. At first, focusing on the breath and allowing it flow smoothly can be a difficult task since the girls do not spend time focusing on their breathing. However, with practice and time, regulated breathing will become easier and a go-to practice when a girl feels frustrated and angry. For instance, “girls report using breath regulation techniques to adapt and respond to the

stress of appearing in court and to avoid engaging in aggressive responses to provocation by peers within facilities” (Epstein and Gonzales 22).

Additionally, two breathing techniques that aid in reducing stress and is incorporated into the thesis project curriculum are called Coherent Breathing (CB) and Resistance Breathing (RB). Coherent Breathing “shift[s] the stress-response system into a healthier balance by activating the healing, recharging part of the nervous system while quieting the defensive, energy parts” (Brown and Gerbarg 10). Similarly, CB works with the parasympathetic nervous system as it slows the heart rate in which at the same times slows down the stress response. Thus, also stated by Brown and Gerbarg, CB is breathing sitting or lying down with your eyes closed and breathing through the nose, “at a rate of five breaths per minute, around the middle of the resonant breathing rate range” (12). It is also important to know with CB, or any other breathing technique is to remember to relax. Further, breathing through the nose will also make it easier to practice Coherent Breathing. Paul and Patricia Bragg highlight that the noses are a “miracle part of our body” that “condition and filter the air as it passes through to your faithful and hard-working lungs” (30).

The second breathing technique is Resistance Breathing (RB). Brown and Gerbarg define RB as “any kind of breathing that creates resistance to the flow of air. Resistance is created by pursing the lips, placing the tip of the tongue against the middle of the upper teeth, hissing through clenched teeth, tightening the throat muscles...” (33). Moreover, RB is also known as breathing with pursed lips or Ocean Breath— (or *ujjayi*, meaning “victory over the mind through breath”). To note, for survivors of sexual abuse, such as many at-risk girls, learning RB may be difficult since it may remind them of the “heavy breathing of their abuser during the assault,” thus, Coherent Breathing may be more beneficial (Brown and Gerbarg 40). However, Brown and

Gerbarg also express that, “Later on, after [survivors of sexual trauma] have been using the breath practices for a few months, [they] may release enough of the trauma-related stress that [they] become able to undertake RB with less difficulty” (40). Likewise, with any breathing technique, yoga posture, or stretch pose, the sessions will be carefully taught to ensure sensitivity and comfortability for every at-risk girl.

Promoting a meditative state of mind and its benefits

Another component of breathing techniques, stretching and yoga is; the meditative state of mind, or what we know as, meditation. Navy Medicine eloquently defines meditation as “a mind-body practice to focus attention and to enhance relaxation or increase calmness” (2018). This effect is essential for the healing of trauma victims. Similarly, mindfulness and meditation have many of the same attributes and go hand in hand. Except, meditation is known to be a mindfulness technique that required sitting down for a certain period, with focused breathing, to increase relaxation. In essence, “Yoga and *mindfulness techniques* are increasingly being used as tools to reduce stress and enhance wellness in various populations with different health concerns” (Fishbein et al., 518, *Emphasis Added*). Therefore, an at-risk girl must also be able to have a sense of mindfulness to meditate and reap its benefits.

Music mogul and meditation expert, Russell Simmons impeccably describes his meditation journey and why more people should develop a meditation practice. He states that:

“In fact, one of the reasons I decided to put this book together is because so many people came up to me after *Super Rich* was published and told me that the chapter on meditation had changed their lives. That for the first time, instead of reacting to their thoughts and emotions, they were actually in control of them. Instead of feeling aimless and unsure

about the direction of their lives were headed in, through meditation they felt confident and empowered”. (8)

Surely, meditation has long-term mental, physical, and emotional effects that are also beneficial for at-risk girls. Russell Simmons also taught his daughters how to meditate at the age of 10, and even has them meditate with him most of the time. Essentially, teaching at-risk girls how to meditate or be still and slow down can take time to develop. Luckily, meditation helps the brain to increase memory and focus, and it allows the brain to continue to grow and evolve throughout advance years. Thus, with the number of outside influences at-risk girls today have, such as TV, social media, magazines, music, and more, they can benefit from knowing how to “go past the surface and begin to experience life at its depths” (Simmons 73). Simmons further states, “By increasing the gray matter in the prefrontal cortex, meditation allows teenagers to bridge the gap that normally exists between the risk-taking and reasoning parts of their brain” (75). In essence, if an at-risk girl develops self-control and self-awareness much quicker through meditation, she will be able to transition through life more smoothly and have confidence through any situation they encounter.

