

All-Party Parliamentary Group - Yoga in Society



Yoga in the Criminal Justice System
13th September 5:30pm Committee Room 12

MPs Welcome – Group Co-Chairs Jonathan Lord MP Ben Bradshaw MP

JL Welcomed all, thanked co-chair Ben Bradshaw (BB) and their fellow parliamentarian Lord Stone (AS)

Special thanks to Heather Mason (HM) for bringing everyone together

BB introduced himself and highlighted compelling evidence and importance of this work

AS shared how his personal experience of neurodiversity (Dyslexia, Dyspraxia and Autism) often led to feelings of exclusion. This is how many people in prison often feel –yoga can help people to feel included.

Heather Mason - Programme Overview

Thanked everyone for coming and parliamentarians for their support.

We need more parliamentary support – request to all in a position to do so to contact MP and offer a free yoga session for them and their staff, highlighting the benefits for them and their constituents. Heather and Paul Fox will create a template letter to be shared.

Already large-scale embedment of yoga in the UK criminal justice system, though much more that can and should be done. Tonight, we are showcasing yoga's general transformational power.

Research showing that those who offend are extremely likely to have mental health condition, particularly PTSD. This prevalence is a major contributing factor to anti-social behaviour and puts them at risk of reoffending upon release.

Unequivocal evidence for yoga improving mental health, many orgs recognise its potential to enhance mental well-being and in turn, help individuals to take responsibility for their actions and increase likelihood of becoming productive members of society.

As a comprehensive practice that includes not just physical postures but self-regulation techniques e.g., breathing meditation, yoga is uniquely positioned to support personal evolution.

Tonight, as we learn of the vital work of organisations leading the charge. It is often said that self-care is social act - we can see how by extension how it is also a powerful tool for the betterment of society.

James Fox (Founder, Prison Yoga Project) - An Overview of Yoga in Prisons)

Introduced himself and the work of PYP

- Started teaching yoga in prisons and jails in 2002. Since then, Prison Yoga Project has trained more than 3,000 people to teach in prison settings, in 17 US states and internationally, including Canada, Mexico, Sweden, Netherlands, France and Australia.

Over the years they have learned:

- Majority of offenders have experienced their own trauma
- Likely to be from marginalised communities
- Poverty and lack of life opportunities are a key factor resulting in criminality
- As is unresolved trauma, history of neglect or substance abuse
- Experiences of trauma are present in the body, memories of past trauma are held in the body

Yoga and meditation practices offer tools to resolve trauma in the body and mind.

Rehabilitation: restore to wholeness

Yoga = union/returning to wholeness (body, mind, spirit)

4 main components to PYP programme

1. Conscious breathing
2. Mindful movement
3. Meditation
4. Opportunities for self-reflection

People are treated with compassion and human dignity

Josefin Wikstrom

(Director, European Prison Yoga Project) Trauma, The Criminal Justice System, and Yoga

Counted over 100 years of specialist experience in the field between various speakers here tonight.

Highlighted prevalence of trauma in offenders - thought to be root cause of criminality.

- 2020 study 82% men said yes to exposure to adverse childhood experiences
- Higher rates of PTSD, 52% women reported sexual abuse experience (suspected many more non-reported)
- 91% come from neglect and abuse background
- History of childhood abuse direct correlation with likelihood of offending
- Mental, emotional, and physical effects of trauma. Multi-layered.

Prolonged exposure to childhood trauma leads to delayed brain development, inability to develop healthy relationships, sleep disorders, reliance on drugs, all contributing to increasing chances of criminal behaviours.

“Hurt people hurt people.” Through addressing their trauma and teaching healthy coping mechanisms, we can lower the risk of that.

When we return to relaxed calm state, effects ANS function- endocrine system function, our ability to think clearly, make good decisions.

Regular, evidence-based, and trauma-informed practice supports self-reflection, acceptance, self-compassion, responsibility-taking, and resilience.

Josefin's wish list for the initiative:

- Larger budget
- More trained teachers
- More trauma-informed training for prison staff

Yoga has established place in therapeutic healthy society, NOT just leisure activity

Video – will be shared

Dr Nora Kerekes - The Research Evidence for Yoga Improving Lives and Reducing Reoffending

Research impact of yoga on mental health, behaviour, personality development.

Conducted large Randomised Control Trial Study within correctional settings with 2 control groups

- Group 1 participated in 90 mins of yoga per week
- Group 2 participated in 90 mins other physical activities

Random groups – controlled/comparable in terms of similar types of offences and demographic factors.

Group 1 demonstrated improvements in:

- Impulse control, sustained attention, self-control, sense of responsibility, self-acceptance, positive behaviour

Reductions in

- Psychological distress, obsessive thoughts, depression, and anxiety

Dr Rosie Meek added that 15 years ago she was a lone voice in this field, so delighted that colleagues and wider sector recognising the meaningful impact / therapeutic benefits for yoga in criminal justice system. Dedicated to continuing to add to the evidence base.

Dr Katrien Hertog (Director, Prison Programs Europe, IAHV / Art of Living) - Towards Reducing Reoffending and Impact Globally

Art of Living's Prison Program (Prison SMART (Stress Management and Rehabilitation Training)) – operates in over 60 countries, reached over 800k prisoners and staff

Programs are advertised 'Stress Management & Rehabilitation Programme'

- Tackle issues such as guilt, addiction, life issues
- Offer opportunities for self-reflection, self-acceptation
- Teaches coping tools and provides practical knowledge of how to handle negative emotions and contribute to society in a positive way

Holistic program of breathing, meditation, and yoga, aims to break the cycle of re-offending.

