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For veterans, yoga can offer peace

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Hugo Patrocino, 29, practicing yoga at a Fort Lauderdale studio, served eight years in the Marines and did two tours of duty in Iraq.

One week into his second tour of duty, U.S. Marines Sgt. Hugo Patrocino was wounded by a suicide bomber who drove a dump truck stocked with 1,000 pounds of explosives into a house in al-Anbar, on the outskirts of Fallujah. He had been attacked before, hurt before, but this time Patrocino was just 20 feet from the explosion.

He would eventually recover from the wounds — the shrapnel in his foot and leg, the severe concussion — but the psychological injuries lingered. His nights were soon crowded with re-runs of the bombing that injured 10 other platoon members. Often, he didn't sleep at all, tormented by searing memories of friends killed in the war. He was angry, prone to headaches and mood swings, one of thousands of soldiers returning from Iraq or Afghanistan suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, one of the masked casualties of war.

In the 18 months of Patrocino's spiral, he eventually turned to yoga after learning about it during group therapy as a way to quiet the inner noise. He found the discipline, the poses, the breathing — and especially, the stillness — worked to restore what had been taken that July in 2006.

"I didn't understand yoga but I knew it was helping somehow. I was in a horrible place, a fog," says Patrocino, 29, who was awarded a Purple Heart medal for his military service. "There is no magic pill that can erase your past or what you have seen but the practice helps me to cope. Now I am not afraid to go to sleep."

Patrocino is part of a wave of returning veterans — with thousands more expected as the United States continues its military pullouts from two decade-long

wars — who are embracing yoga as a calming therapy. For many, it is a companion medical treatment, to ease the symptoms of post-traumatic stress on the mind and body. For others, it is simply a way to relieve the stress of reintegrating. Some are turning to the poses and deep breathing of yoga. Others to the quiet of meditation.

"Through yoga or tai chi or some other discipline, the vet can create a space of calm. And that is a place that

the brain can return to when faced with a trigger,” said David Frankel, executive director of Connected Warriors, a nonprofit offering free weekly yoga sessions to veterans and their families in South Florida. “More than anything, the vet returning from a trauma needs a sense of peace.”

Faced with a growing national health crisis, military officials and the medical community are exploring other methods to help treat psychologically wounded soldiers. Between 11 and 20 percent of veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars have PTSD, according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

In 2005, the U.S. Department of Defense conducted a narrow feasibility study at the former Walter Reed Army Medical Center on the effectiveness of Yoga Nidra, an ancient meditative practice, on soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with PTSD symptoms. After eight weeks, all the participants’ symptoms were reduced. Buoyed by the results, research was expanded to several VA hospitals and centers, including the Miami VA where a study of meditation was conducted on veterans. The local study has been completed but not yet published. The program used in the study, eventually renamed Integrative Restoration or iRest, was added to the weekly treatment for soldiers at dozens of centers across the nation.

“The program provides them body relaxation and breathing exercises that are tools for managing the emotions, the memories, the cognitive thoughts that come with war,” said Richard Miller, a clinical psychologist who served as a consultant and advisor to the DOD study. “It helps to build a deep inner resource that they can call back on for stability.”

At the Red Pearl Yoga studio in Fort Lauderdale, veterans — including Patrocínio — who served in wars from Vietnam to Afghanistan spend an hour on Thursdays lying on green yoga mats staring towards the ceiling. The walls are deep red, and the air is warm and still, the afternoon sun shielded by bamboo blinds.

Frankel, a Broward County prosecutor for 22 years before becoming a yoga instructor, leads the Hatha yoga class. He has practiced yoga two decades as a way to balance his professional life, a discipline he learned as a child from his grandmother. For the veterans’ class, he makes sure that the warriors don’t face walls because they might feel closed in, which can be a stress trigger. When he adjusts their positions, he approaches from the front to keep from startling them. And the final posture of the class — full relaxation often called the corpse pose — goes under its more formal name, Sivasana.

