

## Researchers 'going to the mat' to help teens cope with stress

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FIU YogaTeens staff & volunteers: Leah Ackerman; Patty Ware; Julianna Horton; Megan Murphy; Eric Wagner, Ph.D.; Christine Spadola, Ph.D.; Staci Leon-Morris, Psy.D.; and Michelle Hospital, Ph.D.

Though yoga is believed to have started more than 2,000 years ago, FIU-

BRIDGE researchers and FIU students are finding that this ancient practice may have much to offer teens dealing with the many pressures that young people face in our modern world.

Helping a shy boy open up. Helping a non-vocal girl find her voice. Helping a teen deal with the stress of growing up. According to some schools of thought, the solutions to these and other concerns may be a question of mind over matter. With the support of The Ware Foundation, researchers at FIU-BRIDGE are pursuing this question in regard to yoga.

FIU-BRIDGE Associate Director Michelle Hospital, Ph.D. was approached by The Ware Foundation President Morgan Soumah, who expressed interest in better understanding the therapeutic potential of yoga with at-risk youth. Hospital shared the idea of a yoga study with FIU-BRIDGE Director Eric Wagner, Ph.D. and together, they brought in another FIU-BRIDGE colleague, Staci Morris, Psy.D., to form the team that developed a research proposal, which was ultimately submitted to and selected for funding by The Ware Foundation.

Then the work of putting together a teen-friendly yoga program began.

As head of a vital research center that's a university-community partnership with Banyan Health Systems, Wagner was tasked to identify opportunities in line with the motto Connecting Research With Communities. But another important part of his work as a professor in the School of Social Work at Robert Stempel College of Public Health & Social Work involves identifying young social welfare and public health professionals who are able to make the connections necessary to do in-depth research and effect needed changes. He saw this potential in Christine "Chrissy" Spadola, Ph.D. early on.



FIU YogaTeens' Leah Ackerman, Patty Ware and Christine Spadola.

"Chrissy has great training in both scientific research methods and yoga instruction. She's a rare person uniquely qualified to run this study. She's doing a great job, and we're looking forward to exciting findings," Wagner said.

Spadola came to FIU Stempel College as a Ph.D. student in 2012 with a genuine desire to help vulnerable populations. Her work has been included in nearly 30 professional and peer-reviewed publications and presentations. She's also a proponent of providing free holistic programs and believes there should be no financial barriers to achieving and maintaining mental and physical health. This idea was solidified for her

as she was attending a free yoga class in her Downtown Miami neighborhood at Bayfront Park. There, among the other young professionals like herself, she saw one homeless man who was seriously making the effort to follow the class with everyone else. That event planted a seed that came to bear fruit when she was tasked by Wagner to lead what was to become FIU YogaTeens community based, intervention research.

Spadola, who graduated with a doctorate from FIU Stempel College in December and is now a postdoctoral fellow with FIU-BRIDGE, serves as project coordinator of this Ware Foundation-funded project that investigates the effects of yoga on the mental health and wellbeing of at-risk teenagers in Miami-Dade County.

"A lack of self-esteem is at the root of many problems. That's why we've aimed to make FIU YogaTeens fun and empowering," Spadola said. Together with social work master's student Julianna Horton, who serves as the lead yoga teacher and a research associate with FIU YogaTeens, yoga classes were designed to serve teens 12- 17 who are engaged in a Miami-Dade County community agency. But they still needed a location, and that's where a private-sector partner stepped in.

Kiersten Mooney, co-owner of Green Monkey Yoga along with Luca Richards, director of teachers with Green Monkey Yoga, proved essential to the fruition of FIU YogaTeens. Richards and Mooney collaborated on developing the weekly themes and yoga sequences for the classes, and Green Monkey Yoga provides valuable studio space where the classes take place.

"We were so excited to create something that can give young people access to the help they need, and I felt such a willingness to co-create, collaborate and explore options. Of course I was onboard!" Richards said.

"We are grateful to The Ware Foundation for their financial support of the project and the valuable assistance we receive from Kiersten Mooney, Luca Richards, Green Monkey Yoga and Banyan Health Systems," said Spadola, who acknowledges all of the support FIU-Bridge receives allows the team to provide free yoga for teens and, at the same time, conduct such important research. "We are also thankful for our talented team of volunteer research assistants including, Stina Gee, Megan Murphy, Leah Ackerman, Carolina Ochoa, Patty Ware, Rebecca Reyes and Ireysis Ramos."

FIU YogaTeen participants fill out questionnaires before they start, answering questions about substance use, mindfulness, compassion, quality of life, gratitude and empathy. Then they fill out a follow-up questionnaire at the end of the 12-week program. Classes are capped at 20 kids with three instructors present at all times.

So far, parents have good things to say about FIU YogaTeens.

"My daughter was a very nervous type—she would hardly speak she was so nervous. But after going to FIU YogaTeens, she got some confidence and she's not as nervous anymore. She really looks forward to it," said one mother.

A second mother said, "Both my son and daughter go to FIU YogaTeens. Between all the school work and video games, these classes are the only thing that gets my son off the couch and into the world. He's pretty shy. I was really surprised that he liked the classes, but he does! He finds them relaxing and they help him concentrate." She went on to add, "My daughter is naturally a more active type, but even she appreciates the calm feeling she gets from the classes."

Spadola appreciates the need for calm in today's hectic world, "The class ends with a brief, guided three-minute meditation. I save that moment

for silence because nowadays it may be the only time teens can get a quiet moment."

If she was ever nervous about how teens would respond to [yoga](#), any misgivings were dispelled very early on. "Halfway through the first class, I looked up and everybody was smiling," Spadola said.

*Parents' names have been withheld to protect the privacy of the teens participating in FIU YogaTeens community based, intervention research.*

**More information:** FIU YogaTeens is actively enrolling teens ages 12-17 who are engaged with community agencies in Miami-Dade County. Teens receive free yoga classes and can earn up to \$60 for completing project related surveys. Interested? Call Christine Spadola at 305-348-4720 for additional information.

Provided by Florida International University

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