



Yoga: How We Serve





INTRODUCTION

Here you will find a collection of interviews with yoga teachers working with veterans, active duty service members and their families. It provides an introduction to the reasons these teachers have chosen to work with this population, and offers tips and advice to yoga teachers wanting to do such vital work. There is no better nor enjoyable way to get your head around the importance of teaching yoga and mindfulness practices to our veterans than hearing first-hand accounts of these dedicated and committed teachers.

Veterans and active duty military personnel who are practicing yoga regularly report reduced anxiety and depression, improved sleep and concentration, a greater ability to focus on the positive, support in addiction recovery, pain relief, and increased ability to deal with the mental and emotional strain of combat.

Giving the gift of yoga to vets is an incredible opportunity to help a demographic that suffers from combat-related stress. When I first began yoga in 2001, the vast majority of military members were very doubtful about the benefits. Since then, more and more military personnel are accepting the benefits of yoga...Military personnel don't realize how much they need yoga until they try it.

—U.S. Navy Lt. Taeko McFadden (ret)

We at the Give Back Yoga Foundation have spent the past few years striving to increase accessibility to the healing power of yoga and meditation among veterans and caregivers struggling with the visible and invisible wounds of war. Our goal is to bring Yoga For Veterans Toolkits, developed by expert teachers with years of experience in working with soldiers with post-traumatic stress, to at least 30,000 veterans by 2015.

Yoga programs are also benefitting incarcerated veterans, who represent approximately 9% of the overall prison population in the United States. A decorated veteran and inmate, Ron Self, tells his story in one of the interviews, all of which are from Huffington Post or Give Back Yoga blog series, *Yoga: How We Serve*. This series is edited by Alice Trembour, always asking difficult but important questions.

Rob Schware, PhD
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Susan Barber—Yoga: How We Serve Those in Uniform and Their Spouses



This is an interview with Susan Barber, who, for the past four years, has been working with military spouses in Wiesbaden, Germany. Many of these women are raising their children alone, while their husbands are on their second or even third deployments. Says Susan: "I've seen how yoga is a crucial part of their lives, and a time for them to support themselves so they can better support their families." Susan teaches five classes a week on base. "My current service sort of fell in my lap," she says. Posted 09/09/2013 3:00 pm on www.huffingtonpost.com.

Rob: What originally motivated you to do this work, and what continues to motivate you? How, if at all, has that motivation changed over time?

I saw many of my students' spouses returning from Afghanistan and began hearing about the effects of PTSD. At the same time, my first yoga teacher, Beryl Bender Birch, was starting to work with veterans and writing a book on yoga for them. I started to see a few soldiers trickling into my classes from the Warrior Transition Unit (WTU) here. The WTU has soldiers with physical injuries, PTSD, traumatic brain injuries and/or various other conditions, which are keeping them from participating in their regular units. The mission of WTUs is to return soldiers to duty with their units, or to help them transition out of the Army as they prepare for civilian life. I knew right away that they needed their own space, and that the healing power of yoga was going to be an important part of their recovery. The response of these tough soldiers to yoga practice was overwhelming to me. It was and is a safe place for them to "let go."

Is there a standout moment from your work with the Veterans Yoga Project or veteran population?

Recently a soldier shared with me that he had been suffering from serious depression and PTSD for six years. With tears in his eyes he said that yoga had become one of his only sources of relief, and that yoga is his "new passion." I also received an email recently from the sergeant of the unit I work with, who said that "the yoga classes have absolutely made a difference in the lives of these warriors—they seem to be more upbeat and have a little more confidence in conducting everyday activities that sometimes would hinder them."

What did you know about the population you are working with before you began teaching?

Initially, very little! Again, I was working with many of the spouses, and had never really been familiar with the military community, other than through my regular classes on base. In addition to immersing myself in materials from the Veterans Yoga Project, I talked with other instructors, including my friend Ann Richardson of Om Town Heroes in Virginia Beach. I've grown to greatly admire our military families, and have appreciated the strong support I've received from all my regular students. The bond among military families is strong!

What were some of the assumptions you had about this population, and how have those assumptions changed?

Oh, my gosh, I had assumptions about all the stereotypical ideas about soldiers—that they would be tough, tight, not open to being soft and surrendering. What I found was that, yes, they are tough, but they seek healing the same as we all do. Also, it was a surprise to see how quickly my class went from being "something on the schedule" for them, to something they looked forward to!

What are two distinct ways that your teaching style differs from the way you might teach in a studio, and what are the reasons for these differences?

In my regular classes I tend to teach an energizing vinyasa flow; that's what most morning yogis are looking for! In my warrior class, I get back to basics, because most of the soldiers haven't practiced yoga before. I spend more time on breath work, basic asanas, and restorative and relaxation work.

What has been the greatest challenge in your teaching experience, and what tools have you developed for addressing that challenge?

The biggest challenge has been not knowing the military system—the ranks, who is in charge, and how things work. I still haven't figured that all out! I just decided to show up and focus on the soldiers and teach them as I would any other person in their situation. I have to say, they seem to appreciate and get a kick out of the fact that I am a bit clueless on ranks! My boss at the on-post fitness center has been really good at helping me navigate, and find out who is in charge of the WTU, and also in providing the soldiers in the WTU free tickets to attend classes.

What advice would you give to anyone who is going to teach in the population you work with?

Do your research, get materials for veterans from the Give Back Yoga Foundation, and work with your community to be able to provide these resources for the soldiers. Our local Wiesbaden Community Spouses Club donated funds for me to get some of their CDs and practice posters for my students. The community is very supportive here.

What are some of your ideas about, or hopes for, the future of “service yoga” in America in the next decade?

I think that yoga is now firmly planted in America, and I'm not the only teacher out there with 17+ years of experience. It's time to start finding ways to spread the healing power of yoga to as many underserved populations as possible. There may be a studio on every corner, but not everyone has the money or resources to walk through the door.

How has this work changed your definition of service? Your definition of yoga? Your practice?

We may think service is something we need to pack our bags and fly off to do in another land! Sometimes we just need to look in our own backyard to see that we are valuable, and can give back right where we are. My work in Wiesbaden has reawakened within me the truth that yoga is a healing practice. It has brought me to my mat at an even deeper level, so that I am prepared to more fully serve. Teaching more requires me to show up on my own mat more—my classes come from my time on my mat.

What other organizations do you admire?

Pretty much anything Seane Corn and Off the Mat Into the World does! She is really on fire for service! Also my friend Ann Richardson, of Studio Bamboo Institute of Yoga, who has brought Om Town heroes to my hometown of Virginia Beach. Ann has found a way to reach people in our hometown. While I'm far away, I appreciate that she has really built the community there. My little sister is actually in her teacher training program. My main mentor has always been Beryl Bender Birch. As I tell my students, she is the “real deal,” so authentic, so real, and so open to teaching the practice to everyone who comes to her.

Lilly Bechtel—The Courage to Surrender: How Yoga Supports Veterans in the Return Home



This is an interview with Lilly Bechtel, who has been volunteering in correctional facilities since 2005. In 2010, Lilly became certified in a trauma-sensitive yoga style, and for two years offered a trauma sensitive yoga class in the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) clinic of a veteran's hospital in the Bronx. Her Elephant Journal series "At Attention, At Peace" is a forum for sharing these interviews, hoping to open up a greater dialogue between the military and the yoga communities. She is currently working on a book based on interviews with veterans, teachers and officials in the military about the effects of yoga on PTSD. Posted: 10/15/2013 11:18 am on www.huffingtonpost.com.

Rob: What motivated you to work in a correctional facility, and then a VA hospital? What was the particular moment in which you knew that this was something you wanted to invest your time in?

As a teenager I spent some of my high school years in and out of treatment centers for substance abuse and an eating disorder. The year I was asked back to my private liberal high school as a senior, perhaps because of my own recent experience with addiction and recovery, I chose to study the history of women's prisons in America.

It was through this study that I learned that if I had belonged to a different race or class, my own troubles with addiction were more likely to have been met punitively rather than compassionately. I discovered that the belief that a person can change is in itself a privilege, and one that not everyone in America is granted.

That winter I was accepted to Bard College and spent the next four years offering a poetry workshop at a women's prison. This experience strengthened my belief that self-expression and education are some of the most promising seeds of a healthy democracy and some of the most glaring absences in the American penal system.

In 2010 I attended a trauma-sensitive yoga training at Kripalu. At this training I listened to an Iraq war veteran named Hugo tell the story of his first yoga class. It was through hearing his story that my work with veterans began. Hugo Patrocinio is a Marine who had served in three deployments and had just been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress. On the day of his first yoga class he was suicidal, suffered from insomnia, flashbacks, sleep paralysis, and he was on eight different medications. Hugo had never done yoga before. He sat down reluctantly on his mat. He noticed his breath. Forty-five minutes later when class was over, the teacher woke him up. "And that's when I realized that I felt rested for the first time in years," Hugo told us.

Hugo is now off all his medications, regularly practices yoga and meditation, and is a student of psychology at the University of Miami. "I believe that yoga saved my life," he says.

After leaving Kripalu in 2010, I was called to work with this population and spent the next two years teaching at a PTSD clinic at a veterans' hospital in the Bronx. Once a week, I gathered chairs in a circle. I told my students to feel their feet on the floor. I told them to notice the sounds in the room. I invited them to raise their hands off their lap when they inhaled, and release them when they exhaled.

Although I didn't know it at the time, I now understand that I was drawn to work with veterans for the same reason that I was drawn to yoga in the first place: because it is a practice that shows me that becoming supple is a strength. The ability to stay present to the self and walk through all seasons with grace is the way of the yogi, but also of all great warriors.

From the interviews in *At Attention: At Peace* we learn that yoga is effective in addressing PTSD, both in terms of objective evidence, but also in terms of subjective narratives among veterans. Why aren't more classes offered to them?

I sat in on a class this past summer at a veterans' hospital in DC. Before the meditation began, an older man who had fought in Vietnam wanted to share that his son, who had recently returned from Iraq, had finally sought help for his PTSD. "I've realized that coming here is not selfish at all," he said. "Taking better care of myself has made me take better care of the people I love."

Throughout the next hour as the teacher guided us through practices of internal awareness, loud-speakers in the hospital blared, there were loud knocks at the door, and people came in twice, looking for another room. Toward the end of class I opened my eyes and saw the man who had spoken with a look of vibrant, amazed happiness radiating across his face. He was smiling as if he had discovered a magic trick.

So yoga and meditation really matters to some, and is the catalyst that is working best toward healing other areas of their lives. And while it's exciting to me that yoga is starting to become more accepted in Western treatment, it is still hard for research to use subjective accounts as a viable reason for funding.

"Taking better care of myself has made me take better care of the people I love." If someone said this of a therapy session, wouldn't it be taken as ample evidence that the therapy was useful? I believe that when the positive personal experiences of veterans are taken into account and regarded as reliable evidence, then we will start to see fundamental change in the availability of mindfulness programs.

I'm interested in the objective of *At Attention: At Peace*. Who is the audience for this book, and what kind of opportunity does it present to readers?

When I left that DC class that morning, I rode back to the city with an Iraq war veteran named Ben King. He is an active attendee in the meditation class at the VA, a personal trainer at a local gym, soon to be a father, and a passionate advocate of providing yoga and meditation to veterans.

As we were pulling out of the hospital, we turned on the radio to find coverage of the current suicide rates among veterans. The broadcaster shared about a young veteran who hanged himself in the mental health ward of a hospital. The speaker went on: "When you knock on the military's mental health door, often nobody answers."

But there I sat, next to someone who had struggled with the pain of PTSD and had found a practice that had helped him regain his life. He looked as if he wished he could reach through his stereo and take hold of the man who had killed himself and tell him that it could have been different.

So this is my main hope for service in writing *At Attention, At Peace*: to connect veterans who have found yoga with those who are struggling with PTSD. It is another small way of being of service to all those who have been of service to me.

Kelly Boys—Mindfulness For Impulse Control: Yoga For Incarcerated Veterans

This is an interview with Kelly Boys, who's been practicing yoga for most of her adult life, and is a certified hatha yoga instructor. In 2006, she learned of the practice of yoga nidra and immediately recognized it as a powerful healing tool. That led her to Dr. Richard Miller, a clinical psychologist, who trains teachers in a special form of yoga nidra called Integrative Restoration (iRest). Kelly began training with him, became a certified iRest instructor, and eventually moved to California to help run the Integrative Restoration Institute and work with Richard to train teachers. Along the way, she taught yoga nidra at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, DC as part of their Wounded Warriors program, in a residential PTSD and TBI program through the Cincinnati VA, with cancer survivors,



substance abuse, and in the prisons, teaching both men and women. Currently, she partners with James Fox of the Prison Yoga Project to bring a combined yoga and yoga nidra program into San Quentin State Prison for incarcerated veterans. Forthcoming on www.givebackyoga.org blog.

Rob: What is iRest Yoga Nidra and what originally motivated you to bring it into San Quentin State Prison for incarcerated veterans?

iRest is a meditative practice that is deeply relaxing and restorative, as well as providing tools for working with trauma, stress, and chronic pain, among other things. It's typically taught in savasana, the lying-down pose at the end of the yoga class. It is simultaneously simple and profound, addressing our basic human needs for connection, belonging, and safety, and it gives us a way to compassionately inquire into whatever is currently in our experience. For those of us who resist what life brings us, it is quite the thing to finally stop and face it, and tell ourselves the truth about any given situation. I wanted to help people who have been wounded by war, by their families, and who have in turn wounded others to stop and face themselves, and to give them another way out instead of this punitive system which doesn't tend to focus on restoration and healing. Having been on the receiving end of domestic violence, it is particularly poignant for me to bring the spirit of forgiveness and healing, along with the 'sword of truth' into that setting. This is the sword that cuts through all illusions that we hold about ourselves, and about the world around us. iRest provides such a neat way to get control of our lives by paradoxically letting go of control, and allowing this sword of truth to slice away everything that does not serve us.

What is the importance of mindfulness for developing impulse control? How does this help life inside a prison?

Mindfulness is a foundational element for impulse control; it allows anyone, anytime, to stop in any given moment and take stock of their own situation, to harness the power of attention and intention in order to see clearly and create a space for choice and response rather than reaction and violence. One of the vets in our program told us that this class has changed his life and provided him a way to deal with the chaos of life behind bars, and that he felt confident about going up before the boards (which is when they decide if/when he will be released). Otherwise, he would have been reactive and victimized, but now he feels calm, and has an inner resource to return to no matter what the board decides about his release. Another vet from the Korean War who is 77 years old said that this class has helped him deal with his lifelong racism toward Asian people, and that his tough, violent shell is getting cracked open.

I'm interested in knowing why we should be spending money on providing yoga and meditation to prisoners?

