

G.M.
Tuesday, May 21/19

A12 | NEWS



LIFE & ARTS

PARENTI



A 2018 Swedish study that evaluated the mental-health profile of approximately 150 inmates found that yoga helped reduce psychological distress and difficulty in making decisions. ROBERT STURMAN

What happens when you bring yoga to prisons?

Research suggests the meditative practice could aid a population often dealing with mental-health issues

STEPHEN COOK

Hot yoga, prenatal yoga, yoga in the park: Since coming to the West, the increasingly popular practice of yoga has taken a kaleidoscopic number of forms. Now a new training course in Vancouver is helping it flourish in another arena: prisons.

The course, which takes place next month, will train instructors in trauma-informed yoga in an effort to bring the practice to the Canadian penitentiary system. An increasing body of research suggests the meditative practice could benefit a population often dealing with mental-health issues. Nine people have so far registered for the teach-the-teacher course.

The course will be led by James Fox, a California-based instructor who started teaching yoga in 2002 at San Quentin State Prison near San Francisco. After it helped him deal with his own anger issues and self-control, a desire to be of service motivated Fox to take the practice where he felt it was needed.

"I thought, there's certainly a lot of men who, if they really understood how much value yoga could provide them, they would be engaged with it," Fox said.

In 2010, Fox founded the Prison Yoga Project, which mails out a free yoga book he wrote for prisoners and acts as a central hub for autonomous chapters operating out of 300 prisons in 28 states. The yoga Fox teaches focuses on mindfulness, which involves clearing the mind of preoccupations to calmly concentrate on the present moment.

"The real goal is, okay, you learn [mindfulness] while we practise yoga, but how do you

take it into your life? That's where the rubber meets the road."

At the end of a course, Fox gives inmate participants a questionnaire to fill out. He said he often hears inmates say they feel more peace of mind as well as relief from chronic pain and stress.

"I didn't know what I was going to get into," Clint Martin, imprisoned for first-degree murder and since released, says in an interview posted to the Prison Yoga Project's YouTube channel. He espouses the breathing techniques that bring calm during stressful situations. "Cause in prison there's a lot of stressful situations."

Fox has in recent years adapted his methodology to a trauma-informed approach adapted from research like that of the Trauma Center at the Justice Resource Institute in Boston.

Its director, David Emerson, helped pioneer "trauma-sensitive" yoga, aimed at helping those living with complex trauma and PTSD to reconnect with their body and rebuild their capacity for intimacy. Some of its tenets include a lack of bodily contact, a focus on participants' ability to choose how they approach poses and the use of invitational as opposed to directional language.

"Those components ... are very intentionally therapeutic, if you like," he said.

Dr. Alexander Simpson, who has written on mental health in prison inmates and is chief of forensic psychiatry at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, said people with mental-health issues are overrepresented in custody, and in remand centres often go unaddressed and undetected. For more long-term sentences, more integrative programming that addresses mental-health needs is required.

"Because if you're in person with mental-health problems, your ability to access rehabilitation is often poor."

Simpson also noted that there is a building body of evidence to suggest yoga is helpful not only for persons with mental-health

issues but also those struggling with anxiety, depression and alcoholism.

While not directly targeted at those with identified mental-health problems, research has shown the benefits of yoga in prison populations.

A 2018 Swedish study that evaluated the mental-health profile of approximately 150 inmates placed participants into two groups: one that got a weekly 90-minute yoga class and one that got 90 minutes of free-choice physical exercise. After 10 weeks of observation, the researchers found yoga was effective for reducing psychological distress, specifically suspicious and fearful thoughts about losing autonomy; trouble concentrating; obsessive thoughts; and difficulty in making decisions.

In a similar study at Oxford University in 2013, researchers concluded yoga could be effective in improving well-being and mental health in prisoners.

It's not the first time the concept has been brought to the Canadian penitentiary system. About 15 years ago, Catholic nun Elaine MacInnes founded Freeing the Human Spirit, a charity aimed at healing inmates across Canada through a combination of hatha yoga and zen meditation. But with MacInnes's retirement several years ago, the organization contracted in size and scope.

"It kind of died a death," said recently appointed president Richard Boadway, resulting in many prison instructors losing contact with the "central hub." He is now looking to reconnect with old instructors and provide them with insurance, as well as find new donors.

Boadway himself has been teaching courses out of three Ontario prisons for the past two years. He said there are sometimes delays and difficulties navigating the prison bureaucracy but the inmates themselves have been receptive.

"I see a genuine enthusiasm for our presence and tangible benefits delivered by that," he said.