

Incarcerated Teens Learn Mindfulness

There are things about Juvenile Hall that make San Quentin seem positively uplifting by comparison. It's bleak to see kids locked up, traveling down the path of neglect or delinquency. When we arrive at the Alameda County Juvenile Hall's "Unit B-2," the teens are doing morning "check-in." One by one they stand and state how they are feeling (on a one-to-ten scale) and their goals, things like "get out of here" and "stop flashing on people." Many shift to look at us, new people with notebooks and cameras. Some begin performing with jokes or sarcasm.

Focus is the greatest challenge in the yoga classes. A dozen pairs of eyes and points of attention bounce around the room like exploding popcorn. The teacher, Erin Hill, 30, instructs the class firmly. Her brisk pace and continued instruction – "Extend your right arm up, press your left toes into the mat, gaze just in front of your foot, inhale and feel the belly rise" – leave little time for distraction or interruption. They protest, "This is dorky." "It's okay," she laughs, urging them to "embrace dorkiness." Her relentless enthusiasm wins over their attention. "Notice your heart beating. Listen to the sound of your breathing. Notice what emotion you're feeling – relaxed, agitated? Notice your body sensations in relation to your emotions."

Still, some chuckle, scoff, or just sit down defiantly and stop participating. But some don't. Some find a sense of relaxation. Some step forward to teach a pose proudly. Some sincerely chant "Om, Shanti – peace be unto all beings in the universe."

With funding from the Probation Department and Health Care Services, Niroga Institute offers yoga every weekday morning to the teens housed in B-2, a unit for twelve boys and eight girls. A Niroga study demonstrated that youth participating in yoga had improved self-control and reduced stress.

Niroga founder Bidyut Bose explains, "Yoga is a comprehensive discipline. We use breath to affect state-of-mind and facilitate introspection."

One boy, 18, says he does yoga postures and breathing exercises in his room. "It helps me find a place to relax, to deal with the counselors and peers, just to get through the day. The mornings before court, I breathe a lot and do some of the hard poses."

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