This is an investment that must be made; the transformative effect of yoga and meditation on the prison population is inspiring lasting change. We are beginning to see programs where we connect with the guys on the outside as well, and they are becoming change agents in their own communities. Most of these men will reoffend if we do not offer them another way. Investing in these programs means to invest in the health and safety of our communities. The classes are waitlisted right now because there aren't enough funds to run programs for everyone seeking to learn yoga and meditation. Let me be clear though, this is selfish for me! I receive the most benefit from going into San Quentin, it is humbling and fulfilling beyond what I can say to sit with this group of men and get real, speak the truth, guide meditation, and hear the gems of wisdom coming from that circle of folks. Astounding, really. James and I often just shake our heads at how neat it is to teach there together. A complete blessing.

What is the greatest challenge in mindfulness-classes becoming a regular feature of prisons?

The greatest challenge is funding. I currently donate my time to teach there. The CEO at the Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute, where I work training teachers in a science-based emotional intel-

lignence and mindfulness course, has allowed me to rearrange my schedule so that I volunteer time every Thursday. If we had funding, we definitely have the teachers who want to teach and we also have a way to train those teachers. That is the number one need; otherwise, it won't be sustainable.

What advice would you give to anyone who would like to volunteer teaching a weekly class to incarcerated veterans?

Do it! My advice would be to take a course preparing you to work in the prison environment as a way to make sure you are ready for the challenges of that particular environment. Jacques Verduin at insight-out.org and James Fox at prisonyoga.org both offer trainings for teaching in prison. I would also say, to the extent that you are willing to welcome ALL of yourself, your hopes and joys along with your fear, hate, and the violence you do to yourself, is the extent to which you will be able to teach from a place of equanimity, heart, and truth. This path is a radical one; it asks everything of us. Yoga asks us to take a second look at this idea that we are separate, above, better than, different from, and to let in the thought that just perhaps, underneath all the surface differences, we share the same essence. This is quite inspiring when you really think about it.

What organizations do you admire?

I love what James is doing at the Prison Yoga Project. He tirelessly travels all over the world training teachers to teach yoga on the 'inside'. The Integrative Restoration Institute is doing amazing things bringing iRest out into many underserved populations. SIYLI, where I work, is bringing this same work into Google, LinkedIn, Genentech, and many more places. Any organization that practices what it preaches, I admire. For instance, where I work we meditate at the beginning of our meetings, we practice mindful eating, we do the hard job of telling the truth even when it is more convenient to gloss over it, for the sake of finding out what is really real, what wants to emerge in any given moment. There is a trust that happens when a whole organization of people do this. Whether it's Google or behind prison walls, people are people with the same needs and desires. They are just dressed up differently! Instead of the new Google Glasses I'd love to give the gift of x-ray vision to anyone that can't fathom those two worlds being similar. It's a trip to be able to have a foot in both worlds! I wouldn't trade it for anything.

Sumr Soudi Breez—Yoga: The Journey of Inner Healing For Returning Veterans

This is an interview with Sumr Breez, who began teaching yoga in 1997 at Fitness West in Phoenix, AZ. Now she teaches all levels and all ages at DeVry University & Mesa Community College, the Phoenix Veterans Center, the Merritt Center Women's Returning Vet Program, among other places. Forthcoming on www.givebackyoga.org blog.



Rob: What originally motivated you to do this work, and what continues to motivate you? How, if at all, has that motivation changed over time?

What motivated me at first was how good I felt doing yoga; I wanted to share my discovery with the world! What motivates me now is how valuable this tool is to the world at this time. My passion for yoga has grown deeper and deeper, as I experience its gifts within my personal life.

Is there a standout moment from your work with veterans?

Yes, the moment came when I first began working with veterans, and wondered if yoga was penetrating all the emotional turmoil they have in their psyche and body. I witnessed a major break-down and breakthrough with a veteran who I assumed was not receiving any benefit from our session. Later, he told me

“this was the most soothing amazing experience I have ever felt.” Today, when I walk into the group to begin our session, I hear the veterans take a deep breath and close their eyes, to tune into their body on their own...that is awesome!

What did you know about the population you are working with before you began teaching? What were some of the assumptions you had about this population, and how have those assumptions changed?

I did not know much before I began teaching; I just wanted to offer my services and hope they experience peace within! I do my best not to assume much—I have noticed how open they have become to trying out new movements and chants.

What are two distinct ways that your teaching style differs from the way you might teach in a studio and what are the reasons for these differences?

I do my best to teach to those in front of me in each class. I go by the energy of the group. I teach the same wherever I am...studio or not!

What has been the greatest challenge in your teaching experience, and what tools have you developed for addressing that challenge?

The greatest challenge is to meet all those attending class at the same time. I typically have different levels in the same class. Tools I have developed: now I observe and offer a beginner and advanced movement to address to all those present.

What advice would you give to anyone who is going to teach in the population you work with?

Assume nothing and trust your instinct, and know what you are doing is so valuable.

What are some of your ideas about, or hopes for, the future of “service yoga” in America in the next decade?

That service yoga would be available in hospitals, at doctors’ offices, and readily available to anyone and everyone.

How has this work changed your definition of service? Your definition of yoga? Your practice?

A friend said to me: it sounds like you are not just doing movement and yoga...you are offering therapy...indeed!!!

What other organizations do you admire?

Yoga Phoenix; 3HO; Creative Living Fellowship; Merritt Center; Spirit Voyage; Give Back Yoga Foundation; Area Agency on Aging; and Civitan Foundation.

Felice Brenner—Yoga: How We Serve Our Veterans

This is an interview with Felice Brenner, who had been working as a “headhunter” for 20 years to become a full-time yoga instructor. She teaches two classes a week at the Veterans Administration in Boston, Jamaica Plains campus. This year, Felice received the Outstanding Federal Volunteer award from the VA Boston Healthcare System for her service and commitment. Posted: 08/07/2012 7:11 pm on www.huffingtonpost.com.



Rob: Is there any particular trend you see in your classes with veterans who are recovering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)?

More and more women are attending, victims of rape or assault while they were serving. Sexual abuse of women in the military is rampant. And I see a growing number of Vietnam War veterans, who are feeling empowered to get help. They seem less macho about coming to a yoga class. Their PTSD had become a chronic condition. Almost three decades after the Vietnam War, many veterans are just now getting treated for their emotional trauma from high levels of combat exposure.

What motivates you to do this work?

There are many heartwarming moments working with veterans. One of my students, an 87-year-old WWII veteran, started in a chair and now has enough flexibility to practice on a mat. Some of the participants are returnees from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as women who have experienced traumas that include but are not limited to military sexual trauma (MST), combat trauma, and training accidents.

What continues to motivate you?

It's the best part of my week! The veterans motivate me to keep coming. A lot of students I see who get involved are transformed by their yoga practice. I'm given an opportunity to do this. Their reaction after classes is simply profound. Psychotherapy, or "talk therapy," especially for those I see with PTSD, only goes so far as an effective treatment. On its own, psychotherapy may not be enough to resolve severe depression. It can play an important role I think when complemented with yoga, which is a somatic experience, and with breath work.

What are some of the changes you've seen in your students over time?

One of my students, Richard, a Vietnam War veteran, for decades was unable to lie on his back because of feelings of fear. He simply couldn't sleep on his back. The first day he came into class and prepared himself for Savasana (corpse pose) he just did it and was fine. He was only able to do this in the yoga room for a long while. He now practices at home and can lie easily on his back without fear. I think Richard is a "poster child" for yoga in the VA.

I'm interested in your thoughts on how effective yoga is in terms of evidence for reducing symptoms of trauma among veterans. Why aren't more classes offered to veterans?

Things move slowly in the VA. Just getting one yoga program was a struggle. It's a conservative organization. I want to grow the program throughout the VA here. It should be under one umbrella, tightly run, with trained, compassionate, committed teachers working specifically with veterans. Teachers coming straight out of yoga certification with say 200 hours, as a registered yoga teacher, may not be well-equipped to work with this population until they have had further training.

Have you had any challenges reconciling some of your personal beliefs about veterans and trauma with your work with them?

None whatsoever. The real challenge has been working with a complex bureaucracy and the VA's sprawling health care system.

What's your ideal vision for yoga with the veterans you are trying to serve? What would you like to see happen?

A full-fledged and funded yoga program developed for the VA here in MA that would offer classes to staff a couple times each week, and yoga and mindfulness meditation classes offered in each unit of the VA—the PTSD clinic, Drug and Alcohol, Behavioral Health Unit, Occupational Therapy, etc. This would include a referral system within the VA coordinated by the yoga program. In addition, there should be chair and wheelchair yoga offered in the cardiac rehab unit with yoga teachers trained to teach simple and gentle

exercises, guided relaxation, and breathing exercises. Haven't there been enough studies already evaluating the effectiveness of a yoga program on reducing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms in veterans? The results of many studies suggest yoga is an effective complementary therapy for improving PTSD-related symptoms of increased arousal, such as sleep problems.

How do you look after yourself? How do you avoid burn out?

I limit the number of classes I can teach. I make sure I practice yoga at least twice every week, and I make sure to take someone else's class. I no longer say yes to everything.

Yael Calhoun—Yoga for Veterans: 'I Can Feel Myself Breathe'



This is an interview with Yael Calhoun, who started teaching yoga about 10 years ago. With her three elementary school-aged sons, she started a summer service project teaching yoga at a local boys and girls club and the YWCA shelter. "I told them volunteering goes best when you do something you love," says Yael. Then she started teaching after school at their school, went on to write a kids' yoga book, "Create a Yoga Practice for Kids: Fun, Flexibility and Focus," with Matthew R. Calhoun, and started a nonprofit, GreenTREE Yoga. When you need something done, ask a busy person! GreenTREE's programs have evolved into trauma-sensitive yoga and professional development for clinicians, nurses, and teachers on how to use yoga for compassion fatigue and for work with trauma. Yael offers many training kits and books to support yoga teachers working with different populations—for more information, visit GreenTREE's Support Materials page. Posted: 09/28/2013 11:30 am on www.huffingtonpost.com.

Rob: What originally motivated you to do this work and what continues to motivate you? How, if at all, has that motivation changed over time?

I'd been a teacher, had young children and wanted to involve them in a fun volunteer project, so I just started teaching yoga to kids. As the work expanded, I saw the profound effect of yoga on various populations. Now my work focuses on trauma-sensitive yoga, both with kids and adults, owing to my family's experiences with trauma, and the incredible healing I have experienced over time. I couldn't do what I do without having had these experiences, because I wouldn't be able to teach from an authentic place.

Is there a standout moment from your work with veterans?

I've taught yoga to a lot of different groups of every age, and there is only one group that has given me pause. I was sitting in front a group of vets, all large men from residential substance abuse. I looked at them sitting and waiting for me to do something; I couldn't speak! I felt the weight of the opportunity and I just didn't want to get it wrong. I finally made myself start talking... and we did the practice, just as Dave Emerson taught me. They loved it. One guy said at the end, "I could feel myself breathe. I haven't been able to do that."

What did you know about the population you are working with before you began teaching? What were some of the assumptions you had about this population and how have those assumptions changed?

I'd never worked or interacted with veterans before, so I had no assumptions, other than that they needed a very body-based practice. Having experienced trauma, each of these vets needed to reconnect with their bodies in a positive way. As experts tell us, trauma is stored in the body—so healing needs to begin at that level. Teaching vets has taught me that body-based yoga is an amazing gift to veterans

and to those trying to share yoga and help them heal. There are so many different types of yoga, and trauma-sensitive focuses on being aware of how the body feels in a posture. Some yoga is more cerebral—focusing on thoughts and images. Eventually this approach may be part of the healing process, but studies show that we need to start reconnecting with the body.

What are two distinct ways that your teaching style differs from the way you might teach in a studio, and what are the reasons for these differences?

Teaching veterans has totally changed the way I teach all my yoga classes. I now only teach body-based, trauma-sensitive yoga. My other classes love it. Whether it's a physically challenging class or a restorative, I still teach it as a body-based practice. I think everyone either has had some degree of trauma or knows, at some level, that this type of yoga makes them more resilient. As I said, there are so many types of yoga. This kind of yoga stresses noticing the body sensations in any pose, noticing how the sensations can change based on personal choices. Learning to focus on these bodily sensations and using the breath as a way to deepen this body awareness is the beginning point of healing trauma, of taking control of one's feelings and one's life.

What has been the greatest challenge in your teaching experience, and what tools have you developed for addressing that challenge?

My greatest challenge was not bringing personal challenges with me when I was teaching—to keep that clear space in my head so that I could teach well. The wonderful feedback loop is that using that mental discipline while you teach is in itself healing for the teacher, which then in turn makes you a better teacher.

What advice would you give to anyone who is going to teach in the population you work with?

You are being presented with an incredible opportunity to help people “find their way” (Bessel van der Kolk). Don't take it lightly. Read and reread David Emerson's book, *Healing Trauma Through Yoga*. Also read and reread Pat Ogden's book *Trauma and the Body*. If you work with kids, read as much of Peter Levine's work as you can. Keep reading and learning. Keep notes on what seems to be working and what isn't. Study, learn, and practice.

What are some of your ideas about or hopes for the future of “service yoga” in America in the next decade?

I would hope that qualified, thoughtful, talented teachers continue to offer various yoga options to people in need. One of the strengths of yoga is that it is so diverse and flexible—different yoga for different people, times of life, stages of healing. So we need a lot of yoga teachers sharing what they love to do.

How has this work changed your definition of service? Your definition of yoga? Your practice?

I think the work I do has brought me a much deeper appreciation for the healing that yoga can bring. I needed both to experience the healing myself, and to see how yoga affected others, in order to expand my definition of yoga and my personal practice. From that broader definition and practice, what I am able to share in my teaching grows. It's a lovely feedback loop, or connection.

Chris Eder—Yoga: How We Serve Active-Duty Service Members

This is an interview with Chris Eder, Director of Communications at Mindful Yoga Therapy. Chris' yoga journey began in 1999 after he encountered the joys of a pinched sciatic nerve, and a diagnosis of Adult ADD. A friend introduced him to yoga as an alternative to pain pills and other meds. He was hooked instantly as a student. Chris is a 23-year Air Force veteran. Posted: 07/24/2012 2:08 pm on www.huffingtonpost.com.



Rob: Is there a standout moment from your work with service members?

I remember teaching yoga in Baghdad in a room where all four walls had everyone's M16s standing upright. That is a standout moment for sure. In the same place, another time, we were attacked during the class and several of the Marines popped up, grabbed their rifles and took off. That was another.

My friend Nate Bowen is a standout. He used to tease me (gentle ribbing kind of stuff) about yoga... now he practices several days a week. He is a soldier's soldier... now he is a Yoga Soldier.

What did you know about the population you are working with, before you began teaching? How important is that to your teaching yoga to those people?

