

Perspective

Exploring the Benefit of Yoga Programs in Carceral Settings

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Abstract

This article presents a perspective on the value of yoga and mindfulness programming in carceral settings. The authors explore this topic through interviews with two formerly incarcerated people who participated in yoga programming while incarcerated and who went on to become yoga instructors themselves. Also examined are the potential effects of yoga programming for people who are incarcerated, for those working within carceral settings, and on carceral environments generally. We share recommendations for implementing yoga programming in carceral institutions and discuss policy implications. The stories of both interviewees reflect the value and potential positive effects of yoga programming within criminal justice settings and suggest the need for sustained programming and ongoing empirical evaluation. Rousseau & Horton. *Int J Yoga Therapy* 2020(30). doi: 10.17761/2020-D-19-00039.

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Alan Calkins does not fit the magazine-cover image of an avid yoga practitioner. Self-described as “heavily tattooed and not slight of build,” Alan was first introduced to yoga while incarcerated in the Community Transition Center (CTC), a substance abuse treatment facility operated by the Sheriff’s Office Department of Corrections, in Jacksonville, Florida. Three years postrelease, Alan is now employed as a yoga instructor with Yoga 4 Change, the nonprofit responsible for the CTC yoga program.

Alan believes the life skills he developed through yoga have been key to his past 4 years of sobriety. “I started getting high on drugs, alcohol and violence when I was 15 years old, and I didn’t get clean until I was 37,” he recounted. In and out of rehab since age 15, he had not previously managed to remain substance-free for more than 8 months. Now, he is helping others with their recovery process: “My 12-step sponsor started practicing yoga after he saw what it does for me, after I was released . . . I’ve shared it with a lot

of people. A couple of the guys I sponsor are into it now.”

As Alan’s story attests, not all yogis fit the popular-media image of young women performing complex poses. Such misconceptions should not obscure the fact that yoga—here defined as a practice that integrates physical movement, breathwork, focused attention, and deep relaxation—offers a wide range of physical, psychological, emotional, and behavioral benefits. For many, it is also an opportunity to engage with a secular, nondoctrinal spiritual practice that is compatible with all faiths or none.

Yoga can be adapted to meet the needs of different populations, including people who are incarcerated or otherwise involved in the criminal justice system. Doing so effectively, however, requires specialized knowledge and expertise. This article shares our perspective as an author and editor, respectively, of the Yoga Service Council’s *Best Practices for Yoga in the Criminal Justice System*, a text written to help yoga providers and criminal justice professionals navigate offering yoga in carceral settings.

This article shares considerations for yoga in criminal justice settings. Our discussion is rooted in both empirical data and first-hand experience, including interviews with Alan Calkins and Lynne S., who participated in Trauma-Informed Yoga programs while incarcerated. We offer yoga as a potentially beneficial adjunctive tool for carceral settings, stressing the importance of well-designed and well-implemented programming that is accessible, inclusive, and trauma-informed.

Growing Acceptance

Prior to 2000, few yoga classes were taught in the criminal justice system; those provided typically focused heavily on traditional yoga philosophy. More recently, providers dedicated to offering a more secular, psychophysiological, therapeutic approach have emerged. At the same time, more researchers and clinicians have come to see yoga as a valuable adjunctive therapy for trauma, recovery from addiction, and other issues that heavily impact criminal justice processes and outcomes.

As of 2017, it was estimated that approximately 250–300 U.S. jails, prisons, and court-ordered rehabilitation programs incorporated yoga classes taught by outside program providers.¹ Most classes were in state and county facilities located on the east or west coasts; a few were in federal institutions. An additional 50–75 offered classes taught by people who were currently incarcerated themselves. In a few cases, classes were taught by instructors who learned yoga while incarcerated and after release sought to extend the same benefits they received to others.

Given the growth of yoga in the U.S. criminal justice system and the many potential benefits it offers, it is important that correctional officers, institutional administrators, and other criminal justice professionals develop some understanding of what types of programs are appropriate for this setting. Yoga is an unregulated and nonstandardized field, and a wide range of practices are included under the umbrella term *yoga*, not all of which would be appropriate or even safe in a criminal justice context. Potential problems include physical injuries caused by an overly strenuous practice and psychological upset caused by teaching that is not trauma-informed, accessible, or inclusive.

