

Essential Clinical Social Work Series

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Terry B. Northcut *Editor*

Cultivating Mindfulness in Clinical Social Work

Narratives from Practice

 Springer

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Chapter 5

Beginning with the Social Worker: Yoga Nidra Meditation as a Means for Self-inquiry, Growth, Effectiveness and Resiliency

Corinne Peterson, Amy Zajakowski Uhll and Susan Grossman

As you welcome your wholeness, you become a light for those who follow in your footsteps. We are all brothers and sisters on our healing journey together.

—Richard Miller

Introduction

Social workers are unique in that they work in a myriad of settings, in a variety of roles. Throughout a career, the individual social worker may work as a caseworker, therapist, administrator, teacher, researcher, advocate, activist—even wearing many hats at the same time. She might be employed by a large, bureaucratic organization, or self-employed. The work is often very difficult, with long hours, and challenging (even dangerous) situations. Sometimes the rewards are readily apparent, and sometimes so subtle they are barely perceivable. No matter what hat she wears, the social worker has chosen to dedicate her life to service on a broad scale, working at the micro and macro levels to alleviate problems for those suffering from sociological, psychological, and economic difficulties. This fundamental dedication serves as a foundation throughout her career.

Yet the path is not an easy one and often not as straightforward and romantic (or idealistic) as it seemed at its inception. Burnout and secondary trauma are also part of the likely path of the social worker, at some point in her career. In addition, each social worker comes with her own past history and life experiences. There is always

C. Peterson (✉)

iRest® Yoga Nidra Meditation, Therapeutic Yoga and Massage, Chicago, IL, USA

e-mail: corinne.peterson@gmail.com

A.Z. Uhll

Chicago Center for Integration and Healing, Chicago, IL, USA

e-mail: jazajuhll@yahoo.com

S. Grossman

Loyola University Chicago, School of Social Work, Chicago, IL, USA

e-mail: sgrossm@luc.edu

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personal healing to be attended to, and that inner work has reverberation into the work in the world. As the renowned Buddhist nun Pema Chodron states, "*We work on ourselves in order to help others, but also we help others in order to work on ourselves*" (Chodron 2008, p. 78).

As evidenced by this book, there is more and more information coming out about mindfulness and its effectiveness with various populations. Social workers, and many of those involved in caregiving professions are often looking for techniques that can help clients and communities. What is often overlooked is the profound benefit of these same practices for the caregiver. As practitioners, we (the authors) have been exploring the impact of iRest® Yoga Nidra Meditation in our various roles. Our understanding of the profound implications of this practice continues to deepen as we bring it into therapy, supervision, mentoring, teaching, advocacy, and administration. It is through our collective experience that it has become abundantly clear that these practices are not just for the populations we serve but essential for us as well. In this chapter, we focus on the ways in which these practices enable us to be more responsive practitioners, whether working directly with individuals in the therapeutic context, or teaching future social workers. We also discuss the ways in which they enrich our lives and by connection, the lives of those with whom we work.

In the following sections, there are three voices with different yet overlapping narratives. We begin with a description of the iRest protocol to provide a foundation for understanding the practice. This first voice is a yoga instructor with a social service background who specializes in working with trauma. The second voice is that of a psychotherapist, who is also an administrator and mentor. A social work college administrator is the third voice. She is also a seasoned researcher, professor, and advocate. Through our three voices we speak to the impact of iRest in our personal and professional lives.

What Is iRest Yoga Nidra Meditation?

by Corinne Peterson, M.P.H.

Like many yoga teachers, I began practicing yoga and meditation because of physical pain, and internal emotional suffering. From this personal suffering came a deep desire to help others relieve their suffering as well. Prior to becoming a yoga instructor, I worked and volunteered in several social service settings in Chicago's Latino communities. For over 15 years I was both a direct service provider and an administrator in settings including foster care, domestic violence, and homeless shelters. As I developed as a yoga teacher, I was able to bring the teachings into the workplace with clients and staff. For the past 18 years I have had a private practice. At this time, I primarily work with people with trauma histories, and the therapists who serve them.

Throughout the years my journey to help others has gone hand-in-hand with my own personal growth. I have seen my own path reflected in the many social workers I have known throughout the years. Both yoga and social work seek to end suffering, and that desire is usually both personal and professional. Over this time I have also explored many mindfulness approaches, and finally came to appreciate iRest as an extremely effective practice. I have seen many clients and practitioners benefit profoundly from this approach to meditation.

Yoga Nidra is an ancient meditative practice that has recently been gaining popularity in a variety of forms. Similar to the practice of yoga postures, various systems have been developed over the years. One such system, the practice of iRest, evolved from the studies and teachings of Richard Miller, Ph.D. Miller is a clinical psychologist who has been integrating yoga and other wisdom teachings with western psychology for over 45 years. He has gained particular recognition for using yoga nidra to help military veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). During initial research at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, he was asked to come up with a different name for his approach to yoga nidra, concerned that the words “yoga nidra” might be rejected by the very veterans they were hoping to serve. Careful consideration evolved the name “Integrative Restoration” or “iRest” for short (Miller 2015, p. 2). Miller’s organization, the Integrative Restoration Institute, continues to expand to serve the broader population, including hospitals, clinics, hospice, homeless shelters, sex trafficking, community programs, and schools.

