

Developing Optimal Mental Fitness Among First Responders

By: CASSANDRA BJELAJAC

The safety of the people who put on a uniform everyday to respond to calls for help from across the community is dependent on providing them with the skills to think as clearly as humanly possible under chaotic, dangerous conditions. As a community, it's our duty to also provide these self-sacrificing individuals with the skills to have a good quality of life when they are not on-call. The body and mind don't naturally shift to feelings of joy, safety, and clear-headed calmness after being on call to respond to other people's traumas or intervening in dangerous situations. It takes ongoing practice to train oneself to generate the right degree of stress response at the right time and then re-stabilize, returning to calm and letting go. Yoga For First Responders (YFFR) provides this skill set.

YFFR ground rules that ensure the traditional intention of yoga (to master the mind) remains the focus and a job-specific protocol and language for delivering yoga training to first responders makes the classes unique. This ensures that the practices not only resonate with first responders but also provide the skills needed to optimize mental and physical performance on shift and off. The mental discipline and physical drills practiced in YFFR on the yoga mat translate directly to what is needed during a first responder's shift.

In the classic novel, *How Yoga Works* (Roach, 2004), a young teacher carrying her yoga master's original texts is imprisoned, wrongfully accused of stealing the texts. She faces the challenge of living in a physical prison, but she is the only one not living in a mental prison. She uses the time to teach the captain and prison staff yoga in a way that relates to their inner and outer challenges. Living with ease and flow in the mind occurs through mastering the perceptions created by the mind, and reaching this state is accessible to most people by starting with a physical practice.

"The poses that I've taught you work from the outside...and try to help loosen up the chokepoints; all to get the inner winds moving again. But you can also go at it from the inside."

The captain character summarizes one of her teachings by saying, "No choking—then all the points where your body hurts or where it's getting old, would start to change, and get better. And good thoughts—happier thoughts—would start to grow more and more. It's amazing...," he said."

Later the imprisoned teacher further explains, "And so you see the original purpose of the poses was to make you healthy and strong, and straighten out your thought winds, to the point where you could meditate well." Instead of referring to meditation, she relates it to plumbing – cleansing the negative thoughts that create chokepoints mentally, limiting joy and limiting clarity of mind. "Eliminating misunderstanding" is a result of this process.

The mental discipline used to perform the physical poses starts to translate to control over the thoughts and control of the nervous system off the mat. YFFR training uses physical drills. These drills differ from any other fitness class because of a total constant focus on the breath. It's not just noticing the breath, it's breathing done as Tactical Breathwork that teaches the nervous system to activate and regulate, back and forth. It's essentially toning the nervous system and the brain, while delivering bonus benefits of increased awareness, strength, mobility, and control of the body.

Most people without dangerous jobs are living under a level of stress they don't recognize – never fully exhaling or using the diaphragm and its surrounding muscles -- never fully oxygenating the body. First responders have the added strain of facing chaotic conditions and traumas continuously. Physical drills done with a protocol and language that relates to the jobs of first responders becomes the entry point for learning to control the nervous system. This is the key to elimination of misunderstandings and negative thoughts that overtake the mind and lead to mistakes and fear-based reactions. Being able to optimally activate the nervous system and then return to a state of regulation is the key to feeling ease and peace mentally. In the book, *Light on Yoga (Iyengar, 1968)*, it says, “The right method of doing asanas [poses] brings lightness and an exhilarating feeling in the body as well as in the mind and a feeling of oneness in the body, mind and soul.”

Throughout the U.S., yoga classes bring students to a state of relaxation or encourage gymnastic-like poses. While relaxation may be enjoyable and it is a parasympathetic state for the nervous system (rest and digest), it does not serve as a tool to build resilience or react optimally in high-stress scenarios. The nervous system can be in a parasympathetic state when someone is relaxed, and it can be in that state while the mind is active. That is the time when there is the most plasticity in the brain, meaning the most flexibility to take in new information, change perceptions, and “plant new seeds”. An active, alert mind combined with a parasympathetic state of the nervous system is the best state for training the brain and body how to respond to inevitable stress. YFFR classes intentionally keep the brain active and focused to practice bringing the nervous system back to a regulated state after being activated.

In *The Body Keeps The Score* (Kolk, 2014), the author describes how stress and trauma produce hormones that move energy away from the brain and into the muscles to respond to the threat with either fighting or fleeing. When the body goes into a stress response, it is not possible to think as clearly because of this natural physical process. Additionally, the author describes studies that indicate those chemicals are stored in the cells unless the person does something to end the stress cycle and process the chemicals out of the tissues. For first responders, it is in the nature of the work to continually face high-stress situations or at least be prepared non-stop for a potential high-stress traumatic situation. More than anyone, first responders need to make an ongoing active effort to end the stress cycle in their body and return the nervous system to a regulated state, which is done by controlling the breath and training the mind.

In addition to the physical drills with tactical breathwork that are used in YFFR to maintain a healthy nervous system and master the mind, techniques for processing stored stress chemicals out of the tissues are also used. In YFFR, this is called “Removing The Armor” and it's followed by a time of “neurological reset.” Removing The Armor is a passive style of yoga akin to yin yoga that is done with job-specific language and applications. Holding deep positions for longer periods of time with a focused mind, controlled breath, and therefore regulated nervous system, encourages the movement of toxins and waste out of the fascia tissue that otherwise creates rigidity around joints and muscles. In *The Body Keeps The Score* and other books on the topic, this is referred to as cellular memory. Some students describe a nearly immediate shift in mobility capacity in the body with this type of practice.

While lifting weights and aerobic exercises have their own benefits, the protocol that makes up a YFFR class specifically targets the needs of first responders by processing stress chemicals out of the cells, building a resilient nervous system that equates to a resilient person, and optimizing mental and physical performance on the job. Yoga delivered without the YFFR ground rules and protocol can be highly

beneficial as well. However, first responders are living under exceptional conditions that require a consistent practice of the skills that will make them healthier and safer, as well as able to be responsive to their community on-shift and their family off-shift.

References

Iyengar, B. K. S. (1966). *Light on yoga: yoga dipika*. Schoken Books.

Kolk, V. D., & Bessel, A. (2014). *The body keeps the score: brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma*. Penguin Random House, LLC.

Roach, Michael and McNally, Christine. (2004). *How Yoga Works*. Diamond Cutter Press.