

iRest – Sleeping Your Way to Fertility (the Yoga Way)

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What do U.S. soldiers returning from Iraq and infertility patients have in common? They both might benefit from a form of yoga called Integrative Restoration or iRest. A feasibility study conducted at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., indicated that a particular approach to yoga called Yoga Nidra is having a positive effect on military personnel suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Participants in the program have reported that through the use of progressive relaxation, deep breathing and meditation, symptoms of anxiety, depression, insomnia and pain have lessened.

Meanwhile, on the infertility battlefield, PTSD takes a different yet familiar form: anxiety, depression, loss, isolation from friends, marital stress, financial burdens, spiritual crisis and feelings of being broken. Is it possible this same technique of Yoga Nidra could help fertility patients relieve their symptoms of distress just as it has helped our soldiers? Richard Miller, PhD. Psychologist, who developed the protocol of iRest used in the Walter Reed study says, “yes.” Dr. Miller adds, “The ultimate design of iREST/Yoga Nidra is to help people live contented lives, free of conflict, anxiety, fear and suffering. iREST accomplishes its goal through two basic steps: (1) the embodiment of pure awareness and (2) the release of negative body sensations, emotions, beliefs and stress that give rise to self-destructive patterns.”

Embodiment of Pure Awareness

Yoga Nidra, a Sanskrit phrase which means “sleep of the yogi’s,” has been practiced by yogis and sages for thousands of years. It is based on the idea that we have three states of consciousness: the wakeful state, dream state, and the deep dreamless sleep state. It is thought that the dreamless sleep state is the purest form of consciousness and a connection with it ultimately leads to a greater knowledge of God or Spirit. This concept of the dreamless sleep state maybe difficult to grasp but when you are asked in the morning how you slept the night before, you usually

have a deep knowledge of the answer. You say, “I slept great” or “I tossed and turned all night.” How do you know if you are asleep? There is awareness within this deep, dreamless state of consciousness which the yogis contend offers the greatest opportunity for a student to experience an understanding of her innate nature. This consciousness is pure awareness that never sleeps and welcomes every moment as it is, without analysis, judgment or conclusion. By welcoming things as they are, a student begins to see that they are not separate, finite beings, rather infinite and eternal. Connecting with this state of consciousness offers an opportunity to resolve mental, physical and spiritual confusion, conflict and suffering. It’s like having an internal disarmament mechanism built right into your psyche and that’s not a bad thing to have in your fertility tool belt, particularly if you find yourself among those who experience stress and self-destructive patterns while trying to conceive.

Release of Negativity

The practice of Yoga Nidra is not auto suggestion, hypnosis or a series of postures. It is a guided process of relaxation, self-inquiry and sensory withdrawal which leads to profound contemplation and healing. The great news is, anyone can do it. You don’t need to have Gumby-like flexibility, a fit physique or a calm mind to practice the technique. In fact, if you like sleeping, you will love iRest because the practice is done while lying down in a savasana style (dead man’s corpse) position. Those who are new to the practice often fall asleep and have no conscious recollection of what might have happened during iRest. When they wake, they feel rested and relaxed. Interestingly, it is believed that 30 minutes of Yoga Nidra is like having three hours of regular sleep. Take that to the sleep bank during your two-week wait!

Yoga Nidra is a little bit of body awareness, a little bit of breathing and a whole lot of guided meditation which is meant to help the student process all of the negative emotions and situations which constantly bombard the physical world. You can hop on the treadmill and feel a sense of stress reduction when you are finished, but just like any given point on the conveyer belt of your running machine, your problems and their associated emotions will keep popping up from time to time.

Yoga Nidra teaches us to get off the treadmill by acknowledging our stresses, emotions and problems rather than reacting to them. In so doing, we will experience a more lasting type of healing.

Infertility and Trauma

Yoga, military veterans and holistic fertility are three phrases one would not expect to find in the same article. While some may find it a stretch to connect the stresses of battle with the stress of infertility, the fact is that studies have shown that women undergoing IVF have depression and anxiety rates similar to women with cancer and AIDS (Domar AD et al. The psychological impact of infertility: a comparison with patients with other medical conditions. *J Psychosom Obstet Gynaecol* 1993;14 Suppl:45-52). For those that haven't experienced difficulties getting pregnant, it's difficult to truly recognize the trauma that can occur. At *Pulling Down the Moon*, we find that many women actually seek out holistic treatment following a particular trauma – a miscarriage, failed cycle or devastating piece of news. Take Eleanor, for instance, who finally conceived after years of fertility treatment only to have her baby die in utero from a cord incident. Or Steve, who learned after a routine sperm analysis that he has no viable sperm and no chance of fathering a biological child. Or Amy, whose gynecologist diagnosed her with early menopause at the age of 27. Such events, while not life threatening, are deeply shocking and challenge one of our most primal drives – the drive to procreate. In addition, they assail deeply held beliefs of marriage, partnership and family.

Time and again in our classes we hear traumatic stories of miscarriages, phone calls from the nurses with “devastating” news, and the overpowering fear of having to try again only to experience another failure or loss. These memories are often denied or pushed below the surface without sufficient time for grieving and/or processing because infertility is largely a private experience that occurs simultaneously with daily life, work and relationship experiences. Unlike death in the family or major illness, there is no established societal framework for honoring and working through the losses and challenges associated with infertility. Many former fertility patients report that routine ultrasounds, a television commercial that

features a swimming sperm or even a phone call from a newly pregnant friend can evoke feelings of panic and helplessness well beyond the resolution of their fertility treatment.

Are you Sleeping?

Since research has shown that women who are depressed or anxious have significant declines in IVF success rates (Chen TH, Chang SP, Juang KD. Human Reprod. 2004; 19:2313-2318), it is easy to see the value of a practice like Yoga Nidra which reduces stress and helps a woman feel more empowered while trying to conceive. At Pulling Down the Moon we incorporate Yoga Nidra into our Tools for Healing Yoga Class and are offering a new class called WeRest for couples in September of 2007. Beyond the practical value of stress reduction, our students state that one of the most profound experiences of the practice is using deep relaxation for setting a private intention or Sankalpa. This allows them the opportunity to ask for their heart's desire in a way in which they, themselves, suspend judgment on the nature of the intention and its outcome. The teacher then instructs them to believe that this intention has already manifested. This puts motivation and energy behind the intention so the student feels as though they are actively working toward, and have the ability to attract those things they want in their life. Similarly, they are getting rid of those things that are not conducive for achieving their intention.

What we see in our classes is that women going through fertility are often "sleeping" or at war with themselves. The series of tests, treatments and disappointing outcomes take them further away from their purest form of consciousness and throws them into a state of confusion and separation. They are not truly "awake" to their true potential. When they start welcoming life as it is rather than how they imagine it should be, they awaken from their own symbolic "sleep" and experience the genie in the bottle that exists in each and every one of us.

If you are interested in practicing Yoga Nidra/iRest make sure you seek out a yoga instructor who has been specifically trained and certified to teach its methods. As an alternative to private or group instruction, there are several CD's which offer

exceptional value in taking a student through the process such as Richard Miller's "Infinite Awakening: The Principles and Practice of Yoga Nidra". For more information about infertility, you can visit www.pullingdownthemoon.com.