The words “yoga” and “nidra” come from the Indian Sanskrit language and have many translations. The following definition offers a glimpse into the practice of yoga nidra:

Yoga: the view, path, and means by which you experience your interconnection with yourself and all of life.

Nidra: changing states of consciousness, such as waking, sleeping, and dreaming, which include sensations, emotions, thoughts, and images (Miller 2015, p. 18).

As previously mentioned, iRest takes as its premise that we are already whole and complete. Through this wholeness, we are able to directly experience our interconnectedness with life. Within this deep interconnected wholeness, we also attend to the present moment as experienced in the body. The practice is rooted in direct somatic experience. This includes various emotions and beliefs as they arise. iRest teaches us to welcome our experiences, even the most challenging.

The iRest Framework

The body is always present, the mind is a time traveler. When you can bring your attention to the sensation here, in the body – you are the very presence you seek.

—Amy Weintraub (personal communication, April 21, 2015)

As with most yoga nidra practices, iRest is based on the Panchamaya model (aka Panchamaya Koshas). This is an ancient model that can help us understand our human experiences. This model traditionally describes five layers of our physical experience. These "layers" are often called "dimensions" or "sheaths." As humans, we experience these layers somatically, as felt-sense in the body. The first layer is the physical *Body*. It is physical and tangible. We can feel the solidity of our muscles and bones. The second layer is the *Breath*. It is subtler, yet we can feel how it moves in and out; how our body expands with each inhalation and releases with each exhalation. The third layer includes *Feelings and Emotions*. We can feel sensations like temperature or tension. Emotions like anger or fear or happiness can also be felt as sensation in the body. The fourth layer is that of *Thoughts and Beliefs*. Through quiet listening, we realize that they are also felt somatically, though we often think they are only in the mind. The fifth layer is that of *Joy*. This joy has a subtler felt-sense, and may be experienced through gratitude, kindness, or compassion. In iRest an additional layer is added that invites specific inquiry into the separate sense of "I." This is felt as the perception that we are separate from the world around us, rather than part of the wholeness of life. The practice of iRest helps us cultivate the ability to feel these layers as physical sensations. This ability improves over time through consistent practice.

Inherent in this Panchamaya model, and yoga philosophy in general, there is an understanding that the tangible world of form is always changing, coming, and going. The layers previously described are constantly changing and moving through us. Our bodies, breath, feelings, emotions, beliefs, and joy are impermanent. For example, our bodies will age, and our emotions can change from one day to the next (or even one minute to the next). Within this ancient perspective, there is also an underlying sense of a deeper permanence, an Awareness that is unchanging. Sometimes this is felt as "Presence" or "Being" or "Witnessing Awareness" or "Wholeness." However translated, it speaks to a deeper experience beyond words that is often hard to describe but can be felt. This Awareness is often likened to the clear blue sky and the layers are weather patterns moving through. Sometimes there is sunshine, other times storms swoop in. Sometimes we just have a cloudy day. But the sky is the continuous backdrop through which the weather moves.

In iRest, mindful attention is brought to each layer, these metaphorical weather patterns, with a sense of welcoming and curiosity. Through this attention, the layers gradually quiet, the mind calms and this unchanging Awareness is felt and witnessed within the practitioner. The sense of welcoming and curiosity is fundamental to the iRest practice, as we demonstrate in the narratives to follow. Through following the protocol as it unfolds, we intentionally cultivate openness instead of trying to ignore or push away uncomfortable sensations. Physical discomforts, uncomfortable emotions, or challenging beliefs are considered messengers or allies that may bring insight or information. Ultimately, we are developing the ability to deeply listen and befriend ourselves. It is through this ability to "be with" ourselves, rather than deny ourselves, that we can recognize our deeper wholeness that is peaceful and calm amidst even the most challenging circumstances.

The Panchamaya model provides the basic outline for the 10-step iRest protocol. This protocol is often delivered as a guided practice in group settings, and can be done through the use of recorded practices. The protocol also provides a framework for dyads (one-to-one meditation) and shorter micropractices that can be used throughout the day.

The 10-Step Protocol as a Guided Practice

Setting the Stage—Unlike other forms of mindful meditation which are often done seated, iRest can be practiced in any position. Most commonly it is practiced lying down, with support under the head and knees. The practitioner¹ is asked to get as comfortable as possible to feel completely supported. When coming to the practice from a place of comfort, the body can more deeply rest, and attention can be directed inward toward each aspect of the protocol.

Moving through the Protocol—The iRest protocol consists of 10 stages. First, we set the stage for the practice with Heartfelt Desire, Intention, and Inner Resource. Then we bring attention to each layer: Body, Breath, Feelings/Emotions, Beliefs/Thoughts, and Joy. After attending to each dimension, there is a “stepping back” or a defocusing into Awareness. At the end of the practice, while resting in a sense of Wholeness, participants are asked to recall their Heartfelt Desire and Intention, as they move back into their daily life.

