

Prison Yoga Teachers' Newsletter

From Selina, Sally and Victoria, Yoga Co-ordinators



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Autumn 2020

Small Steps, Safety First!



By Selina

Prisons are high risk environments for an epidemic due to the widespread health vulnerabilities and the challenges for social distancing imposed by limited space in closed settings. As they try to open up, they've been confronted with distinct challenges. This has led to creative approaches which might shape the future of prison yoga teaching.

The PPT has four prison systems in its remit: The Irish Prison Service, Scottish Prison Service, The Northern Ireland Prison Service and Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (for England and Wales). In March, ALL prisons across these four prison systems, went into lockdown suspending external visits, including their yoga classes. Across the board, restrictions are easing much later than in the wider community, with localised differences. We talked to colleagues about what has been happening in their areas and future plans.

Ireland



Martin O'Neill, Governor of Mountjoy Campus shared how The Irish Prison Service had seen no cases of Covid-19 amongst prisoners. This was due to quick, decisive action and strict measures. "Working with prisoners as equals during the pandemic has been revolutionary and saved lives. Of particular importance has been the Red Cross, which uses a

system of prisoner volunteers to provide peer support, model good behaviour and provide a system of feedback about what works and doesn't."

There have been some periods when prisoners have been locked in their cells for 22 or 23 hours a day, but slowly things

The Prison Phoenix Trust encourages prisoners in their spiritual lives through meditation and yoga sensitively tailored to students' needs. We support prisoners and prison staff through teaching, workshops, correspondence, books and newsletters. We assist qualified yoga teachers in establishing and maintaining weekly classes in prisons, secure hospitals and hostels throughout the UK and Ireland. We offer training and ongoing support in person and over the phone.

have begun easing in phases. There is a three-phase plan to ease restrictions, including in the prison schools, where every activity – including yoga sessions – will be risk assessed. Martin sees people's mental and physical well-being as critical, and therefore a return of yoga classes would be welcome, should risk assessments deem them safe.

Physical visits from outsiders have started (limited to 15 minutes, and with strict risk minimisation procedures in place), and people are let out of their cells for longer periods. Prisons are responding to localised outbreaks and whilst physical visits had initially resumed, they have been suspended again in Portlaoise and Midlands Prisons.

They have been making good use of the prisons' internal TV stations to get information out during lock-down about sleeping properly, fitness workouts, mental health, and awareness of the potential for overdosing. As visits from outside resume and drugs come into prisons again, after some months of people being drug free, this is a serious concern.

England

Suzy Dymond-White, Governor at Eastwood Park and a SPPT trustee, explained how all prisons are planning how to resume services. These need to be approved centrally but the message is: go in small steps and make sure that everything is in place for safety, rather than rushing.

Cases of infection among staff are falling, with still no active prisoner cases at Eastwood Park and just a small number isolated as a precaution. The staff infection rate remains very low.

First on everyone's agenda is social visits. Well-planned contact-free visits have begun and are happening in most sites. Gym activity is still restricted to outside exercise in small numbers with no equipment, with an expectation that when gyms in the community open, there will be guidance on what is acceptable. Thought has been given as to what classes could safely be run, with a view that yoga is one of the safest gym activities so will be given priority. Mats can be spread out appropriately in a sports hall and yoga provides some great techniques for coping with lockdown stresses.

Education classes are still on hold but with plans for more



distance learning. Cell time varies, depending on whether inmates have jobs, including essential jobs like kitchen workers, or those where they can work in the open, like gardeners. "Some women tell me they enjoy the peace of being locked away and much needed thinking time without the pressures of daily prison life!" said Suzy. Video calling families continues but is not believed to be the case in all prisons. In Eastwood Park there is a digital facility to live-stream funerals and have a video meeting with a dying relative.

Scotland

The Scottish Prison Service (SPS) introduced a number of measures to reduce the spread of the virus, suspending visits, education classes, communal dining and non-essential prison work. It also restricted numbers attending exercise or recreation at any one time, closed gyms and increased the frequency of hygiene procedures. Physical visits across the entire prison estate resumed in August, with some changes to limit the number of visitors, although under-twelves can hug those they are visiting. The SPS has done well with such measures: there have only been three confirmed Covid cases among prisoners. There have, however, been a few more cases of staff infections, echoing what the Irish Prison Service experienced.

