

Yoga helps young offenders deal with stress

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Circumstances landed them in Juvenile Hall and many are angry. Some have been traumatized by violence. Some are coming off addictions. Just about all worry about what is next in their lives.

These extreme stresses experienced by incarcerated youths are why county health officials thought yoga would help.

So, each morning, 20 teenagers in the Alameda County Juvenile Justice Center, Unit 6, participate in hour-long yoga classes. The classes are taught by Niroga Institute, an Oakland-based nonprofit whose purpose is to bring yoga to at-risk youths and other groups that might benefit from the discipline but are unlikely to seek it out, such as senior citizens and cancer patients.

The teenagers in the program are recently detained offenders awaiting hearings. They also are youth who have been identified as needing assistance with mental health issues.

On a recent Tuesday morning at the San Leandro facility, eight girls filed into the yoga classroom and unfolded their mats. Niroga instructor Erin Hill led them in poses and chants.

Some chants were in Sanskrit. Some words were in English: "May I be safe and protected. May I be healthy and strong. May I accept myself as I am."

A second class of 12 boys followed.

"When I first started coming, I thought it would be kind of boring and weird because I've never been introduced to something like this," said one 17-year-old girl who has been at the center for about a month. "But the more I got into it and allowed the yoga to help me and accept it, then I started to appreciate it." She said she wants to teach yoga someday. A 16-year-old boy, particularly diligent in following the yoga poses, also said he would like to become a yoga instructor.

"I like yoga because what's ever on my mind, I can use yoga to take it off my mind. I feel relaxed after yoga," he said, standing with perfectly straight posture. "It's all about the breathing. If you breathe and some places you feel tightness, you draw attention to those places and you don't feel tightness anymore."

Not all the youths were that enthusiastic. Some just lay on their mats rather than following the instructor's directions. But 18 months after the program was started, juvenile hall officials and Niroga believe they have measurable evidence that yoga has helped the teens. In a study with the help of Kaiser Permanente and UC Berkeley, Niroga

measured stress rates experienced by teenagers in the program and others who elected not to participate.

Bidyut Bose, the founder and director of Niroga, said it used two psychological testing methods: a 10-point perceived stress scale, and a 30-point Integral Health Scale. He said that within three months of the program, "statistically significant decline" in stress levels was detected in the stress test and general improvement in health in the integral health scale. He said Niroga undertook the study because other counties' juvenile systems are considering the program.

Yahru Baruti, senior psychiatric social worker in Unit 6 at Alameda juvenile hall, said yoga has proven to be "a very valuable tool kids can use. We remind them to take what they learn here and bring it out into their lives. So, if they are feeling anxious or having trouble sleeping, we ask them what they learned in yoga that they can apply."

The program is paid for by the Alameda County Health Care Services Agency and the Juvenile Justice Center at a cost of \$40,000 a year.

"This is a unique population," said Chief William Fenton, deputy chief of Alameda County Juvenile Facilities. "This unit is an intensive day treatment program designed to stabilize them."

He said 3,500 youths from around Alameda County are brought to Juvenile Justice each year. The county aims to prevent them from returning to juvenile hall, he said, by giving them life skills rather than just incarceration.

"With most kids, if they can make it to over 25 years of age without returning to prison, then they can be a success," he said.



The Niroga Institute has a program that teaches the incarcerated youth at the Alameda County Juvenile Justice Center the art of yoga. They believe that it helps them center themselves in helping deal with their

emotions. Niroga Institute yoga instructor, Erin Hill, shows demonstrates one of the many yoga poses. (Laura A. Oda/The Oakland Tribune)



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