Here are salient aspects of each stage of the protocol:

1. **Heartfelt Desire**—We begin the practice by identifying what we most want in life, a deeper longing that is connected to that which is most important to us. Some may word this as a “heartfelt mission,” “heartfelt path” or even a prayer. It helps clarify our deeper motivations and connects us to the flow of Life. The Heartfelt Desire is the simple felt-sense of the life force that is animating every cell in our body. By simply feeling this life force, we experience a deep felt-sense of value, meaning and purpose, just as we are—that is prior to anything we do in the world. Just our basic beingness has value, meaning and purpose (Miller, personal communication, July 2015). Connecting with one’s reason for practicing brings deep personal meaning to the practice and support in daily life. It is expressed in present tense, and we experience it as if it were already true in this moment. Examples might include:

¹Please note that I use the word “practitioner” as a personal preference. In yoga the term “student” is often used, but this indicates that there is a learning involved, rather than an internal experiencing that is being facilitated. A psychotherapist who uses iRest in their practice would likely say “client”, and a doctor would use “patient”.

- *I am whole, healed, and healthy.*
- *My thoughts, words, and actions agree and align with one another.*
- *I am deeply connected to myself, to others, and to life.*
- *I am at peace with myself and the world.*
- *I accept and appreciate myself.*
- *I am a compassionate, loving, and kind person.*

2. **Intention**—We then come to a short-term intention for the specific practice. Intentions are the vows that support our realizing of Heartfelt Desire. They can help define and support behavior change, including shifting attitudes. They are also expressed in present tense, and experienced as if it were true in this moment. Examples might include:

- *I exercise and eat healthy foods to strengthen and nourish my body and mind.*
- *I show up on time, respecting my relationships with others.*
- *I pay attention and notice when I am getting reactive. I take time to mindfully respond.*

3. **Inner Resource**—Our Inner Resource is that within us which is already healthy and whole. It has never been harmed or damaged. It is already a place of contentment, peace, security, safety, strength, ground, ease, and well-being. Inner Resource is ultimately the feeling of being, and of the life force that is living us. Sometimes it is referred to as “inner sanctuary,” “inner refuge,” or “safe place.” Each practitioner finds their own pathway to eliciting the felt-sense of their own inner resource. These may include:

- *A place in nature (real or imagined).*
- *A special room which is comfortable, filled with favorite things.*
- *Being in the company of a special person, wisdom figure or spiritual guide.*
- *A word or phrase (calm, peaceful, ease, safety...).*

Images can be useful to help orient the practitioner to this felt-sense of ease in the body. However, Inner Resource is not the image itself, but is the felt-sense of the image that links us with that felt-sense of connection to that which is unchanging. Everyone can feel this. Some come to it innately, others find that a skilled instructor can help identify a connection that is personally resonant.

The ultimate Inner Resource is the innate, simple feeling of being that has always been with us. It is always pure, spacious, beyond time, beyond need or lack, complete and always whole. It is the ground of security, ease and well-being that can never be harmed, does not need healing and is always whole. It just needs to be remembered. By connecting with our Inner Resource at the beginning of the practice, we have a safe place to return to whenever we would like to reconnect with our inner safety. This can be particularly useful during the practice (or in everyday life) when we experience sensations that are overwhelming.

4. **Bodysensing**—The body is the first layer we attend to, noticing sensations in different parts of the body. By feeling into the body we begin to befriend it and listen to the messages it sends us. Through consistent practice, we increase our capacity to feel various sensations in the body. By learning to feel these more tangible sensations (arm, toes, etc.), it helps to foster the skill of feeling sensations as they arise in more subtle form (anger, excitement).
5. **Breathsensing**—The breath layer is more subtle than the body, yet it can still be felt. We can sense the expansion and release of the inhalation and exhalation as it moves in and out of the body and continue to increase our capacity to experience sensation. As several authors point out (Miller 2015; Van der Kolk 2014), by breathing mindfully, we are helping the regulation of the central nervous system. Over time the system becomes more responsive, the sympathetic nervous system (fight/flight/freeze) begins to calm and parasympathetic nervous system (rest/renew/heal) becomes more prominent. With regular practice they come more into right relationship with each other. The balance between the sympathetic nervous system and the parasympathetic nervous system is measured by heart rate variability (HRV), an indicator of overall well-being and resilience to stress (Miller 2015, pp. 81–82; Van der Kolk 2014, pp. 266–267).
6. **Feelings and Emotions**—In this layer, the word “Feelings” refers to particular sensations in the body, such as warmth, coolness, heaviness, lightness, comfort, and discomfort. The internal experiences of “Emotions” can include angry, sad, excited, bored, guilt, satisfaction, shy, etc. The variety and richness of human emotion is endless, yet few of us are fully aware of the rainbow of our internal emotional landscape. Richard Miller likens *Emotions* to a pot that holds ingredients, and *Feelings* as ingredients in the pot (Miller 2015, pp. 94–95). As with all layers, Feelings and Emotions are welcomed as messengers, with the understanding that anything that is refused becomes more ingrained, and processing is delayed. It is common to want to push down or ignore emotions that are uncomfortable. For example, anger is an unacceptable emotion for many people, but with iRest we have the opportunity to engage it in meditative inquiry. We can ask ourselves, “What does it feel like in the body?” Then we can explore, “What is it doing here? Does it have a message for me? Is there an action this anger is asking me to take?” Instead of pushing away challenging emotions, we can experience them as bringing helpful information.