Above all, meditation and breathing are vitally important parts of making stretch therapy and yoga more effective. As a whole, this holistic approach to juvenile rehabilitation can effect change in the juvenile justice systems recidivism rates and the self-esteem of the at-risk girls involved. The most important factor is that the girls will receive the tools to be successful and change their life around through conscious breathing, stretching, and yoga.

Creating a Healing Dynamic

A healthy and sustainable part of community development is mentorship and the role it plays in the life of an at-risk girl. Many women in the community are becoming mentors to at-risk girls for the simple fact that mothers cannot guide their daughters into womanhood by love and trust alone (Echevarria 3). Along with transformative, healing rehabilitation, the thesis project also works as a mentoring program for at-risk girls so that they can transition into womanhood with the support of her mother, a mentor, and her peers. Echevarria also states that “External support from a nonparent female role model is an essential—far too frequently ignored—requirement for healthy development in girls and young women” (7).

Based on Ms. Wade and Shay’s relationship, Shay was open about a lot of things that she would not share with her mother. Because when a girl has a mentor, she begins to open up about important issues that are, for a variety of reason, simply impossible for her to discuss with her mother, is something that will be embraced in the program (Echevarria 9). With the girls in my group at the YMCA, they view me as a mentor and a role model, especially when they want to share things that are going on at home or in school. Therefore, stretch therapy, yoga and breathing techniques are activities I can teach and do with the girls that they relate with. For instance, when the girls at the YMCA stretch and create their dance routines, I give them the freedom to lead group stretching, help their peers to learn dance moves, and create their own dance routines as a group.

Building trust amongst the group and I is also essential to the healing dynamic for the girls I work with and the project. Similarly, Superintendent at J. DeWeese Carter Youth Center, Annette Miller states that “because of the trauma, there’s a lot of distrust. So, they don’t come into the program open to trusting people and open to, you know, this program is really here to

help me” (Green 1:00-1:05). Therefore, as at-risk girls go through the healing program, they will become more open, expressive and willing to trust those who want to help them.

Conclusion

Through my connection with the girls at the YMCA, I am confident that contexts just like this cry out for the implementation of the transformative, healing, rehabilitative principles I've presented in this document. Since prevention is better than cure, teaching open-minded at-risk girls breathing techniques, stretch therapy, meditation, and yoga postures give them more knowledge about their emotional, physical, and mental health. Myers eloquently states that “The essence of empowerment is that there is some kind of process of social change directed by the people themselves by which people—as individuals and groups—are able to shape their own lives in ways that they choose” (218). At-risk girls are the starting point for dynamic community change and transformative healing. As these girls begin to increase their self-awareness, they will move on to educating their peers and families about the mind-connection and mindfulness practices. Through a transformative, healing rehabilitative program, at-risk girls will have a stable support group that focuses on compassion, empathy, and togetherness.

Providing at-risk girls with the resources they need to reach their true potential makes my project worth the fight. Bornstein and Davis affirm that “We need people who possess a ground-level view of problems and a mountaintop vision, who have a talent for building teams and the freedom to experiment” (25). I am a social innovator who does just that and gives at-risk girls the freedom to experiment, cry, grow and heal individually and as a group; using this project to create a bigger safe space and mentoring program for at-risk girls. Above all, I desire to see girls like Shay, Jamari, Kanari, Camari, and Cheyanne grow into successful young women who are confident and who know that they are important.