Stuart Kelly at HMP Perth offered his insights into the current situation in Scottish prisons. Stuart spoke from his personal experience as a Programs Officer in the Education Department at HMP Perth, but much of what he says applies to other prisons.

The education department opened up again to prisoners on 10th August. A lot of planning has happened to ensure prisoners and staff are kept safe. A full risk assessment was undertaken before allowing prisoners back into the classroom. Prisoners have been arranged into bubbles of 20 people, according to flat (aka landings) with social distancing and no mixing of different bubbles. Prisoners remain in their bubbles, and move around the prison, from one class or activity together to another. Everything is deep cleaned regularly. Different bubbles don't mix. It is still very restricted.

Family visits in Perth have taken place via Zoom for two months. Currently only six prisoners are allowed in the visits centre at a time. Each prisoner is allowed to receive visits from one household.

When asked about yoga classes re-starting at the prison, he cited two practical problems: (1) the fact that prisoners now move around in bubbles, rather than following their own activity choices; (2) the yoga room is small, presenting a social distancing challenge. Stuart hopes things improve and looks forward to classes starting once again.

Northern Ireland

A prison yoga teacher who represents the PPT coordinating prison yoga teaching in Northern Ireland, had some great insights. Like elsewhere, no external staff are allowed into any of the nation's three prisons, so prison staff have undertaken some ongoing activities. This has meant nearly all education is on hold and gyms have been shut down in all three prisons. Staff working across different sites have had to choose one. For example the Development Worker chose to be based at Hydebank for the duration, facilitating some wellness activities on the landings. Each landing acts as a 'family' so all activities are done together in that group. That includes all aspects of wellness across the mental and physical health spectrum. Mental health incidents and self-harm are down in Maghaberry, linked to fewer drugs getting into prisons.

At Hydebank a newsletter was set up, providing an opportunity to reach yoga students. The teacher we spoke to submitted a message, including a reminder of PPT resources in the library and a link to the PPT online handouts. Like other teachers reaching out to their prisons, she had emailed that through to gym staff, but wasn't sure whether anyone did anything. It is thought many are still on long term sick leave, or stretched in their roles.

Zoom visits are taking place, but lack of space for social distancing and security means (continued on p.3)

Prison, Straight from the Horse's Mouth



Victoria reviews the latest addition to our recommended reading list

Carl is a former prisoner sentenced to two and a half years for criminal damage. He served a year of that sentence in two London prisons and on his release decided to write the guide containing all the information he wished he'd known when he came into contact with the justice system.

At just under 200 pages, his book *Prison: a survival guide* delivers a wealth of pithy, down to earth, tips, tricks and get-arounds for the newly imprisoned. There's reassurance and advice for loved ones outside, and a few shocking bits of information too.

The book is arranged in bite-sized chunks, with cartoons by Banx. It details the journey from arrest to imprisonment, enabling the reader to navigate the prison system and rules.

Everything is covered, from how to access education and support services in the prison, to brewing hooch from your breakfast contents, to living with your fellow prisoners and maintaining your sanity.

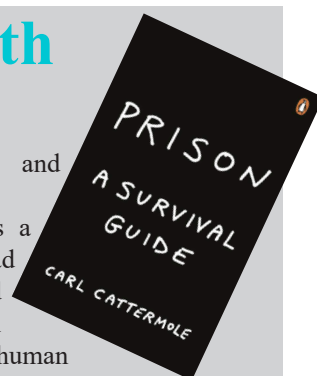
He has some wonderful guest contributors: a woman prisoner, an LGBTQ prisoner, someone in youth custody, an addicted prisoner, a prison wife, and the child of a prisoner. Their sections are profoundly moving and help to round the book out.

Carl has a degree of antipathy to the criminal justice system - that's understandable - and this is reflected in a good humoured way. On the whole, his attitude towards the system is balanced by his understanding that prison staff have had increasingly tough times because of

underfunding and overcrowding.

