



How Yoga Changes Mental Health in Correctional Facilities

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Yoga seems to be “trending” as it pops up in gyms, rehabilitation facilities—and even correctional facilities. Lindsay Tucker (2018), in *Yoga Journal*, reported that the military is shifting its focus to look at the benefits of yoga for military personnel. She writes: “Traditionally, military leaders often met these practices with skepticism. But over the past two decades, a series of clinical trials backed by a growing catalog of scientific evidence has persuaded high-level DOD health care experts to accept yoga and meditation as legitimate treatments for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), pain management, and much more.”

Annually, the yoga industry produces (McCain, 2022) \$9.09 billion dollars in revenue. It has been marketed as a workout and a wellness practice that has its own clothing and style. One false stereotype of the yoga trend is that it is not for those who are interested in a “real workout.”

A distinct benefit of yoga is its mental health benefits. Studies show that correctional officers have higher rates of suicide (Stack, & Tspidos, 1997) than other professions, high rates of PTSD symptoms, (Spinaris, Denhof, & Kellaway, 2012), and other health issues. (Dowden & Tellierb, 2004). The need to provide a wellness program to address these issues is obvious. Correctional facilities are de facto mental health institutions.

Trauma Informed Yoga

The type of yoga that helps the most is called ‘trauma informed yoga’. Research shows that trauma informed yoga is effective with incarcerated individuals (Muirhead & Fortune, 2018), correctional officers, (Smith, Ferdik, Turner, & Radcliffe, 2022), and veterans (Staples, Hamilton & Uddo, 2013). This type of yoga helps heal the limbic system of the brain, which is impacted by the daily traumatic stress of the job.

The amygdala is the “uh-oh” part of the brain that sends out an alarm that there is a threat – the feeling a CO gets after hearing over the radio that a fellow officer needs help. An immediate chain reaction occurs, sending messages to the hypothalamus to get the body ready for the threat. The heart rate increases and blood pressure rises. The hypothalamus will send a message to the pituitary gland to secrete adrenaline and cortisol, “amping” the body so that the CO is “puffed up” and ready to go. This system is supposed to occur when there is a threat, followed by a period of rest, allowing the body to

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de-escalate. For COs, there are only limited de-escalation periods. A CO must be prepared for a threat for the entire shift. Unsurprisingly, the CO’s body gets stuck in the “uh-oh” gear, making it difficult to relax even after the work shift is over. This excessive secretion of cortisol is linked to a myriad of behavioral changes a correctional officer feels after months of being on the job: not remembering things, feeling irritable and agitated, not trusting others, and being excessively vigilant.

Trauma informed yoga is a bit different from “regular yoga.” The instructor stays on the mat and does not offer any physical adjustments, talks the entire time with invitational language, and encourages participants to notice muscle parts as the class flows through the physical forms. Participants are encouraged to listen to their bodies and not engage in any movement that does not feel good. As simple as it sounds, engaging in a practice of this type of yoga puts one in the “here and now.” This “in the moment” thinking helps heal the damage to the limbic system of the brain.

Additionally, by stretching, tension is released from the muscles.

Yoga Veterans Project

Interestingly, veterans who suffer from PTSD can benefit from trauma informed yoga, as it has been found (Price, et al, 2017) effective in decreasing the symptoms of this disorder. Founded in 2011, the mission of the Yoga Veterans Project is to support resilience and recovery for veterans, their families and the communities where they reside. The agency provides free yoga classes online and in person classes nationally. It is also responsible for training of yoga instructors specifically for veterans in a program called ‘Mindful Resilience and Recovery’.

How Correctional Officers Benefit from Trauma Informed Yoga

Do correctional officers see the benefits of these kinds of programs? When it is presented from a science perspective, they do. Smith, et. al (2022) researched an entire detention center (administration and staff) who participated in a one day yoga class where correctional officers were provided with the science behind trauma informed yoga. The results were striking:

- 98% said that the trauma informed yoga class helped them feel less tense.
- 98% said the yoga class had a positive impact on their physical health.
- 98% said they would recommend yoga to other correctional officers and inmates.
- 100% said that learning how to breathe can be effective in calming the brain and the body.
- 100% said the yoga class had a positive impact on their emotional well-being.

York County Prison

Deputy Warden Valerie Conway, from York County

Prison, Pennsylvania, incorporates the researched yoga class into the correctional officer training regimen. "It was absolutely necessary that we provide some sort of wellness training program for our officers. We were able to see how the pandemic compounded the stress of our staff. Along with the normal daily job stress and fatigue, they had to deal with wearing masks for long periods of time and the constant threat of contracting the virus and potentially passing it to colleagues, friends, and family members. I was looking for something that would help their mental wellbeing and provide an opportunity to kickstart a healthier lifestyle, or at least give them some tools to combat the stress."

After one class where the neuroscience of corrections fatigue was explained and participants engaged in an hour-long trauma informed yoga class, York County Prison decided to send a staff member to be trained in trauma informed yoga to provide this practice to staff and inmates alike. Conway noted, "For the COs that have taken this class, they have an understanding of what happens to their brains as a result of the constant job stress. The knowledge that there is nothing wrong with the brain of the officer, that they are having a normal reaction to an abnormally stressful working environment, has been key for them to hear. To show the officers a way to help themselves without medication or talk therapy has been rewarding to say the least. The training has left them wanting more, more information and also more yoga. I constantly get asked, "When will there be another class?"

Yoga for the Incarcerated

What about yoga for the incarcerated? The research is significant. Kerekes, et. al (2019) found that when inmates participated in 10 weeks of yoga,

it increased their ability to take responsibility, feel more purposeful, and be more self-acceptant. Sfindla, et. al (2018) found that yoga reduces the psychological distress such as suspicious thoughts and fearfulness of prisoners in Sweden. Studies in Israel (Kovalsky, et al, 2020) and in North Carolina, (Landau & Gross, 2008) both found lower rates of recidivism for those who practiced yoga while incarcerated.

The takeaway is simple. If you want a physical exercise that helps restore the damage from job stress that you can do in your home with a video, and you can heal the limbic system of your brain, yoga might be for you. If you want a class that can help those who are incarcerated feel calm and heal the damage to their brains from trauma, yoga might be just the ticket. All aboard! ■

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