



IMPACT REPORT

Eight-week Yoga intervention at the Villawood Immigration Detention Centre

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Background. The Villawood Immigration Detention Centre (VIDC) is an Australian immigration detention facility in Sydney. Detainees are mainly people who have overstayed their visa in Australia or have violated their visa conditions. Asylum seekers arriving by boat without visas may also be accommodated at VIDC.

The Yoga Intervention. Yoga teachers from The Yoga Impact Charity offered weekly trauma informed yoga sessions to detainees (all over 18 years) during Term 4 of 2019. Classes consisted of breathing exercises, gentle yoga and guided relaxation. The aims were to: inspire psychological calm through focus on breath; improve physical well-being, body awareness & relaxation through movement; improve mind-body connection by providing a safe place for participants to explore themselves. Part of the trauma informed approach to yoga prescribes that attendance at the groups is not compulsory, therefore participants were able to attend as many or as few sessions as they liked. As a result, not all the participants completed follow-up measures.

Measures of stress and wellbeing. Usually, no writing implements, phones or cameras are permitted into the centre, however the Yoga Impact Charity were granted permission to take a pen to record attendance (initials of each individual) at each session. In the final session they asked attendees whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of questions about their experience of the yoga program, and also to write down any comments that related specifically to the yoga program.

Participants. A total of 28 detainees participated in at least 1 yoga session. Of these, 12 participated in 2 or more sessions, and 1 individual attended all 8 sessions. An average of 7.25 people attended each session.

Results

The final yoga session included 8 individuals, who attended an average of 3.25 sessions across the program (attendance rates ranged from 1 – 7). Tables 1-3 summarise the responses of participants (Yes, No, No Answer) when asked about the impact of the yoga sessions on specific physical, psychological and social criteria. Comments relating to the yoga program were also recorded.

Physically	Yes	No	No Answer	Comments
Reduced Pain	8	0	0	Helped with my knees
Improved Sleep	8	0	0	
Better Flexibility	8	0	0	
Other Comments	The Yoga has improved my breathing so I can do other exercises. It has improved digestion.			

Table 1. The physical impact of the Yoga Program.

Psychologically	Yes	No	No Answer	Comments
Sense of Calm	8	0	0	
Increased Confidence	8	0	0	Yes, doing something for my mind and my body makes me feel more confident
Better Self Reflection/Insight	3	1	4	When we're quiet it makes me reflect on what I've done to my family. Elders. I'm trying to release tension for that
Relaxation	8	0	0	I don't feel like I'm in detention. I feel normal
Reduced Anger	2	1	5	
Reduced Fear	0	0	8	
Fun	8	0	0	It's always fun. Every week we laugh.
Other Comments	We just want more, it would be good to start every day with yoga.			

Table 2. The psychological impact of the Yoga Program.

Socially	Yes	No	No Answer	Comments
Benefits of The Group	8	0	0	We socialise in all the activities. It's good here though as we wouldn't always mix like this (referring to different nationalities)
Sense of Belonging	2	0	6	
Feeling of Friendship	8	0	0	Yes. We feel the friendship from you (Yoga Impact Charity)
Other Comments	None.			

Table 3. The social impact of the Yoga Program.

Discussion

The overwhelming response from the detainees that provided feedback was positive. Eight out of eight reported improvements in physical (reduced pain, improved sleep, better flexibility), psychological (sense of calm, increased confidence, relaxation, fun) and social (benefits of the group and feelings of friendship) domains. In each domain, additional positive feedback was offered, providing further insight to the yoga program experience.

In the **physical domain**, it is notable that every participant reported better **sleep**. An increasing body of research has indicated a bi-directional relationship between sleep and emotion regulation. Sleep is important for restoring daily function, and for our ability to cope with emotional stress in everyday life. Additionally, when daily stress is insufficiently regulated, it may result in sleep disturbances and potential mental health problems (Vandekerckhove & Wang, 2017). Improving a person's sleep may therefore have knock-on impacts across multiple domains.

It is notable that participants spontaneously offered feedback around **breathing** and **digestion** as well. Both these physical functions are related to emotional function. A steady, smooth breath can develop feelings of calm in a person, whereas short, shallow breaths are indicative of panic and activation of the 'fight-flight' response. Regarding digestion, a growing body of evidence points towards the bi-directional relationship of gut function and brain function, with implications for mental health (Jarbrink-Sehgal & Andreasson, 2020). In sum, this suggests the physical mechanisms interact with one another, as well as with emotional and mental function. An intervention that operates at all levels of function – such as yoga – may

be the most effective approach in managing complex needs in a group of vulnerable individuals.

Evidence of positive **social interactions** in an immigration detention centre, where people will necessarily be from different backgrounds, nationalities, cultural and ethnic groups and languages, has widespread implications. Developing a sense of friendship and community within the centre will promote enjoyment and relaxation in daily life. Shared enjoyment is also powerful, not only for the positive impacts on emotional wellbeing, but also for people to be motivated to continue to attend and to engage. The positive feedback in the social domain is therefore a highlight of the intervention, and the comment that **'every week we laugh'** is striking. Improving quality of life for these individuals at a time of intense uncertainty is so important, with implications for their mental health and wellbeing in the long run.

It must be acknowledged that not all questions received consistently positive responses. An area where most people chose to withhold an answer was in reduction of fear and anger. It's possible that the experiences and ongoing situations of the detainees produced such high levels of fear and anger that more focussed and / or longer-term interventions were needed to reduce their symptoms. The practice of yoga could not change the specific causes of fear and anger in the detainees, so to expect a reduction in these domains may be unreasonable. However, it is hoped that the development of skills in the **psychological domains of relaxation and a sense calm** – both of which eight of eight detainees reported a positive impact – would lead to a gradual improvement in ability to manage the emotional and physical impacts of fear and anger.

Conclusions and future directions. This preliminary research into the impact of yoga on vulnerable group of individuals, who were likely to be suffering from high levels of stress and trauma, was overwhelmingly positive. It paves the way for future research into the impact of yoga interventions and calls for more detailed assessments as well characterisations of the symptoms and needs of the target group.

Contributors:

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References

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