

Yoga Provides Mental Strength

A VFW member and his wife opened a yoga business, which provides free classes for veterans and first responders

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When Army Special Forces vet Brad Whiteman began dabbling in yoga, he did so to support his wife, Eliza, who was teaching yoga classes. But about seven years ago, he “selfishly” began yoga in earnest when he realized his body wasn’t responding to his lifestyle as it once had.

“I really didn’t classify myself as a regular yoga student,” said Whiteman, a member of VFW Post 1827 in Charlottesville, Va. “Rugby has been a huge part of my life for about 25 years. At 36, I found out my body was starting to fail me. It was affecting my ability to play rugby and my quality of life. Selfishly, I began yoga so I could continue playing rugby.”

Whiteman said he began practicing yoga regularly about four to five times a week. He saw a very quick physical change in terms of his flexibility and stability in his joints and muscles.

Yoga offered Whiteman more than a physical outlet, though. He noticed that over time, he was in a better emotional space.

“The analogy I use is that my fuse was about two inches short before yoga,” said Whiteman who served with the 10th Special Forces Group. “After yoga, that fuse grew longer and longer. People around me noticed the difference, too.”

He was able to deal with his frustrations and anxiety more easily and said it takes a lot to get him upset now that yoga is a regular part of his life.

Eliza knows first-hand the ways in which yoga increases mental strength. She has been doing yoga since she graduated from Alabama’s Auburn University. At first, she used it in addition to her regular workouts and found it enhanced her stability and balance.

Then, just months after Eliza and Whiteman married in 2003, he was deployed to Iraq for a

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year.

“Yoga showed me, figuratively and literally, that I could hold myself up on my own,” Eliza said. “This was the height of the war in Iraq, in 2004- 2005. Every breath was a prayer, and I was wracked with worry and anxiety. Yoga allowed me to focus on the present moment and gave me tools to use off of the mat when I felt stress and anxiety begin to consume me.”

FLYDOG IS BORN

In 2007, Whiteman transitioned from the military, and the family moved to Charlottesville, Va., where Whiteman was earning his Master of Business Administration at Darden Business School at the University of Virginia.

It was in Virginia that Eliza became a trained yoga instructor. In 2014, she led her first 200-hour yoga teacher training, which meant they needed a space to host it. From there, she began teaching classes, which grew in just a few months’ time.

With the community behind them, the Whitmans decided to become small business owners and open their own yoga studio.

“While I was in business school, I liked to write business plans just for fun,” Whiteman said. “Early on, I wrote one for a yoga studio because my wife was teaching yoga. In July 2015, we opened FlyDog Yoga.”

In its peak season, FlyDog sees 330 people come through in a day with 80 classes per week. The staff of 30 offers Power Vinyasa, Vinyasa, Aerial Yoga, Barre, Power Sculpt and Yin classes.

Eliza leads both 200-Hour Yoga Teacher Trainings and 300-Hour Advanced Teacher Trainings as well as other workshops and programs. She teaches yoga for the military community and first responders through FlyDog’s “Honor Our Heroes Program.”

The free classes are taught at fire stations around town and also at the studio. For two years, one of the classes for veterans was held at Post 1827, which incidentally, is where Whiteman’s rugby club meets.

MENTAL AND PHYSICAL BENEFITS

Whiteman had read in the March 2017 VFW magazine about a VFW Post offering yoga, so he took that magazine to the Post commander, who agreed it was a good idea. Whiteman said he has seen vets at class with chronic back pain and even more with invisible wounds such as PTSD.

He added that he finds most combat vets feel more comfortable around other combat vets in such situations.

“We want them to work through their challenges by exposing them to yoga and graduating into the public group classes,” Whiteman said. “If yoga is something they enjoy, they have something in common right away with non-veterans practicing yoga.”

At FlyDog, the staff understands that yoga is a broad term. It ranges from meditation to a rigorous wide spectrum of physical activity. For vets, in particular, the physical practice of yoga is a good introduction. What follows the physical benefits is an exposure to other aspects of yoga mindfulness such as breath work and the power of the breath in terms of calming the mind and the nervous system, Whiteman said.

“Being comfortable in stillness is not always a good place for veterans to be,” he said. “I ease them into this so that they are more comfortable in that space. Yoga, mindfulness and meditation have such positive impacts on the brain.”

In addition to running FlyDog, the Whitemans have four active children — Ava 12, Ethan 10, Cara 8 and Dylan 6.

“Our kiddos are involved in various sports and activities,” Eliza said. “Our oldest two attend classes as an opportunity to learn to de-stress and use yoga to complement their athletic endeavors. I taught and took yoga through all of my pregnancies. Our kids have always been around yoga and think of our studio and teachers as another home.”

Whiteman said he understands how intimidating yoga can seem, especially for veterans who aren’t used to being novices. Nevertheless, he encourages everyone to at least try it.

“I am the perfect ambassador for this,” Whiteman said and laughed. “I will never look pretty doing yoga. But hey, if I can do this or make it through this, absolutely anyone can.” Visit flydogyoga.com.

This article is featured in the April 2020 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Janie Dyhouse](#), senior editor for VFW magazine.