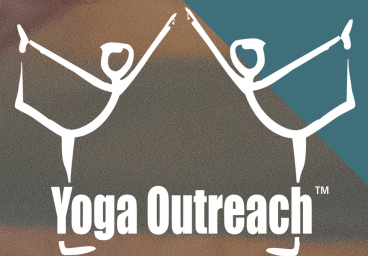


Promising Practices

Trauma-informed Yoga for
justice-involved youth in
drug treatment



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McCreary Centre Society carried out an independent evaluation of Yoga Outreach Society's trauma-informed yoga initiative, Incorporating Yoga as a Trauma-Informed Practice to Enhance Drug Treatment Outcomes for Justice Involved Youth. The original time frame of the project was April 1st 2017 to March 31st 2019 but was extended to December 31, 2019.

This project involved delivering a trauma-informed yoga program to youth with substance use challenges who are justice-involved or at-risk of justice involvement. Volunteer yoga instructors were trained through Yoga Outreach to facilitate trauma-informed yoga sessions in partner agencies which offer drug treatment programs to youth. The goal was to contribute to enhancing youth's health outcomes, ability to self-regulate, and impulse control. The project also delivered training to staff at partner agencies (Using Yoga in Your Work training) to support them in using yoga-based tools in their work as well as for their own self-care.

The mixed-method evaluation canvassed youth participants; staff and managers at partner agencies; yoga instructors; and Yoga Outreach directors through surveys and interviews/focus groups.

This Promising Practices Guide is the result of that project.

"I want to begin to love and appreciate myself more, to find peace within myself."



Youth health • Youth research • Youth engagement

Reflections on promising practices for sharing trauma-informed yoga with youth.



- To best support youth who have experienced trauma, everyone in the agency should be trauma-responsive, rather than only a few staff members.

"The yoga sessions were a good opportunity for [staff] to slow down and to connect with the youth. We were calm and the youth were too."

- Instructors need to be patient, sensitive to youth's needs, and adaptable (e.g., make modifications during a session based on youth's needs).
- A program should ensure the yoga instructor's approach and values match the goals of the program and agency, and that the instructor is in a healthy space. It is helpful to do a pre-screen to ensure the individual can maintain healthy boundaries and that they have worked through their own trauma sufficiently so they can offer appropriate support to youth.



- Offering the yoga sessions consistently, such as on the same day and at the same time each week, helps to engage youth. This also helps to create a sense of predictability, which contributes to youth feeling safe. In addition, consistency helps to weave trauma-informed yoga into an agency's culture, which promotes buy-in.



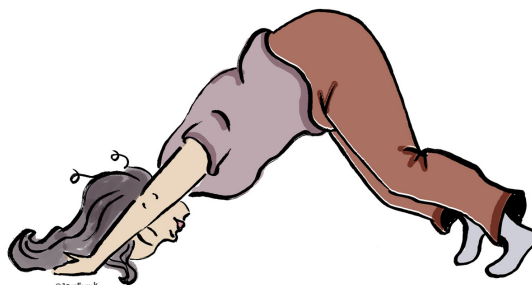
- Buy-in from agency staff is essential. At the start of a yoga program for youth, staff should be given an explanation about the purpose of the yoga sessions (why the yoga is being offered), so they understand the rationale and the goals. Being provided with this information helps to increase staff buy-in, which in turn can contribute to greater buy-in and engagement among youth participants.

Feedback from youth...

"The yoga helped me feel calmer."

"I liked how it made me calm."

- There should be program staff who are willing to take part in the yoga sessions alongside the youth. Staff involvement can help to support youth through a potentially vulnerable experience for them; can help to foster a sense of connection between program staff and youth; and can improve youth's level of engagement in the sessions.
- It is important for an agency to select appropriate program staff to take part in yoga sessions with the youth. Staff should have the sensitivity and gentleness that is needed to work with youth in a trauma-informed yoga session.
- Participants should be given freedom of choice during the yoga sessions, including alternative poses, to help them feel safe. For example, refusal to do certain poses might be rooted in trauma, and there should be understanding and sensitivity around this. Yoga should be presented as an offering, using invitational language, as opposed to instructing participants what to do.





- While offering choice is important, it should be coupled with encouraging youth to participate and to try something new.

Feedback about the yoga sessions...

"It's fabulous to incorporate a yoga program like this one using a trauma-informed lens."

"It's a great addition to the work we do."

- There should be sensitivity around language, and an awareness that different words might "trigger" different youth. Yoga instructors and support staff should adapt their language to meet youth's needs.
- There should be awareness that unlike typical yoga, trauma-informed yoga does not involve physically adjusting participants or any form of touching, even with participants' consent, because they may not have had safe experiences saying no in the past.



- Participants' sense of safety is greater when the sessions are separated by gender, as opposed to having mixed-gender groups.



- A calming physical space should be created. For example, it is important to have adequate space to do yoga, so that participants can stretch out and feel comfortable. Also, there should be lamps with soft lighting, as opposed to bright ceiling lights.

Comments from staff...

"[The program gave participants] an opportunity to be still and notice changes in their bodies, and to feel safe and comfortable with their bodies."

"The sessions really helped some youth to feel calmer, less stressed, and more in control."

- Music in the background can help to reduce the discomfort of sitting in silence, and can help to engage youth. However, the music should be grounding, calming, and trauma-sensitive. For example, it can be instrumental (i.e., contain no vocals) and mindfully chosen so that it is not distracting.
- It is important for program staff to develop a good relationship with the yoga instructor and to maintain good communication. For example, it is helpful when staff communicate with the instructor before a session if youth are struggling on a particular day. This sharing of information helps to prepare instructors for the session.
- Between sessions, self-care for instructors is important, so that they can be supportive and compassionate toward the youth during the sessions.
- Having a system in place to support self-care among agency staff is important, so that they can provide optimal support to youth participants. Offering trauma-informed yoga sessions to service providers is one way of supporting their self-care and ultimately the well-being of the youth they work with.





Additional comments from youth...

"Yoga is pretty awesome."

"Thanks for the great opportunity."

"I liked the teacher a lot!"

"I really enjoy [the instructor] & the restorative yoga."

"Great instructor! Super duper nice!"

"I really did benefit and enjoy each and every yoga class with [the instructor]."

"I had a good time!!"

"This was so fun 😊"

"I liked everything...the program is great."

"I really appreciate this. My life is difficult without these kinds of services."





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