Myers asserts that “The identity and agency of human beings are ultimately derived from their being in the image of God. We are the image of God, not of our country, our race, our gender, or our religion” (53). Teaching mindfulness and self-connectivity through stretch therapy, yoga postures, and breathing techniques is vital in shaping our young women into confident future leaders. At-risk girls have the potential to achieve their goals and become more than a statistic. In essence, a therapy intensive that focuses on stretching, yoga postures, and breathing techniques is a catalyst for change and transformation in the lives of at-risk girls and the community.

Appendix 1

The activities listed and explained in this section are the core of the thesis project. The activities are also explained in a specific way to help bring more understanding of how each breathing technique, yoga posture, and stretching position work as rehabilitative tools and principles. Also found in this section is a curriculum for a 5-day healing intensive to meet at-risk girl's needs.

Activities: Breathe. Stretch. Relax.*Regulated Breathing Techniques for Relaxation*

In his book, *Breatheology: The Art of Conscious Breathing*, Stig Åvall Severinsen eloquently states, “Your breathing is a perfectly accurate and honest barometer for your emotions. You can feel for yourself how stress affects the ease and pace of your breathing – especially the way you inhale” (25). As discussed in Section III, Coherent Breathing and Resistance Breathing are two examples of conscious breathing “techniques that can shift the stress-response system into a healthier balance by activating the healing, recharging part of the nervous system while quieting the defense, energy-burning parts” (Brown & Gerbarg 10). Coherent Breathing and Resistance Breathing are essential to remedying the struggles of trauma and anxiety for at-risk girls because the techniques help them to slow down and enter into a more mindful and conscious state. In addition to Coherent Breathing and Resistance Breathing, three other breath practices – “Ha” Breath, Breath Counts, and the Om Chant – are vital to relaxation and breath awareness. With practice, breath awareness or mindfulness of breath, allows an at-risk girl to reduce her stress-response. Many at-risk girls who have experienced sexual abuse are less likely to feel safe in their environment. According to Brown and Gerbarg, “A person who grows

up in an unsafe, abusive environment can have much in common with a war veteran returning from multiple tours of duty—*they never feel safe*” (24-25). To release trauma and self-soothe anxiety, one must come to terms with the fact that they may feel unsafe. Regulated breathing techniques can increase relaxation and rejuvenate the mind and body and produce feelings of safety and belonging, even as girls’ experience anxiety.

“Ha” Breath

Breath practices are also known to increase mental alertness and improve focus. “Ha” breath can bring the mind into to focus when anxiety and fear overcome it. As clearly stated by Brown and Gerbarg, “‘Ha’ breathing has been practiced for thousands of years by millions of people in different lands. For most people, it is a safe, invigorating practice...” (88). One of the great things about “Ha” breath is that it is beneficial to do after waking up in the morning, when a girl needs to study, or when her mind becomes unfocused during the day. Brown and Gerbarg outline the instructions for “Ha” breath which are:

- Stand up straight, with your elbows bent, palms pointed upward, fingers curled into loose fists.
- Inhale, breathing deeply through your nose while retracting your elbows behind your back, palms facing upward, and in loose fists.
- Exhaling sharply, make the sound, “Ha!” loudly, while you extend your arms and throw your hands forward, letting your palms downward. Thrust your hands forward as though you are flinging water off the tips of your fingers. As you fling your hands forward, let go of any tension in your hands and fingers.

- Inhale deeply, palms pointed upward, bending your elbows and drawing them back, hands in loose fists.
- Exhale sharply with the “Ha” sound, repeating the same arm movements.
- This should be done briskly, approximately one breath per second—that is, you should breathe both in and out during one second.
- “Ha” breath can be done for fifteen repetitions (fifteen seconds) or for up to three minutes continuously, depending on your physical capacity and on how much is needed to activate your system. (88-89)

Breath Counts

With “Ha” breath there is no counting involved, and it is more rapidly. Breath Counts is great to do while standing, with movement, and in yoga in the child pose position. The Breath Count 4-4-6-2, used in yoga, is highly effective when combined with movements and stretching, and it will enhance the physical and emotional benefits of the practice. The instructions for Breath Counting with 4-4-6-2 in a Standing Position, according to Brown and Gerbarg are as follows:

- Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart. Straighten your head and relax your knees.
- Close your eyes and your mouth. Breathe in and out gently and slowly through your nose.
- Breathing in and filling your lungs, count slowly and silently: Breathe in
...2...3...4...
- Pause and hold your breath as you slowly and silently count: Hold...2...3...4...