Understanding How Yoga Helps

People who are unfamiliar with or new to yoga tend to think of it as a purely physical practice focused on stretching. Of course, it is possible to pursue yoga simply as exercise or sport, and this is common in the current Western conceptualization of yoga, often termed *modern postural yoga*.² Traditionally, however, yoga has always been a holistic practice in which the mind plays a more fundamental role than the body.

This is not to suggest that the physical dimensions of yoga are not important; yoga can and should be adapted as necessary to help people at any level of physical ability gain strength, balance, and flexibility and reduce physical discomfort and pain. It is just as possible to teach yoga to athletic students as to those who need to practice seated in chairs. Either way, given a good instructor and appropriately adapted practice, there is no question that yoga is enormously beneficial to physical health. Yoga can and should be offered in a manner that is accessible to any body or ability.

It is the integration of the physical side of yoga with its subtler mental, emotional, behavioral, and spiritual dimensions that enables many people to experience it as a deeply healing, perhaps even transformational, practice. Therapeutic, trauma-informed yoga instruction teaches students how to work with movement, breath, and attention in ways that help to regulate the nervous system, calm the mind, process challenging emotions, and connect people to a sense of their deeper and better selves.

This may sound overly abstract and lofty, but it translates into concrete, practical skills that have tremendous consequences for everyday life. As Alan explained:

One of the biggest things that I learned on my mat is that I don't have to react to discomfort. Whether that discomfort is physical, emotional, a craving to get high, or a desire to physically attack someone, I'm able to sit in that feeling for a few more breaths, and take a more objective look at what's going on in my mind and in my emotions without having to act on it.

This ability to create space before reacting to events and to choose a more considered response is familiar to all serious students of yoga as a skill that grows with practice. As Alan explained, this seemingly simple but challenging skill can prove invaluable: “That in itself has saved my life on more than one occasion. And I would venture to say [has] saved other people from harm at least once.”

Lynne S., a 52-year-old woman who learned yoga while serving time in a Massachusetts correctional facility, reported similar benefits:

One of the most important things I learned was how to take a moment to breathe, reflect, and remain calm when I have strong feelings—while knowing that it's okay to feel whatever I feel. I don't have to justify or explain my feelings to anyone. They're my feelings, and it's OK. I can work through them. And that's what's really important.

Lynne participated in the Trauma-Informed Mind Body (TIMBo) program developed by the nonprofit organization yogaHOPE while at MCI-Framingham and went on to be trained as a facilitator during the time she was incarcerated.

Developing a capacity to experience challenging emotions without being overwhelmed by them, remaining calm in the knowledge that it is possible to process and work through emotional responses, is an invaluable life skill that can be developed through an appropriately designed yoga practice. “I've learned that I can actually remain calm,” Lynne explained. “Not to say that I never fly off the handle anymore! But I'm a lot calmer than I have been in the past.” Over time, this process of learning how to take care of herself emotionally has enabled Lynne to develop “better self-understanding” overall.

Enhanced self-regulation and self-knowledge contribute to positive life choices and opportunities. Today, after 16 years of incarceration, Lynne is employed as a division manager for a nonprofit organization in addition to working as a hairdresser part-time. Although these achievements are hers alone, Lynne is clear that the skills she

learned through TIMBo (which combined yoga with meditation and facilitated group discussion) have been central to her sense of enhanced self-efficacy while navigating the challenges of postrelease life.

Benefits for Participants

Research to date supports the validity of yoga as adjunctive programming in diverse settings. People who practice yoga experienced less anxiety and depression and fewer symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder.³⁻⁶ Distinct improvements in mental health and well-being, including increased self-esteem, compassion, self-awareness, and feelings of hope, have been noted.⁷⁻¹⁰ Additionally, there is specific evidence to suggest that individuals who are incarcerated benefit from yoga and mindfulness-based programming. Studies exploring the effect of yoga programming in correctional settings affirm that yoga can help incarcerated people with mood, anxiety, substance use, stress, impulsivity, aggression, and a wide range of physiological concerns. Yoga was shown to improve mental, physical, and spiritual well-being and to increase hope and connection.⁷⁻²² Those who participated in yoga programming experienced reduced stress, better emotional regulation, improved anger management, and increased impulse control.¹⁹ A study of yoga programming for men incarcerated in North Carolina demonstrated significantly reduced reincarceration rates for those who had attended at least four yoga classes.¹⁵ Compared with other mental health interventions, in carceral settings, yoga is typically more cost-effective and the positive effects are more persistent.²²

