

# Give the Gift of Yoga to Veterans

## *A Campaign by the Give Back Yoga Foundation*

### **It's Our Problem**

Mental health conditions in Veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan have become an important public health problem. Up to 37% of the over two million service members who have deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan are struggling with serious mental health problems including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), major depression, and traumatic brain injury.<sup>1</sup> These mental health conditions result in debilitating pain and suffering and are associated with additional problems including addiction, difficulties maintaining work, and homelessness.<sup>2</sup>

These mental health issues can lead to tragic consequences, as illustrated by the increasing military suicide rates. Active duty suicides reached epidemic levels in 2010 with one active duty service member committing suicide every 36 hours. Our Veterans are killing themselves at twice the rate of other Americans.<sup>3-4</sup>

There are approximately 214,000 women serving in the military today, with more entering military service every year. In addition to the combat experiences that their male counterparts have to cope with, female Veterans suffer from significantly higher rates of Military Sexual Trauma, and have suicide rates that are up to three times higher than the rates of civilian women<sup>3</sup>. In addition, the impact of these problems has a cascading effect on each of the 8-10 family members directly related to each service member and Veteran.

Despite barriers to care, soldiers are seeking mental help more than 100,000 times a month.<sup>5</sup> The number of active duty troops discharged from the Army for mental health problems increased by 64% between 2005 and 2009.<sup>6</sup> Mental health problems now account for one in nine medical discharges. For

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<sup>1</sup> Seal KH, Metzler TJ, Gima KS, Bertenthal D, Maguen S, Marmar CR. Trends and Risk Factors for Mental Health Diagnoses Among Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans Using Department of Veterans Affairs Health Care, 2002-2008. *Am J Public Health*. September 1, 2009;99(9):1651-1658.

<sup>2</sup> Karney BR, Ramchand R, Osilla KC, Calderone LB, Burns RM. Predicting the Immediate and Long-Term Consequences of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Depression, and Traumatic Brain Injury in Veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. In: Tanielian TL, Jaycox LH, eds. *Invisible Wounds of War: Psychological and cognitive injuries, their consequences, and services to assist recovery*. Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation; 2008.

<sup>3</sup> McFarland BH, Kaplan MS, Huguette N. Datapoints: Self-Inflicted Deaths Among Women With U.S. Military Service: A Hidden Epidemic? *Psychiatr Serv*. December 1, 2010;61(12):1177.

<sup>4</sup> Kaplan MS, Huguette N, McFarland BH, Newsom JT. Suicide among male veterans: a prospective population-based study. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*. July 1, 2007;61(7):619-624.

<sup>5</sup> Zoroya, G. Mental Illness Costing Military Soldiers. *USA Today*. July 23, 2010. Available at: <http://www.usatoday.com/news/military/2010-07-23-1Amentaldischarge23 ST N.htm>

<sup>6</sup> In 2009, there were 17,538 hospitalizations for mental health problems, 17,354 for pregnancies, and 11,156 for injuries and battle wounds. See Zoroya, G. Mental Care Stays Are Up in Military, *USA Today*. May 16, 2010. Available at: <http://www.usatoday.com/news/military/2010-05-14-mental-health>.

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the first time, in 2009, more U.S. troops were hospitalized for mental health disorders than for any other reason.

Fortunately, there are effective treatments for these mental health problems and a great number of clinicians dedicated to helping our nations heroes. Unfortunately, even when provided with the best evidence-based treatments, non-response rates can be as high as 50%.<sup>7</sup> In addition, access to these treatments may be obstructed by an array of institutional and diagnosis-related barriers.

## Why Yoga?

Yoga is a path to experience greater connection and wholeness in life, a way to reconnect when life's challenges result in a deep sense of fragmentation. Yoga has been increasingly accepted as an effective complementary therapy for mental health issues including PTSD.

According to Dr. Bessel A. van der Kolk, clinician, researcher and teacher on posttraumatic stress since the 1970s:

*People with PTSD lose their way in the world. Their bodies continue to live in an internal environment of the trauma. We all are biologically and neurologically programmed to deal with emergencies, but time stops in people who suffer from PTSD. That makes it hard to take pleasure in the present because the body keeps replaying the past. If you practice yoga and can develop a body that is strong and feels comfortable, this can contribute substantially to help you to come into the here and now rather than staying stuck in the past.*

Many returning service members experiencing symptoms of combat stress such as nightmares, chronic physical pain, hyper-vigilance, sleeplessness, difficulty in controlling anger, and problems in personal relationships say they feel somehow disconnected. They report feeling disconnected from themselves, from their loved ones and from life as whole. We see that look on the faces of Veterans when they first hear about yoga class as part of a treatment program for PTSD, the one that says, "you've got to be kidding." But often another Veteran will jump in: "I know what you're thinking, and I felt the same way. It took me awhile to even give it a chance, but you know it really helps me."

