



## **CREATING, OPTIMIZING, PRACTICES FOR ENDURANCE**

**By: Dezette C. Johnson & Dr. LaSonya Townsend**

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**CREATING, OPTIMIZING, PRACTICES FOR ENDURANCE**  
**A Stress Reduction Program for College Students**

By: Dezette C. Johnson, MSW, Ph.D.  
Dr. Lasonya Townsend, MSW, Ph.D.

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## **Abstract**

Creating, Optimizing, Practices, for Endurance (COPE) is a stress reduction program for college students. The purpose of the program is to reduce mental health stressors in college students at a Historical Black College and University (HBCU) in the South who have experienced trauma by establishing an alternative behavioral practice program. The program consisted of an eight-week stress reduction program using yoga, mindfulness, guided imagery, essential oils, and Reiki. Each weekly session consisted of a featured complimentary alternative modality lesson and how the method could be used to assist in reducing stress and trauma indicators.

## **CREATING, OPTIMIZING, PRACTICES FOR ENDURANCE** **A Stress Reduction Program for College Students**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The number of students dealing with trauma has increased significantly on college campuses. The increase of sexual assault, domestic violence, and date rape has led to mandatory federal programs on college campuses to assist victims of these offenses. In 2012, research found that victimized college women reported symptoms of PTSD (Walsh,, Danielson, McCauley, Saunders, Kilpatrick, and Resnick, 2012). Students report post-traumatic symptoms after their trauma often influence their college success such as depression, anxiety, nervousness, and irritability. Students that have been in situations of abuse and trauma are dealing with symptoms of PTSD or related disorders and need access to services to address their mental health needs. College can be a stressful time for students which can trigger or exacerbate any presenting issues.

Traditional approaches to healing symptoms dealing with trauma have been psychotherapy and pharmaceutical medications. Recently, more approaches to healing have incorporated alternative complementary treatment approaches. In addition to traditional treatment to mental health, complementary evidenced based treatment such as yoga has found to be extremely effective in reducing stress, anxiety, depression, and insomnia. (Barnett, Shale, Elkins, & Fisher, 2014)

The *DSM – 5* defines trauma as:

“Exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence in one (or more) of the following ways: (1.) Directly experiencing the traumatic event(s); (2) witnessing, in person, the event(s) as it occurred to others; (3) learning that the traumatic event (s) occurred to a close family member or close friend – in cases of actual or threatened death of a family member or friend, the event(s) must have been violent or accidental; (4) experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event(s).” (Briere & Scott, 2015)

There are various types of traumas. Some major types of trauma are: sexual abuse or assault, interpersonal violence, child maltreatment, gang/community violence, natural disasters,

accidents, war, and life threatening medical conditions. Traumatic experiences can be experienced directly, or indirectly by witnessing the trauma of another. (Kawam & Martinez, (2016).

Evidenced based research has indicated many treatment facilities and hospitals have begun using healing touch therapy to assist clients with trauma and PTSD. Reiki, a form of healing touch of ancient practices has become more widely known. Research has reported that it primary assists in the alleviation of symptoms such as stress, anxiety, depression, and chronic pain (Psych Central, 2015.) Aromatherapy has been used to ease stress, anxiety, depression, and restoring emotional balance and improve overall attitude (Herz,2009).

### **COPE Purpose and Program Components**

College can be a stressful time for many students dealing with trauma due to the stress of academic performance, social interaction, and personal development. According to Kataoka et al, (2012) approximately 4 to 6 percent of youth in the general population nationwide will meet the criteria for a diagnosis of PTSD following a traumatic event, including symptoms such as depression, anxiety, difficulty eating, sleeping, focusing, concentrating, exhibiting risky behaviors, and possibility of developing addictions.

The purpose of **C**reating, **O**ptimizing, **P**ractices for **E**ndurance (COPE) was to reduce mental health stressors in college students at a Historical Black College and University (HBCU) in the South who have experienced trauma by establishing an alternative behavioral practice program. Program officials conducted two focus groups to assess the need of the COPE program and to understand the students' perceptions of trauma and stress. The focus groups included traditional and non-traditional students, which were conducted separately.

