

Frontline Yoga is an Australian Based yoga charity that provides adaptive yoga services to the current and ex-serving ADF community. Adaptive yoga has both physical and mental health benefits

# Frontline Yoga Submission

**Inquiry into adaptive sport programs for  
Australian Defence Force veterans**

CEO

## About Frontline Yoga

1. Frontline Yoga is a health promotion-based charity established in 2015. We offer best-practice guidance and training on the delivery of adaptive yoga to the current and ex-serving ADF members and the wider frontline worker community. Through our network of skilled teachers, we also offer a suite of Yoga services that cater to the needs and abilities of all members of the community.

## Current evidence on the benefits of adaptive sport

2. Adaptive sports have been shown to have numerous benefits for individuals with physical and/or mental health impairments. These benefits can include:

- a. Physical Health Benefits: Adaptive sports can improve physical fitness, increase strength and endurance, and reduce pain and stiffness.
- b. Mental Health Benefits: Participating in adaptive sports can boost self-esteem, and confidence, and provide a sense of accomplishment. It can also help individuals with mental health impairments reduce anxiety, depression, and stress.
- c. Social Benefits: Adaptive sports can provide opportunities for individuals to connect with others and form supportive relationships. It can also help individuals develop a sense of community and belonging.
- d. Cognitive Benefits: Adaptive sports can also improve cognitive function, memory, and problem-solving skills.

3. Studies have shown that participating in adaptive sports can significantly improve the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of individuals with disabilities. It is important to note that the specific benefits may vary depending on the individual and the type of sport.

4. A growing body of evidence suggests that yoga can provide a wide range of benefits to individuals with physical and mental health impairments. Some of the specific benefits that have been found to be associated with yoga practice include:

- a. Physical benefits: Yoga has been found to improve flexibility, strength, balance, and endurance. It may also help to reduce pain and improve function in individuals with chronic conditions such as lower back pain, rheumatoid arthritis, and fibromyalgia.
- b. Mental health benefits: Yoga has been found to be effective in reducing symptoms of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It may also help to improve sleep quality and reduce stress.

5. Increasingly efforts have been made to evaluate the effectiveness of Yoga as a complimentary or standalone treatment for those who experience trauma or chronically stressful environments (Groessl et al., 2020; Macy et al., 2018, Jeter et al., 2015). Yoga based stress management in frontline workers has demonstrated capacity to improve wellbeing in a number of ways (Riley et al., 2017). In a study of healthcare workers, significant improvement on a variety of health metrics was found following an 8-week yoga-based stress management intervention. Improvements included reductions in stress, depression, secondary traumatic stress, burnout and alcohol consumption. Positive improvements were also found for overall mental health, relaxation, physical activity and awareness (Riley et al., 2017).

6. Similar effects have been found in other groups of frontline workers, even those whose traumatic experiences result in PTSD (Cushing et al., 2018; Seppälä et al., 2014). In a study of U.S.

Military Veterans, breathing-based meditation techniques reduced PTSD symptoms (Seppälä et al., 2014). Sudarshan Kriya yoga involves breathing mediation with breaks for discussion and stretching. The intervention involved a week long yoga program where participants met for three hour-long group sessions. Veterans engaging in an active yoga program showed reductions in PTSD symptoms on a self-report measure. They also showed reduced anxiety and respiration rate. These effects were maintained in a follow-up evaluation one month after. All but respiration rate were maintained a year post-intervention. No such effects were found in the waitlist control group.

7. For those who have experienced significant trauma, Trauma Aware yoga can provide particularly strong support (Cushing et al., 2018). Yoga programs tailored to veterans have been found to be effective in reducing PTSD symptoms (Cushing et al., 2018). Previous research using a six-week vinyasa style, trauma-aware yoga course found significant improvements in participants PTSD symptoms, anxiety, depression, and sleep. It was also associated with an improvement in mindfulness. This course consisted of six, 60 minute sessions focusing on coordinating movement with the breath and meditation. Trauma-sensitive adjustments included no hands on the participants during class, avoiding postures that could make participants feel vulnerable, allowing participants to keep their eyes open in the class and focusing on body sensing. This resulted in statistically and clinically significant reduction in symptoms on the PTSD Checklist-Military version, Beck Anxiety Index, and depression symptoms on the Patient Health Questionnaire. Additionally, post-program, they found significant improvements in mindfulness on the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale. They also showed statistically significant improvements on the Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index.

