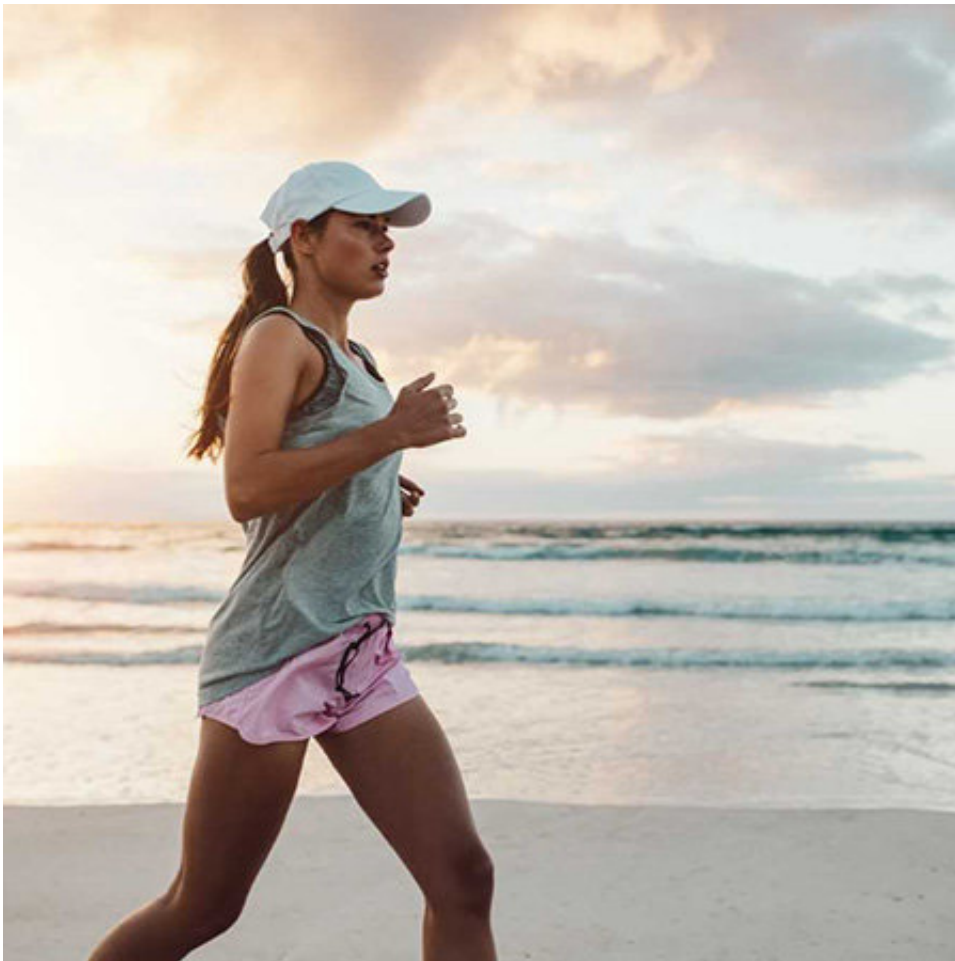


Meditation, aerobic exercise help women recover after sexual assault

April 23 2018, by Robin Lally



Meditation and aerobic exercise helps to quell negative thoughts of women sexually assaulted and suffering from PTSD. Credit: Rutgers University

Women who are sexually assaulted and suffer from Post-Traumatic

Stress Disorder (PTSD) can learn to decrease negative thoughts and enhance self-worth by a combination of meditation and aerobic exercise, according to a new Rutgers University-New Brunswick study.

The research, published in *Frontiers in Neuroscience*, found that a combination of mental and physical, training with meditation and [aerobic exercise](#) done for one-hour twice a week over a six-week period significantly reduced post-traumatic and ruminative thoughts in women with a history of [sexual violence](#).

"Despite the undeniable connection between sexual trauma and mental illness, few interventions are tailored for women who experience [sexual violence](#)," says Tracey Shors, distinguished professor in the Department of Psychology and Center for Collaborative Neuroscience, both in the School of Arts and Sciences.

The small pilot study included 100 women between the ages of 18-32, with about one-third of the women having experienced sexual violence. After six weeks of a clinical intervention called [MAP Training My Brain](#), findings indicated that trauma-related thoughts experienced by the women who were victims of sexual violence decreased significantly.

"Women who experience sexual violence, and people who experience trauma, tend to ruminate over what happened—asking themselves why it happened or if they could have done something differently," says Shors. "The more you think about it, the more you go over the memories, the more memories you make. MAP Training diminished those thoughts in women who experienced violence."

The study was broken down into four groups. One group did the MAP Training, which included meditation and aerobic exercise. The second group did only meditation.

The third group only did the aerobic exercise. Another group did not participate in training.

Each session began with 20 minutes of sitting meditation, followed by 10 minutes of slow-walking meditation and ended with 30 minutes of aerobic exercise.

Trauma-related thoughts of women who suffered sexual violence lessened after the combination of meditation and aerobic exercise but not after [meditation](#) or aerobic exercise alone. MAP [training](#) also enhanced the level of self-worth in all the women who participated. Meditation and [exercise](#) alone did not have the same positive effect, Shors says.

There appears to be a synergistic effect of the two activities that specifically helps women learn to recover from the trauma of sexual violence, at least with respect to [negative thoughts](#) about [stressful life events](#), according to the study.

"What we found is that the whole is bigger than the sum of its parts," Shors says.

According to the study, more than 25 percent of women worldwide experience sexual or physical violence in their lifetime, with similar estimates in the United States. Women are four times as likely as men to experience sexual assault and ten times as likely to be raped.

Although PTSD is often associated with veterans returning from war, women—particularly those who are sexually assaulted or victims of violence—are more likely to be diagnosed with PTSD, Shors says.

While many women with these [experiences](#) do not have PTSD, they still have symptoms related to the memory of what happened. The data

suggest that MAP Training can help in that regard, says Shors.

"The #MeToo movement and other platforms have provided [women](#) with an opportunity to tell their stories of sexual harassment and assault," Shors says. "It is important that we also provide them with new ways to help them recover from these experiences."

Shors and co-authors Emma Millon and Michelle Chang, both graduate students at Rutgers, recently participated in a Rutgers National Science Foundation sponsored program that aims to take laboratory discovery into the marketplace.

"MAP Training should be made available to others because it is easy to learn, doesn't take much time and actually works," Shors says.

More information: Tracey J. Shors et al. MAP Training My Brain™: Meditation Plus Aerobic Exercise Lessens Trauma of Sexual Violence More Than Either Activity Alone, *Frontiers in Neuroscience* (2018).
[DOI: 10.3389/fnins.2018.00211](https://doi.org/10.3389/fnins.2018.00211)

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