An evaluation of the Yoga 4 Change curriculum for incarcerated individuals, the program in which Alan participated, demonstrated significant increases in coping, anger management, emotional awareness, emotional regulation, self-compassion, forgiveness, and sleep for curriculum participants. Participants experienced a significant increase in access to positive coping tools and a decrease in anxiety. This 6-week theme-based curriculum resulted in multiple quantitative and qualitative improvements in well-being for participants.²³

Alan reported that it was much easier for him to connect meaningfully with teachings on principles such as honesty and accountability when they were integrated into yoga classes. For example, one unit in the Yoga 4 Change curriculum focuses on courage. “It’s one thing to sit and talk about courage, or read stories and write about it,” he reflected. “It’s another when you’re practicing a pose like crow, where you could fall on your face any second. Having to put the principle into practice physically while it’s being discussed was much more effective.”

Benefits for Correctional Employees

Well-designed yoga programs can offer distinct and important benefits to corrections officers and other criminal justice professionals. When feasible, offering free classes to officers and other staff is highly recommended. It is widely acknowledged that employment in a correctional facility is both stressful and dangerous. Research indicates that correctional officers have 39% higher suicide rates than people in other professions, as well as reduced life expectancy linked to stress-related conditions such as high blood pressure, heart attacks, and ulcers.²⁴ Although they are able to leave at the end of a shift, those employed in correctional facilities spend a significant amount of time in an environment that can be both traumatizing and retraumatizing, often without effective tools to manage the effects of vicarious trauma.

Research shows yoga to be exceptionally effective at reducing the negative effects of stress, which is vitally important to both physical and psychological health. Particularly when chronic, stress can negatively affect all of the body’s physiological systems (cardiovascular, respiratory, gastrointestinal, endocrine, immune, musculoskeletal, etc.), as well as mental health and emotional resilience. Regular yoga practice reduces symptoms of anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress, as well as heart rate and systolic blood pressure. In the process, it increases overall physical fitness, flexibility, balance, and endurance.²⁵

Institutional Effects

Yoga offers tools to assist in self-regulation, which can serve to de-escalate situations that may arise in institutions. Holding regular classes for people who are incarcerated can improve the correctional environment and working conditions for correctional staff. Based on his own experience of incarceration, Alan believes that offering yoga to people who are incarcerated is beneficial to officers because “it will cut down on violence.” Giving incarcerated people “a chance to move and breathe” while being guided through yoga sequences activates a parasympathetic nervous system response. As Alan described, this enables them to take themselves out of fight-or-flight mode. He went on to note,

That’s going to be safer for everyone, other inmates and staff both. Guys are not likely to be as reactive or as violent. And that mindset and attitude can travel throughout the rest of the population as well, even to the people who aren’t going to yoga classes.

Implementing Yoga Programming

There are many benefits to introducing yoga programming into the correctional environment. At the same time, it is important to note that not all yoga is equal. Selection of a

yoga-based program should be intentional and guided by trauma-informed theory and practice. Our recommendations are rooted in our work in this field and with writing the Yoga Service Council's *Best Practices for Yoga in the Criminal Justice System*.

The Yoga Service Council is a collaborative community with a mission to maximize the effectiveness, sustainability, and impact of individuals and organizations working to make yoga and mindfulness practices accessible. Through a co-creative process, experts from the field, including yoga teachers, researchers, therapists, medical professionals, policymakers, and others in yoga service build best practice recommendations rooted in both experiential and empirical data. Resultant best practices support teaching yoga and mindfulness in ways that are safe, effective, inclusive, and, for the edition referenced, specifically tailored to criminal justice settings.

To minimize risk, we recommend that criminal justice professionals interested in establishing yoga programs in correctional facilities and other criminal justice settings insist that yoga instructors who are contracted to teach classes, whether on a paid or volunteer basis, meet the following minimum requirements.