I still am a part of this population... 22 years and counting. So I suppose I knew a whole hell of a lot and find it extremely important and rewarding. I believe I serve as a positive role model for our brave warriors... especially the men. There is a huge stigma in the military about men practicing yoga, an even bigger stigma on getting treatment for PTSD. So you can only imagine how difficult it is to get a guy with PTSD onto a mat!

The reason I'm in the military is because I believe I'm a servant. I enjoy working for the USA! Similarly... I enjoy serving in this role too.

What are two distinct ways that your teaching style differs from the way you might teach in a studio, and what are the reasons for these differences?

All of my classes are fun, but focused. I can really connect and meet the "warriors" where they are because I walk in their shoes. I can tell stories that resonate with them and inspire them. I try to explain things "in other words," which I choose based on who is on the mats in front of me. I spend a lot more time with my "warrior" population working on breathing techniques that engage the parasympathetic nervous system. I also end all of these classes with some kind of Yoga Nidra.

What has been the greatest challenge in your teaching experience, and what tools have you developed for addressing that challenge?

I really don't know! I feel like I've been teaching within this population so long that I have constantly been developing and changing with the times. The more you teach, the more mistakes you make, the better you become.

What advice would you give to anyone who is going to teach the active-duty soldiers that you work with?

You need to at a minimum know how it feels to walk a mile in their shoes. Be real and authentic. Don't patronize them!

What are some of your ideas about or hopes for the future of "service yoga" in America in the next decade?

I hope yoga will become a mainstream option for PTSD treatment. I know there is a time and place for pills, but pills should be used to initially get the "warrior" in the right direction... yoga should be the treatment plan. Pills often mask or dull symptoms...never treat or cure.

Has this changed your definition of service?

Service is a core value for the military. That is what drew me in the first place to be a part of this community. Now that I have been diagnosed with PTSD... I am all in!

What are some of your greatest hopes for the development of a service yoga community?

I hope that yoga becomes a mainstream treatment plan, not an afterthought or an “oh yeah and do yoga too!”

Pamela Stokes Eggleston—A Spouse of a Veteran and Caregiver Strives to Give Back Through Yoga

This is an interview with Pamela Stokes Eggleston, a registered 200-hour Pranakriya yoga instructor. She is the founder and CEO of Yoga2Sleep, LLC, an organization that supports the tired, restless, and sleep-deprived through a deep passion for yoga. She is also a Mindful Yoga Therapy for Veterans faculty member; and an ambassador for The Give Back Yoga Foundation. Follow her on Facebook at Yoga2Sleep and on Twitter at @pamsegg and @yoga2sleep. Posted: 09/16/2013 9:57 am on www.huffingtonpost.com.

**Rob: What originally motivated you to do this work, and what continues to motivate you?**

I started my yoga journey over a decade ago because I wanted a natural way to alleviate stress, strengthen my mind and body, and expand and fortify my spirit. The notion of teaching yoga occurred organically as I strengthened my personal practice and wanted to share more of myself and my passion for yoga with the people and communities around me.

How, if at all, has that motivation changed over time?

This journey has evolved into so much more. As I struggled with knee issues and sleep deprivation from living with a wounded warrior dealing with PTSD and TBI, I began to look at yoga as more than my spiritual practice and a vehicle for my students. I wanted to use yoga to affect change in the populations I've worked with throughout my professional career: veteran and military families, those incarcerated for abusing drugs, and people living with mental illness.

Is there a standout moment from your work with veterans and military families?

It was the realization that I was part of a military family. My father is an Air Force veteran and my grandfather served in the Army, but it wasn't until my husband was injured in Iraq and began recuperating at Walter Reed Army Medical Center that I understood the significance of this realization, and how it would change my life. I began to work with military families and the organizations supporting them. Additionally, I knew when I completed Mindful Yoga Therapy (MYT) for Veterans training that I wanted to work with this specific population, using my love of yoga. I've had veterans and service members attend my classes, but I hadn't been teaching only veterans. Accordingly, I have been able to take my MYT training and use it with military and veteran spouses and families. I strive to do more with this population in the near future.

What did you know about the population you are working with before you began teaching?

As the spouse of an OIF wounded veteran dealing with PTS and TBI, I know what it's like to live with these challenges, day in and day out. And as his caregiver, I know that many caregivers of veterans and military service members neglect their own care. When a military caregiver or veteran comes into one of my classes, I immediately connect with them on a deeper supportive level. I've been there and I get it.

What were some of the assumptions you had about this population and how have those assumptions changed?

I figured that some military members would not want to hear all of the “light in me sees the divine light in you” narrative that I’ve used in my studio classes. But many are spiritual seekers and have asked me what that means to me, what namaste stands for, what jai bhagwan means and so forth. So I think it is a good idea never to assume anything, even if you are a part of that population.

What are two distinct ways that your teaching style differs from the way you might teach in a studio, and what are the reasons for these differences?

With my private clients who are spouses/caregivers of veterans, I’m more on the level of, “take care of yourself this way because you need to be strong for your veteran, so be selfish (or self-full as I like to call it)—put yourself first.” I can bring this message in a studio, too, if one of my students expresses an interest in this narrative. It might be that the stressor is not so much being a caregiver or spouse/parent/sibling of a veteran, but that we should all pause to take great care of ourselves, so we can show up fully and completely for those we love and cherish. Veterans and military families have experienced inordinate stressors throughout this past decade. I know through personal experience that their needs are special and different and that my compassion and understanding needs to be as well.

The second way is that I bring my sense of humor and laid-back disposition to my teaching style, and infuse a “we are all in this together” mantra to my classes. I also ask my students to challenge themselves on and off the mat.

What has been the greatest challenge in your teaching experience and what tools have you developed for addressing that challenge?

To constantly return to the tenets of my yoga training to remind myself that every one and every body is different. To that end, all I can do is show up for each and every one of my students and clients 100 percent.

What advice would you give to anyone who is going to teach the veterans (and military families) you work with?

Not to make any assumptions. Thoroughly educate yourself about this diverse population. Don’t think that we are all so resilient that we don’t need a hand, or that we are so weak and broken that we need a handout. Get trained in teaching yoga to these specific populations with programs like Mindful Yoga Therapy for Veterans. Use your compassion and humility to assist veterans and military families in a tangible, viable way. And then be authentic in your approach.

What are some of your ideas about or hopes for the future of “service yoga” in America in the next decade?

My hope is that service yoga becomes widespread, and that it is taken to heart. I truly believe that yoga can transform our communities, but that those who practice and teach yoga have to hit the streets to make sure this happens. I like the notion of helping underserved populations—those in prisons and jails, folks dealing with substance abuse and mental health issues, and veterans, service members and their families—by showing them that there’s a way to import peace and serenity into their lives, no matter how stressful or hopeless or hard life may become.

How has this work changed your definition of service? Your definition of yoga? Your practice?

In the beginning, I just wanted to teach yoga in a studio. But during YTT, I realized that one of the reasons I was there in the first place was because of the transformative role that yoga had played in my life up to that point, and especially during the rough times when my husband was at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. It was certainly this awareness that forced me to look at my teaching career differently, and thus my volunteerism and professional efforts, in a more creative way. My definition of yoga has

always had service at its core, but now I believe that as I teach yoga I am serving the communities that I teach in and the populations I teach. My personal yoga practice is definitely stronger. Now when I step onto the mat, I think about the myriad reasons why I have arrived at this place in my yoga journey. It is this continued motivation that inspires me to develop and expand the work that I'm doing.

What other organizations do you admire?

I love any organization that has a mission to use responsible innovation and that has a distinctive mission that is substantially realized. Some of these organizations include The Give Back Yoga Foundation, Mindful Yoga Therapy for Veterans, Blue Star Families, Women Veterans Interactive, VeteranCaregiver.com, Semper Fidelis Health and Wellness, Veteran Artist Program and Tee It Up For the Troops.

David Emerson—Trauma-Sensitive Yoga Therapy in Practice

*This is an interview with David Emerson, who was a social worker for 10 years before going to graduate school to become a therapist—a talk-based psychotherapist. Well, he just didn't click with that modality. He became a certified yoga teacher in 1999. After connecting with Bessel van der Kolk in 2001–02, they started the Trauma Center Yoga Program together soon thereafter. With Elizabeth Hopper, David is co-author of *Overcoming Trauma Through Yoga: Reclaiming Your Body*. Posted: 08/19/2013 11:49 am on www.huffingtonpost.com.*



Rob: What originally motivated you to do this work, and what continues to motivate you?

How, if at all, has that motivation changed over time?

The primary motivation was the fact that our country was ramping up for two wars, and there is a wet shelter (a homeless shelter where people are not turned away if they are actively using drugs and alcohol) around the corner from my house filled mostly with Vietnam vets. I knew we'd be seeing the younger vets in there soon enough. As we started the Trauma Center Yoga Program and as things evolved, we started working mostly with survivors of chronic, complex, intra-familial abuse and neglect, and this is where the potential benefits of Trauma-Sensitive Yoga really started to reveal themselves. Now I work mostly with teens who have had a great deal of trauma exposure. I also have a veterans group and we continue to meet sporadically after nine years.

Is there a standout moment from your work at the Trauma Center?

When Senator Kennedy mentioned our yoga program during his comments for the Trauma Center's 25th anniversary I felt like yoga had arrived as a serious, viable treatment. One of two other incredibly meaningful moments was our team receiving the first grant ever given by the National Institutes of Health to study yoga and trauma; the other was completing the first—and to date only—randomized controlled PTSD trial using yoga as the therapeutic intervention. Finally, any day on which someone I am working with notices a body feeling and makes a choice about what to do with it, is a standout day.

What did you know about the population you are working with before you began teaching?

What were some of the assumptions you had about this population, and how have those assumptions changed?

I knew trauma was complex, but I didn't really understand how complex. I have been very lucky to have had several adult students over the years who have been willing to articulate for me what it's like to have a body after suffering through tremendous trauma. I have learned everything I know from them.

What are two distinct ways that your teaching style differs from the way you might teach in a studio, and what are the reasons for these differences?

We do no physical assists and the teacher does not move around the room. To fully explain these teaching points would take up too much space here but they are the result of our understanding of the impacts of trauma that include: 1. dissociation (when people “check out” or have fragmented experiences that from time to time do not include you); 2. the internal interpretation of external stimuli (like touch); and 3. the feeling of safety in relationships.

What has been the greatest challenge in your teaching experience, and what tools have you developed for addressing that challenge?

The biggest challenge for me has been something that is very specific to the kind of chronic, interpersonal trauma that we are working with. Because the trauma took place within the context of a relationship, and the student and I are now entering into a relationship (even more pointed, a relationship with power dynamics, teacher-student), there are times when I have been the source of a trigger for someone. It could be the way I dress, the way I move, a facial expression or a tone of voice—anything. Sometimes when this happens people become very angry with you, or scared of you, and this has been the most difficult thing for me to experience. The best way we have found as a team to deal with these experiences is to talk with each other. We are a team of yoga teachers and clinicians and we all support each other.

What advice would you give to anyone who is going to teach in the populations you work with?

Please don't go it alone. Get involved with some kind of treatment center where you can interact with therapists, and they with you. If you do yoga with traumatized people it is automatically a clinical issue. Please respect that, and do your due diligence in terms of learning about trauma and its impact on the entire organism.

What are some of your ideas about or hopes for the future of “service yoga” in America in the next decade?

I would like to see more science, more data, and more randomized controlled studies. In my opinion we owe it to our clients/students and to our future funders (tax payers and private citizens) to prove what works, and to recognize what doesn't. We need to enter into the empirical domain, as difficult and as challenging as that is for yoga teachers like me!

How has this work changed your definition of service? Your definition of yoga? Your practice?

First, in terms of my definition of yoga, there have been very real changes as a result of my work with traumatized people. For one thing, the whole process has become much simpler. I feel like I used to put a lot more effort into practicing yoga than I do now. In my personal practice I find that I am less inclined to interpret my body experience and more comfortable just trusting the experience itself. I find that I make less effort to do yoga for someone else, some external approval, and am more interested in practicing yoga for the pure joy of reminding myself that I am here, that I have a body, that I exist.

On the question of service my response is that service, to me, is not a side project. It is a fully-integrated, professional endeavor. Yoga teachers should be paid a reasonable wage if they are offering trauma survivors, for example, a high quality treatment with proven outcomes. People are suffering tremendously, and they need others to devote themselves to their care and unless one is independently wealthy (and more power to you if you are!), one needs to make a living. Service and making a living do not have to be mutually exclusive.

What other organizations do you admire?

There are many, but 3 that I am particularly fond of are There and Back Again, Mandala House and Green Tree Yoga.

Mark Francis-Mullen—Yoga: How We Serve Veterans and the Homeless While Homeless



As defense spending cuts limit vital benefits for veterans and our country increasingly faces the issue of veteran homelessness, we offer this interview with Mark Francis-Mullen, who became a certified yoga teacher and taught yoga at the Denver Veterans Administration Regional Medical Center while homeless. “The yoga classes and teaching gave structure to my week,” Mark told me. He taught at the VA’s PTSD and psychiatric wards for 16 months, and also taught his friends without shelter. Posted: 02/06/2013 3:52 pm on www.huffingtonpost.com.

Rob: What originally motivated you to do this work, and what continues to motivate you? How, if at all, has that motivation changed over time?

Yoga and service were originally part of my martial arts and personal practices. The impetus to deepen my practice—and eventually drop the martial arts practice of 30 years—was a combination of pain, tragedy, and PTSD. Yoga helped me survive. As I progressed, my motivation was to become one less angry and poorly-adapted veteran (me), and create a happy, healthy member of society (the new me). Now it’s evolved to sharing the transformative and healing benefits of yoga to marginalized populations: veterans, amputees, the elderly, drug and alcohol dependents, and the homeless, to name a few that resonate with me. However, most of my work has been with combat veterans with PTSD, and the homeless.

Is there a standout moment from your work with veterans?

They are all inspirational in their own way, even the simple, quiet stories. One Vietnam War veteran in my inpatient PTSD ward class was on oxygen. At the end of class, he told me that he had run out of oxygen halfway through the class. When he saw my eyes widen in concern, he laughed and said when it happened he just breathed like I told him and everything was all right. The sense of freedom he had when he said that almost made me cry, and filled me with joy at his newfound freedom and joy of breath. Another guy told me he was about to “pull the plug and end the misery” when he recalled a yoga class we’d had the week before on being in the moment and riding out particular thoughts.

What did you know about the population you are working with before you began teaching? What were some of the assumptions you had about this population and how, if at all, have those assumptions changed?