### **The role of sport in supporting individuals' transition**

8. In the military population, a study of veterans diagnosed with PTSD found that those who practiced yoga experienced significant reductions in symptoms of PTSD, as well as improvements in sleep quality and overall quality of life. Another study found that veterans with PTSD who participated in a 12-week yoga program experienced significant reductions in symptoms of PTSD, depression, and anxiety.

9. In a small-scale post-consumer study that Frontline Yoga ran in 2022 an adaptive Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Program resulted in a 50% reduction in PTSD symptoms. Our paper is still being written.

10. A study of mental ill-health in the Australian Defence Force (ADF) found more than half the ADF service members have experienced a mental disorder (Department of Defence, 2010). This is a rate higher than the general population despite generally better access to medical care. The most prevalent class of disorders were anxiety disorders, particularly PTSD. Frontline workers of all fields are at a high risk of traumatic life events and chronic stress (Dobson et al., 2021).

11. Considering the extreme consequences this can have to mental and physical health, consideration of practices that may mitigate these effects is of high importance. Yoga is increasingly becoming popular as a complimentary therapy. While many studies show promise (e.g. Donaldson et al, 2020; Gard et al., 2014; Jeter et al., 2015), the body of literature is relatively small and the mechanisms by which improvements occur are still uncertain (Macy et al, 2018).

12. Yoga has been found to be effective in helping veterans with physical and mental health impairments transition into civilian life. Some specific benefits that have been associated with yoga practice for veterans include:

- a. Improving physical function: Yoga can help veterans with physical injuries or chronic pain improve their flexibility, strength, balance, and endurance. This can help them to better manage the physical demands of civilian life and improve their overall quality of life.
- b. Reducing symptoms of PTSD and depression: Yoga has been found to be effective in reducing symptoms of PTSD and depression, which are common among veterans. A study of veterans with PTSD found that those who participated in a 12-week yoga program experienced significant reductions in symptoms of PTSD, depression, and anxiety.
- c. Improving sleep quality: Yoga has been found to improve sleep quality and reduce insomnia, which is a common problem among veterans.
- d. Improving social connections: Yoga can help veterans to improve their social connections and feel more supported as they transition into civilian life. Yoga classes provide a sense of community and offer veterans an opportunity to connect with others who have had similar experiences.
- e. Suicide prevention: Yoga has been found to be effective in reducing symptoms of depression, anxiety, and PTSD, which are all risk factors for suicide. Some specific studies have found that yoga can improve mood, reduce stress and anxiety, and improve overall quality of life for veterans, which can help to reduce suicide risk.

13. Overall, these studies suggest that yoga can be an effective tool for veterans transitioning into civilian life, especially those diagnosed with PTSD, depression, and other mental health conditions. However, it's important to note that yoga is not a replacement for professional care, and it is important that veterans have access to other mental health resources.

### **Gaps and funding**

14. For Frontline Yoga there are significant funding gaps in yoga services for the veteran community, which limits access to these services for many veterans who could benefit from them.

15. There are several ways that additional funding support can expand equitable access to yoga services for veterans:

- a. Increasing the number of yoga classes and programs available: Additional funding can be used to create new yoga classes and programs specifically for veterans. This will make it possible for more veterans to access these services and will increase the variety of classes and programs available to veterans.
- b. Providing scholarships and financial assistance: Additional funding can be used to provide scholarships and financial assistance to veterans who would not be able to afford yoga classes and programs otherwise. This will ensure that veterans have access to these services regardless of their financial situation.
- c. Improving outreach and education: Additional funding can be used to improve outreach and education efforts to veterans and their families. This will increase awareness of the benefits of yoga and make it easier for veterans to find and access yoga services.
- d. Developing a network of Trauma-Informed Yoga Practitioners: Additional funding can be used to train more yoga practitioners to become trauma-informed. This will create a network of practitioners who can provide safe and effective yoga services to veterans.

16. These funding gaps in yoga services for the veteran community can be addressed by providing additional funding support to organisations like Frontline Yoga. This will help to expand equitable access to these services for veterans and their families, and in turn, improve their overall well-being.

It is important to note that this information is based on the mission and vision of Frontline Yoga, which is a specific organisation working in this field. Other organizations may have different funding gaps and solutions.

### **Centralised co-ordination**

17. Frontline Yoga strongly supports Invictus Australia as the centralised authority to play a role in coordination and resourcing to provide access and where appropriate, enable consistency in the use of adaptive sport to support rehabilitation, transition or reintegration for serving members and veterans around the nation and across support services and organizations.

There are several reasons why Frontline Yoga believes that Invictus Australia is the best organisation to take on this role.

