Prisoners doing yoga may see psychological benefits

Yoga can improve mood and mental wellbeing among prisoners, an Oxford University study suggests, and may also have an effect on impulsive behaviour.

The researchers found that prisoners after a ten-week yoga course reported improved mood, reduced stress and were better at a task related to behaviour control than those who continued in their normal prison routine.

'We found that the group that did the yoga course showed an improvement in positive mood, a decrease in stress and greater accuracy in a computer test of impulsivity and attention,' say Dr Amy Bilderbeck and Dr Miguel Farias, who led the study at the Departments of Experimental Psychology and Psychiatry at Oxford University. 'The suggestion is that yoga is helpful for these prisoners.'

Dr Bilderbeck adds: 'This was only a preliminary study, but nothing has been done like this before. Offering yoga sessions in prisons is cheap, much cheaper than other mental health interventions. If yoga has any effect on addressing mental health problems in prisons, it could save significant amounts of public money.'

The researchers were supported in the running of the trial by the Prison Phoenix Trust, an Oxford-based charity that offers yoga classes in prisons. They approached the Oxford University psychologists about conducting such a study to assess the benefits, though the study was designed, analysed and published independently of the Trust.

The Oxford University researchers, along with colleagues from King's College London, the University of Surrey and Radboud University Nijmegen in the Netherlands, report their findings in the Journal of Psychiatric Research.

Prisons see rates of mental health problems that are many times higher than the general population, and high levels are often recorded of personal distress, aggression, antisocial behaviour and drug and alcohol abuse among prisoners.

Yoga and meditation have been shown be beneficial in reducing anxiety, depression and improving mood in other areas and settings, so the Oxford researchers carried out an initial exploratory study to look at a range of possible benefits of yoga among prisoners.

Inmates of a range of ages were recruited from five category B and C prisons, a women's prison and a young offender institution, all in the West Midlands, and were randomly assigned to either a course of ten weekly yoga sessions of 90 minutes run by the Prison Phoenix Trust, or to a control group.

In sessions with the researchers before and after the yoga course, all the prisoners completed standard psychology questionnaires measuring mood, stress, impulsivity and mental wellbeing. A computer test to measure attention and the participant's ability to control his or her responses to an on-screen cue was also used after the yoga course.

If yoga is associated with improving behaviour control, as suggested by the results of the computer test, there may be implications for managing aggression, antisocial or problem behaviour in prisons and on return to society, the researchers note – though this is not measured in this initial study.

Dr Bilderbeck, who practices yoga herself, cautions: 'We're not saying that organising a weekly yoga session in a prison is going to suddenly turn prisons into calm and serene places, stop all aggression and reduce reoffending rates. We're not saying that yoga will replace standard treatment of mental health conditions in prison. But what we do see are indications that this relatively cheap, simple option might have multiple benefits for prisoners' wellbeing and possibly aid in managing the burden...
of mental health problems in prisons.

Sam Settle, director of the Prison Phoenix Trust, says: 'Almost half of adult prisoners return to prison within a year, having created more victims of crime, so finding ways to offset the damaging effects of prison life is essential for us as a society. This research confirms what prisoners have been consistently telling the Prison Phoenix Trust for 25 years: yoga and meditation help them feel better, make better decisions and develop the capacity to think before acting – all essential in leading positive, crime-free lives once back in the community.'

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Notes to Editors

- The paper 'Participation in a 10-week course of yoga improves behavioural control and decreases psychological distress in a prison population' is to be published in the *Journal of Psychiatric Research* with an embargo of 00:05 UK time on Thursday 11 July 2013.

- Copies of the paper are available to credentialed journalists upon request from Elsevier's Newsroom at newsroom@elsevier.com or +31 20 4853564.

- The study was funded by the Portuguese BIAL Foundation and was supported by the Prison Phoenix Trust.

- 167 prisoners signed up to the study, but 100 completed the sessions and were included in the analysis. There were no significant differences between the groups in those that did not complete the study, say the researchers.

- **Oxford University's Medical Sciences Division** is one of the largest biomedical research centres in Europe, with over 2,500 people involved in research and more than 2,800 students. The University is rated the best in the world for medicine, and it is home to the UK’s top-ranked medical school.

  From the genetic and molecular basis of disease to the latest advances in neuroscience, Oxford is at the forefront of medical research. It has one of the largest clinical trial portfolios in the UK and great expertise in taking discoveries from the lab into the clinic. Partnerships with the local NHS Trusts enable patients to benefit from close links between medical research and healthcare delivery.

  A great strength of Oxford medicine is its long-standing network of clinical research units in Asia and Africa, enabling world-leading research on the most pressing global health challenges such as malaria, TB, HIV/AIDS and flu. Oxford is also renowned for its large-scale studies which examine the role of factors such as smoking, alcohol and diet on cancer, heart disease and other conditions.

- **The Prison Phoenix Trust** (PPT) is a UK charity that supports prisoners in their spiritual lives through meditation and yoga, working with silence and the breath. It recommends breath-focussed stretches and meditation sensitively tailored to students' needs. This safe practice offers ultimate peace of mind. PPT also encourages prisoners – and prison staff – through correspondence, books, newsletters, free taster workshops and weekly classes. In 2012, the PPT sent 3954 free resource books and CDs to prisoners who requested help in starting a practice in their cells. They currently support 131 weekly classes in 80 prisons, secure hospitals, bail hostels and immigration removal centres, including 20 classes for prison staff.