I served in the military for ten years, first in Germany as a radar technician, then Okinawa as a satellite communications technician, and between 2004-06 in Afghanistan and Iraq. I was the Southwest Asia regional engineer for military communications in Camp Victory, Baghdad. I’d been on a lot of convoys going base to base with satellite equipment, and often went out into “Indian Country” alone. I saw people die in bad ways. And my son was in Columbine High School when the shooting took place. I didn’t know for a couple of hours if he was alive, sitting all the while with the mothers of kids who were killed. So I was familiar with the effects of PTSD, and with being homeless. What I didn’t know is how widely PTSD has spread, how it affects not only veterans, but their spouses and families. And how it affects forgotten but still PTSD-suffering civilian contractors and DoD civilians ineligible for VA assistance. I have begun to recognize that when you suffer, I suffer, and that we are all in need of peace and healing, and release from our personal versions of suffering.

In what way does your teaching style differ from the way you might teach in a studio?

I take a lot of time to create a safe space. I combine asana, intuitive somatic movement, breath regulation, meditation, mudra, and yoga nidra in my classes. I give homework—research and observation on the self and on yogic topics. I've come to see the practical utility of mindful yoga therapy for veterans, especially as vets begin their practices and therapies. I include techniques and traditions from all schools of yoga, since I think yoga is all one.

What has been the greatest challenge in your teaching experience, and what tools have you developed for addressing that challenge?

No challenges, just opportunities...to see myself in all, to respect and allow all differences and approaches, and to see that people come to their mats (and practices) only when they're ready. I've seen this transformative, healing practice of yoga may not be wanted (or needed) by some. In essence, yoga is an opportunity for vets to allow the ego to drop into that place that is...not the place that should be.

What advice would you give to anyone who is going to teach veterans?

I recommend the following:

- Take a trauma-sensitive training, such as Mindful Yoga Therapy by the Veterans Yoga Project.
- Be mindful not to say that you “get” what a combat veteran has gone through unless you've had a similar experience.
- Do not project experience or limitations onto your students.
- Be aware that a veteran may not be able to relate to prescriptions for reaching nirvana from non-combat veterans, especially affluent female civilians.
- Truly understand why you are doing this.
- Be aware we veterans can easily detect insincerity, facetiousness, self-promotion, or self-serving.
- Have a good understanding of the physical and psychological manifestations of PTSD.
- Speak your truth and extend your own peace and calm to others.

What are some of your ideas about or hopes for the future of “service yoga” in America in the next decade?

That it becomes the norm, and that the sexy, merchantization, glossy model of yoga becomes the exception to the rule. We live in a world in need of healing and support from each other, not of self-service, glamorization, and productization of yogic science.

How has this work changed your definition of service? Your definition of yoga? Your practice?

Sometimes while volunteering at the local church, teaching yoga to homeless people, nobody would show up. I realized this was not about me and I just needed to show up for even the one person who might come, as well as for myself. One day a homeless dude walked 45 minutes in the rain to my class. I thought, “Wow, he came to my class!” But then I realized “We're both out of the rain, and while we're at it, let's move our bodies together.”

What other organizations do you admire?

Yours, perhaps foremost (Give Back Yoga). The Veterans Yoga Project, which has already made a huge impact in my life. The Prison Yoga Project and the National Buddhist Prison Sangha. I admire any organization teaching compassion, consideration, and unity as fellow shipmates on Spaceship Earth. And definitely Core Power Yoga, for providing the vehicle, space, and tools for my own yogic healing and transformation.

Gina Garcia—Yoga: For Everyone, Everywhere. Yoga Across America.

This is an interview with Gina Garcia, a former television journalist and California Capitol correspondent. She is a 500-hour certified Baptiste Power Vinyasa Yoga teacher and founder of the 501c3 non-profit Yoga Across America (YAA). Whenever I am in touch with Gina she is traveling, teaching in high schools around the country, and to our wounded warriors. Visit www.YogaAcrossAmerica.org. Posted: 11/19/2013 3:26 pm on www.huffingtonpost.com.



Rob: What originally motivated you to do this work and what continues to motivate you? How, if at all, has that motivation changed over time?

I felt a calling to share yoga during my first yoga teacher training. I'd been practicing yoga for years, but there was a huge shift during that training. I'd been given a new tool to share this practice and connect with people. It started with my close friends, in my living room. When we outgrew my house, we moved to the park. What started out as teaching to a few friends turned into sharing this practice with people from all walks of life. Anyone who wanted to practice at the park was welcome. FREE Yoga in the Park!

Yoga in the Park started in 2009 with a few friends, and now averages between 150 to 350 people every Saturday morning. We rent a space in winter, inside the park clubhouse, so we can practice together year-round.

From the park came all kinds of callings. I founded Yoga Across America (YAA) shortly thereafter, a non-profit that shares yoga in underserved communities across the country. We have two main initiatives. The first is "Yoga in the Classroom," which allows us to share yoga with high school students in 62 high schools and 14 states across the country. This is part of our national strategic partnership with HealthCorps, founded by Dr. Mehmet Oz and his wife Lisa.

Our other main initiative is "Yoga for American Soldiers and Service Members." We launched this initiative when the suicide rate in Iraq was higher than the fatality rate from war injuries. Yoga Across America shares yoga with all branches of the military, veterans and wounded warriors. In the last 6 months we have shared yoga with more than 3,000 service members.

Is there a standout moment from your work with name of organization or specific population?

When I was a TV news reporter, I covered many stories about homeless people. I was never able to wrap my brain around why almost everyone I interviewed was a veteran. My older brother is a West Point graduate who served in the Gulf War, and my father is a veteran. Connecting with my own family roots empowered me to reach out to all veterans.

The first day of classes was difficult for me. I was in Los Angeles, sharing yoga and meditation throughout the day with wounded warriors. About a hundred of them were part of a warrior transition unit program, preparing to return to either active duty or civilian life. This group, service members in transition, has the highest suicide rate.

The energy that day was heavy. Young, wounded men and women with lost looks on their faces. A steady stream of veterans making their way outside to smoke a cigarette. War stories. Lots of war stories. The 22 year old young man who was getting ready to lose his leg—it was injured in Iraq. The thirty-something year old man who'd already lost his leg. When the event was over, I got in my car and cried for an hour. My throat chakra was hurting from holding it in all day.

But that day was a breakthrough for me. I've since gone through yoga for trauma trainings and am able to teach from a place of experience, knowledge and authenticity.

What advice would you give to anyone who is going to teach veterans?

Sharing yoga with veterans requires special training. There are many triggers to post-traumatic stress (PTS) and traumatic brain injury (TBI), which we regularly encounter with veterans. Teaching a class in a yoga studio is absolutely nothing like teaching a roomful of wounded warriors. Even with active duty military, it's important to hold the space and show up responsibly.

What did you know about the population you are working with before you began teaching?

How has it changed?

My work with veterans has evolved over the years. I don't need to hear their stories about war. I don't get lost in my own stories about them. Together, we do yoga: breath work (pranayama), physical yoga postures (asanas) and meditation. We let go and connect through this practice, this gift that we get to share together. We focus on what's real: bringing awareness to the physical body reminds us that we are alive. Combining movement with breath awareness allows us to experience being alive. And quieting our minds allows us to create peace from within.

We've all experienced trauma in some way, whether it was Johnny spitting in our face when we were 6 years old, losing someone close to us too early, or fighting in a war. Trauma connects us all. It shows up differently in different people. But it's there.

I'm humbled, inspired and blessed to share yoga in underserved communities across the country. With the suicide rate among veterans at an all-time high, sharing yoga with these men and women is a gift for everyone. This is not about anyone's view on war, it's about humanity. Connecting through this practice allows me to share from the heart. When I hear a service member tell me "I found my freedom," or "Yoga saved my life," I experience the power of this practice in its purest most beautiful form. It's a journey of support, healing and love, and our veterans deserve it.

What are some of your ideas or hopes for the future of "service yoga" in America in the next decade?

Teaching and serving is one of the best ways to get out of your own way. Americans can be self-centered, me-centric, worried about having more than their neighbors, and therefore live from a place of fear. My hope is that this way of thinking and living shifts, to become more community-centered, we-centric, and concerned with whether your neighbors have enough. Service yoga is one step in this direction, and another way to make the practice accessible to everyone, everywhere. I hope that more partnerships with non-profits are formed, that more people and organizations actively start supporting this work, so that it can continue shaping lives and communities.

How has this work changed your definition of service? Your definition of yoga? Your practice?

Yoga is about union, eradicating the ego, connecting and accepting. And then letting go. My work has shown me that everyone wants the same thing—to love and be loved. My work is to provide a space where everything is OK, where it's OK to feel, where it's OK to be injured, where it's OK to work through trauma. It means being there for my fellow humans. My practice has changed in many ways. The biggest change is realizing that sharing yoga, serving through yoga ... this is my yoga practice.

What other organizations do you admire?

Mindful Yoga Therapy, the Give Back Yoga Foundation, 4Point4, HealthCorps Africa Yoga Project.

Daniel Hickman—Yoga: How We Serve Wounded Warriors

This is an interview with Daniel Hickman, who started teaching adaptive and multidisciplinary yoga in 2007 to amputees who are combat veterans, their families, friends, as well as the hospital staff at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center (WRNMMC, Washington, D.C./Bethesda, Md.). He is the author and lead of the yoga sessions for beginners in VetsYoga, a DVD designed to introduce the stress-relieving benefits of yoga to military veterans and personnel (produced by Yatra Yoga International and Craig Coffman Productions with support from the Give Back Yoga Foundation www.vetsyoga.com). Posted: 08/20/2012 4:28 pm on www.huffingtonpost.com.



Rob Schware: What originally motivated you to do this work, and what continues to motivate you? How, if at all, has that motivation changed over time?

The original motivation to do this work stemmed from my curiosity and creativity that has always propelled me to go into exploratory projects. At the time there weren't many of us offering yoga service in the military medicinal field, and I was very happy to do so. As well, I couldn't think of anything more opposite to the military than yoga, and I was interested to see how the relationship would develop.

My motivation has changed over time after teaching for a few years at WRNMMC, and now when I teach the wounded warriors my main aim is to alleviate suffering and cultivate relaxation. This includes addressing phantom limb pain, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), applying customized yogasanas with constructive movement patterning, and conversing about other specifics.

Is there a standout moment from your work with military veterans?

There was a standout moment with a U.S. Army combat veteran amputee at Walter Reed when it was in Washington, D.C. I never push anyone to take yoga class but will always keep the door open for them to come and see. Once, I did ask this particular soldier if he was interested in trying yoga with us and he felt pretty uneasy about it. I imagine it was partly due to the fact that while on patrol in Iraq, he was blown up by an IED (improvised explosive device) that obliterated most of his left side, leaving him without a hand or foot and with shrapnel wounds all over his body. He would watch class from time to time, the other veterans would joke and chide him to come take class, but he just wasn't up to it.

Then one day several months later, this young man enters the room walking, with a robotic arm, leg prosthesis and a cane, and sits down right at the front of class. He decided that it was time to try yoga. So I started the session with dirgha pranayama and ujjaiyi, explaining to sense the movement of the belly, ribs and collar bones while maintaining a raspy sound quality to the breath in the throat. After a minute of breathing in this way this warrior blurts out, "Ninjas." We make eye contact and after a moment he again blurts out, "Ninjas." I smile a bit and gently nod my head in agreement as he says, "Ninjas do this!" Through the martial arts he already knew of the connection among body, mind, and spirit, and in that very moment recognized the same relation in yoga.

What did you know about the population you are working with, before you began teaching? What were some of the assumptions you had about this population and how have those assumptions changed, if at all?

I did not know that much about the unique population of the war-wounded in a U.S. military hospital setting before I began teaching them—especially about the specific culture of individuals who have been blown up by bombs or who are living with the “invisible wounds” of PTSD.

My father is a U.S. Navy veteran who was stationed on the USS Iowa battleship during the conflict in Korea in the early 1950s. He also was part of the United States Foreign Service in several countries of Southeast Asia during the bellicose 1960s. Some of my assumptions about veterans and the military in general came through the lens of the son of a sailor. In the following decades, members of my family were posted with the Foreign Service in a few Latin American countries. When I was living there, I became friends with a few of the Marine Security Guard (MSG) stationed at the embassies. I would do physical training, play sports, and occasionally take part in security drills with the MSG. So I had some exposure to a section of the U.S. military population before my current working relationship in a U.S. military hospital.

My general assumption about the military “machine,” if you will, was that it was a humungous entity with the momentum of a juggernaut. When I started working and then befriending individual people who were severely affected by war, my views began to shift. People are people and the human experience takes on many forms and many ways. In the middle of it all, I look to connect with the spirit of the individual. I do so with the intention to see the person beyond the generalizations and stereotypes of a population. Therein lies the humanity.

What are two distinct ways that your teaching style differs from the way you might teach in a studio and what are the reasons for these differences?

I teach without the chanting, and I vary the jargon. I have made these adjustments in respect to the institution where I am offering my services. It is not like when I lead a seminar or workshop, in which education is the theme. Instead, it's about addressing the individual wounded in warfare, his or her one-of-a-kind healing process, and to meet soldiers and veterans where they are every time.

What has been the greatest challenge in your teaching experience, and what tools have you developed for addressing that challenge?

It has to do with the assumptions people have about yoga. I have a slogan, “There is no one way to yoga; there are numerous ways, and the best way is to find your way.” The tools I have developed in addressing this challenge have been formed over 25 years of multidisciplinary mind-body culture (Western and Eastern). With these tools I am able to offer myriad variations and options.

What advice would you give to anyone wanting to teach the veterans with whom you work, both in and outside of military settings?

Take your time and find a sense of neutrality when offering your services. Provide a good vibe with space for people to be themselves. It is mostly about using the powers of observation and the craft of adaptability. Regarding going to work in a military setting, it is best to learn about its culture and subcultures, including its history, from a wide range of perspectives. When teaching in a military setting, remember to be professional, and underneath it all just be yourself.

What are some of your ideas about or hopes for the future of service yoga in America in the next decade?

I'd like to see more of it offered to under-served communities. This encompasses impoverished neighborhoods, hospice care, retirement homes, immigrant societies, as well as throughout the medical field.

Olivia Kvitne—Yoga: Serving Those Who Serve

This is an interview with Olivia Kvitne, who started her service career in 2003 teaching low-cost private yoga sessions for people with disabilities who couldn't make it in to a studio (MS, high-risk pregnancy, etc.) in New York City. She also taught free yoga for her cast while dancing in the national tour of "The Producers." Now based in Los Angeles, she has created "Yoga for Heroes," free yoga workshops for vets, military, and first responders. Olivia donates proceeds from civilians to a veterans' organization. As a writer for two yoga publications, she has written articles for each of them about the science underlying yoga, how yoga affects and heals the nervous system, and why this is beneficial for veterans, military, and first responders. Olivia also teaches at the training center for the LA Fire Department. Forthcoming on www.givebackyoga.org blog.



Rob: What originally motivated you to do this work, and what continues to motivate you? How, if at all, has that motivation changed over time?