Yoga is increasingly being utilized by the military and VA to help address unmet mental health needs. Veterans and active duty military personnel who practice 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. A recent Department of Defense study found that Veterans diagnosed with PTSD showed improvement in their symptoms after 10 weeks of yoga classes.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Schottenbauer MA, Glass CR, Arnkoff DB, Tendick V, Gray SH. Nonresponse and Dropout Rates in Outcome Studies on PTSD: Review and Methodological Considerations. *Psychiatry: Interpersonal & Biological Processes*. 2008;71(2):134-168.

<sup>8</sup> Zimmerman, R. Harvard, Brigham Study: Yoga Eases Veterans PTSD Symptoms. *Common Health, Reform and Reality*. Dec. 8, 2010. Available at: <http://commonhealth.wbur.org/2010/12/harvard-brigham-medical-study-yoga-veterans-ptsd/>.

*Over the past few months, this meditation has helped me realize how closely connected my physical and mental pain are. I told my wife that I feel like I'm untangling a big knot. I didn't know which strand was which when it was all knotted together, but as I do the meditation, I feel myself unwinding. As I undo the knot, I see what was mental and what was physical and how letting go of each helps the other.*

– Jon, Vietnam Veteran

*"When I heard we were going to do yoga, I laughed! I thought that soldiers doing yoga was ridiculous. After two weeks of practice, though, I thought, 'Who would have ever thought you could get so chill?' I want to find a class to do with my wife, something we could share."*

–OIF Veteran (3 deployments)

*"Sometimes when I meditate, flashbacks come to me of helicopters circling and the time we accidentally killed a woman and her little son. Normally, this would have sent me into a breakdown. Now, I am learning to observe the experience, learn the lessons from it. Meditation helps me find the part of my soul that is still peaceful."*

- Ralph, Enduring Freedom Veteran

## **We Believe We Can Help**

These men and women who have put their lives on the line to serve their country need our help. We at the Give Back Yoga Foundation have spent the past few years researching and working in the field of yoga for Veterans. In 2010, we started with a small grant to Comfort for America's Uniformed Services at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, DC to support a volunteer yoga and meditation program for wounded warriors. We quickly found ourselves deluged with requests both from yoga teachers around the country wanting to serve returning Veterans and from the Veterans and their families themselves.

We then began work on several forthcoming gifts to Veterans:

- (i) a book, *Finding Peace: A Yoga Guide for Veterans, Active Duty Military Service Members and Their Families*, written by Beryl Bender Birch and James Fox;
- (ii) meditation CDs donated by Patty Townsend and Rod Stryker, *Deep Relaxation with Yoga Nidra*, Karen Soltes' *iRest Yoga Nidra: Easing into Stillness* (who teaches at the Washington, DC VA Hospital as part of the War Related Illnesses and Injuries Study Center), and Suzanne Manafort's *"Breathe In, Breathe Out: Quick and Easy Breathing Practices to Help Balance the Nervous System,"* designed for the Mindful Yoga Therapy for Veterans Coping with Trauma Program, a component of the PTSD Rehabilitation Residential Program (PRRP) in Newington, CT.; and
- (iii) a new DVD, *VetsYoga*, by Washington, DC yoga teacher Daniel Hickman who teaches at Walter Reed Medical Center, produced by Yatra Yoga International and Craig Coffman Productions.

*The 'Give the Gift of Yoga to Vets' (campaign) 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*

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*and more military personnel are accepting the benefits of yoga. The classes here average about 20 each time. It is amazing how word spreads and how much people like it. Military personnel don't realize how much they need yoga until they try it.*

—U.S. Navy Lt. Taeko McFadden, Base Command Group, Al Asad, Iraq

In addition, the Give Back Yoga Foundation recognizes the need for rigorous empirical research on the effects of yoga for combat-related mental health conditions. Although testimonials from Veterans and active duty service members have convinced us of the benefits of yoga for mental health, well-conducted research is required to document these benefits for policy-makers, and to understand which yoga practices and which methods of delivery are the most effective. To this end, Give Back Yoga Foundation plans to support a pilot randomized clinical trial of Mindful Yoga Therapy for Veterans coping with trauma led by Daniel J. Libby, PhD, clinical research associate with the Evaluation Division of the National Center for PTSD.

### **Help Us Reach Our Audience**

Throughout the United States, dedicated yoga therapists are working with Departments of Veterans Affairs, and other organizations that currently offer or are interested in offering yoga as a complementary therapy practice for Veterans coping with mental health problems. For example, the National Veterans Wellness & Healing Center in Angel Fire, N.M., and the Wounded Warrior Family Support Retreat at Granite Ranch in Roosevelt, Texas, are two places offering wellness retreats for Veterans and their spouses. In addition, many military bases in the U.S. and abroad are now offering yoga as part of pre-deployment basic training.

These organizations and the others listed below are fully engaged with wounded and disabled service members and specialize in innovative wellness and health programs including yoga. We intend to support these efforts by distributing as many books, meditation CDs and DVDs as possible to these organizations--and to many other groups with whom we are currently working with providing evidence-based mind/body approaches for service members deploying and returning to help manage combat stress. We will also share information about the products with our growing network of studios and teachers through social media updates.