The book is a compulsive read but be prepared to run the full spectrum of human emotions from humour to horror. The section on 'How To Stay Sane' reduced me to tears, and I marvelled at the levels of human ingenuity. (Who knew you could make a secret compartment from toothpaste?)

It does such a good job covering life in prisons, underpinning that section in our *Yoga Teacher Handbook*, that we've added it to the recommended reading list for those teaching in prison, or considering such work. (Let us know if you want to see the complete list.)



(continued from p.2) it hasn't been practical to offer things like yoga classes via Zoom. But it is now being considered, even if just for staff initially, with teaching shared between three prison yoga teachers. Funders are keen to resume classes, which might mean two classes instead of one each week, to fit in all the classes before the end of March 2021. This would give scope for a females/staff class and one for YOs.

Wales

The yoga teacher at HMP Berwyn, had no contact from her prison about suspension of classes, just an assumption that as Wales went into lockdown that classes wouldn't continue. This seems to be common among teachers who were working in prison before lockdown. She'd always used handouts, and is hoping her students will have been using these on their own. She sent additional lessons to her line manager and was encouraged to learn they were being shared with yoga students. Whilst some men in her classes had been independently practising meditation, they were mostly reluctant to practise yoga due to lack of space in a shared cell.

Like in the wider community, Wales has been more cautious in reducing lockdown measures in prisons too. Cardiff, Usk and Parc prisons are now currently offering limited visits for family and friends. Although these have now been temporarily suspended in HMPs Berwyn and Swansea.

Whilst it is clear there are differences in new ways of doing things, all prisons in Ireland and the United Kingdom seem to understand the need to respond quickly to localised risk, to put stricter measures back in place if needed. But with well-being also identified as a top priority, there are some encouraging signs for the return of yoga classes: three weekly classes have restarted at Heathrow Immigration Removal Centre, and at Elizabeth Fry Approved Premises in Reading there are now bi-weekly Zoom classes.



Staying Connected – Emerging Stronger

**A report on the PPT's June teacher workshop
by a prison yoga teacher**

In June, the PPT organised a useful and enjoyable prison yoga teachers' workshop. Dave Grosvenor, Residential Worker at an Approved Premise (AP) shared his experience about the place for yoga. We also heard from three AP teachers.

Dave was a prison officer for ten years before becoming a Residential Worker at Stonnall Road, an AP functioning as a bridge between custody and community. Various other specialist groups, such as mental health and drug dependency, support Stonnall Road residents to successfully return to the community. They average three months in the hostel. By their nature all are

high risk and on license. Some are on Home Detention Curfew Tag. Residents can spend time out of the AP, but have to be back for their curfew.

Prior to lockdown, Stonnall Road had held a yoga workshop with the Prison Phoenix Trust. Initially, some

of the young men were sceptical, concerned about their image. But once a few started the class, those sitting on the side lines soon joined in. They felt the benefits of yoga and meditation: a sense of well-being, peace and physical release. Dave sought approval and budget for a regular class with a local prison yoga teacher. Unfortunately this was just before COVID restrictions! But funding has been agreed, so classes will start once the go ahead is given after lockdown.

One difference between prisons and APs is that in prison, you can go to the gym and do other physical activities. APs on the other hand have limited space and a complex system of health and safety risk assessments, making it hard to offer any physical activity. Consequently, many AP residents have plenty of pent up energy, especially from frustration and anger.

Residents can become restless and for those battling addictions, life becomes even tougher and more frustrating, making relapse more likely. Those residents who had previously taken up yoga in custody already know the real benefits they offer: helping with sleep, relaxing and dealing with stresses of life as well as giving physical release. After yoga, life looks and feels much better than it does when you're stressed.

The second part of our teachers' workshop centred on teachers' experience of and strategies for teaching and maintaining contact with prisons during lockdown. Ireland operates a different system so that teaching by Zoom may soon become possible, but is not currently an option elsewhere. An experienced yoga teacher spoke about the difference of teaching in prison and the London AP where she was working before lockdown. Another teacher described the process of starting up a class in an AP. A third explained how she prepares and encourages attendance at her AP in Oxford, and a fourth ran through new ways of working, including fortnightly Zoom classes at her Reading AP.