I've always been a patriotic person with so much admiration for service men and women and first responders. I wanted a way to serve my country in conjunction with a tangible offering to express my gratitude to real-life heroes. Both my grandfathers served in World War II; one of them was a Navy officer, and also a psychiatrist. He believed in the power of the mind to heal the body. That is my underlying motivation. It's not easy introducing yoga to anyone; there are common stereotypes and misconceptions. It is even more difficult to introduce yoga to this population, especially as a young woman with no military and combat experience. But when I see them being open to try, listening to what I have to say, learning something new, followed by a positive and healing experience, it keeps me motivated to continue to offer the benefits of yoga to a population that otherwise might be overlooked.

Is there a standout moment from your work with veterans and first responders?

Recently, a few veterans I taught in Iowa took their first yoga class with me. They tell me they continue to practice yoga, and describe the breakthroughs they are having. One of the vets said, "Olivia Kvitne is my hero!" That was huge for me.

What did you know about the population you are working with before you began teaching? What were some of the assumptions you had about this population, and how have those assumptions changed?

Through my training with Yoga Warriors International, as well as extensive interviews with veterans, and my own research, I know there is a broad spectrum of how PTSD can present itself. This population is trained to be tough, to show no weakness, and often those experiencing PTSD don't even seek help. Those who do may be placed on prescription drugs or in "talk therapy," and for many, these are either not helping, or giving them undesirable side effects. Some don't have PTSD at all.

My assumptions when giving my first workshop for veterans was that I was going to have to do a lot of convincing for them to even close their eyes and take a mindful breath. I prepared to have some chuckles, resistance, and everyone would want to get to the planks and chaturanga push ups. Surprisingly, everyone enjoyed the guided meditation during final relaxation more than anything else. I could tell their nervous systems were craving homeostasis.

What are two distinct ways that your teaching style differs from the way you might teach in a studio, and what are the reasons for these differences?

I approach all my yoga classes with a down-to-earth attitude, and especially so with vets and first responders. I try to approach these students from a "spiritual science" perspective: these guys (and gals) want proof. It's been shown through the recording of brain activity using an Electroencephalog-

raphy (EEG), that yoga and meditation can shift brain wave activity, encouraging the increase of lower-frequency brain waves associated with the body's relaxation response <http://blog.neuroelectrics.com/blog/bid/250431/Meditation-And-EEG-Helping-Patients-Along-The-Way>. The students need to be able to relate to the practice, so they can experience that they are already yogis, and realize these concepts are not out of reach.

Most importantly, I am very careful about my use of language, and which poses we practice. I avoid words like "surrender" or "corpse pose." Instead, I will say "allow" or "deep relaxation." Opening up the throat, letting the chin tip back, and hands behind the back I also avoid, as to not trigger a memory.

What has been the greatest challenge in your teaching experience, and what tools have you developed for addressing that challenge?

The ego is difficult for most of us to overcome in our practice, and it's probably even worse for someone who is trained to be a hero. My approach is to remind them that it's not just about the pose, it's about observing our reaction and ego within the pose. The biggest challenge for me is convincing people that having the flexibility of an acrobat does not make a yogi. I see frustration when postures are difficult for someone, or when they are sweating a lot in a pose that looks so simple when I demonstrate it. Physical flexibility and strength are by-products, the practice is building mental and emotional flexibility and strength. I also might make a joke to lighten the mood; we can all find common ground in laughter.

What advice would you give to anyone who is going to teach in the population you work with?

Become trained in trauma-sensitive yoga classes. There are many affordable certifications. Don't try to force them in to your world, bring yourself to their world. If they are not ready for this kind of work, don't take it personally, just continue to offer it to those who are.

What are some of your ideas about, or hopes for the future of, service yoga in America in the next decade?

Yoga teachers have a very special and important job passing down these ancient principles and healing tools. I'd like to see hours of "service yoga" be required after going through teacher training, and I wish Yoga Alliance would require such hours every year thereafter. We all need reminders to work and teach from the heart of giving. If yoga is part of training systems for our military and first responders, and offered in every VA hospital, for example, teachers will have plenty of places they can contact to offer classes.

What other organizations do you admire?

Yoga Warriors International, Mindful Yoga Therapy for Veterans, iRest, Yogafit for Warriors, Mindful Resilience for Trauma Recovery are all great training systems for trauma-sensitive classes. I also love what Give Back Yoga, Veterans Yoga Project, YogaforVets.org, Operation Mindful Warrior and Honoring the Path of the Warrior are doing to make yoga and meditation accessible to vets. This year, Bhakti Fest offered free entry to vets and military.

Sue Lynch—Yoga: How We Serve Combat Veterans Coping With Trauma



This is an interview with Sue Lynch, who began serving her fellow veterans in 2005 when she founded There & Back Again with Dave Emerson, JRI Trauma Institute, Bill Donahue (Vietnam War veteran), LTC Scott Wakefield (ret.) and Silke Denker. Bessel van der Kolk was key in bringing them together so that they could draw on each other's experience to develop a program that incorporates yoga as its foundation and integrative therapies such as acupuncture, Reiki, and cranio-sacral massage. All these have come to provide integrative tools to veterans of combat to help manage the symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Posted: 11/09/2012 2:00 pm. on www.huffingtonpost.com.

Rob: What originally motivated you to do this work and what continues to motivate you? How, if at all, has that motivation changed over time?

As an Army Reserve soldier, I deployed to Saudi Arabia during the Gulf War in 1990. I returned at age 21 feeling disconnected from myself and those around me. I didn't understand what was going on. I've always been self-motivated and "Army Strong." At times, I couldn't pull myself out of bed. I experienced symptoms such as anxiety and depression, isolation. I cried all the time and felt like life was too difficult to continue. I never attempted suicide but I understand why others reach this point. At that time, not much was known about PTSD. Therapy helped me understand, intellectually, what was going on: I could see an emotional storm coming. I understood the triggers behind the emotional storm. But I wasn't able to prevent the storm from taking me down the black hole—until I found a yoga mat. Everything changed on that mat. Therapy gave me the intellectual understanding of PTSD; yoga provided me the tools to manage the symptoms of PTSD. After hearing Bessel speak at a JRI Trauma Conference, I understand that there is no direct pathway in the brain between the intellectual and the emotional functions in the brain. We must go back to the body to release the trauma. His work validated my experience.

Is there a standout moment from your work with There and Back Again and with veterans?

My intention in sharing yoga with my fellow veterans was to give them tools for immediate relief, instead of suffering for decades, as was my experience and that of many generations of veterans. When I actually observed that veterans experienced the immediate benefits of yoga, as I had, I was convinced that yoga has a profound effect on empowering veterans to manage PTSD symptoms. Yoga gives us choices, allows us not to have to try so hard, which is contrary to military training ("no pain, no gain" and "pain is weakness leaving the body"). Yoga connects us to ourselves. This connection in turn allows us to then connect to our loved ones and our communities. A profound moment for me occurred after I taught a six-week pilot program at a vet center. After completing the six-week program (one class a week), the veterans gave me a fire extinguisher as a gift. Initially, I was a bit confused by the gift; the veterans explained that the significance of the fire extinguisher was to thank me for creating a safe place and helping them put out their own fires. These veterans' experience truly validates the power of yoga.

What did you know about the population you are working with before you began teaching? What were some of the assumptions you had about this population and how, if at all, have those assumptions changed?

I have served in the military for more than 25 years as both an enlisted soldier and an officer. I know military culture and understand many of the issues facing returning veterans, such as fear of the stigma, impact on career progression, and belief that "leading from the front" means that it's not okay to disclose that we need support (the military doesn't issue emotions, so therefore we don't have them). Given that we are humans and humans have emotions, this idea is not realistic. Learning the concept of self-care is central to empowering us to feel better; the military is now getting this and is working to implement programs that are more in alignment with overall wellness.

In what way does your teaching style differ from the way you might teach in a studio?

The major difference in my vets class is in how I use language. I don't use Sanskrit. I do incorporate military terms and examples to support a better understanding of the practice. For example, I refer to how we use the breath on the rifle range to create awareness of the inhale and exhale. I also tend to teach like I'm "back on the block" as we call it in the military, which is down-to-earth, irreverent, and invoking lots of humor. The other way my veterans class is different is we do an "after action report" after we practice, to share what shifts may have occurred while on the mat. I've found this quite powerful. Often the discussion brings as much awareness as the actual practice. Group discussion also helps validate their experiences, which is key.

What has been the greatest challenge in your teaching experience, and what tools have you developed for addressing that challenge?

My biggest challenge continues to be to have good boundaries in place. One of the reasons for founding There & Back Again was to ensure that my fellow veterans get access to practices that provide relief from PTSD as quickly as possible. Over time I've learned that this impulse tempts me to try to "fix" others' problems. After seven years, I've gained a better awareness of this dynamic, and now I dial it back as something that belongs to me, not the veteran standing before me. It's a matter of knowing what's mine and what's yours and letting you have your experience just as it is while offering guidance and support.

What advice would you give to anyone who is going to teach in the population that you work with?

I recommend the following:

- Take a trauma-sensitive training, Warriors at Ease or JRI Trauma Center with Dave Emerson.
- Be mindful not to say that you "get" what a combat veteran has gone through unless you've had a similar experience.
- Understand that teaching veterans is similar to teaching any student in your public classes who carries his or her own individual experiences, some of which may involve trauma.
- Dispel the fear that veterans may have a PTSD meltdown. As yoga teachers, it is important to understand how to be present for students who have abreactions. Everyone is susceptible to have one—not just veterans.
- Teach from your heart. Let intuition guide you. I've found that mine has never let me down.

What are some of your ideas about or hopes for the future of "service yoga" in America in the next decade?

My hope is that the yoga community can continue to collaborate to bring the benefits of yoga to those who lack access and the funds to reap those benefits. Our work continues to raise awareness that yoga empowers individuals to understand how they tick, what they need, and gives tools to support self-healing and the discovery of trust of themselves and others. I hope this rising awareness will lead to increased funding to ensure that everyone has access to integrative practices, especially yoga, which I believe is the foundation of a path to wellness.

How has this work changed your definition of service? Your definition of yoga? Your practice?

My work has compelled me to help organize an effort to form the Military Mind Body Health Consortium ("MMBHC") to ensure that military personnel, families, and veterans have access to the benefits of yoga and the many integrative therapies. The mission of the MMBHC is to unify and galvanize the mind-body professional community to support a common mission.

What other organizations do you admire?

Warriors at Ease, Exalted Warrior Foundation, JRI Trauma Center, Give Back Yoga Foundation.

Suzanne Manafort—Bringing Mindful Yoga Therapy to Veterans

This is an interview with Suzanne Manafort, who has been a student of Beryl Bender Birch for about 15 years and Patty Townsend for a decade. She has completed advanced certifications with both yoga masters and also studied in the Living Tantra and Sage Programs at the Himalayan Institute with Pandit Rajmani Tigunait. Currently, she is the director of Newington Yoga Center and also the founder of Mindful Yoga Therapy for Veterans.



*Besides teaching yoga and teacher trainings at her yoga center, Suzanne has been teaching veterans with post-traumatic stress in a treatment facility for the past five years. She is co-author of *Mindful Yoga Therapy for Veterans: An Embodiyoga Practice Guide*, and has two CDs, “Breathe In Breathe Out” and “Yoga Nidra. Posted: 11/04/2013 4:44 pm on www.huffingtonpost.com.”*

Rob: What originally motivated you to do this work, and what continues to motivate you? How, if at all, has the motivation changed you?

Being a student of Beryl Bender Birch teaches you to go out into the world and make some kind of difference. Jokingly, she says that she is “training spiritual revolutionaries,” but it’s really the truth! She leads by example. She has trained all of her students to step in where there is a need.

What keeps me motivated is the successful results that the yoga practices have with men and women with PTS. Watching their progress and witnessing people stepping back into their lives is a true gift.

Is there a stand-out moment with your work with veterans?

There are many! I had a man in one of my residential programs who I thought really didn’t want to be there, and was very resistant to the practices. In this program when they graduate they receive a medal for their accomplishment. The day of this man’s graduation he presented me with a medal for my service. I keep it on my desk and it reminds of how important this work is, and never to think I know what anyone else is thinking.

What did you know about the population you are working with before you began teaching? What are some of the assumptions you had about the population and how have those assumptions changed?

Nothing at all! I thought it would be nice to donate my time at the local VA. They asked me to teach a class in the residential PTSD program. I was surprised at how many women were suffering with PTS, and for quite some time. I very quickly learned that I needed to adapt the yoga practices to meet their needs, physically and mentally.

Mindful Yoga Therapy was born out of this treatment program. Feedback from the veterans in the program was one of the reasons it became apparent to me that the practices had to be adapted appropriately. The results have been amazing! I watch the men and women as they begin in my 12-week program look as if someone has dimmed their inner light. After a few weeks, their interests in the practices begin to increase and slowly it looks as if they brighten up. It truly is a visible change. So many men and women taking our program combined with psychotherapy are getting well and leading productive lives. It has been my honor to be a part of this!

What are two distinct ways that your teaching style differs from the way you might teach in a studio, and what are the reasons for the differences?

One of the things we stress in our Mindful Yoga Therapy (MYT) programs is to create a safe space, so there is a whole list of things that go along with that, but here are two. Because so many women and men are suffering from PTS, the postures are very carefully chosen so that no one ever feels vulnerable. My language is different. I don’t use Sanskrit in an MYT class.

What are the greatest challenges in your teaching experience, and what tools have you developed for addressing them?

One of the greatest challenges is to get these programs into the places that they are needed. I've had to learn how to do professional presentations on the benefits of yoga and MYT.

What advice would you give anyone who is going to teach in this population?

Be your authentic self, create a safe space, and allow them to do only what they are comfortable with. Let them be in control of the pace that they progress at, while teaching them to find their inner space where there is peace.

What are some of your ideas about or hopes for the future of “yoga service” in America in the next decade?

There are so many people doing such good work! In my narrow little window I would like to see a yoga therapeutic program in treatment centers for veterans everywhere. I believe that yoga is really helping to make a difference with PTS. I am seeing the results first hand.

How has this work changed your definition of service? Your definition of yoga? Your practice?

My work as a board member with the Give Back Yoga Foundation has exposed me to so many people who are doing amazing work. I do completely believe what Beryl Bender Birch says: “We all have the ability to make a difference in the world.”

My definition of yoga is more about the way I live my life now than what I do on my mat. I try to live my life as my practice.

What other organizations do you admire?

There are so many! I have been proud to work with Semper Fidelis Health and Wellness. They are a group of men and women dedicated to helping their brothers and sisters. And I'm also proud to hold a seat on the board of directors for the Give Back Yoga Foundation.

Daniel Martin—A Veteran's Experience With Yin Yoga

Posted on givebackyoga.org.

My name is Daniel Martin and I served in the USMC in Vietnam from September 1968 to October 1969. I worked as a social worker for 15 years before becoming a massage therapist in 1991. In 1994 I became a practitioner of structural integration. At present I have 300 hours of yoga training and teach yin yoga at the local senior center. I have been married for 22 years and have a daughter 11 years old, who is adopted from Vietnam.