iRest also offers other ways of inquiring into feelings and emotions. Sometimes we explore the opposite of a feeling or emotion. We can feel the present sensations (e.g., anger or tension), and then we can explore what its opposite might feel like (e.g., calm or relaxed). We go back and forth, experiencing the felt-sense of each. Then we experience them both at the same time, which often dissipates the challenging emotion and reveals the restful experience of wholeness. This process can also help to build our resiliency when challenging emotions arise. Through the practice we become familiar with

tolerating uncomfortable sensations and can navigate them more easily when they arise in everyday life.

7. **Beliefs and Thoughts**—As humans, we all carry thoughts and beliefs that guide our movement and interactions in the world. Sometimes we are cognizant of those beliefs, sometimes they are subconscious, and sometimes we carry conflicting beliefs. Beliefs and thoughts are all temporary, some are short lived, and others more engrained with a longer life cycle. Quite often we take our beliefs to be completely true and don't question them. We might not even be aware of some of our guiding beliefs. Or we might try to talk ourselves out of a belief, thinking, "I really shouldn't think that way because _____." In either case, these unprocessed beliefs can become even more engrained. Many common beliefs are a variant of "Something is wrong with me." This might be as concrete as "If I were thinner, I would be happier." During iRest meditation we have a chance to explore beliefs and welcome them in as messengers bringing us information and guidance. We can notice what a belief feels like in the body. We can engage with it, feeling what an opposite belief might feel like. For example, "I am perfect just as I am," or "I appreciate my body for all that it does for me." Exploring opposite beliefs helps us to understand our deeper motivations, and we begin to understand that we are not our beliefs, but that they are also something that changes over time, like clouds moving through the sky. We come to a deeper knowing that all experience is part of our wholeness.
8. **Joy**—This is the subtlest layer, referring to a felt-sense of Joy that is already part of our experience. This is a joy that is deeper and more permanent. It is different than the temporary joy we derive from pleasurable experiences, like eating something tasty, enjoying a good movie, or the addict's temporary relief giving into the object of their addiction. The more permanent joy may also be experienced as an inner smile, gratitude, kindness, and compassion. It is already in us, and as the more accessible sensations quiet down (body, breath, emotions, etc.), we are able to directly experience this truth. There is a saying in neuroscience that, "neurons that fire together wire together" (Hanson 2013, p. 10). By lingering in our felt-sense of joy, we are actually rewiring our brains.
9. **Witnessing Awareness**—After sensing into each layer of being, we "step back" into simply witnessing our experience. This witnessing opens up into a broader perspective of Awareness that is often experienced as open, spacious, expansive, grounded, stable and/or a deep equanimity. Awareness is like the unchanging, clear blue sky in which the other layers are temporary, moving through like clouds (or sometimes thunderstorms). Here we take a broader view and are not caught up in experience. Our True Nature emerges as an inner knowing felt deeply in our being.
10. **Integration/Experiencing Wholeness**—This is the integrative stage of the iRest protocol. Here we rest in the experience of our own wholeness and interconnectedness with Life. We often feel a deep sense that everything is ok, just as it is. There is nothing we need to do. Changing sensations may come and go, yet there is a feeling of deep trust. We completely rest in Wholeness.

Completing the Practice—At the end of this formal practice, we make a slow transition back into our daily lives. First, we allow our Heartfelt Desire and Intention to return. We notice any accompanying insight that we may want to make note of. Then we slowly begin to sense our surroundings, the body and breath, and begin to slowly stretch and move. As we transition back into the day we can feel the practice linger with us like a perfume that permeates our lives.

“Off the Mat”: iRest Dyads and Micropractices

As with the guided practice, both micro-practices and dyads help cultivate the ability to be with all that arises in the present moment with a sense of welcoming and curiosity, even the most difficult and the most joyous of life's experiences.

Micropractices—Another way of exploring iRest is with mini-practices throughout the day. The 10-step protocol can be considered as ten separate practices combined sequentially. Each can be practiced at a moment's notice at any time throughout the day. Through neuroscience advances, we know that these short mindfulness practices can have a huge impact on the structure of our ever-changing brains (Hanson 2009, p. 17). For example, when confronted with a difficult situation, we can sense into our Inner Resource, or when making a decision we can feel whether it feels in alignment with our Heartfelt Desire. When fusing with an uncomfortable emotion we can explore its opposite. Or we might simply be walking outside on a beautiful day and feel our connection with all of life.

Dyads—iRest can also be experienced one-to-one with a teacher. In this process, the individual and the teacher are both present in meditative awareness. As in a guided practice, the individual welcomes whatever is arising as sensation in the body with a sense of curiosity. But instead of moving through the sequential protocol, the body becomes the guide. Feelings, emotions, beliefs, and thoughts arise in their own time and the teacher helps the individual stay present to the experience. Dyadic regulation and the activation of mirror neurons can explain how this process occurs, as the teacher's calm presence serves as a model in the midst of disturbing sensations (Graham 2013, pp. 24, 199).