1. **200-hour yoga teacher training** or the equivalent (e.g., a dedicated practice and teaching experience of many years' duration).
2. **Specialized training in Trauma-Informed Yoga** or the equivalent (e.g., professional experience as a social worker or therapist who works with trauma).
3. **Additional yoga training for specialized populations** that form a substantial part of the student body (e.g., carceral settings; youth; pre- and post-natal women; veterans; people with addictions, mental health issues, and/or physical disabilities).
4. **Relevant department of corrections–sponsored safety and security training.** Prospective yoga teachers should also be familiar with Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) provisions and complete a training on it if possible.

It is entirely appropriate to require yoga teachers who wish to work in the criminal justice system to have a higher level of training, experience, and maturity than is typically demanded by yoga studios or gyms. Given the nature of the environment, this is necessary to maximize the safety and security of all parties; to offer instruction that is as safe, effective, and therapeutic for students as possible; and to ensure an accessible, inclusive, trauma-informed approach. Although we offer general recommendations here, we also recommend that anyone interested in bringing yoga into a carceral setting seek further information, including resources such as *Best Practices for Yoga in the Criminal*

Justice System, current research in the field, population-specific Trauma-Informed Yoga training, and connection with other organizations doing this important work.

Policy Recommendations

A 2017 report on the value of therapeutic somatic practices for system-involved girls, published by Georgetown Law's Center on Poverty and Inequality, concluded that "unlike many interventions, the implementation of trauma-informed somatic programs is surprisingly cost-effective and highly sustainable."¹⁷ Although framed more broadly, the focus of that study was on Trauma-Informed Yoga programs working with girls in youth detention centers. Demonstrated positive effects of participation in these programs included: (1) improved self-regulation and other emotional development, (2) improved neurological and physical health, and (3) healthier relationships and parenting practices.

Given the low cost and high efficacy of Trauma-Informed Yoga programs in the youth justice system, researchers advocated for increased public and private funding to support the expansion of high-quality, sustainable programming: "We recommend consideration of state and county government support for these programs, as well as funding from private foundations."¹⁷ Such support is operative in some jurisdictions. For example, San Francisco County's juvenile hall yoga program and programs in San Mateo County are funded through a state block grant; the Linn County Juvenile Detention Center's yoga program is supported by the Greater Cedar Rapids Community Foundation in Iowa. Funding and infrastructure development could be supported by private foundations that maintain health and wellness portfolios, as well as by federal, state, and local funds dedicated to improving physical, mental, and behavioral health outcomes.¹⁷

An Idea Whose Time Has Come

Yoga alone cannot address the challenges confronting criminal justice professionals, nor can it transform the life circumstances of system-involved people. It can, however, play a critical role in supporting the physical and mental health—as well as the self-awareness, self-regulation, and positive empowerment—of those who practice it regularly. Such positive effects on people who are involved with or work in the criminal justice system ripple outward. This, in turn, supports new openings for creative synergies with other therapeutic interventions, organizational improvements, and system-level reforms.

Not long ago, the idea of offering yoga in the criminal justice system would have been a nonstarter. Even today, many people mistakenly believe that yoga is only for young,

physically able bodies. The deeply positive experiences of Alan Calkins, Lynne S., and countless other incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals, however, demonstrates the falsity and short-sightedness of such assumptions. Today, an increasing number of specialized teachers and organizations are adapting yoga to meet the particular needs of the criminal justice system. This emerging field has demonstrated its capacity to change lives for the better and to positively impact everyday work and life in correctional facilities and other criminal justice settings.

Based on experiential and empirical evidence to date, we suggest that further support for yoga programs in carceral settings and empirically sound program evaluation are warranted. For those interested in bringing yoga into carceral settings, either as yoga teachers or institutional administrators, we stress the importance of an intentional and informed approach. Empirically based curricula that model appropriate trauma-informed methods, such as those developed by Yoga 4 Change (www.y4c.org/incarcerated-individuals) and yogaHope's TIMBo (www.timbocollective.org/), are increasingly available. Yoga programming can be a complementary and cost-effective tool to support improved mental and physical well-being in carceral settings.

Conflict-of-Interest Statement and Disclosures

The authors declare no conflict of interest, including financial relationships with entities that could be perceived to influence the content of the submitted work. The authors declare no patents, copyrights, or royalties relevant to the submitted work.

This article draws from the book *Best Practices for Yoga in the Criminal Justice System*. Learn more about the book at <https://yogaservicecouncil.org/best-practices-for-yoga-in-the-criminal-justice-system>

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