I first became interested in yin yoga in 2010. During “reclining spinal twist” I became aware of an opening in my low- and mid-back. At first I thought it was a release of tight, over-worked soft tissue but as time went on I felt this deep feeling of reconnection to my heart. It was as if my mother was holding me in her arms. I felt safe, whole, and not alone anymore.

Fleeting as this moment was, I wanted to experience it again. I attended more yin yoga classes and took two yin yoga teacher trainings. Through the yin poses I have learned to use my breath as a way of staying more present in my body. I am more accepting and less judgmental of others and myself. I am re-connecting with an inherent wisdom and truth that permeates my body and mind. My past stories and experiences of war no longer are in the forefront of my life. My heart has softened. I feel more space to make choices and I am learning to react to things in my life in a more conscious way. I don't feel so alone. Since Vietnam I have always felt unsafe in large groups of people, but now I can be in a room with many people again. I practice yin yoga and meditation almost every day. It is an important part of my path toward healing.



Biff Mithoefer: How Yin Yoga Can Help Veterans Practice Self-Compassion



*This is a special interview with Give Back Yoga advisory board member Biff Mithoefer, an international teacher of Yin Yoga. Biff is the author of *The Yin Yoga Kit* and the co-author of *The Therapeutic Yoga Kit*. He is also the founder and director of the *Jamtse Sponsorship Project*, for the support of Tibetan refugee children.*

With its gentle, meditative approach to reconnecting with the body and accepting the present moment, Yin Yoga is a highly effective tool to help veterans and other trauma survivors begin to heal from post-traumatic stress. Posted on givebackyoga.org.

The practice of yin yoga is a return to yoga's ancient meditative roots. It's a very simple practice; in its simplicity lies its quiet power. There are two things that make a yoga asana more yin. First, the posture must allow muscles to relax. It is only when the muscles relax that we may access the deep yin parts of the body, the connective tissue. Perhaps most importantly, the asana must be done with an attitude of yin acceptance. To understand what this means, we must have some understanding of the Taoist concepts of yin and yang.

Yin Yoga Can Help Us Find Equanimity In Our Lives

Taoist tradition speaks clearly of the unity of all things. From the Tao—that place before and beyond duality—came the whole manifested universe, the realm of yin and yang. The polarities of yin and yang began when the universe separated from the Tao itself, at the time physicists call the big bang, the time when, from a Taoist point of view, all things came into being.

Yin and yang exist only because of one another. Without yin there would be no yang, without yang there would be no yin. Without up, there is no down. Without joy there is no sorrow, without sorrow there is no joy. Without life there is no death, without death, no life. Without you there can be no me. The relationship of yin and yang speak of the truth of interconnectedness.

Yang is our more masculine, aggressive nature while yin is our softer, feminine, more accepting self. By setting an intention in our practice to nourish this gentler part of ourselves, we can begin to soften, and be with what is happening in our bodies.

We can practice a simple posture, such as a seated forward bend, in either a yang or yin way. If we decide that there is a "right" way to do the posture, then we will adapt a yang attitude and strive to be "right." We might take hold of our toes and use our muscles to pull us deeper into the pose. This can be helpful if we want to stretch our hamstrings, but it can also encourage any feelings we have that we're not enough, that we should be different. To do this posture as a yin posture, we will bring to it an attitude of nourishing acceptance. Rather than trying to force ourselves to look like some one's idea of what the posture "should" be, we can let our own bodies guide us. By not forcing and striving, our body will find its own natural pattern. Once we have allowed the body to find its own way into the posture, we invite it to stay there, generally for around five minutes. During this long hold, we are able to just be with what is. It is not a time to control either the mind or the body, but a time to be a witness to everything that comes up.

The human nervous system operates within two basic systems, the somatic and autonomic nervous systems. The somatic system responds to our free will, and is the way we control our bodies' movements and functions. The choices we make are carried out by the somatic system. When we decide to move, it is the somatic system that makes it happen. This is the more yang aspect of our nervous system. The autonomic system operates by itself. It knows what to do to keep the organism functioning, by controlling such systems as heart rate, digestion, respiration, and circulation.

Within the autonomic system are two divisions, the parasympathetic and the sympathetic. The sympathetic system controls our "fight and flight" response, so that when we feel unsafe or threatened we automatically move into our sympathetic system. When this happens, a number of physical changes

in the body take place in order to best prepare us to run or fight. The blood pressure rises, the immune system is modulated, the digestive system shuts down, and blood is sent to the big muscles of the legs. This puts strain on the body, which is necessary for its survival, but which can have detrimental long-term effects. The feelings of danger might emerge from immediate threats: a lion charging, a car heading toward us in the wrong lane, or layoffs at work. They can also be the stories of past dangers or threats that may no longer be current, but remain with us nevertheless. Strong deeply-seated memories can keep us stuck in this feeling of vulnerability.

The parasympathetic system is where we go to rest and renew ourselves. It is the natural state of the nervous system, when we feel safe in our lives. It is where we can feel that our life is in balance.

The Buddhist tradition speaks of the four divine abodes: loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. In my experience, the state of equanimity comes through the understanding that it is possible to be happy with things just as they are. It is the knowing in our mind and in every cell of our body that there is a place of balance in ourselves and in the cosmos where peace and joy exist, and that that place is available to us all. It is the understanding that the Tao is not something outside ourselves, but that it is who we truly are. For us to feel compassion, loving-kindness and sympathetic joy, we must have some equanimity in our lives. The Taoists think of this in terms of the balance of yin and yang. Until we can feel some peace in our lives, some balance, it's very hard to feel compassion, kindness, or joy for others. It's especially difficult to feel compassion and acceptance toward our selves.

Equanimity is not possible when we are stuck in our flight and fight response and every effort is aimed at survival, at making it through another day. Yin yoga can help us make the shift from fight to restore, from fear to peace, and from fight to reconciliation.

Yin Yoga Can Help Us Release Deeply-held Trauma

From a physical point of view, yin practice is unique. If we look at the human body, we can see—as with the whole universe—that there are aspects of the body that are more yin, and aspects that are more yang. Yang is represented by the more striving parts of our physical being,—the muscles; yin is held by our more accepting, less active parts—our connective tissue.

Connective tissue takes on many different forms within the body. It is the tissue that holds the bones together, the muscles to the bones, and the internal organs in place. It is the web that forms and connects all aspects of the human body. The connective tissue has its own intelligence and memory. It is listening and remembering our every thought and experience.

Much of the trauma we carry is held not just in the mind, but also in the body itself, most specifically in these deep connective tissues. Just as yin never exists without yang, trauma never exists without healing. Where the trauma is held in the body, there also is the healing. By allowing the muscles to relax and our physical and emotional attention to focus on the body's deep connective tissue, we can begin to release this trauma and access the healing that is our natural state. Yin yoga can work in much the same way as acupuncture, Thai massage, and Rolfing, by helping access and release the old stories that our cells are holding. When we are able to listen to these deeply-held memories without blame or judgment, we create a space for learning and for healing.

As the poet Kabir suggests:

“So let your body speak for you now, without you saying a word
Like the student walking behind the teacher says
This one knows better than I the way.”

Reconnection

The practice of Yin yoga is a practice of reconnection. The Sufi poets speak of the source of our human sorrow being our disconnection from our source. We are the lonely reed that has been plucked from the

reed bed. This sweet loneliness is a normal part of the human experience. This longing for reconnection opens our hearts.

When events occur in our lives that are beyond normal human experience, events that are so horrible we have no way to integrate them into our concepts about life, we have no choice but to disconnect. We disconnect from society, from our family, from our body, and from our own heart. No place seems safe.

Yin yoga is a way to begin to reconnect. It begins by helping us reconnect with our body. Accepting ourselves as we are is the first step. Allowing ourselves to be in the posture just as we are is a way of acknowledging our body and its wisdom. When a small child needs our attention, we first have to acknowledge it. By taking the time to sit down quietly and listen to a child or to our body, we can connect. In the quiet of the yin postures we can create a space for the body to feel safe. The small child within us can crawl out from under the bed and begin to reconnect with all the aspects of life from which it's been hiding.

Dr. Michael Mithoefer—A Psychiatrist's Experience Working With Veterans and Other Individuals Healing the Effects of Trauma

Posted on givebackyoga.org.

After many years in which my wife Annie and I have worked with trauma survivors, it is abundantly clear to us that daily medications and talk therapy are not adequate tools for many of the people who seek help with their healing from the effects of trauma (often referred to as post-traumatic stress, or post-traumatic stress disorder). Much of what Biff [Mithoefer] says about yin yoga resonates strongly with our clinical experience regarding what is needed for healing: regaining a balance between striving and letting go, an invitation to listen to the body, allowing for reconnection.

When people who have not responded to conventional western treatments are offered experiential methods that allow them to go beyond cognitive processing and to access deeper levels—where the burdens of trauma are carried in the psyche and the body—remarkable healing and heart-opening can occur. Methods for working directly with the body, such as yin yoga, are valuable and often indispensable tools for accessing these deeper levels. They also work as an ongoing practice, so that healing can continue to unfold that has been started by experiential psychotherapy.

All healing—both physical and psychological (which are not separate, but two aspects of a whole)—is accomplished as a result of our innate healing capacity. When I practiced emergency medicine it was important for me to take action to create favorable conditions for healing by removing obstacles to it, but the body knew how to heal, and did the healing. If someone had a big cut on their arm I would remove the dirt and bring the edges close together, maybe take other measures to treat infection or other problems that might be obstacles to healing, but I did not know how to heal the wound. That happened as a result of an amazingly complex and elegant process within the body, and it always moved in the direction of healing. I never saw a seven-cm laceration that turned into an eight-cm laceration when I checked it a few days later. Complications could impede the healing process, but the body always spontaneously moved toward healing.

The same is true of psychological healing from trauma, or anything else. The role of the therapist, facilitator, or teacher is to help create favorable conditions for healing. This person supports access to the inner healing wisdom and amazing healing ability of the body/psyche, and helps people directly experience that they can pause in their striving, and trust their own healing intelligence. Yin yoga practice is a wonderful way to practice and develop this direct experience of letting go, receiving and allowing their own healing to unfold.

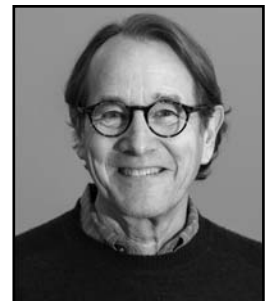


Photo ©Hunter McRae

John Morgan—Yoga: How We Serve Veterans and People With Substance Abuse

This is an interview with John Morgan, an Army veteran in recovery from alcohol abuse. He graduated from Samadhi Yoga Studio in Manchester, Conn. in 2010 with a 200-hour RYT (Registered Yoga Teacher) certification in Hatha Yoga and wanted to work with veterans and people with substance abuse. John's yoga service began on Veterans Day, 2012 at a treatment center in eastern Connecticut for veterans, active duty personnel, and dependents. Posted on XXXXX on www.huffingtonpost.com.



Rob: Is there a standout moment from your work with veterans?

Every class I teach stands out. I always ask, “Who’s done yoga?” Most say they haven’t. The second question I ask is, “Who learned how to march and sing cadence?” Everyone laughs and replies “yes.” I make the comparison: Cadence was a form of breath work and marching was a form of asana. The two—cadence and marching—nearly always went together just like breath work and asana.

But a particular moment was when I started a class and asked everyone who came to get into a comfortable seated position. Two men, one Army and one Navy, came into perfect lotus positions. I told them they had just achieved an advanced yoga posture! They gave each other a “high five.” Everyone else cheered.

What did you know about the population you are working with before you began teaching?

Obviously I knew about this population—I’m one of them. I attended my first Veterans Yoga Project (VYP) training at the Newington Yoga Center in Newington, Conn. in January 2012. Dr. Daniel Libby and Suzanne Manafort delivered what I thought was the perfect approach to teaching veterans. I was glad to know my first teaching job would include active-duty personnel as well as veterans.

Prior to Nov. 11, 2012, I had not taught yoga in a studio. My style of yoga has been Ashtanga. I’ve been a student since my first yoga teacher training in 2009. I could never see myself teaching ordinary yoga in a studio to householder yogis. I wanted to work with special-needs populations. What I learned from Dan and Suzanne was how to conduct a class for people with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), trauma and substance abuse. I learned how to hold the space, be mindful of language, and provide support. Dr. Libby asked me to teach in July of 2012 at a program he was involved in. At the time I was busy working on the other side of the state (Connecticut). I told him when I concluded that project by September I’d give it a try. Suzanne invited me to attend another VYP training in Amherst, Mass. in October 2012. I attended the training because I wanted to be straight with teaching this population. When the day came to teach I was in my comfort zone because I was with people I already knew and had acquired the skills through the VYP training program to perform my duty.

What has been the greatest challenge in your teaching experience, and what tools have you developed for addressing that challenge?

The greatest challenges for me are setting aside the time and not hiding behind my work. I try hard to get my ass back out on the line and help out where I’m needed the most.

What advice would you give to anyone who is going to teach veterans or special-needs populations?

Attend some training, and get out and teach! Just teach in your authentic self and be clear. If the first week goes by and the attendees seem distant, just go back the next week and try again. Then try again. And again.

What are some of your ideas about or hopes for the future of “service yoga” in America in the next decade?

I'd like to see yoga in all grades at schools and in the business sector.

How has this work changed your definition of service? Your definition of yoga? Your practice?

I've become a more humble person. I have a renewed sense of my military service. I kinda feel like I'm back in my unit. Yoga is the connection to self, others, and the physical world. My practice will remain Ashtanga. However, lately I've taken a liking to Embodiyoga.

Sarah Plummer—Yoga: How We Help Veterans of Combat Reintegrate Into Their Lives



©Vithaya Photography

This is an interview with Sarah Plummer, who started practicing yoga in 2001 in order to cope with overuse injuries from soccer and military training. After years of dabbling in the practice, in 2006, during her second deployment to Iraq, she became “hooked.” Yoga “saved my life when I was on the edge. At a time when I felt like I was suffocating, yoga was the one thing that got me doing something very simple each day—breathing.” If she could roll off her bed, onto her yoga mat and start there, she knew she would make it another day during the war. In January 2012, she did an intensive yoga teacher training in Costa Rica and became certified to teach others this healing art. Posted: 11/16/2012 1:19 pm on www.huffingtonpost.com.

Rob: What originally motivated you to do this work and what continues to motivate you? How, if at all, has that motivation changed over time?

