How to ease the mind of returning veterans: yoga

Derek Auguste, a former Army sergeant, is used to following instructions. So by the time yoga instructor Molly Birkholm finished her relaxation session, he was at ease.

Auguste was one of 40 or so military veterans and community members practicing yoga and relaxation techniques at Warrior Wednesday, a monthly forum hosted by United Way of Miami-Dade as part of its Mission United veterans support group.

So far, topics have included transitioning back into civilian society and employment. The October session was devoted to mindfulness, a meditative technique that focuses on the present moment, through yoga.

“Anything that can help me deal with my anxiety is worth learning how to apply,” Auguste said.

Birkholm, co-founder of Warriors at Ease — a yoga practice intended to help veterans deal with stress, trauma and combat injuries — led the group through a meditation session and Q-and-A discussion. Civilians and veterans alike found themselves dealing with common issues: busy minds and restless nights.

“The noise in my head just wouldn’t shut up,” said one participant after the session. Heads around the room nodded.
According to Mission United vice chair Tomas Erban, finding mutual ground through shared experiences is the goal. He said he wants the forums to help active-duty members and military veterans re-acclimate to civilian life through interacting with community members.

“I was very impressed with the level of honesty,” Erban said of previous sessions. “It (gives) the veterans a chance to get together and discuss different issues that impact them.”

Auguste, who served in Iraq and Haiti, said the sessions have helped him deal with the sense of isolation he felt after leaving the military.

“I felt alone a lot of the times. I thought I was going through it by myself.”

Now, he says, he’s learned there is a community for him.

“The thing that heals all of us is community,” Birkholm said during her yoga session. “This community needs each other. This is yoga as well.”

After the session, Auguste said he felt more rested and less burdened.

Brian Lynch, Mission United’s director and a former major in the U.S. Marine Corps, said he plans on continuing the Warrior Wednesdays each month. The next session will feature Amishi Jha, a University of Miami associate professor of psychology who has done a lot of work with veterans and mindfulness training.

“It’s inspiring and refreshing to see so many people in Miami come around for their veterans,” Lynch said.

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