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Taking Yoga out of the Studio and into a Refugee Camp

By Mounia Moalla

As a hospital pharmacist, yoga teacher, and yoga therapist in France, I have been involved in humanitarian work for several years in children's education and health.

Convinced of the role of yoga as a therapy for displaced people and victims of war, I applied for a 2-week volunteer mission with genocide survivors in the camp of Serres in northern Greece. This mission was proposed by Lifting Hands International (LHI), a non-governmental organization that provides an array of services to the refugees living in this camp.

Introducing Yoga Where and How It's Needed

What motivated me to take up the challenge of this mission was bringing yoga as close as possible to people who need it. For 2 weeks I was able to introduce the practices' benefits to the women and men who took refuge in this camp. The people there are mostly Yazidis, an ethnic minority in northern Iraq, who suffered deep psychological and physical trauma and had traveled thousands of kilometers before arriving in the camp.

Coming from a culture far removed from yoga, it took time for many of the participants to rid themselves of the prejudices they had about this discipline and to decide to participate in my classes. To get this to happen it also helped that I could speak with them in Arabic (my native language) and explain the benefits of the exercises. My fluency in Arabic was a definite advantage that allowed me to gain their trust as well as their adherence.

Building in Safe Choice

I was able to offer sessions for women for several hours every day, applying the principles of trauma-informed yoga. I was also able to offer different sessions for men, who were very cautious at first, as they thought of yoga as "a sport for women" and that it was "about sitting down and closing your eyes."

With every class I taught postures as well as adapted breathing exercises to bring participants moments of well-being in a very difficult daily environment while at the same time striving to avoid triggering memories of trauma. I favored postures of openness (e.g., *tadasana* [mountain pose] with arms opened), rooting (e.g., *vrikshasana* [tree pose] and *balasana* [child's pose]), and self-confidence (e.g., *virabhadrasana* [warrior pose], *natarajasana* [dancer pose]). We also practiced relaxing breathing exercises such as diaphragmatic breathing and *nadi shodhana* (alternate-nostril breathing).

One student told me that she practices the diaphragmatic breathing before sleeping and that she noticed that she slept better afterward. Another student/beneficiary of the classes told me that he used the half bridge pose for back pain and that it gave him considerable relief.

Adapting to the Environment

To bring yoga as close as possible to the women in the camp, we created, along with LHI volunteers, defined spaces and times dedicated to yoga in the tent of women's manual activities. By reorganizing the interior of this tent, I was able to have a space for several mats and offer sessions to those who wanted to practice with me while allowing other women to continue their hand crafts (crocheting, knitting, etc.) and learn a bit about yoga from afar—perhaps becoming curious. Several of them joined the sessions afterward to discover the real benefits of the exercises.

Practicing yoga in this difficult environment was a daily challenge. I had to adapt to the surrounding noise and focus on the fatigue and the psychological and physical state of each of the participants to ensure that every session brought its benefits despite all the constraints.

Other important factors during these sessions were accepting laughter and intrigued looks and taking the time to explain, in simple words, the benefits of the exercises.

An Unforgettable Experience

During my mission, I provided a training on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), its management, and the role of yoga therapy for the volunteers of LHI. I also offered a yoga class to them to thank them for all that they had given me during this mission and to offer them the benefits of yoga, like peace and comfort, that they need daily.

To maintain this dynamic around yoga classes in the community center, I proposed to be available for the next volunteer yoga teachers should they need my advice and experience in yoga therapy and trauma-

informed yoga. I also designed a yoga session to serve as a model for future volunteers that avoids postures and exercises that can trigger trauma, practices such as the cat/cow exercise and rapid breathing like *kapalabhati* (skull-shining breath).

This unforgettable experience, so rich on both a human and a professional level, touched me deeply, and allowed me to participate in proving that yoga can adapt to all needs and all places to bring its benefits. Yoga has no limits or borders.

My time in the refugee camp also allowed me to share the values of yoga—patience, acceptance, and self-esteem—with people who need them most. **YTT**

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