Going into small groups, we shared experiences of supporting prisoners remotely during lockdown. Many were finding this challenging. The importance of keeping in touch with our line manager was discussed, by offering to help and reminding them we are still here. Useful suggestions included emailing our own lesson plans and resources to the right staff member, for distribution to prisoners, and reminding our prisons that the PPT has great handouts downloadable from their website. Other suggestions included offering more but shorter classes to smaller groups/individuals to ensure social distancing, and online classes for prison officers.

Recently the newspaper reported 23 deaths of prisoners from COVID in prisons across England and Wales. It's another reminder to keep well so we are ready to resume yoga and meditation in prison when the go-ahead is given. We finished with a reminder of the sacred in our work, concluding with a short meditation, and left feeling inspired, renewed and centred.



Dave

Spread the Word: New Yoga and Meditation Handouts Now Available!



At our public Zoom event in June, PPT Trustee and former prisoner James said how valuable it would be if ALL prisoners had the PPT's details in their cells. Since April we've started a process of doing just that! We made yoga sequences and meditation instructions available on our website, so prison staff can download and include them in in-cell packs. These packs have been fundamental during lockdown to give people constructive activity whilst being confined to their cells for up to 23 hours a day.

We started with ten handouts and there are now ten more available. If you were teaching in prison or secure premises in February, or have any contacts in your local prison, you can help get the word out about these. If your usual line manager is unable to help, we suggest phoning the switchboard and asking to speak to whoever is responsible for in-cell activity packs.

The handouts are popular with prison staff and prisoners. They also give you an opportunity to show your support for the prison, and to stay in touch, making it easier to get back in and teach when the time is right. They can be found here <https://www.theppt.org.uk/yoga-handouts/> - call us at the office on 10865 512521 to get the password to access these resources.

Training for Teachers

Autumn Meditation Day for Yoga Teachers and Letter Writers

Saturday 17th October 10 a.m. – 4 p.m., online. £10

Our annual retreat is being held online this year. The day, held mostly in silence, offers a chance to deepen your own meditation practice so you feel more confident in offering it as part of your teaching. A talk on the practice, a chance to virtually meet one-to-one with the PPT facilitators and an asana practice before lunch will provide the support you need. Your home needn't be totally silent, like a retreat centre. We'd rather you welcome the realities of what's happening domestically and weave them into your practice, rather than seeing them as obstacles. We hope you can join us.

For more information, or to book your place on the meditation day, please get in touch with Laura – laura@theppt.org.uk

An Introduction to Teaching Yoga in Prison - CANCELLED

Sunday 15th November 2020, Wytham Village Hall

This annual opportunity to find out how yoga and meditation give unconditional support, affirmation and encouragement in a highly regulated, stressful setting like prison, has been cancelled this year, as workshops and yoga classes in criminal settings are almost entirely still suspended. We are navigating the new landscape of where and how classes will restart, supporting teachers who'd been working in prison before lockdown, to resume their teaching. As prisons adapt to the changing conditions, we will share and guide teachers to safely run classes within the framework of new measures. As new opportunities arise, we will offer this informative and popular training again, either in person or online. Watch this space.

Meditation Together

Every Tuesday 8.30 - 8.55 a.m.



Staff at the Prison Phoenix Trust sit in meditation each day from 8.30 to 8.55 a.m. Prisoners, volunteers, trustees and prison yoga teachers are invited to join, wherever you are. We may not be together, but in fact we are never separate. (Regular sitting makes that clearer!) And if 8.30 isn't a good time for you, it doesn't matter: any time you do it is time well spent.

We share this by Zoom each Tuesday morning from 8.30 - 8.55 a.m. We sit on other days at that time, but with only the technology of breath, body and attention. Join when you can! Contact Laura@theppt.org.uk to register for the Tuesday meditation. We'll send joining instructions.