Now that we have briefly described the philosophy and practice of iRest, the remainder of this chapter looks at how the practice of iRest can be instrumental for social workers in both micro- and macro-level work. This next section focuses on work with clients in a therapeutic setting and details how the practice facilitates a deeper therapeutic bond while supporting both therapist and client. Following this discussion, we focus on the experience of a practitioner and application of iRest to social work practice in macro settings.

iRest Yoga Nidra as a Tool for Therapists

by Amy Zajakowski Uhl, L.C.P.C.

As therapists, we, ourselves, are the tools of our craft. Our personal history and present experience enter the therapy room with us and influence the clinical relationship. I became interested in becoming a psychotherapist when I served as a full-time volunteer in a domestic violence shelter 25 years ago. I have specialized in working with individuals with a history of trauma throughout my career including working in community mental health and with refugees seeking political asylum. I initially trained in psychodynamic theory, but through my work in trauma and growing awareness of neurobiology, I became interested in integrating my psychodynamic, relational work with a body-centered focus. Ten years ago I also engaged in advanced training in Sensorimotor Psychotherapy. For the last 4 years I have been the Director of a group practice that specializes in trauma, and specifically in the integration of relational and body-centered thought in psychotherapy. My role includes providing administrative leadership, supervision, and direct practice with clients.

Research has demonstrated that, regardless of clinical theory or technique, the therapeutic relationship is an extremely powerful factor in positive therapeutic outcome (Norcross, Beutler and Levant 2005 in Siegel 2010). A critical component of that relationship is the empathic communication that occurs between client and clinician. Neuroscience and attachment research have demonstrated that much of that very important communication occurs in the nonverbal realm (Ogden and Minton 2006; Schore 1994; Siegel 2001). Our very sense of self, a sense of integration and basic safety, is developed in our early preverbal experiences with a primary caretaker (Wallin 2007). At each moment in the process of therapy we are engaging with our clients at many different levels both verbally and nonverbally. When we devote our attention exclusively to our cognitive processes we are limiting our scope to a narrow range. "We risk allowing the words we exchange in therapy to monopolize our attention when we don't remind ourselves that beneath the words there is a flow of crucially important experience" (Wallin 2007, p. 115). These experiences cannot be accessed in therapy through our traditional "talk therapy" methods. They must be accessed through the nonverbal realms that include tone, posture, sensation, movement and the dance of nonverbal information.

We, as practitioners, are taught that we must be careful that our own issues don't contaminate the treatment in some way or harm our clients. We may feel that in order to address this concern we must keep ourselves completely out of the room—become a blank slate. However, in order to work in the present moment and connect to the experience of the client, the therapist must be aware of his or her own experience. A mindfulness practice is necessary so that we can cultivate an awareness of ourselves in the present moment, and move more fluidly within the multilayers of conversation that occur in thought, feeling, and sensation.

Our clients often come to us with stories of horrible events and difficult circumstances that cause them pain. However, their ongoing suffering is often caused

by avoidance of their own internal experience. Anxiety, shame and depression can be the result of avoiding deep feelings such as grief, loss, anger, and longing. Many clients fear this inner experience because it feels chaotic and overwhelming. This is particularly true for those who have a history of trauma. Many of the behaviors we would describe as self-destructive—drug usage, compulsive behaviors, suicidal ideation, or self-harm can be viewed as attempts to manage this overwhelming experience. “Traumatized people are often afraid of feeling. It is not so much the perpetrators (who, hopefully, are no longer around to hurt them) but their own physical sensations that are now the enemy” (Van der Kolk 2014, p. 208). Individuals often enter a practice of meditation or mindfulness hoping for some kind of relaxation or ease. However, as individuals begin a mindfulness practice they often touch into experiences that are terrifying and painful. We, as therapists, know the deep value of sitting in the present moment at these times. Neuroscience has taught us that through the social engagement system our calibrated and attuned response to this terror can help soothe the client’s central nervous system (Ogden and Minton 2006, p. 170).

We have discussed the importance of a mindfulness practice for the practitioner. iRest is a mindfulness practice that can be particularly helpful for social work practice. iRest is anchored both in ancient practice and current psychology. As noted throughout this chapter, it holds the belief that we have an Inner Resource, something that has remained whole, integrated and undamaged by any of the things that have happened in our lives. As therapists, we are often challenged to sit with incredible pain. Our capacity to remain present and aware of both our own Inner Resource and that of our clients in the face of this pain is itself healing. Our practice of iRest helps us to embody it ourselves. Supported by our own experience of wholeness we can sit with another’s pain confident in the capacity of all individuals to heal.

iRest’s teaching on Heartfelt Desire can also be transformative in the clinical relationship. Often when individuals come into therapy they are acutely attuned to their suffering and not able to wish or hope for anything. At the same time, they may have longings and desires of which they are unaware or these longing and desires may be difficult for them to access. As practitioners, we may also often become oriented toward their suffering, yet instead of working toward simply a decrease of symptoms we can practice orienting toward a fuller, richer, more peaceful life for both our clients and ourselves. Practicing with an embodied, full sense of our own Heartfelt Desire develops our capacity to orient toward the Heartfelt Desire in our clients.

