



## VA Salt Lake City Health Care System

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#### Yoga pose takes on whole new meaning at VA Salt Lake City

They don't look the part: Tats, ball cap, scruffy beard. The room is silent except for the occasional clank of two dog tags banging together. The quest for inner peace is palpable and until now has eluded them.

“My body is different; there is an absence of tension, I'm not walking around anymore with my fists clenched.” Mhikal Munny, Marine Corps Veteran.

It's called “trauma sensitive” yoga, but these Vets don't care what you call it, they just say it works. The hour long sessions of stretching and meditation are easing the minds of those struggling with moral injury. “It allows me to redirect my energies from thoughts to feelings. The PTSD I started with is not the PTSD I have today. This practice enables me to slow down and to see what my issues are with combat. You get so bogged down with emotions and thoughts all day long and yoga allows me to transcend that.” Ezekiel Madden, Marine Corps Veteran.



Chaos in their personal lives due to physical injuries, post traumatic stress or military sexual trauma brings these brave Veterans together twice a week. The hour is spent literally soul searching.

They want to feel whole again and acknowledge that the journey begins within.

“Offering trauma sensitive yoga to help people heal from trauma is the most rewarding teaching that I do.” says instructor Yael Calhoun. “I have observed that yoga classes not only help people feel their bodies and learn to self-regulate, but they give people a social connection and a voice. Most Vets freely offer comments after a class: what felt good, what they experienced, why they want to come back. The word 'feel' is used -- 'I felt my muscles working,' or 'I finally felt my breath' which makes me know that the class was a success.”

Yoga rules don't apply in this classroom. Eyes can be open or closed there is no expectation here. It is a safe place to release and regain what was once lost.

“I focus on the moment and it instantly relieves my anxiety”, Ginger Mercer, Army Veteran.

It's been a privilege to see the transformation take place in our Veteran's lives; the physical, emotional and spiritual improvements. “It's been inspiring for the Women Veterans Program to support and be directly involved with bringing this innovative program to life!” says Gina Painter, Women Veteran Program Manager.

Veterans are also reporting significant physical improvements after just a few classes to include lower blood pressure and less aches and pains.

For many the long road back to what they once were is just beginning, one stretch, one pose, one breath at a time.

*Yael Calhoun is a registered yoga teacher through Yoga Alliance and is certified in Trauma-sensitive yoga through the Trauma Center and the Justice Resources Institute. The program is based on David Emerson's book "Overcoming Trauma Through Yoga: Reclaiming your Body"*