- Breathing out, count slowly and silently: Breathe out...2...3...4...5...6...
- Pause and hold your breath as you slowly and silently count: Hold...2...
- Breathing in and filling your lungs, count slowly and silently: Breathe in
...2...3...4...
- Hold your breath and you silently count: Breathe out...2...3...4...5...6...
- Hold your breath as you slowly count: Hold...2...
- Repeat this 4-4-6-2 breathing exercise for about five minutes. (91)

The *Om* Chant

Next, the third breath practice is ancient. “According to Eastern traditions, the universe originated as a sound that can still be heard: *om* (or *aum*). The notion that the universe began with a word, or sound or a vibration is found in many ancient religious texts, including the Judeo-Christian Bible” (Brown & Gerbarg 98). The Universal Om is chanted in a low note, and it “causes vibrations throughout the body that activate the other branches of the vagus nerve,” which is the longest cranial nerve connected to the heart, lungs, upper digestive tract, chest, and abdomen (Brown & Gerbarg 100). Learning how to do the *om* chant is quite simple. Brown and Gerbarg outline the instructions as:

- *Om* can be chanted in any position. To enhance your ability to feel vibrations, however, it can be best if you begin by sitting in a chair.
- Sit in a chair with your spine straight, feet comfortable and flat on the floor, hands resting on your thighs. Close your eyes as you take two slow deep breaths, drawing in through your nose and releasing out through your mouth.

- Take a slow deep breath in, and as you breathe out, sing one low note:
o...o...o...o...m...m...m...
- There can be three parts to the sound: a...o...m... As you chant, prolong each of the three parts of the sound: a...a...a...o...o...o...m...m...m...
- Close your eyes and repeat a...o...m... three times, drawing the sound out longer as you notice the place in your body where each sound created the most intense vibrations.
Keeping your eyes closed after you complete the three long a...o...m... chants, notice how you feel. (98-99)

“Ha” breath, breath counts, and *om* chanting are all essential mind-body breath awareness practices. They allow you to feel the waves and vibrations of your body and enhance relaxation and focus. Practicing these breathing techniques with at-risk girls will impact their emotional and mental well-being as they develop coping mechanisms that can be done throughout the day, outside of the program.

Connecting the Breath with Stretching

There is healing power in our breath that we must be aware of. The way we breathe reveals our state of mind and our stress levels. When the mind is at ease, our breath is at ease. When our mind is stressed and uneasy, it will show up in our breathing. Thus, for many at-risk girls who deal with anxiety and stress, breath consciousness coupled with stretch therapy will give them a greater sense of awareness and attentiveness to the way stress and anxiety feel in their body and mind. Interestingly, “Our breath is so finely tuned, that it can reflect our personal health, and thus reveals which factors in our environment affect us negatively” (Severinsen 28).

Essentially, the connection the breath has with stretching will allow at-risk girls to relax, go deeper into their stretches and increase their flexibility.

There is one particular stretch/exercise that is fun, challenging and requires much focus, balance, and breathing. The balancing straight legs apart pose is a pose that will leave one feeling stronger and empowered. Stretch and flexibility practitioner, Brad Walker, states, “Many people unconsciously hold their breath while stretching” (29). It is also important to remember to breathe slowly and deeply in the balancing straight legs apart pose, and in every stretch exercise, so that blood can flow through the muscles properly and add nutrients in the body in order to avoid tension (Walker 29). Kit Laughlin’s instructions for pose are to:

Begin by sitting on the floor with the legs bent and apart in front of you, holding the feet from the arch side. Lean backwards until you are balancing on the ischial tuberosities, or the bottom bones. Arch the lower back until the spine is long, straight shape. Take in a breath. On a breath out, slowly straighten the legs. Then while focusing on your breath, balancing, and making sure your back is straight, slowly take the legs out on the side as far as you can. (241)