Recent research in the trauma world has demonstrated that it is essential to work in the present moment in order to help our clients settle their highly dysregulated central nervous systems and live a more peaceful day-to-day life (Ogden and Minton 2006; Siegal 2001). As therapists we often collude with our clients in avoidance of their pain because it is difficult for us to sit with and can touch our own wounded places. However, touching the cast-off experience in a regulated way is often what’s needed for healing. The practice of iRest can assist the therapist in developing the capacity to regulate his or her own self in the face of a client’s deep

pain. Because it is a body-centered mindfulness practice, it accesses the resources of the body to anchor in the present moment. Through the iRest work with emotions and beliefs, the therapist can then strengthen the capacity to touch the painful places and return to safety. This is regulating for both client and therapist. It can help protect the therapist from vicarious trauma. The practice of iRest strengthens our capacity to connect to difficult stories by allowing them to enter our experience and then move through us. We experience vicarious trauma and burnout when the painful things we sit with daily enter our experience and become stuck. A mindfulness practice helps to increase the capacity to tolerate both pain and joy.

Recently I had a session with a woman that I had seen in therapy for 5 years. Ellen was planning to move out of state with her partner because of a job change. She experienced the belief that her mother hadn't wanted her and we had often worked with her deeply felt-sense that she did not deserve to feel, to think or to exist. Her therapy was often difficult, intense and moving. About six weeks before she was leaving, I asked her in session how she was feeling about ending our therapy. She began reporting that she was feeling nervous about leaving but had gained some really good skills. She described these skills and the achievements she felt she had made. She planned to seek out a therapist in her new city but wasn't sure if she would do it right away. While she was talking I felt vaguely distracted and I observed a clenching sensation in the pit of my stomach. I know from my own practice of mindfulness that my body sensations can give me important information about my emotions. I realized that I was bracing in my core. On some level the material that my client was presenting was hopeful and optimistic. I became curious about my own present experience and practiced relaxing my stomach muscles, deepening my breath, and began to become aware of my own sense of sadness and loss at the coming separation in our relationship. I focused my attention for a moment on releasing my muscles and letting myself feel the sadness. As I did that her reporting also started to shift. She began to identify that she was going to miss me—not only her therapy but also me as a person. She explored how proud she was of the work that we together had done and she identified her sense of connection in the room. She described that when our work began she experienced me as “just a therapist” and now she felt that I was an actual person and in our relationship she knew that she existed. We both became tearful as we shared both our sadness at the parting and our joy over the changes she was able to make in her life. In this circumstance I hadn't reported my own inner experience. However, as I brought it into mindful awareness something shifted in her experience as well which enabled us both more flexibility to experience a wider ranges of experience.

In another example, Sarah has a history of sexual abuse by her father and has worked long and hard both in therapy and in her own iRest practice to help stabilize her posttraumatic symptoms. She has a long history of job difficulty, drug abuse and engaging in destructive, often violent, relationships. She had worked hard in her therapy to achieve a sense of stability in her daily life. She had gone to graduate school and had a job in social services in which she was very successful. One day in therapy she was describing a conflict that she was having with her male supervisor. She was discussing her feelings that her job requirements were too demanding and

decided that she was going to ask for some changes in her job description. This all sounded very reasonable. However, as she was talking I began to notice that I was feeling a sense of urgency and noticed a desire to help her “solve” her work issue by giving her advice. I paused a moment to mindfully observe my own internal experience and noticed a sense of agitation in my brow and my arms. I also noticed a sense that I wanted to move toward her and convince her to advocate for herself with her boss, to protect herself. I took a moment to acknowledge this sense of activation and grounded myself by observing my feet in contact with the floor. I commented to her that I had noticed that I was feeling agitated and wondered if we should pause in our efforts to solve her work problem. In that moment she became aware of a growing sense of fear. She recognized that she felt if she asked for a change in her job responsibilities she would be saying “no” to her boss and the very thought of telling him “no” was activating a sense of terror within her. She immediately commented, “I don’t think this is about my supervisor—this is about my dad.” Because of her own iRest practice we were able to sit together with both the sensation of terror and her feelings of fear until they eased in the present moment. Without my own practice of mindfulness in the session I would have worked with her to develop a course of action and she would have gone off to talk to her boss unaware of her sense of terror. My effort to “fix” her problem was an attempt to avoid my own fear. It may have communicated to her that I was also afraid of the intensity of her terror and that it wasn’t safe to experience it with me in the session. Simply bringing the experience into mindfulness together helped us both to widen our capacity to experience her fear together and to recognize the difference between the present and the past.

It is clear that the practice of iRest can be an invaluable tool for those working with clients in a therapeutic setting. In this next section, we hear how the practice can be helpful for social workers practicing in macro settings through the author’s role as a Social Work administrator and teacher.

iRest in Other Social Work Contexts

by Susan Grossman, M.A., Ph.D.

Meditation isn’t what you do, it’s who you are.

