



PATI RICHARDS YOGA BENEFITS WOMEN BEHIND BARS

BY MARY LEWIS

A group of women enter a small, all-purpose utility room. They are all dressed alike in grey sweats. They may, or may not, chat as they settle onto their mats cross-legged and try to relax into their breathing. The mats are situated in a circle formation that allows them a sense of safety. This is the one place that allows for peace and quiet in their lives.

These women are inmates attending a yoga class at the Minnesota Correctional Facility in Shakopee, Minnesota. Pati Richards, owner of Sacred Waters in Jordan, teaches the yoga class at the prison. She's been supporting and encouraging her students for the last three years. The inmates sign up for her class and are chosen to attend through a lottery system. Once chosen, they attend for two hours every Monday night for 12 weeks.

The program is funded by an Allina Neighborhood Health Connection grant providing weekly yoga and mindfulness classes as a means for supporting mental and physical health. One Yoga, a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, and a cornerstone yoga studio in the Twin Cities, facilitates the funds by ordering supplies for the yoga class (mats, blankets, etc.) that are shipped to the correctional facility. Allina and One Yoga are huge proponents of health and wellness and believe that everyone should have access to the tools to support mind and body.

Pati says that the women have shared how yoga has benefitted them.

One of the inmates said, "I completely lose the sense that I am in a prison." Another said, "This is the only time I feel like a person."

The class offers them a chance to feel safe and experience quiet, because the prison is a loud and chaotic environment.

The Minnesota Correctional Facility in Shakopee has housed all of

Minnesota's female inmates since 1911. As of July 1, 2018, there were 703 inmates at the prison. The largest percentage of the women are incarcerated for drug convictions, with the next most common sentence being served for homicide. Academic and vocational educational opportunities, and mental health and treatment services, are available to the inmates, as well as work opportunities. These offerings are helpful in preventing recidivism—the returning to prison for criminal behavior.

Yoga is one of the opportunities offered to the inmates. ►

"This is the only time I feel like a person."





◀ According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, “Yoga is a system of physical postures, breathing techniques, and sometimes meditation derived from Yoga but often practiced independently especially in Western cultures to promote physical and emotional well-being.” Yoga, at its most basic, is a practice that allows for being present and at peace in the moment, internally and externally.

Inmates are typically wrestling with negative emotions—anxiety, fear, despair, anger, depression, and trauma. Yoga can be a great coping mechanism for anger management and conflict resolution. It teaches people to be aware of themselves, in body and mind. When a person is totally aware, it allows them to process situations differently, from a more proactive than reactive state.

Pati was told by one of the inmates that yoga completely changed how she reacted to a negative interaction at the prison. Before learning yoga practices, she would have lost her temper, become violent, and ended up in solitary confinement. Instead, she remembered her breathing techniques, accepted a genuine apology and, ultimately, felt better about herself.

There are many benefits to practicing yoga. Flexibility, better breathing, balance and core strength, bone density, blood sugar balance, better brain function, and controlling anxiety are all results experienced by people who practice yoga. Many of the inmates come from a place of trauma. Whether they’ve suffered mental or physical abuse, yoga creates a space for them to heal.

Some of the women perform the stretching and breathing techniques to help with chronic pain and sleep issues. The benefits of yoga can be life changing and far reaching. With results such as sharpening focus and concentration, relaxing the mind and body, easing stress and anxiety, increasing body awareness, stimulating the mind and body by relieving chronic stress and muscle strain, it is no wonder yoga is beneficial to the inmates. It is a tool they can take with them to their cells while they serve their sentences, and a practice they can continue to pursue once they are released back into their community.

The hope for almost every inmate is to be released from prison and return to their lives outside the walls. But without education, health, and support it is easy to revert to unhealthy and destructive habits. A report by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) said, “About 68 percent of 405,000 prisoners released in 30 states in 2005 were arrested for a new crime within three years of their release from prison, and 77 percent were arrested within five years.” Yoga (along with other educational programs) challenges inmates to better themselves while incarcerated, so that they are more prepared to re-enter society and find success.



TYPES & BENEFITS OF YOGA

Yoga has been practiced for centuries in many ways, but it is always beneficial to the mind and body.

- Hatha Yoga—one of the most popular and common types of yoga in North America, great for beginners, a good fit for all fitness levels because of the relaxation and loosening the muscles
- Viniyoga—super for beginner, people recovering from injury, or those just looking to warm up muscles, focused on breathing and awareness of how the body moves
- Anusara Yoga—perfect for people who thrive on the support and motivation from group classes, different levels of difficulty, can be higher intensity
- Kundalini Yoga—builds core strength, grounds and focuses, can be an intense workout
- Vinyasa Yoga—a variety of poses that will get you sweating with intense, fluid movements
- Seva Yoga—focuses on the mind rather than the body, a spirit of giving

ABOUT PATI

Pati Richards teaches yoga at her studio in Jordan, at the Minnesota Correctional Facility in Shakopee, and other locations.

- Public schools, teaching teachers, students and parents
- Common Grounds Yoga and Music Festival in Minnesota
- Private instruction for all ages
- Richards has completed her 235 hour and 500 hour Yoga Teacher training at Devanadi School of Yoga
- She is also educated in Yoga Therapy, Pre-Natal Yoga, and Restorative Yoga
- She is a Reiki Master
- Minnesota Licensed Parent Educator and Certified Yoga Calm teacher specifically designed for children *RVW*

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