The reason for highlighting this balancing pose is that during a women’s health and wellness workshop in Baltimore, practitioner and personal friend, Grace Diaz mentioned that “when I do [the balancing straight legs apart pose] I feel fearless and able to achieve anything.” Grace Diaz also stated that she used to stretch every day for two hours a day. Now, she does yoga and breathing techniques daily and shares her knowledge and experiences with women all around the world. It is incredible to know that one’s life can improve through stretching, yoga and breathing techniques. This strength is the same type of motivation I desire to see in at-risk girls. If an at-

risk girl can commit to an activity, believe in herself and improve her capability she will be able to do anything she puts her mind to doing.

Restorative Yoga, Guided Imagery, and Partner Breathing Techniques

As mentioned previously, calming the nervous system is essential for yoga, meditation, and breathing techniques. Stress and anxiety impact the nervous system. Through yoga and meditation, an at-risk girl can learn to calm her nervous system with yogic or conscious breathing. Initially, being aware of her anatomy can play an important role in her emotional, physical, and mental health and overall well-being. For example, clinicians who work with over-responsive children (which are children who respond easily to stimuli) are always looking for ways to help children self-calm or self-regulate. This goal is achieved through restorative yoga poses. Neiman teaches us, “When a child is feeling angry, anxious, or traumatized, a basic restorative pose can feel very safe and comforting...For children with sensory, trauma, balance, sleep and regulatory issues, relaxing in a basic restorative pose allows the body to yield into the earth and feels secure” (10). Restorative yoga poses are a series of yoga poses that calm and reset the mind and body. Such restorative poses are: “Child’s pose, Legs-Up-The-Wall pose, Happy Baby pose, Corpse pose (or Sponge pose), Reclining Bound Angle pose, Reclining-Hand-To-Big-Toe pose, and Reclining Hero pose” (Yoga Journal).

One of the most common restorative yoga poses is the Child’s pose. The Child’s pose is also a great pose for an at-risk girl to relax into after doing active yoga poses. Neiman describes this connection through brief instructions:

- Start in a quadruped position
- Sit back on the heels, lower the chest to the thighs

- Extend the arms forward, chin to the chest or place arms along your sides
- Lean over equipment such as pillows, blankets, towel rolls, or bolsters for a supported Child's pose.
- For an adapted, restorative pose for children who don't want to lie down, extend the legs out in front of the body with a V and place a pillow, bolster, or ball between the legs placed in front of the body, Instruct the child to lean forward onto supports used and hug their arms around it while resting. (11)

Specifically, for working with at-risk girls with trauma, guided imagery has also been proven to create relaxation and have health benefits simply because the core of the activity is guided. In part, "Guided imagery is a right brain technique that engages the emotions, senses and imagination" (Neiman 24). Another key factor in guided imagery according to Neiman is that "another person is speaking and suggesting images that are meant to engage all of the participant's senses: typically feeling, hearing, seeing, smelling, and sometimes taste" (24). One guided imagery activity mentioned in Neiman's book is The Floating Raft. The children, teens, or participants are invited to imagine they are floating on a raft. Then, "Describe the color of the water, the gentle rocking movements, the sun of the face, and smells of the wind" (Neiman 25). In essence, the whole activity is guided by evocative and sensory-rich language that causes an at-risk girl to become one with a positive image of floating on a raft and exploring the beautiful imagery around her.