—Richard Miller

My path as a social worker has been long and varied. My first job, as a recent college graduate, entailed working with youth in a wealthy community on the North Shore of Chicago. I soon discovered that direct practice with individuals was not my true calling however, and returned to get my Master’s degree in social work with an emphasis on community development and social welfare policy. A child of the late 60s and early 70s, my intention was to change the world and right all social injustices. Over the years, that intention has remained, but I have learned that all change—personal and/or social—takes time and is not a solitary effort. As I reflect

below, iRest has helped me in accepting this reality. I worked for several years with policy makers, researchers and service providers on issues related to homelessness and domestic violence. I loved those aspects of my work involving evaluation and program development and saw that data derived from these activities could facilitate advocacy for change. Subsequently, I returned to school to obtain my doctorate, going on to engage in research and teaching at a social work program in Chicago. In my research and writing, I have focused on issues related to poverty, violence and social inequality, particularly as they affect women, and teach classes on social welfare policy and research methods. I also transitioned into an administrative position more recently because of a desire for change and new challenges. Ironically, this work has brought me back full circle to direct practice in a way I never expected as I am called upon to address difficulties and concerns among students, staff, and faculty.

I came to iRest having established a meditation practice built on Jonathon Kabat-Zinn's work on Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (Kabat-Zinn 1994, 2013) and Vipassana or Insight meditation (Rosenberg 1998; Salzberg and Goldstein 2002). I began practicing to relieve stress and increase calm in what felt like a very busy and hectic life at the time. As my practice deepened, however, I came to see that meditation was not about the absence of thoughts or feelings. If anything, meditation practice helped to clarify exactly what I was thinking and feeling and sometimes I did not welcome this awareness.

Like other meditative practices, iRest allows me to hold a space so that I can observe my thoughts and feelings. Yet connecting with my inner life seems easier for me because so much of the practice is grounded in the body and in a felt-sense of things in congruence with observation. Much of my work day involves the use of my intellect to understand and approach things, so operating from my feelings and senses is challenging; I cannot neatly explain all that is happening in a conceptual way, disrupting my usual orientation. Changing my usual perspective is also quite delightful as through the practice, I continue to learn that everything I think is not necessarily correct or "true" and that my felt-sense of things—what is happening in my body and in my feelings—can be a sign post to truth as well. Indeed, learning to trust this felt-sense and the feelings that arise, even when they are the difficult feelings of sadness, loneliness and anger, has led to a shift in how I teach, work with students and think about effecting change in the world.

As an administrator, the ongoing demands from students, faculty, and other administrators for attention and time frequently pull me away from the present. I am sometimes left feeling disjointed and disconnected from others and myself. Here is where my ability to apply what I have "learned on the mat" to the real world is put to the test. A student may end up in my office because he or she has clearly not "followed the rules." He or she may have taken courses out of sequence or failed to meet the graduation application deadline. While it is not usually possible to go through a full practice at such times, frequently I use these situations as opportunities for engaging in the micro-practices mentioned at the start of this chapter. For example, I use Bodysensing to feel what is happening in my body, and tune into my feelings and emotions, as well as beliefs and thoughts. Sometimes I am aware of

anger and the heat rising to my face or I sense the tension in my body. At other times I am aware of my belief that I need to “fix” the situation for the student and sense tightness in my chest or queasiness in my stomach, sensations I associate with anxiety. Pausing to acknowledge these beliefs and feelings, I consider my Heartfelt Desire, which may reflect a desire for others (“All beings are happy and safe”) or something I desire for myself (“I am a compassionate and kind person”). I may also connect with my Intention (which in this instance, is often to be fair in my response). These micro practices help me to avoid acting out my own issues and allow me to have a more mindful connection with the student even when the outcome may be one the student does not like.

I have become increasingly aware as I have practiced longer, of a growing ability to wait and sit with the unfolding of an interaction whether it is between me and a student who is worried about his or her ability to remain in school, or me and a faculty member who is angry about a teaching assignment. Pausing to feel the sensation in my body grounds me in the present place and time. From this place, I then move on to consider the different feelings that are also arising at the moment in that encounter and use that information to guide my responses. Remaining mindful of my intention is key in shaping my response to each interaction as well. I also try to tune into any sensation of something not feeling “right” or “easy” as a way to help me recalibrate my reaction. Perhaps most difficult to sit with are the feelings that arise when a student or faculty member becomes angry or tearful in an encounter. As my co-authors have noted, here is where my practice of iRest is particularly helpful. I have seen how sitting with these difficult feelings, inviting them in so to speak, paradoxically lessens their power to control my response and allows me to react with more awareness and less often on “autopilot.”

I believe that my ability to sit with what is occurring has also been strengthened by my ongoing understanding and experience of the belief, inherent to the practice of iRest, that individuals are already whole and healthy and that our natural movement is toward health and healing. I resonate with this philosophy as well because I see it as complimentary to the strengths based perspective of social work. From this viewpoint, our role as therapists, teachers, change agents, and administrators is really one of facilitator to the extent that we support the movement toward wholeness. Yet this understanding of the individual as whole and healed at each moment all too often results in concern that such acceptance will lead to stagnation. Indeed in our iRest class, many of us, who have been involved in social change efforts for much of our lives, have grappled with the question of exactly what acceptance means. We have worried that acceptance means that we will no longer be motivated to change either the world or ourselves; that acceptance means passivity.

