Overview of Give Back Yoga

The Give Back Yoga Foundation, Inc. (“GBYF”), is a non-stock, non-profit corporation, incorporated in the State of Maryland and registered in Colorado and Maryland. GBYF supports and funds certified yoga teachers in all traditions to offer the teachings of yoga to under-served and under-resourced socio-economic segments of the community and inspire grassroots social change and community cooperation. GBYF’s federal income tax status is that of a 501(c)(3) charitable organization. Our motto is: “Awaken, Transform, & Give Back!”

Our Work with Veterans

The Give Back Yoga Foundation has helped create and distribute empirically-informed, clinically-tested multi-media resources for veterans, all of which have been distributed to, and widely used by VA hospital facilities, various Soldier and Family Assistance Centers, and wellness programs for wounded warriors across the country. One of these resources was developed by one of our board members, Suzanne Manafort. The course began as a once-a-week class several years ago and turned into the inspiration for Mindful Yoga Therapy for Veterans, a training program for yoga teachers and a model for yoga programs in VA Hospitals all over the country. Her program has incorporated a variety of yoga practices, including Asana, Pranayama, Meditation and Yoga Nidra. Feedback from Veterans in this and similar programs has been overwhelmingly favorable and research is confirming the benefits. Yoga Nidra is now recognized as a Tier I Integrative Medicine Modality (IMM) for working with chronic pain, and a Tier I IMM for working with PTSD in military settings. To date, we have sent over 10,000 practice “toolkits” to Veterans.

The toolkits include:

- **The Mindful Yoga Therapy Practice Guide** by Suzanne Manafort and Robin Gilmartin produced specifically for veterans coping with trauma.
- Suzanne Manafort’s “**Breathe In, Breathe Out: Breathing Practices to Help Balance the Nervous System.**” This CD contains a series of short breathing practices that are part of the Mindful Yoga Therapy Program. These Embodyoga® practices are offered and adapted by Suzanne Manafort for the Veterans at the PTSD Residential Rehabilitation Program (P R R P) in Newington, CT, as part of the Veterans Affairs Connecticut Healthcare System.
- **Deep Relaxation: Yoga Nidra with Patty Townsend**, a master teacher with a background of over 40 years in yoga and meditation.
- A **practice poster** that correlates with the sequences of postures explained in the book to provide an easy reference for veterans with pictures only.

In 2014, we are launching a 100-hour certification program for yoga teachers that provides an in-depth study and certification. The 100-Hour Mindful Yoga Therapy program covers the 12-week Resilience Program—the follow-up to the Beginning Mindful Yoga Therapy Program. Yoga practices are a powerful complement to professional treatment for Post Traumatic Stress. A mindful, embodied yoga practice can provide relief from symptoms and develop the supportive skills that Veterans need in their everyday lives. Yoga has proven to aid in a Veteran’s healing journey.
Dear Team Leader:

There is growing interest within the V.A. and in the Vet Centers around the country in complementary therapies for PTSD, particularly yoga practices and mindfulness.

I’m writing as a PTSD clinician to share my experience with Mindful Yoga Therapy for Veterans and its effectiveness in helping Veterans. I also want to explain how you may be able to offer this program at your Vet Center.

I recently retired from V.A. Connecticut having served 9 years of my career as clinical director of the PTSD Residential Rehabilitation Program. In 2006, an experienced yoga therapist volunteered to teach a weekly yoga class in our program. This evolved into Mindful Yoga Therapy for Veterans (MYT for Veterans).

Mindful Yoga Therapy for Veterans is:
- A non-profit project that has provided free yoga and meditation toolkits to 10,000 Veterans.
- Offered in 45 V.A.s across the country.
- A structured 12-week program developed through collaboration of an expert yoga therapist (Suzanne Manafort), PTSD clinicians, and Veterans.
- Used in outpatient, inpatient and residential treatment settings, military bases.
- An adjunct to evidence-based therapies for PTSD. (NOT a stand-alone therapy).
- Most often effective in helping Veterans improve sleep, concentration/focus and ability to manage daily stress.

Who Can Teach Mindful Yoga Therapy for Veterans? Certified yoga therapists complete between 20–100 hours of special training. They learn a Veteran-centric approach to teaching yoga, including simple mindfulness meditation, safe postures, breathing practices and a resting practice. Yoga therapists learn about trauma, military culture, PTSD symptoms, and some “dos and don’t.” Following training, they return to their “home studios” where they seek to partner with PTSD clinicians working with Veterans within a safe venue.

How Can We Offer Mindful Yoga Therapy for Veterans at Our Site? Contact the Give Back Yoga Foundation by emailing info@givebackyoga.org or calling 301.792.5352. They can connect you with trained yoga therapist in your area. The Give Back Yoga Foundation (the non-profit “home” of MYT for Veterans) will also provide free yoga and meditation materials (CDs, manuals and instructional posters).

