

‘Yoga at the VFW is a Win-Win’

Post leaders say the practice of this ancient exercise bolsters a healthy lifestyle and promotes the VFW within their communities

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Around the world, more of VFW’s nearly 5,800 local Posts are offering yoga programs to help veterans and community members experience improvement in their physical and mental health.

The VA reports on its website that yoga is one of the “evidence-based complementary and integrative health (CIH) approaches” offered as part of a veteran’s medical benefits package when deemed “clinically necessary” by his or her care team.

“Based on literature review, these approaches were found to be safe and have sufficient evidence of benefit to be recommended as appropriate components of care for the veteran population,” according to VA.

And it is not just beneficial for the veteran population. Community members also can take advantage of these yoga offerings at discounted rates, with money going to help local vets, and, at some Posts, the classes are offered for free.

“The low price of the yoga classes makes it very affordable and covers the cost of professional cleaning of the carpet in the hall where the classes are conducted,” said Kevin Calnan, commander of VFW Post 7272 in Bellingham, Mass., about 30 miles southwest of Boston. “The profit is deposited into the Post relief fund. It helps provide a revenue stream we wouldn’t normally have. That revenue gives us the ability to help veterans or to support other community organizations. This provides us with a positive footprint within the community.”

Pricing for the 60-minute yoga classes at Post 7272 ranges from \$7.50 to \$10. Lower rates are for people who commit to doing more classes. The \$10 rate is for one class only and payable at the door.

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Since September 2021, when the Bellingham yoga program began, nearly \$5,000 has been raised for the Post to help local vets. More than 120 people have taken the classes.

“Yoga at the VFW is a win-win for me and our vets,” said Sabrina Grancio, a frequent attendee. “It’s why I do it, and I like the participants.”

Other Bellingham residents are taking advantage of the classes, too.

“I’m thrilled by the sense of community support at the VFW,” Elle Taran said. “I’m connecting with local veterans and making amazing new friends along the way.”

A VFW Post in The Lone Star State also offers yoga classes.

“Our yoga classes are free for veterans and senior citizens and are part of a wellness program that we are trying to accomplish,” said Marcey Phillips, commander of District 17 in Texas and VFW Post 4709 in Conroe, Texas, north of Houston. “The participants absolutely love the classes, and they love the teacher who helps each student work to their full potential and gears the exercises to each student’s abilities. That inclusiveness makes it easy for people to keep coming back.”

Phillips adds that the classes enhance a healthy lifestyle.

“I feel that one of the largest benefits of offering our yoga program is helping to combat the ‘smokey bar’ stigma that the VFW has,” Phillips said.

‘BENEFITS... ARE AMAZING’

Calnan says yoga classes also promote VFW within the community.

“Another hope is that the community members who participate will support the VFW in other ways like at the Buddy Poppy drives or renting the hall,” Calnan said. “Any event or activity at the Post is its lifeblood. In my opinion, Posts need to be engaged with the community. If we can offer positive experiences to our members and make the Post a place people want to go, it’s a win-win for the community and our members.”

A VFW Post also is a comfortable place for a beginner to learn the practice, according to one Bellingham resident.

“I would not have even tried yoga if I had to walk into a high-end yoga studio,” Ed Baker said. “At the VFW, I don’t feel like I’m being judged. The benefits I get from this weekly class are amazing, [such as] mental discipline, breathing techniques [and] finding space in my own head to just calm down and relax.”

Calnan adds that his Post is “blessed” because one of the Post members, Dave Dunbar, is a

yoga instructor.

“He is willing to give back and help veterans through the VFW 7272 Bellingham Post,” Calnan said. “We are very fortunate to be in that position and make a little cash while we do it.”

Tara Castonguay, a wife and mother of two in Bellingham, learned about Post 7272’s yoga classes from a Facebook post. Her only obstacle to attending, she said, was finding someone to accompany her.

“I originally saw the Facebook post many months before I joined,” Castonguay said. “I was trying to convince someone to go to motivate me. Eventually, I was lucky enough to get one of my daughters to come along.”

‘A BONDING EXPERIENCE’

Castonguay added that she and her daughter were “super happy” with the atmosphere of the group.

“We were very comfortable and thoroughly enjoyed it,” she said. “When we got home, we were talking about how much we enjoyed the class and how great we felt. I was able to convince my Navy retired senior chief husband to join us for the next class. Shortly after that, we convinced our 16-year-old daughter to come.”

Castonguay said that beyond the health benefits of yoga, it is mentally stimulating as well.

“It is a bonding experience for the family because the four of us go together,” she said. “Once there, it is relaxing, and the mood is set as soon as we walk in. Once class starts, it is a mind/body experience. We have an amazing instructor, and he even makes it fun for novice yoga students.”

If you are interested in finding out more about yoga, try checking out this website: <https://www.myhealth.va.gov> and search for “yoga.” You’ll find an explanation of why you should try yoga, how you can recharge with yoga and an article titled “Pain? Try yoga.”

Additionally, The Veterans Yoga Project is a nationwide effort to promote yoga to veterans. Check it out at <https://www.veteransyogaproject.org>. You’ll find free yoga classes, both online and in-person, and learn about yoga. There also is an opportunity to participate in yoga teacher training.

The Veterans Yoga Project’s goal is to make mindful resilience techniques available to veterans. To accomplish this, several training programs for those wanting to teach in their community with sliding-scale scholarships are available to cover the cost of the program.

You also can check with your local VFW Post to find out about yoga classes that might be offered there.

This article is featured in the 2024 April issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by Dave Dunbar. Dunbar is a Navy veteran who served in the Vietnam War. He is a Life member of VFW Post 7272 in Bellingham, Mass., and leads the yoga program there. He has taught yoga classes for 18 years at sites around Boston and the commonwealth of Massachusetts.