My own laundry list of physical and mental injuries made me want to help others coping with the same challenges. I've had crazy things happen to me, like getting hit by a car, struck by lightning, combined with Marine Corps wear-and-tear for over a decade. I used to think yoga was a crock of hippie hocus-pocus. Originally, yoga was only a physical thing to me, another type of workout, but as soon as it took on spiritual meaning, it catapulted my life forward, which is why spreading the message of yoga is near and dear to my heart. It has saved my life on many occasions. I know yoga is one of the main reasons why I thrive today and I am passionate about bringing this life-saving therapy to others. At first, I only wanted to do the ashtanga-type classes. Now, although I love the physical challenge, the “type” of yoga that serves me best is gentler, more meditative. I've seen this trend in others I teach. Above all else, though, I try to keep yoga fun for myself and for those I teach.

What did you know about the veterans you were working with before you began teaching? What were some of the assumptions you had about this population and how have those assumptions changed?

I assumed they would only want something that was very physically challenging. However, the balancing series and slower paces are often a better fit for most of them. It depends on who the students are. As my teacher taught me, effective teaching is all about being astute —you should adapt your class to your students (if necessary). If you are in tune with your students, you should be able to do that in a way that best serves them. The class should never be about what the teacher wants, but what the students need—and that's going to be different every single time.

What are two distinct ways that your teaching style differs from the way you might teach in a studio, and what are the reasons for these differences?

I spend more time talking in the beginning, introducing myself so they know I can relate to some of their experiences, and explaining what we'll be doing and why and how the movements are connected to mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of our lives. I also try to get the students laughing. I believe laughter is the best meditation because in that instant that your eyes are closed, your mouth is open, and your head is tipped back, nothing else is on your mind. You are clear. Veterans with PTSD need that clarity, even if for a moment, because their minds are racing most of the day and night.

What has been the greatest challenge in your teaching experience and what tools have you developed for addressing that challenge?

As a new teacher, I'm still learning how to best serve my students. When a student gets frustrated and we're in a group setting, it's hard to tend to him or her without feeling like I am neglecting the flow for the other students. So, I try to read the situation, put the class in a posture that is comfortable to hold, and go speak quietly to the student who is frustrated, and give her options for where to go next. Sometimes even a light touch can work wonders. Many veterans constantly have walls up, and close themselves off from human touch; being able to offer a gentle adjustment, or assistance getting deeper into a fold, can feel really good to them. I love seeing them completely relax after fighting a posture, and even see them smile when they notice the change in their own body and mind.

What advice would you give to anyone who is going to teach in military settings?

Do not walk into a class with assumptions. They will read your energy. Get to know your students as much as possible. Many of us military folks already feel like just another cog in the wheel; try to make them feel special and like you're really there for them. Be fully present.

What are some of your ideas about or hopes for the future of "service yoga" in America in the next decade?

I hope that yoga becomes increasingly mainstream. I hear a lot of critiques of "westernized" yoga, but ultimately I don't care what "type" of yoga you're doing, if you're out there giving it a try, great! Stick with it. And I can empathize with people who poo-poo it at first, because I used to be one of them. Had I not had the option to do a "hardcore" yoga class first, I may have never gotten to the spiritual part of my practice I live with today. I hope for the same availability for others. Let them practice the "kind" of yoga they want to.

How has this work changed your definition of service? Your definition of yoga? Your practice?

Since I began teaching, I understand the principle of "yoga off the mat" more and more every day. I teach veterans—who tend to be survivors of anything from combat to sexual assault—that you can apply yogic principles to all areas of your life. Service isn't just about building homes on the weekend, although of course that is admirable and we need that, too, but about helping people live better, accept themselves, and move forward. It's why the title of my new book is *Just Roll With It*.

Rob Schware — Yoga Therapy in Practice: Are You a Prisoner of Your Judgments?

Posted: 06/26/2012 7:50 am on www.huffingtonpost.com.



I grew up a pacifist. Along with an entire generation of anti-Vietnam War youth, I was devoted to and energized by the Gandhian principle of ahimsa and other ideas of non-violence. Still true to these influences in later life, I co-founded the Give Back Yoga Foundation, which supports teachers who bring yoga and meditation to underserved populations.

But the younger me might not have predicted that part of its core mission would be to bring yoga to veterans, active-duty soldiers, and their families. Or that my son's oldest and best friend, someone very dear to me, would be serving in Afghanistan, while my youngest daughter joined the Israeli Defense Forces.

Thus, now in mid-life, I find myself standing in what appears to be a contradiction: I profess to be guided by ahimsa, and yet people I love, as well as those served by Give Back, are trained not just to defend, but also to attack.

At times I allow myself to wallow in the apparent contradiction and can be quite convinced of the righteousness of my confusion. Other times I understand that even the appearance of this so-called contradiction is itself based on unfair and toxic judgments that are buried deep within me, and that I even nurture and protect. Sometimes I confidently paddle around in my private sea of judgment; sometimes I can clearly see the whirlpool in which my judgments have caught me.

Not too long ago I joined a teleconference class called "Teaching Yoga in Military Settings." The class was offered by Warriors At Ease, an organization that trains and certifies yoga and meditation teachers to work effectively within military culture, and safely with combat-related injuries and conditions. Our first homework assignment was to examine our own thoughts and opinions about serving this military population. After three weeks, I still had not completed it. I found it so difficult to overcome the contradictions I had uncovered in myself. I was holding on to old feelings based on conflicting judgments about people's choice to serve in wars. I needed to do some work on myself before I could do the homework.

I turned for help to the wisdom of Patanjali and his Yoga Sutras, in which he defines ahimsa as non-violence. I figured out that for me, actively practicing ahimsa means replacing the judgments I cling to with compassionate acceptance, kindness, and forbearance of thought. This task will take me this lifetime, at least.

I'd hazard a guess that I'm not the only yogi who's a prisoner of my judgments. Many people have an aversion to working with specific populations—whether it's the homeless, incarcerated youth and adults, people with HIV, or people trying day by day to beat the disease of alcoholism or substance abuse. The challenge of working with underserved populations is the everyday practice of looking at that aversion and finding the common humanity in us all.

The Give Back Yoga Foundation and many other non-profit organizations are dedicated to helping yoga teachers reach such underserved populations. One of the most important things we do may be to model how we work with our own judgments and help others do the same. It is this inner work that can help all of us feel inspired and empowered to step up and get involved.

Ron G. Self—Yoga: Incarcerated Veterans Taking Healing Into Their Own Hands



This is an interview with Ron G. Self, founder of Veterans Healing Veterans from the Inside Out (VHV-FTIO), a program he started at San Quentin State Prison in 2012 specifically to address psychological, emotional and ethical issues of veterans related to their active duty in the military, and to explore how their personal experiences may have contributed to behavior that resulted in their committing a crime. The program offers cognitive behavioral processing and mind/body integration support and seeks to share its healing work with veterans on the outside.

Ron enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corp in 1987 and served in the Fleet Marine Corps till 1992. He transferred to Active Reserve and was re-assigned to Special Operations. He went on to a Permanent Duty Assignment to the Joint Special Operations Command. As team leader of a Hostage Rescue Prisoner Recovery Unit, he participated in campaigns ranging from training Afghans to shoot down Russian aircraft on the Uzbekistan border during the 1988 spring offensive to extracting civilians from Rwanda in April 1994. Other special operations were in the Gulf War, Mogadishu, Somalia, Bosnia, and Panama “to name a few.”

Ron was honorably discharged in 1996. He was later convicted of attempted murder and sentenced to 25 years to life in prison. That was 17 years ago. He is now up for parole and has been a resident of San Quentin since 2009. His decorations include two Navy Marine Corps Medals and numerous other citations for heroism and combat wounds. The Navy Marine Corps Medal is the highest Marine medal given during peacetime or non-declared actions. One of the medals involved pulling 15 Marines from a burning helicopter in Pohang, Korea.

Ron says his “mission is to implement a policy shift within the military that mandates participation in the VHV-FTIO program before discharge from any active duty component. A period of decompression and re-socialization before returning to society after active duty is needed. The program we’ve created will provide that.” Posted: 03/18/2013 5:05 pm on www.huffingtonpost.com.

Rob: What originally motivated you to start this program for veterans and what continues to motivate you?

My primary motivation for starting VHV-FTIO was the high rate of suicide among post-combat veterans returning from our most recent two wars (Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom). I have since discovered there are many Vietnam War veterans that have basically been forgotten about. Many of these veterans have gained valuable insights as to where they went wrong and can show the younger generation of veterans how to cope with the stress of a post-combat life and avoid the mistakes that ultimately brought many veterans to prison.

Do you see similarities between veterans who experienced trauma in war zones and prisoners in terms of coping with PTSD?

Without a doubt. Incarceration syndrome, a term I think I coined some years back, presents itself identically to PTSD even though prisons and the military seem worlds apart. They actually share common ground: the emotional stressors both situations produce on the psyche.

How is being in prison like being in combat?

In prison you’re on edge 24/7. You never know what is around the next corner. You can be rolled up and placed in administrative segregation at any moment with no cause, or maybe you offended someone, so he and his friends lie in wait to beat you down. In many ways prison is more dangerous than combat. In combat, when the patrol is over you have the relative safety of base camp. Prison is a free-for-all any time and any place. San Quentin State Prison is unique—it is safer, but I have seen many men become complacent and bam—“gone transferred got caught slippin.”

What are some specific benefits you have seen for the veterans in your group thus far?

For yourself?

The vets in this group are like seeds that have been buried in the ground for millennia. Now, for the first time, they have water, and are un-burdening themselves of emotional baggage they may have carried from childhood. Then in adult life, there is the trauma associated with combat, and they get to peel away the layers of trauma with clarity and passion. There's the growth related to emotional intelligence, spirituality, broadening their compassion and empathy for others, and for themselves. For me, I created this program because I felt with my level of combat-related trauma this type of program would work for me. With the help of people like James Fox, Lt. Col USMC Ret. Sunny Campbell, Brent MacKinnon, and Jacques Verduin (<http://www.insight-out.org/>), VHV-FTIO was created.

What is it that your program has to offer veterans outside prison?

Trauma came long before combat-related trauma for most of these men and women. You would be surprised at how much luggage is being left by the curbside: What comes with identifying the original trauma in one's life is an understanding of how a current trauma is affecting the individual right now. The big difference is that we address all traumas one accumulates over a lifetime, so, oddly, in many ways a prison creates a safe haven for combat veterans. The perception of prison is that it is a dangerous place. Walking into a prison is like walking into enemy territory. Every veteran I have worked with has said they immediately felt at home walking into prison, a place perceived to be violent; this perception is what opens the veteran to healing. Feeling calm is an abnormal feeling to get from combat. However, after combat when a veteran is in the safety of their home, they feel uneasy and out of place. When they visit the prison, a place where the perception of violence is implied, they feel at ease, normalcy in an abnormal situation, and they open up to us and leave just a little less burdened than when they arrived. Brent MacKinnon, a Vietnam War veteran, stated, "I am a 30-year veteran of veteran groups; I have never experienced anything as magical as what is happening in this group."

Do you find the programs at San Quentin Prison unique in being able to offer yoga and other inmate rehabilitation classes?

Yes. There are 33 prisons in California. Yoga on a regular basis only occurs at San Quentin, as far as I know, although it may happen at two or three others. A program like VHV-FTIO, where veterans from outside the walls of the prison actually come to the prison and participate in healing with incarcerated veterans, does not occur in any other California prison. We have expanded our program to include yoga, yoga nidra meditation, mentorship training, and we require participation in the Prison University Project's AA program.

What are some of your ideas about or hopes for the future of service yoga in America for veterans in and out of prison in the next decade?

My mission is to implement a policy shift within the military that mandates participation in the VHV-FTIO program before discharge from any active duty component. A period of decompression and re-socialization before returning to society after active duty is needed. The program we've created will provide that by offering yoga to address healing the trauma related to combat.

Yoga is one tool that needs to be in the toolbox. It allows the body to let go of things the mind has chosen to ignore. If the body is in pain, it provides a distraction, a reason, if you will, for the mind to not face the traumas that are lingering in the shadows of a veteran's psyche. If the body is healing through yoga and meditation, the mind also can heal.

How can your program expand both in San Quentin and for veterans outside?

Our program is expanding. We started with stress reduction and a PTSD recognition curriculum less than a year ago. We've added yoga, and soon yoga nidra, thanks to James Fox and his Prison Yoga Project's

Incarcerated Veterans Program. Additionally, we have California Association of Alcoholism and Drug Abuse counselors working one-on-one with those who need that service. VHV-FTIO also started a mentorship training program taught by veteran Brent MacKinnon. As long as people like you show genuine interest and are willing to support programs like this one, the healing will continue. We need to remove the stigma that some veterans feel when they ask for help in coping with physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional wounds that are such a big part of military service.

I would like to see the materials used in the yoga program and the curriculum used in the stress reduction and PTSD programs translated into Hebrew and adapted for use by the Israeli Defense Forces. And I believe this program would also benefit veterans of other U.S. allies such as Great Britain.

Ann Richardson Stevens—Yoga: Inspired to Serve Our Troops



This is an interview with Ann Richardson Stevens, who began teaching yoga to active-duty service members prior to 9/11 at all of the major bases in the Hampton Roads area of Virginia Beach, VA. Most of her students were strong and able; occasionally, she worked with students who had injuries. She still trains some of the men and women who began with her then. Founder of the Studio Bamboo Institute of Yoga, she now works with wounded, ill, and injured United States Marines. She travels extensively as an instructor for Special Warfare working with both able-bodied and injured men and women. Posted: 02/26/2013 5:27 pm on www.huffingtonpost.com.

Rob: What originally motivated you to do this work, and what continues to motivate you? How, if at all, has that motivation changed over time?

My original motivation was simply to share the ease I gained in my own body from practicing yoga. Now I see the same benefits working in my students' bodies. Some of these men and women have lost touch with their own bodies. I want them to feel again, relax, and to find peace.

Is there a standout moment from your work with veterans and service members?

Absolutely! Last year I had a young man who had been hit by an I.E.D; most of his ankle has been remade. Once someone is injured like that, he or she is forever changed. On one particular day, the guys were sitting up after final rest. The soldier who had been hit looked at me and said, "Something is wrong." That is the last thing any teacher wants to hear after a class! I got him some water and had him sit for a moment longer. Mind you, he looked fine. We got up and walked to the waiting area where he put his shoes on and then slowly, as if he was on a cloud, walked out. I'm thinking, "What in the world just happened?" He sat in the van he had arrived in, and had a huge smile across his face. He then came back into the studio and said, "I figured it out!" His comment was "I have not been this relaxed since before my accident." That was my moment, and why I keep doing this work.

What did you know about the population you are working with, before you began teaching? What were some of the assumptions you had about this population and how, if any, have those assumptions changed?

I live in a military town. We see the news about the many lives we have lost in the recent wars. What we don't see often is the figure of the 48,000 men and women who have been physically injured in the recent military conflicts. We're also seeing men and women physically injured and also living with the invisible wounds of war, like post-traumatic stress and major depression from WWII, Vietnam, and Desert

Storm. I thought that some of these men and women would be frail and broken. That was a huge assumption. In actuality, these are some of the strongest and most motivated people I've ever worked with.