Traditional students reported they lacked the skills of how to appropriately use coping strategies, financial issues, lack of support systems, interpersonal relationship difficulties, academic pressure, and expectations of school performance from parents. Only 5% of the traditional students reported using the services of the University Counseling Center, 10% indicated they would use the services if necessary, and the remainder students indicated they did not feel comfortable using the services.

Non-traditional students reported having difficulty focusing and balancing school, work, and family. Students also reported feeling inadequate returning to school after being out for at least 10 years. It is estimated that approximately 81% of non-traditional students experience moderate to high levels of stress compared to 18% that experience low level or no stress. High levels of stress and the “increasing demands” of non-traditional students has led to a greater dropout rate of 38.9% compared to 18.2% of traditional students (Francois, 2014; Massey, 2015). The non-traditional students reported it is stressful needing mental health services and not having access to those services. There are limited mental health and support services that focus on the needs of the non-traditional students on campus.

The second phase of our program consisted of an eight- week stress reduction program using yoga, mindfulness, guided imaginary, essential oils, and Reiki. Each weekly session consisted of a featured complimentary alternative modality lesson and how the method could be used to assist in reducing stress and trauma indicators.

The participates consisted of 20 African -American college female students (ages 18-60) who had experienced some form of trauma in their life such as domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, life experiences, or post-traumatic stress disorder. Participants were recruited by fliers distributed throughout campus. The screening process consisted of participants

completing an application and an interview. Participants were given the following measures before and after the program to assess traumatic symptomatology indicators: (1.) Life Events Checklist, (2.) Generalized Anxiety Disorder Questionnaire, and (3.) Patient Stress Questionnaire. The last session of the program testimonials was given by the participants and transcribed into narratives. The program was conducted by two BSW faculty and the campus Violence Prevention Coordinator. Program officials are certified Reiki masters, and or experts in one of the complimentary modalities.

### **Christian Application of COPE**

The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine defines complementary and alternative medicine as: “A group of diverse medical and healthcare systems, practice, and products that are not presently considered to be part of conventional medicine” (Tindle, Davis, Phillips, & Eisenberg, 2005. Pg.1). Natural products, chiropractic care, diet, massage, meditation, essential oils, and yoga are some of the most commonly used methods of complementary and alternative medicine (Nijs, 2013, pg.1) Is complementary and alternative medicine compatible with Christian beliefs? Christianity has modified various complementary and alternative medicine to coincide with their faith. The following information will demonstrate how complementary and alternative medicines or models can “enhance the Christian spiritual journey” while improving health outcomes (Symington & Symington, 2012, p. 71).

### **Christian Model of Mindfulness Meditation**

Practicing mindfulness meditation will help Christians deal with stress, anxiety, and negative thoughts that impact their behavior. Christians develop psychological disorders as a result of destructive thinking and experiencing negative emotions. Those thoughts and feelings are continuously being reinforced and reflected upon, which strengthens the presence of the

psychological disorders. Mindfulness meditation encourages Christians to focus on God's glory, grace, and mercy while experiencing difficulties (Symington & Symington, 2012). The Christian Model of Mindfulness includes three pillars: Presence of Mind, Acceptance, and Internal Observation. When Christians are able to stop their minds from wondering and thinking about their adversities, they experience presence of mind. Presence of Mind includes focusing on the glory, grace, and mercy of God. Once the presence of mind is achieved, Christians are able to transition through the remaining pillars. Acceptance is achieved once Christians are able to accept their negative thoughts and feelings without being self-critical. Acceptance decreases the power of the negative thoughts and feelings and increases tolerance and coping ability. This leads to the last pillar, internal observation. Internal observation allows a person to "observe a feeling rather than be the feeling" (Symington & Symington, 2012, p. 74). This means, Christians are able to observe how negative thoughts and feelings trigger different physiological sensations throughout the body without allowing those sensations to dictate their behavior (Symington & Symington, 2012).

### **Reiki (Healing Touch)**

Reiki (pronounced "ray-key") is Japanese for "Universal" (Rei) "Life Force Energy" (ki). It is a subtle yet effective energy healing technique for stress reduction and relaxation that supports the body's own natural healing abilities. During a session, the practitioner delivers Reiki through their hands using a light touch or slightly above the body to help increase the amount of ki (or chi) in the body. When we experience physical or psychological trauma, our life force energy can become weak or blocked, which can lead to imbalances and dis-ease in the body. Reiki helps by increasing the flow of ki to bring the body back into balance.