While using Neiman's book as a guide, Neiman also makes mention of partner breathing and yoga poses. Another goal of the project is to help at-risk girls learn patience, trust, and effective communication. Partner breathing and yoga poses are like "having a dialogue with the

body and also teaches us not to be attached to letting-go and beginning again” (Neiman 60). The purpose of partner breathing and yoga poses is to increase team building skills that will give at-risk girls a sense of belonging and attachment to those around them, creating appreciative inquiry. Similarly, Hammond states that, “Every human being has a need to (1) have a voice and be heard, (2) be seen as essential to the group (i.e. if I was absent, I would be missed), and (3) be seen as unique and exceptional” (25). Essentially, teaching at-risk girls positive team building skills through yoga skills helps them to find support and confidence in their peers and friends and themselves. Neiman describes a breathing and yoga pose called Suspension Bridge. In this activity the girls will be advised to:

- Find a partner who is about the same size.
- Begin practicing breathing in and out.
- Try to get your breathing in sync with one another.
- Hold your arm out and grasp each other’s hand with one arm for support.
- Standing on one leg, raise the other leg behind, bending the knees as you grasp the foot with your other hand.
- Maintain your balance supporting one another.
- Continue to hold each other’s hand and come again slowly to stand. (60)

Overall, the activities listed and described, plus more in the curriculum, can add value and confidence in the lives of at-risk girls. The project can work in any context; however, being able to witness growth and changed the outlook on life in vulnerable youth takes strength and a certain amount of courage. All at-risk girls, whether system-involved or potentially system-

involved, deserve to learn self-soothing mindfulness practices that attribute to their entire work well with their interests and enhance their self-perception. Creating a holistic, trauma-informed rehabilitation program is refreshing and will be able to promote long-term effects such as reducing recidivism rates while also helping at-risk girls become more calm and confident young women.

Appendix 2

Thesis Project Curriculum for At-Risk Girls Ages 8-13 (The Soul Beings Project)

Note: Each category has a list of practices that will be divided up accordingly to make a 1-hour session for 5 days (Monday through Friday). The flow of the session is also expected to change to fit the girl's needs and experiences.

Breathing Techniques: (to calm the nervous system)

- Coherent Breathing
- Resistance Breathing
- “Ha” Breath
- Breath Counting
- Breath Counting with Movement
- The *Om* Chant
- Breath awareness: slow deep breathing while focusing on the breath and relaxing the body

Meditation: (to calm the nervous system)

- Sitting still for 20 minutes in full or half lotus
- Heart-womb connection meditation
- Guided Imagery
- Mirroring (partner activity)

Stretch Therapy: focused breath, flexibility and trust

- Stretching small and large muscle groups
- “Flow stretch”
- Focused breath while stretching
- Partner Stretching

Yoga Postures

Restorative Yoga Poses

- Child’s Pose
- Corpse or Sponge pose
- Happy Baby Pose
- Leg-Up-The-Wall Pose
- Reclining Hero Pose
- Reclining Bound Angle Pose
- Reclining Hand-To-Big-Toe Pose

Plus, much more yoga poses

- Tree Pose, Chair Pose, Eagle Pose, etc.
- Partner Poses i.e. Suspension Bridge, The Arch

Appendix 3

Monday: Session 1

Breathing: Coherent Breathing 10 minutes

Meditation: Stillness for 10 minutes

Stretching: Flow stretch ('go with the flow' stretching) for 12 minutes

Yoga: Restorative Yoga for 25 minutes

Ending Breath Awareness for 3 minutes

Tuesday: Session 2

Breathing: Breath Counts with movement for 15 minutes

Meditation: Heart-womb meditation for 15 minutes

Stretching: Partner Stretching for 15 minutes

Stretching: Mirroring for 10 minutes

Ending Breath Awareness for 5 minutes

Wednesday: Session 3

Breathing: Resistance Breathing for 7 minutes

Meditation: Stillness for 10 minutes

Stretching: Small and large muscle groups for 17 minutes

Yoga: Restorative Yoga and additional yoga poses for 17 minutes

Ending Breath Awareness for 7 minutes

Thursday: Session 4

Breathing: The Om Chant and “Ha” Breath for 5 minutes each

Meditation: Stillness for 10 minutes

Restorative Yoga Poses for 30 minutes

Stretching: Flow Stretch for 5 minutes

Ending Breath Awareness for 5 minutes

Friday: Session 5

Breathing: Breath Counts for 5 minutes

Meditation: Guided Imagery for 5 minutes

Stretching: Focused breath while stretching 30 minutes

Yoga: Selected Yoga postures for 15 minutes

Ending Breath Awareness for 5 minutes

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