What are two distinct ways that your teaching style differs from the way you might teach in a studio and what are the reasons for these differences?

I'm not as soft-spoken in these classes. I joke a little more. And allow the students to joke with me—it makes them feel at ease. Yes, I'm in there as a yoga therapist, but I surely don't come across that way. They wouldn't respond as well as they do, if I did. I don't concentrate on the breath; I simply ask, "Are you breathing?" Safety is a key concern for both the student and me. In a traditional class I'm a hands-on instructor. In these adaptive classes I have to be super careful.

What has been the greatest challenge in your teaching experience, and what tools have you developed for addressing that challenge?

I like to have a plan in my head as to how the class will unfold, all the time. I've realized that "my plan" isn't necessarily going to work. I've had to be flexible with my ideas and be ready at any moment to try something else. My classes have a wide variety of physical challenges because I have students in wheelchairs, leg braces, paralysis, spinal injuries, arthritis, and traumatic brain injuries. These challenges have made me more present than ever and ready to make changes in the class at any moment. Instructors working in this field have to be creative, because traditional patterns and flows simply don't reliably work.

What advice would you give to anyone who is going to teach in the population that you work with?

First and foremost, be present, be "in it" with the students, "it" being the experience. Second, don't treat these amazing people as if they are broken; they are not. They don't want you to pity them. They want to be treated like you and me. Third, learn how to be creative, and fast!

What are some of your ideas about or hopes for the future of "service yoga" in America in the next decade?

What doctors are finally realizing is that traditional medicine isn't working for every "body." We are going to see yoga and meditation—as well as other modalities—being used to address many issues that are now being medicated. The medical field is slowly coming around, encouraging alternative practices for patients to complement their ongoing treatment. We are going to see more and more of this in the years to come, which to me is very hopeful.

How has this work changed your definition of service? Your definition of yoga? Your practice?

I once watched the movie *The Way of the Peaceful Warrior*, and a character in it said, "Service, there is no higher honor." I believe this to be true. I'm giving back to this population who gave/gives so selflessly to us!

My definition of yoga is simply to be present in each and every moment. It took time to get to this place, and at times I have to be reminded that it's all practice. My students inspire my practice each and every day. I'm always grateful to be on my mat, to have the opportunity for experience, and above all finding joy!

What other organizations do you admire?

I'm honored to be a part of two extraordinary foundations: the Give Back Yoga Foundation and the Exalted Warrior Foundation. Both are doing remarkable work in the world! Locally, we just founded an organization called Om Town Heroes.

Marc Titus—Yoga For Veterans: Yoga Festival Owners Making A Difference

Posted on givebackyoga.org.

This is an interview with Marc Titus, co-founder with Heather Sheree Titus of the Sedona Yoga Festival in Arizona. I first met Marc when he approached the Give Back Yoga Foundation to train hundreds of professional yoga teachers before a festival to share yoga with our nation's veterans. With the suicide rate among veterans at an all-time high, sharing yoga with these men and women was something Marc and Heather believed would be a gift for everyone.



Rob: What originally motivated you to start a yoga festival?

I became a yoga teacher in Sedona in 2007. Even after that, though, I had to go down a personally torturous road, involving finding a way to transcend and heal from a very materialistically-lived life, and moves to and from Sedona. Finally, while I was living in Los Angeles in the winter of 2011/12, on an especially hard day, with literally the last dollar to my name in my pocket, the spirit of Sedona appeared to me, and said, "It's time to return to Sedona...to begin the yoga festival." I didn't know how I would get back, how I would pay for it, or how it would unfold, but I said YES! Within two weeks, I was sleeping in Sedona in a beautiful house under a full moon, with money in my pocket, all my stuff with me, and a new and profound sense of purpose.

What motivated you to partner with a non-profit organization for this year's yoga festival, and to focus on introducing therapeutic yoga for veterans?

I'd been reflecting on my relationship with my father, who was a Vietnam War veteran affected by PTSD. It was like a lightning bolt that came to me: we can use the energy of the yoga festival to bring awareness to an ever-growing problem in our country. We can help returning veterans with mental health recovery and rehabilitation tools that are inexpensive, and can help relieve the symptoms of stress-related physical and non-physical injuries. This approach would also promote community collaboration. As you know, Rob, the situation is very real, with several thousands of veterans returning with PTSD, depression, anxiety, etc. I feel one solution our community can offer is simple: yoga, right now, brings about and supports inner peace.

I'm interested to know what do you see as outcomes?

My friend Chris Courtney, an Iraq War combat veteran and yoga teacher, once said to me, "heal our veterans, heal our communities." We are all affected by the return of so many veterans with trauma, and part of the solution is where and how we direct our attention. Therefore, at the Sedona Yoga Festival 2014 we envision over 200 teachers receiving the Mindful Therapeutic Yoga Practices for Veterans training. We hope to support them with Yoga For Veterans Toolkits, in collaboration with the Give Back Yoga Foundation. And we hope these teachers will return to their communities prepared to serve our veterans and their spouses. If every teacher we train aims to serve 50 veterans in his or her local community, together we would provide 10,000+ veterans with useful tools. These will help them overcome the debilitating and often severe symptoms PTSD, TBI, and the other myriad experiences that are making life incredibly difficult for returning veterans, their families, and their communities. Those are possibly real outcomes. We simply cannot solve the problem in the same way it was created. We need to step out of the energy of old, into a model of Giving Back—dharma, service in action.

How do you maintain a mindful corporation, and emphasize “compassionate action” in dealing with festival partners?

I think it's hard to run a “conscious business” with all that is going on in the world today. The accouterments of our modern world, while purporting to be “helpful,” have actually created a situation in which we are always doing something, always needing to do more, always striving. There is a lot of pressure to keep moving, to grow, etc. As an antidote, I try to be present to what's happening right now, to life itself flowing through me, to you, to all of us right now. The more I embodied this, the easier things got, and the more mindful, awake, and aware I've become. As a result of a consistent and dedicated asana practice that completely stilled my overactive “monkey mind,” I've come to see that it all unfolds without my effort, and that if I am “to be” compassionate in collaborations with business partners, then I must learn to be compassionate with myself first.

What advice would you give other festival owners?

Maintain your connection to, and listen only to your inner voice, to your visions and dreams. Through your practice cultivate an intimacy with yourself that allows you to trust this voice, and follow it wherever it takes you: walk your own path. Be an advocate for dharma, service in action.

What are some of your ideas about, or hopes for, the future of yoga in America in the next decade?

I see yoga “doing” what it has always done, assisting humanity in letting go of all the trappings that prevent the inevitable, or consciousness expanding infinitely. I believe yoga will continue to evolve, back to its own roots, right here in the west, as the masses of Western yogis realize what traditional yoga is all about. I believe we will see an expansion of “giving back” in the very near future, as we realize that we are all the same. In that individuated sameness, will come over 7 billion solutions to the one “problem” of separation. When that happens, the world will be a totally different place.

Lisa Wimberger—Yoga: How We Serve First Responders

This is an interview with Lisa Wimberger, who began serving first responders in 2007 teaching mindfulness Neurosculpting® trainings at national law enforcement agencies. Over 700 police officers have been trained in the Denver metropolitan region alone. She opened a private practice in 2007 with civilian and law enforcement personnel. She went on to create the Neurosculpting® Institute in 2012 to serve civilians and private law enforcement personnel. Posted: 09/11/2012 1:11 pm. on www.huffingtonpost.com.



Rob: What originally motivated you to do this work and what continues to motivate you? How, if at all, has that motivation changed over time?

Personal family history and personal trauma have been my motivation. I was asked some years ago to work with my young cousin, who was 14 at the time. His father, a member of the NYPD, was suffering a typical officer-PTSD cycle. The son was also suffering; he was diagnosed with clinical depression at 14! I began teaching him techniques that had worked so well with my own trauma. I suddenly realized that he may never have needed my help if I had helped his father. I began to put all of my efforts into going directly to first responders. My experience with my own life-and-death trauma gave me a great platform and confidence with these techniques, as I've had to use them as my own lifeline.

What happened to you?

At age 15, the same summer I was hit by lightning, I began having black-out spells that left me unconscious and confused, which increased in severity as years went by. It wasn't until I was 31 and flatlined in a doctor's office, waking up to a needle of atropine poised above my heart, that I received a diagnosis; it turned out I was having extreme vasovagal responses to fear and stress. My vagus nerve would shut down my heart and brain stem during heightened moments of fear, causing me to seizure and actually flatline. Resuscitation was usually automatic, but the older I got, the harder it was. Neurosculpting® practice was a lifeline during recuperation from these attacks. Using these techniques I was eventually able to rewrite my nervous system's response to fear.

Is there a standout moment from your work with police officers? With other law enforcement agency members?

The International Law Enforcement Educators and Trainers Association (ILEETA) conferences have been very validating. Last year I got to train FBI, Secret Service, Homeland Security, and some military personnel. My sessions were standing-room-only. Afterwards, an emotional FBI agent told me that a few years back he had lost his own son in the line of duty. He hadn't known how to cope with that. He said that during the first meditation in my training he found some relief from that pain for the first time, and that he believed these techniques were the first to help him begin his own healing.

What did you know about the population you are working with, before you began teaching? What were some of the assumptions you had about this population and how, if any, have those assumptions changed?

I had experience growing up watching family members and friends in the law enforcement. I researched the industry before I began offering my training by calling many agencies and asking about their approach to wellness, their resources, their trainings, and their opinions. I read books and looked at stats as well. My assumptions were that officers would be skeptical, tough, and closed. In some cases this is true, but over the last five years I've discovered that more of them are craving change and healing, and many are open to help, and are willing to heal themselves.

What are two distinct ways that your teaching style differs from the way you might teach in a studio and what are the reasons for these differences?

I use completely physiological language and dive into the brain and hormonal underpinnings of stress with the officers. There's little room to refute biology and neurology. In the civilian classroom I sometimes rely more on anecdote or personal experience to convey information.

What has been the greatest challenge in your teaching experience and what tools have you developed for addressing that challenge?

The greatest challenge has been getting in the door and convincing law enforcement agencies that their budget will be well-used if they offer this training. Once I'm in, I usually expect a quiet group who wear perfect poker faces. I've learned not to assume a flat affect means they are not connecting to the information. My anonymous feedback forms at the end of each training show the true results. Over 75 percent of all the officers in each training note they find great value in the techniques.

What advice would you give to anyone who is going to teach law enforcement agencies that you work with?

To be a practitioner of the techniques so you can teach from integrity and seniority, otherwise the audience will sense weakness, and there will be no way to connect.

What are some of your ideas about or hopes for the future of “service yoga” in America in the next decade?

I hope to see every agency in this country mandating wellness programs that include Neurosculpting® and yoga, food and diet courses, and life-style balance trainings.

How has this work changed your definition of service?

It hasn't changed it. It has completely defined it. I didn't really know what service was until I stepped in front of a room full of individuals in pain who saw no way out.

What other organizations do you admire?

I admire Badge of Life, Safe Call Now, CopsAlive and any other organization that tirelessly gives back to the men and women we expect to serve us.

Paul Zipes—Yoga: A Veteran's Way to Serve Veterans

This is an interview with Paul Zipes, who started practicing 17 years ago in response to a dare from his wife. He tried following a Bryan Kest Power Yoga video tape and was sore for days. It was much harder than he expected. He started teaching years ago and founded his organization, Yoga For Vets, five years ago. Posted 11/02/2012 9:22 pm on www.huffingtonpost.com



Rob: What originally motivated you to do this work and what continues to motivate you? How, if at all, has that motivation changed over time?

I started Yoga For Vets to send a clear message to our combat vets—“Welcome Home” —and to make sure they know that the yoga community cares. Yoga For Vets now has over 500 locations listed around the United States that offer four or more free yoga classes to any combat vet. Unfortunately, some problems vets encounter after returning from war haven't changed yet. I still read reports about over-medicated combat vets, suicides among active duty and reserve soldiers, and misunderstood vets. So, my motivation hasn't changed much over time, it is still very much all about the vets.

Is there a standout moment from your work with veterans?

It was when a local vet told me after his first yoga class that he'd had the best night's sleep in years.

What were some of the assumptions you had about this population and how, if at all, have those assumptions changed?

I am a military vet so when I first started teaching vets, the only assumption I had was that they were going to laugh if I chanted, used woohoo, flowery language, or mentioned a chakra. Since then, the military culture has changed a bit and yoga has become more accepted. Now I might chant a little but I still try to make yoga as relatable as possible to the military culture, so I try to quickly emphasize breath, muscles, and mind: three things all vets can relate to.

What has been the greatest challenge in your teaching experience and what tools have you developed for addressing that challenge?

My greatest challenge is getting the word out that Yoga For Vets offers free yoga for combat vets. Facebook is helpful, so is talking to spouses and friends of vets. Getting someone who knows yoga to tell a vet to try it is the greatest tool, especially if a vet tells another vet.

What advice would you give to anyone who is going to teach veterans and active duty service members that you work with?

I tell them to be aware that not every vet will benefit from yoga or like it. This is hard for some yoga teachers to accept, but it's true. Teach because you care; realize that if you've never been in combat you won't be able to relate to being in a combat zone, so don't try. What teachers should do is be present, do your best and everything will turn out the way it was meant to.

How do you make money if you are offering so many free classes to veterans?

The vets that take classes at my studio sometimes pay for more classes after the initial four free, others never return. The offer was never intended to make a ROI.

What are some of your ideas about or hopes for the future of “service yoga” in America in the next decade?

My hope is that all teacher training programs will make service a mandatory requirement to graduate. Yoga For Vets is a good place to look for examples of teachers who embrace service yoga. If a requirement to serve others was established in teacher training, of course I would like the service to be related to our vets, but a close second would be in senior citizens' homes. These areas are far removed from most yoga teachers' initial skill sets, but still very much related to yoga. I think four hours of service as a graduation requirement is a good minimum because it will give the future teacher a taste of what service is about.

How has this work changed your definition of service? Your definition of yoga? Your practice?

This work hasn't changed my definition of service. Service is service; just do it. My definition of yoga is a practice or activity that is healthy and fun; no matter what the style or program you are teaching, this should always be true. My practice includes meditation and a short yoga practice seven days a week or as often as possible.

What other organizations do you admire?

There and Back Again, Exalted Warrior, Give Back Yoga Foundation and Warriors At Ease.



AWAKEN. TRANSFORM. GIVE BACK.

Give Back Yoga Foundation believes in making yoga available to those who might not otherwise have the opportunity to experience the transformational benefits of this powerful practice. We do this by supporting and funding certified yoga teachers in all traditions to offer the teachings of yoga to under-served and under-resourced socioeconomic segments of the community and inspire grassroots social change and community cooperation.

www.givebackyoga.org