Thanks for your time and for the important service you provide Veterans,

Robin M. Gilmartin, LCSW
Phone: 860.833.3368
Voices of Experience

This project is incredibly helpful to the Veterans because they can be guided in the breathing practices when they need them, any time of day or night. —Bobbi Blake, Coordinator of Complementary Therapies, VA CT Healthcare System

“I was introduced to yoga during my time at the (PRRP) PTSD Rehabilitation Residential Program in Newington, CT. Mindful Yoga Therapy has been incredibly helpful to me in coping with my post-traumatic stress. Yoga is like a gyro that brings me back into equilibrium when dealing with the effects of my disorder. The more I practice, the more my symptoms are mitigated. Yoga has helped to reduce my anxiety and has improved my ability to focus. I like the challenge of doing something that tests my abilities and rewards me with observable progress, which keeps me motivated. I think of Yoga as survival training for the veteran’s mind, body, and soul.” —Paul, Vietnam War Veteran

“Yoga has helped my racing mind stop racing.” —Heather, Iraqi War Veteran

“Yoga Nidra helps me access the true Me.” —Diane, Saigon ’70

I am a Iraq war Veteran who works as a Peer Support Specialist. Also, I suffer from PTSD, anxiety, panic attacks and I have a mild TBI. Before working here in December 2012, I found your website and received the Mindful Yoga Therapy for Veterans Recovering from Trauma book w/cds. That book helped me deal with my symptoms and I found out that I like to do yoga and meditation, two things I never thought I would do.

Now that I work here at the VA, I’m trying to help my fellow Veterans gain the same relief and peace that I felt from this program. I am able to run groups here and one of them is a stress/anxiety management group. Is there a way that I can get the book in bulk for the program? I think it would be a great tool for the Veterans to have to take home with them.

Thank you for this program, it helped give me life again. —Melanie, Peer Support Specialist, Iraq War Veteran

“Yoga and this practice guide is my personal pathway to paradise.” —D., Veteran

My name is Sandra. I’ve been part of the Canadian Forces family for the past 26 years. I have a husband and two children. As any family in the military, we’ve gone through a lot of changes, emotional ups and downs, and worries. The first time I heard my husband was going on a mission for 6 months, I began feeling a lot of stress. We’d never gone through a separation for that long. I started reading books on how to cut stress out of my life.

The information that I was looking for at the time is being given to you in the palm of your hands. The only thing you need to do is the practice. These techniques in Mindful Yoga Therapy are simple and powerful. For example: “Deep breathing sends a message to the brain that all is well and cuts the stress cycle.” Wow, with the breathing practice I realized that I didn’t need to be in a relaxed atmosphere to reduce stress. It’s that simple. I started to take time every day even if I only had a minute to spare and say to myself “am I breathing in, and breathing out?” Some days that is all I needed to feel calm again.

If you would like to introduce some thing in your life that is simple but powerful that will change your life, this toolkit is a very good starter kit. It has worked for me and still is keeping me balanced and calm. If you open up to this program you will see positive results in no time!

—Sandra

“Mindful Yoga Therapy brings clarity to my life.” —Afghanistan War Veteran

I recently had the opportunity to attend a series of classes at my local VA Hospital titled Mindful Yoga Therapy that was presented by Suzanne Manafort. I’d like to a minute to describe my experience. The class met twice a week for twelve weeks and was attend by both men and women of various ages with military service dating from Viet Nam to present day conflicts. One thing we all had in common is that we are all under treatment for, and suffering from, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and needed a doctor’s referral to attend.
The vast majority of people who were in the class I attend had zero experience with both yoga and meditation, but all were willing to try something new to relieve some of the symptoms they were suffering from which the drugs/therapy currently available don’t help with. While I describe my own experience in a minute, I just wanted to mention what I observed and heard from the others in the class.

One big thing that I noticed from the first class to the last was how much more flexible everyone was during the last class compared to the first. In general they were probably not as physically fit as they could have been at the start but there was a definite improvement by the end of the twelve weeks. The other thing, probably far more important to them getting into shape, was their mental state from beginning to end. I don’t know how many times I heard someone mention in class that they were sleeping much better (a serious problem with PTSD) and one or more of their other symptoms were far less troubling. That to me was the whole reason behind the class, to show people there is a drug-free way to make them feel better, something they could do in the comfort of their own home and with a regular class for guidance and motivation. So to me, from what I saw and heard, the class was a great success.

As for myself, I spend a couple of years in Viet Nam and got out with a case of PTSD, but didn’t realize it until years later. I had serious alcohol and drug problems, went from one relationship and job to another, barely got by financially, and watched helplessly as my life rapidly spiraled downward. Then one day at yet another job, in another town and in a rare lucid state, I ran across a paperback book, bought it, and my life changed forever. The book was a twenty-eight-day progressive yoga/meditation routine (similar to Mindful Yoga Therapy). By the time I was through with the book meditation had become a daily habit for me, one that has lasted for close to forty years. The drug and alcohol use had completely stopped, I became what people used to describe as a “health nut”, gulping down vitamins, eating health food, becoming a vegetarian, and exercising daily. My entire life changed for the better with that book and continues to to this day. I went from someone who was a drug abusing, broke, depressed, and often homeless person to someone who has had many amazing adventures and a very interesting and productive life. I retired in my fifties, am financially secure, and continue to improve myself and try to help others in the process, recently becoming an EMT and soon attending advanced Paramedic training. I can’t honestly say the yoga and meditation cured me of PTSD completely, I still see a therapist and I’ve hit a few rough spots along the way, but I CAN say without a doubt that if I hadn’t started meditating years ago I could pretty much guarantee you that I’d be dead or in prison by now. And I did it all without a single prescribed medication, solely with yoga and meditation. Lastly, I wanted to mention that even with all the previous experience I had with meditation even I noticed a definite improvement in my mental state while and after taking this class.

Mindful Meditation (and similar practices) are a great way to treat the symptoms of PTSD. I know it works, I’m living proof of that and I’m certain there are other stories such as mine out there. I urge you to not only continue this program, but to expand it throughout the VA system. Military personnel are putting their lives on the line every day for this country and I think the least the government can do is to do every possible to heal us once we come home. This program is a cheap, side-effect free, safe, and effective way to do just that. — Joseph

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

Sincerely yours,

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