The power of healing through touch is an essential aspect of the Christian ministry. The Bible provides numerous stories of how Jesus demonstrated the power of healing through touch. For people to be healed by Jesus, they must have faith in him. Based on the healing stories, the church is responsible for continuing the work of Jesus by forgiving sin, showing compassion, obeying the commands of Jesus, and engaging in ministries associated with teaching, preaching, and healing (Culpepper, 2016). Reiki is “administered by the laying on hands” (Forgey, 2014, p. 1). This touch based healing uses the life-force energy that flows throughout the body and is thought to be coming from a higher power or realm (Leonard, 2014; Rand, 2017). The higher power restores balance to the life-force energy. When the life-force is high, people tend to be healthy physically and emotionally. When the life-force is low, people tend to be sick and suffer from mental and physical illnesses (Leonard, 2014; Rand, 2017). Christian accommodative Reiki involves Christians engaging in intercessory prayer and petitioning God to use them as a vessel to heal others (Brown, 2014).

### **Christian Yoga**

Yoga is not a religion, but is used to strengthen Christians’ faith and relationship with God (Thielen, 2015). Yoga has existed for over two-thousand years and is comprised of innumerable ancient traditions. Although yoga is rooted in the South Asian culture, it has evolved and is practiced by various religions, which include Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Jains, and Muslim (Jain, 2017). Many religions have altered and assimilated yoga techniques to promote “holistic wellness” and to use as “an act of worship” (Thielen, 2015, p.1). Yoga is used to improve physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health (Thielen, 2015).

Additionally, Christians incorporate yoga into their life style in order to glorify God while honoring their temple (body). Christians believe their body is a temple and yoga allows

them to attune their body, mind, and spirit for deepening their faith in God (Yogafaith, 2016, Markides, 2008). Christians use Biblical terminology and prayer to accompany specific yoga poses (Jain, 2017). Christians have incorporated the prayer practice, which focuses on and recites the Jesus Prayer “Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me” (Markides, 2008, p. 185).

## **Essential Oils**

Essential oils are natural aromatic compounds found in the seeds, bark, stems, roots, flowers, and other plants. They are 50 to 70 times more potent than herbs. The nature of an essential oil varies from plant to plant, within botanical families, and from species to species. The delicate ratio of aromatic constituents found in any given essential oil are what make it unique and give it specific benefits. Essential oils can be used for a wide range of emotional and physical wellness applications. They can be used as single essential oils or in complex essential oil blends depending on user experience and desired benefit (Retrieved from <https://www.doterra.com>).

Similarly, to the previously discussed complementary methods, various religions use essential oils. Pagans are known to use essential oils for supernatural practices like creating spells and calling upon spirits. Pagans believe essential oils have supernatural powers. Some essential oil companies are promoting their oils by using descriptions derived from the Wiccan Book of Shadows. Paganism and its connection to essential oils is the reason some Christians are hesitant to use essential oils (Gilkerson, 2016). However, Christians must understand that they can use essential oils to glorify God. “Partake of the Lord’s good gifts with thankfulness” (1 Corinthians 10:30). “For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer” (1 Timothy 4:4-5). Oils are mentioned 191 times in the bible and there are 600 references to essential oils. Bible

scriptures reference the healing properties and the impact oils can have on the body and mind. Essential oils are known for elevating mood, supports healthy immune system, promotes relaxation, and supports skin health along with other various benefits (Stewart, 2004). Essential oils can be applied topically, inhaled, and ingested with professional assistance (Halcon, 2016).

## **Conclusion**

The COPE program can serve as a model for universities to implement to reduce stress and trauma on their campus. At the end of our program students revealed their stress and trauma indicators were reduced by 30 percent at the end of the program. Worrying, anxiety, and irritability were the top stress indicators reduced. Qualitative data narratives indicated participants adapted complementary alternative modalities in their lifestyles and used the modalities daily to reduce stress indicators.

“After participating in the COPE program, I gained self-confidence and realized that I need to put myself first. I put everyone first but me. I discovered through this program that I don’t value me. I get so stressed out easily. Through learning about the essential oils, mindfulness, and Reiki I have learned to relax. Most importantly, I learned after completing this program that I need to work on me. I feel so blessed to have been chosen and gone through this program.”

COPE Participant

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