Veterans Yoga Project
Healing Retreat Annual Report

2018 Women Veterans Retreat
Feathered Pipe Ranch, Helena MT
Veterans Yoga Project Retreat Mission

For 5 days in September 2018, nineteen veterans gathered at a women’s healing retreat at the Feathered Pipe Ranch in Helena, Montana. The retreat was led by 4 female facilitators (two of them veterans): a clinician, a yoga teacher, the Veterans Yoga Project board president, and the Veterans Yoga Project Director of Programs. The retreat intended to provide female veterans with an opportunity to learn skills to enhance their recovery and/or build their resilience via:

- Instruction and practice in self-regulation skills including breathwork, meditation, mindful movement, guided rest and gratitude practices;
- Various recreational activities with plenty of time to unplug, including hiking, swimming, napping and connecting with other veterans; and
- Information about social, medical, legal and mental health resources available to veterans

Retreat Participants

Veterans attending served in eras from Vietnam to OIF/OEF and served in the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, and Air Force. All participants were female. Participants came to the retreat from Nebraska, Illinois, Michigan, Montana, Texas, New York, California, Nevada, Ohio, New Hampshire, Maryland, and Washington. 64% of participants reported they had practiced yoga once a week or more in the month prior to the retreat. Only one participant reported that this was her first experience with yoga.

Figure 1. 19 total participants attended the retreat. The veteran support staff included the clinician (Army) and the VYP Director of Programs (Marine Corps).
Stages of Recovery

Participants represented all different stages of recovery or resilience-building. Participants expressed symptoms of depression, fibromyalgia, Military Sexual Trauma, Posttraumatic Stress, Traumatic Brain Injury, and anxiety. Some expressed attending the retreat with the intent of addressing symptoms and some were in the post-traumatic growth stage of recovery and came to help teach and support the veteran family. Participants were asked to fill out a post-retreat survey. Fourteen participants filled out the post-retreat survey. 93% of participants reported feeling very satisfied with the retreat. All participants reported they were very likely to continue using breathing practices and meditations for recovery and resilience. 93% participants reported they were very likely to continue using mindful movement for recovery and resilience. 86% participants they were very likely to continue using guided rest (yoga nidra) for recovery and resilience.
Post-Retreat Results

Changes were measured from one week immediately before the retreat until a week following the retreat, allowing at least two weeks between measure responses.

Functional Outcomes

Functional outcomes were measured using the Patient-Reported Outcomes Measurement Information System® (PROMIS-29), a tool designed to measure self-reported physical, mental and social health and wellbeing. Change scores were based on standardized scores provided by measure developers as derived from a large U.S.-based sample. The PROMIS-29 is a publicly available health related quality of life measure that has been validated for many diseases (Source: www.healthmeasures.net). On average, participants reported clinically meaningful improvements in sleep disturbance over the period in which they attended the retreat. They also reported significant improvements in depression and fatigue while other areas of functioning showed some improvements as well.

*Indicates recommended clinically meaningful change of .5 standard deviations
*Raw scores used instead of standard scores due to single subscale-item missing
Posttraumatic Growth

Personal growth over the period of the retreat was measured with the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI), the most widely used measure of the positive changes following highly stressful and potentially traumatic events. Changes were measured using raw scores from respondents. On average, participants reported improvements in all PTGI domains, including: relating to others, awareness of personal strength, awareness of new possibilities, appreciation of life, and spiritual change. ‘Relating to others’ was the domain with the greatest increase at 20%. These changes are also reflected in Veterans’ statements at the end of this report.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relating to Others</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Strength</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Possibilities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appreciation of Life</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual Change</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Testimonials

“I found the most helpful thing about the retreat was being united with other Women Veterans and focusing how to be better and deal with our situation in a more holistic way.”

“The community of women, a supportive environment and seeing how far I’ve come along my own wellbeing journey was the most helpful thing about the retreat.”

“I am very grateful for the space to breathe and process. Also very grateful it was a women's retreat. Felt safe and warm and allowed for healing. This retreat really was a benchmark in my recovery process to see how far I have come in 4 years. Recognizing that healing is possible as I reflect on the changes I have undergone since previous retreats in 2015 and 2017. This retreat really provided for me to meditate in a different way. Being at breath and peace.”

“The support, teachings, and the overall relaxed atmosphere that allowed plenty of time to quietly listen to my breath, being more aware without distractions in my movements, and to learn that letting the hectic noise, atmosphere at home can be easier by using techniques learned at this retreat.”

“Sharing supportive, healing, intentional space with other women veterans [was most valuable]. New tools for self-care and healing that I can take with me and share with others. Nature time, solo and with others. The facilities and folk running them to help hold space for us there.”

“I found that the connections we made the most powerful part of this retreat.”

“The most valuable part of this retreat was more self awareness of being kind to myself.”

“I found the most helpful part of the retreat to be the optional-ness of it all. A lot of retreats I end up feeling bad because there are things that I "should" be doing. It was very nice being given the space to just exist. It was the first time in a long time where I didn't feel pressured or hurried to be doing. All I had to do was 'being'.”

“I would have liked more time at the retreat. As I know in order to solidify a practice one needs to do it for a couple of weeks. Also it would be awesome to have more VYP classes in my area and more yoga teacher trainings in my area. So I can be in this YOGA ENERGY more often. Thank you so much for creating this Retreat!!!”
Testimonials (continued)

“I wouldn't change anything except maybe making it longer. I don't think that's realistic because life is busy and it was hard for me to get away for the 5 days but wish it was longer.”

___________________

“I am so grateful for the opportunity to heal at the Feathered Pipe Ranch.”

___________________

“Women's retreat is the way to go.”

___________________

“This retreat was deeply moving and healing in ways I never expected. I can only begin to express my gratitude for the opportunity to share this experience. I am taking so much forward with me in my life, and leaving behind things that don't serve me or which have been causing suffering. My sleep has improved, my relationships with other and myself are changing toward the positive, and I have much more clarity about further steps in healing and my path from here. I have already been experiencing it unfold. My heart is bursting with the joy of all this and the readiness and openness to do this new work. Thank you, thank you, thank you.”