Over time, I have come to see that this is not what is meant by acceptance within the iRest framework. Rather, to the extent that the practice of iRest engenders a deeper embodiment and mindfulness of what is at any point in time, it has allowed me to both accept the truth of a situation and consider change at the same time. I understand in a deep sense what is “really” happening, and I also have clarity about what needs to change and why. Acceptance in this framework does not mean

throwing up my hands and saying that nothing can change. Instead, it means acknowledging what is and moving forward from there. To bring this back to a social work lens, until a woman who is being abused by her partner fully understands that abuse is occurring and the nature of that abuse, it may be difficult for her to move toward changing her relationship to her abuser or to leave the abusive situation. Similarly, a caseworker dealing with a neglected child cannot develop an effective service plan until she acknowledges the myriad of problems, many of which will not be easily fixed, facing a single parent who is poor. Indeed, if we are to be effective change agents, the more we understand our own intentions, beliefs and feelings about an action in which we are engaged, including the overwhelming sense of futility and sadness we may sometimes feel when we recognize the number of systems that add to the problems of our clients, the greater our chances of promoting a change that reflects the desires of those for whom we are advocating and not our own agendas.

For me, there is also an element of this understanding of ourselves as whole and healthy that allows me to understand that in the end, things cannot go wrong. This is facilitated by the larger sense described in the previous section, arising from the process of iRest, that everything is part of a common whole through which we are all connected. What each of us does affects another in some way and what may sometimes seem like a negative experience may in another context be positive. In essence, one outcome is not worse than another, but part of the unfolding that is occurring at that point in time. At another time, another outcome may occur and that is the unfolding that works at that point in time. In essence, there is an equanimity that arises as a result of doing this work. This equanimity is not a blind acceptance. Rather, it sustains me as I work toward a goal. It also protects me from becoming burned out when things do not unfold in the way that I had hoped. It helps me to continue moving forward toward my goal. Feelings arise as I work toward one outcome and they guide me to the next right thing given the situation as it is at that moment. This is particularly helpful when so much of my work involves working toward social change and addressing social problems that are quite entrenched. Rather than getting discouraged, although this does happen too, I can consider each outcome as one step in a larger unfolding.

There is also an awareness embedded in this same framework, that we alone are not responsible for any given outcome. That is, I acknowledge that other people, both those involved in working for change and those who oppose our efforts also have heartfelt desires and intentions that will shape what happens. This is particularly salient when I am teaching. I may have a specific direction or goal in terms of what students learn in a class each class session, and yet I have come to realize that my goal is not the only thing shaping student learning. Indeed, the checking in and recalibrating process facilitated by my practice is a critical tool when in the classroom. For example, students often struggle with the concept of probability sampling. The logic is sometimes hard for some of them to understand and some students only grasp the concepts intuitively. Here again, I find the micropractices helpful for tuning into my own feelings and emotions, as well as the felt-sense of the classroom when confusion arises. Where is there tension? What feels easy

and/or “smooth” in terms of my explanation or their understanding? What is too “logical”? What direction seems to make the most sense to follow in terms of where the students are heading with their understanding? How can I support their approach to understanding certain concepts and still make the logic clear? What am I sensing each time I make a change? And where does that lead me? When I hold true to this process, I believe it deepens the learning experience for students and enriches my skill as a teacher.

This practice is not always easy. Sometimes I cannot get past the words or concepts I want the students to understand. I can only convey an idea one way and it is difficult to relax and work with the class, moment by moment tuning in so that I can access other explanations or ways of understanding. Similarly, throughout the day, as I move from one role to another, in the frenzy of activities I can easily ignore what is currently happening in my interactions with students and faculty members because I feel pressured to get something done and to move ahead to the next item on the list. If I remember my practice and pause, breathe, and sense back into my body to ground myself again in the present, I am deeply rewarded by my greater ability to respond from a place of clarity and connection.

Conclusion

Social workers must often address both individual and societal pain and trauma in their work. It is clear that the capacity to remain present in the face of this pain is healing to individual clients and whole communities. Mindfulness, at its most fundamental, helps us to experience our own wholeness and to recognize it in others. Quite often mindfulness practices are presented as tools solely for clients, but they are a tremendous resource for social workers as well. In this chapter, we have shared our experience with iRest Yoga Nidra Meditation as an effective mindfulness practice. Through examples of personal experience, we have demonstrated the usefulness of this practice in a myriad of settings.

iRest is a particularly body-centered practice that is anchored both in ancient practice and current psychology. It begins from the belief that we have within us something that has remained whole, integrated and untouched by any of the things that have happened in our lives. When we practice this belief with iRest it helps us to fully embody it ourselves. Supported by our own experience of wholeness, we can be truly present to others' experience, confident in the innate capacity to heal. This has profound implications for how we approach ourselves and our work. It is our deepest desire that students enter the field of social work with tools that can help them mitigate the stressors inherent in the work, whether they work as therapists, casemanagers, administrators, or academics. iRest as a powerful tool of transformation that will serve the practitioner throughout their career and beyond.

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