Research and demonstrated impact are consistent with what others have presented so need to repeat– ultimately program shown to reduce crime in society. Indianapolis study conducted over 6-year period showed participants in prison programme had 60% lower rate of reoffending.

More and more Ministries of Justice are now integrating yoga into the system. Many have signed MOU calling for shorter sentences for participation in rehabilitation program

Illness and job satisfaction also improved in staff groups participating in yoga program. Improved prison environment and culture, better relationships between prisoners and prison staff.

HEATHER question to Jonathan Lord –Matt Hancock’s budget £500m improving access to Psychological Therapies for people in CJS– can we use this as a jumping off point for these kind of yoga programs?

Jakob Lund (International Association for Human Values) - Changing the Lives of Hardened Prisoners

Overseen IAHV Prison program since 2000, created a community of ex-offenders, whilst in prison and continued program of healing upon released.

Works closely with offenders - 90% of their team is from criminal background or within the CJS.

Trauma creates isolation from self, leading to isolation to others, resulting in increased likelihood of hurting others. Inevitable that internal trauma is projected into the world.

Strong destructive energy can be transformed into something powerful but productive – so much potential for significant change.

Work with angry gang member – started crying min-session due to his realisation of pointlessness conflict with gang member. Another *participant said ‘the more I do these breathing exercises, the fewer idiots there are in this place’*

Selina Sasse (Director, Prison Phoenix Trust) Yoga in the UK Prison System: More than 3.5 decades of Transformation

When Prison Phoenix Trust started 35 years ago, yoga was still relatively new/ not widely known in UK. 1998 research showed profound spiritual experiences in prison – founder had vision that this had potential.

Started with writing to people, sending books to support personal evolution, expanded to include practices of meditation and yoga, working with silence and the breath.

Offer personal support to prisoners around the UK and the Republic of Ireland through teaching, workshops, correspondence, books, and newsletters – and to prison staff too.

Demographics to highlight:

Disproportionate number of prison population are from minority groups/ have experience of racism, poor mental health, and neurodiversity

Work closely with participants and include the voices of people in prisons as part of program design.

- 108 classes per week at 224 correctional centres
- 1:1 support of about 4500 people
- 96,000 people engaging in yoga and med just through PPT

John shared his experience participating in PPT program as formerly incarcerated guest.

Personally vouch for the improved ability to cope – happened immediately!
Trauma experienced prior to criminal behaviour as well as continuing and getting worse while in prisons. Value of the practice for people who have been excluded all their lives.

Richard Lambe

Shared his first-hand account of PPT program as formerly incarcerated guest.

Felt excluded all his life. Experience of autism was an internal battle.

Came from care system – did not like society, crime was his way of seeking pay back. Ambitious – wanted to get to the top. Now he sees how wrong that was.

First started taking yoga to start just to get out of cell. Yoga teacher encouraged PPT letters programme. Writing & yoga & meditation became stable practice when he would be moved from facility to facility – was the only constant.

Program has not only helped Richard but also his friends and family.

Dr Jamie Bennett

(Oxford University, Chief Strategy Officer, Youth Justice Board) Yoga for Children in the Criminal Justice System

Developing best practice to working with children in criminal justice system, primary aim to have less children in custody / CJS

Child-first Approach adopted based on research of effective practice of children in criminal justice system. ABCD model:

1. Treat children **as children**
2. **Build pro-social identity**
3. **Collaboration** – kids have a voice and a role in their services
4. **Divert** – meet needs outside CJS

Harvard study – weightlifting for the brain. Yoga and brain development.

Urban Yogis – yoga to help kids and divert them away from crime

Medway secure school – start the day with yoga before learning.

Suzy Dymond White

(Women's Directorate Strategy & Stakeholder Engagement, HMPPS) The Big Picture and Future Directions: Prevention, Rehabilitation and Support Through Yoga.

Current focus in women's prisons. Working to understand and respond to trauma in our services

Benefits of yoga and meditation overlap with other psychological support/therapy.

Impact can be immediate and significant. Supports calm and rational thinking – reprogramming how we deal with fear/stress, decision making. Not only supports individuals participating but prevention of future victims of crimes.

Decision makers no longer see it as nice to have, but need to see it as a must-have – not quite there.

As governor of prison, Suzy joined a yoga class alongside prisoners – atmosphere changed from nervous giggling, self-conscious, to relaxed, confident, ability to close eyes and be vulnerable after just one session.

Final comments:

Jakob – beyond prison, the community you build continues healing together. General outlook changes once the trauma goes – space to think, final stage how can I be useful in society.

Chelsea Roff (Give Back Yoga) asked how we can respond to funders who do not want to support people who have broken the law:

- Josefin -it offers so much hope for the rest of society, if we capture even just one prisoner, it is worth the investment. It is a low-cost
- Rosie – It is not a leisure activity, reduces likelihood of US being a victim of crime in future. Backed up- by evidence. Return on investment case will help
- John – he has come full circle and is now able to offer what he has learned to others in need

Closing word from JL – Moving and inspirational session - most powerful to date.

HM commended speakers for their dedication to cause and efforts to be here. Thanked all for coming.