He encourages these veterans to surrender to the quiet, so the body relaxes, the senses soften and the mind eventually settles. For returning soldiers, whether diagnosed with PTSD or not, one of the great challenges is to slow a mind racing with troubling and obsessive thoughts and to disconnect from the whirlwind of combat. Frankel has them breathe and exhale deeply as they move through a series of poses: downward-facing dog, standing forward bend, full forward bend. During each pose and stretch, they are told to concentrate on their cores. Later in the session, Frankel plays soft music, the lyrics of one song promising, “no one will lose their soul.”

It is all meant to help the vets reconcile war experiences with civilian life. It is another path to healing.

For Beau MacVane, an Army Ranger from Boca Raton who served five tours in the Iraq and Afghanistan, yoga helped enhance the quality of his final months. He died in 2009 of Lou Gehrig’s disease at 33, but his legacy lives on in the work of Judy Weaver, a yoga instructor in Boca Raton and co-founder of Connected Warriors who taught him the breathing and meditative techniques that helped even as he neared death.

Weaver decided to launch a campaign to teach service members, veterans and their families the benefits of yoga through free classes. It was the beginning of Connected Warriors, now offered in 17 studios and VA hospitals and centers including the Deering Estate in Palmetto Bay and the U.S. Southern Command in Doral.

The number of veterans in Connected Warriors, which started in 2010, has grown steadily — the group serves about 220 people per month — and is likely to increase as more troops come home. The U.S.

announced last year that all troops would be were out of Iraq in December and plans call for combat forces to return from Afghanistan by the end of 2014.

Three months after Army Capt. Jonathan Freeman returned from Kabul, his third tour, he began yoga at Red Pearl. He had learned Transcendental Meditation from his father as a child and practiced it occasionally while deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. But by the time he returned in November after the intensity of combat environment — Freeman and his unit were among the first soldiers on the clean-up scene after an Iraqi family of 14 was killed in 2005 — he needed something more to help with the transition back. So he started running and in February, he added yoga as part of the Connected Warriors program.

“The yoga is really beneficial on the bad days when I am having negative thought after negative thought, and can’t get outside my head,” said Freeman, 36, who lives in Fort Lauderdale and is part of the Virginia National Guard. “The breathing helps me center myself and settle down.”

For Patrocinio, the path to healing through yoga started with a headache.

When he first got back home, he experienced anxiety, depression and relentless flashbacks but kept it all a secret. He had joined Marines just out of Miami Central High School and planned on a military career as an infantryman. He is proud of his service and received 11 awards.

He had deployed to Iraq in 2003, returning to the war-torn country three years later and was wounded that summer. When it was time for a third deployment, he worked hard to ready his unit. “I kept thinking everything would go away and telling myself that everything was OK. But the reality was I was in a really bad place,” said Patrocinio, now a student at Nova Southeastern University studying psychology.

He finally walked turned to his battalion medical officer and asked for help.

“At the time, my main purpose was to get some medication that could even me out so that I could finish my mission. I needed to finish training my Marines. We were supposed to leave around Christmas of 2007,” said Patrocinio, who also serves as a trainer for ArtsReach Foundation, which uses creative expression to help those who have experienced traumas. “I was honest in the assessment and they came back and said I was not going anywhere, that I had PTSD. For me, that diagnosis meant career suicide. One minute I was a sargeant, the next minute a patient.”

Patrocinio was transferred to a medical platoon at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina in late 2007, where he was finally placed on a regimen that included nine pills a day to deal with his emotional trauma. While there, an instructor who taught yoga on the base attended group therapy and suggested they consider yoga as a way to relieve the stress. He hesitated.

“I was thinking I was this tough guy so I didn’t embrace the idea,” he said.

Eventually, he decided he had nothing to lose and attended a class. He didn’t attempt a single pose that day, concentrating on learning “to breathe again.”

“I was lying on a mat and trying to push my thoughts away. Suddenly, I fell asleep. I couldn’t even remember the last time I was able to fall asleep without medication,” said Patrocinio, who now hopes to become a yoga instructor working with veterans. “That was when I knew yoga could help me get better.”