19. First, Invictus Australia is a well-established organisation with a strong track record of supporting veterans and serving members. They have a deep understanding of the unique needs of this population, and they are well-positioned to coordinate and provide access to adaptive sport programs that will meet those needs.

20. Second, Invictus Australia has a strong network of partnerships with other organizations that work with veterans and serving members. This network will enable them to coordinate and provide access to a wide range of adaptive sport programs, including yoga, that will be tailored to the specific needs of veterans and serving members.

21. Third, Invictus Australia is dedicated to creating opportunities for veterans and serving members to participate in adaptive sport programs that will help them to achieve their physical and mental health goals. This includes providing yoga programs that can help veterans and serving members to reduce stress, improve sleep, and manage chronic pain.

22. Fourth, Invictus Australia has a dedicated team of professionals, who are experienced in working with veterans and serving members, they are well equipped to provide education and training to other organizations, ensuring that veterans and serving members receive consistent, high-quality support, regardless of which organization they are interacting with.

23. In conclusion, Frontline Yoga believes that Invictus Australia is the best organization to take on the role of centralised authority to coordinate and provide access to adaptive sport programs that will support rehabilitation, transition, and reintegration for veterans and serving members around the nation. Invictus Australia's expertise, network of partnerships, and dedication to veterans and serving members make it the ideal organization to take on this role and provide access to programs like yoga that can improve the overall well-being of veterans and serving members.

## References:

- Australian Defence Force (2010), Mental health in the Australian Defence Force: 2010 ADF mental health prevalence and wellbeing study. <https://www.aph.gov.au/DocumentStore.ashx?id=526e5f5f-c5bc-4da0-aa74-86cc54f403d2>
- Biegel, G. M., Brown, K. W., Shapiro, S. L., Schubert, C. M., & Sibert, J. (2009). Mindfulness-based stress reduction for the treatment of adolescent psychiatric outpatients: a randomized clinical trial. *Journal of consulting and clinical psychology*, 77(2), 242.
- Cushing, R. E., Braun, K. L., C-layt, S. W. A., & Katz, A. R. (2018). Military-tailored yoga for veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder. *Military Medicine*, 183(5-6), e223–e231. <https://doi.org/10.1093/milmed/usx071>
- Donaldson, M. T., Neumark-Sztainer, D., Gaugler, J. E., Groessl, E. J., Kehle-Forbes, S. M., Polusny, M. A., & Krebs, E. E. (2020). Yoga practice among Veterans with and without chronic pain: A mixed methods study. *Medical care*, 58, S133. <https://doi.org/10.1097/MLR.0000000000001331>
- Gard, T., Noggle, J. ., Park, C. ., Vago, D. ., & Wilson, A. (2014). Potential self-regulatory mechanisms of yoga for psychological health. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 8, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2014.00770>
- Garland, E. L., Gaylord, S. A., Park, J. L., & Fredrickson, B. (2015). The role of yoga in improving mental and physical health: a brief review. *Primary care*, 42(2), 343-349.
- Groessl, E. J., Liu, L., Schmalzl, L., Chang, D. G., McCarthy, A., Chun, W. I., Sinclair, C., & Bormann, J. E. (2020). Secondary Outcomes from a Randomized Controlled Trial of Yoga for Veterans with Chronic Low-Back Pain. *International journal of yoga therapy*, 30(1), 69. <https://doi.org/10.17761/2020-D-19-00036>
- Jeter, P. E., Slutsky, J., Singh, N., & Khalsa, S. B. S. (2015). Yoga as a Therapeutic Intervention: A Bibliometric Analysis of Published Research Studies from 1967 to 2013. *The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine (New York, N.Y.)*, 21(10), 586–592. <https://doi.org/10.1089/acm.2015.0057>
- Macy, R. J., Jones, E., Graham, L. M., & Roach, L. (2018). Yoga for Trauma and Related Mental Health Problems. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 19(1), 35–57. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838015620834>
- Ruzek, J. I., Rauch, S. A., Acierno, R., Cook, J. M., Difede, J., Dobscha, S. K., ... & Spiro, A. III. (2012). A randomized controlled trial of virtual reality exposure therapy for posttraumatic stress disorder in active duty service members. *Journal of traumatic stress*, 25(6), 517-524.
- Seppälä, E. M., Nitschke, J. B., Tudorascu, D. L., Hayes, A., Goldstein, M. R., Nguyen, D. T. H., Perlman, D., & Davidson, R. J. (2014). Breathing-Based Meditation Decreases Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Symptoms in U.S. Military Veterans: A Randomized Controlled Longitudinal Study. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 27(4), 397–405. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.21936>