*The Give Back Yoga Foundation, a 501(c) (3) non-profit registered in Maryland, supports and funds certified yoga teachers in all traditions to offer the teachings of yoga to underserved segments of their communities. Please visit us at [www.givebackyoga.org](http://www.givebackyoga.org).*

## Give Back Yoga Projects for Veterans

**Robin Carnes** -- for a project at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, DC, serving members of the Warrior Transition Brigade with yoga, and iRest yoga nidra.

**Jo Kirsch**--and the Adaptive Sports Foundation (ASF), Windham, NY, serving people with cognitive and physical disabilities and chronic illnesses.

**Karen Soltes**-- to produce and distribute an audio CD of iRest Yoga Nidra, *Deep Relaxation with Yoga Nidra*, specifically designed for Veterans and Active Duty Military Service Members, Washington, DC. With Mid-Atlantic Yoga Association.

**James Fox and Beryl Bender Birch**—to produce and distribute *Finding Peace: A Yoga Guide for Veterans, Active Duty Military Service Members and Their Families*.

**Daniel Hickman**--For *VetsYoga*, an introductory yoga DVD for Veterans, featuring interviews with Veterans who have found yoga to be essential for their healing process, in addition to easy-to-follow practice sessions for beginners. With Mid-Atlantic Yoga Association.

**Patty Townsend and Rod Stryker**—to produce a meditation CD for Veterans: *Easing into Stillness*.

**Veterans Affairs Connecticut Healthcare System**, West Haven, PTSD Clinic Complementary Therapies Program, for yoga accessories to do yoga therapy for four groups of Veterans (men, women, Iraq/Afghanistan, and PTSD Rehab).

**Suzanne Manafort**—to distribute a CD containing a series of short breathing practices that was designed for the Mindful Yoga Therapy for Veterans Coping with Trauma Program, a component of the PTSD Rehabilitation Residential Program (PRRP) in Newington, CT. The CD gives Veterans a quick and easy way to practice each day while in the PRRP, and can also be used at home upon graduation from the program.

**LIVe**, a program serving diabetic Veterans at the Washington, DC Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VAMC), for yoga accessories.

### Organizations We Work With To Support Veterans

Yoga For Vets, [www.yogaforvets.org](http://www.yogaforvets.org), which lists studios, teachers, and venues throughout the country that offer four or more free classes to war Veterans.

Veterans Yoga Project, [www.veteransyogaproject.org](http://www.veteransyogaproject.org) which aims to bring together information and resources for anyone interested in the use of Yoga as a therapeutic practice for Veterans coping with PTSD and other trauma-related psychological problems.

Warriors at Ease, [www.warriorsatease.com](http://www.warriorsatease.com), which facilitates the deployment of highly skilled yoga and meditation instructors, as well as other professional complementary and adjunctive medicine practitioners, into the military healthcare system.

Wounded Warrior Project -[www.woundedwarriorproject.org](http://www.woundedwarriorproject.org)

The Exalted Warrior Foundation [www.exaltedwarrior.com](http://www.exaltedwarrior.com)

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## Budget: Give the Gift of Yoga to Veterans

Category	Description	Amount Donated To Date
Production Investment, VetsYoga DVD	Yatra Yoga International	\$22,100
Production Investment, CDs and Book	The Give Back Yoga Foundation	\$2,500 + 2,000 volunteer hours
Production Investment, Book	Private Foundation	\$9,000
Production Investment, CD, DVD	Mid-Atlantic Yoga Association	\$4,300
<b>Total Investment</b>		<b>\$37,900 + 2,000 volunteer hours</b>
Category	Description	Amount Requested
Editor	30 days @\$450	\$13,500
Graphic Design/Illustrator	15 days @\$220	\$ 3,300
DVD	Printing & manufacturing	\$ 9,500
Book	Cover design & final production	\$ 750
Book	Interior design & layout	\$ 600
Book	Prep for print production	\$ 360
Book	Jacket design/finished art	\$ 475
Book	Supervision (bids/production)	\$ 1,875
CDs	Graphics design (x3)	\$ 1,500
CDs	Printing & stamping supervision (x3)	\$ 750
CDs	Manufacturing (x3)	\$ 7,200
Book	Printing & manufacturing	\$14,600
All products	Fulfillment services (bid-out)	\$ 6,200
All products	Marketing, advertising	\$ 8,500
All products	Web registration & purchasing	\$ 4,500
e-book	Adaptation	\$ 5,300
All products	Admin/Fin. backstop (7 days @\$410)	\$ 2,870
All products	Yoga Journal magazine ad	\$16,000
<b>Research</b>		
Yoga props for MYTRCT	(Mat, CD, Manual, Strap, Block) x 40	\$2,000
Qualitative Interviews	\$100 x 40 Veterans	\$4,000
Scholarship Fund		\$4,220
<b>Total</b>		<b>\$108,000</b>