

Interview with Laura Wilson

- What are your aims for the festival?

There are three elements to the festival. The main aim is to raise funds for our outreach program. Many of the people we teach and the organisations we partner with do not have the funds to pay for the yoga they receive and fund-raising events like this one is one of the ways we address this. It is also a great way for us to get our message out there and raise awareness that yoga isn't just about being fit and flexible but about connection and wellbeing and self care. For us, inclusivity and accessibility is crucial. And thirdly it's a way to bring together the yoga community and to celebrate how generous and willing people are to participate and share yoga in the name of a good cause.

- How has the festival grown from previous years?

The festival grows each year as we build on the last one. We learn what works and doesn't work and allow it to evolve naturally. This year we have paired up some of Edinburgh's most popular and experienced teachers to offer totally bespoke workshops that celebrate all aspects of yoga.

- Are you expecting a big turnout this year?

It's hard to predict! But certainly there is a buzz around the event and much interest on social media so we are certainly hoping so!

- What is different this year compared to last year's festival?

This year, alongside the studios and cafe timetable we are offering local organisations the opportunity to hold fundraising classes at work. We want to highlight the importance of self care at work and to shine a light on the issues around stress and pressure in the workplace. Yoga and meditation are fantastic ways to reduce work related stress and we want to get this message out.

- You offer local businesses the chance to organise classes for their staff, is this a popular programme?

Yes! And it's growing as people recognise the worth of yoga and meditation at work. Our workplace wellbeing program is being expanded all the time and particularly within the NHS we are noticing a real change in the acceptance of body/mind practices as a way to support people at work.

- What are the benefits of practising yoga?

How long do you have?! Because a yoga practice offers a very holistic approach it covers many issues and crosses many boundaries. From a neurological perspective it helps regulate our nervous system, boosting our immune system and helping us to feel calm and in control. Physiologically it keeps our muscles strong, joints supple and muscles flexible. It improves our balance and proprioception and helps elevate bad posture and the aches and pains associated with this. The meditative and mindful aspects of the practice encourage our minds to slow down and increase our focus and concentration. They encourage us to be present and in tune. The philosophy and lifestyle associated with yoga encourages self care, community, respect and insight.

- What gave you and the team the idea to start the festival?

Originally, my colleague Lorraine Close came up with the idea of the festival as a way to bring together the yoga community and the communities we were reaching with our outreach work.

- What motivated you to start the Edinburgh Community Yoga Outreach?

I had found yoga to be a very important part of my own self care for many years and I recognised that there was a very deep divide within our community between people who could afford to access these benefits and those who couldn't. I wanted to try and address this inequality.

- ECYO also work closely with those with addictions, veterans and those who self harm. Can you tell me why you think yoga can be so beneficial to those who are struggling with addictions and trauma?

Taught in a way that is sensitive to the individual needs of the population yoga can be a very useful tool to improve the wellbeing of individuals suffering in the ways you mention. For people with mental health issues all the benefits I mentioned above are all relevant and because stress and suffering underlies any mental health issue or subsequent behaviour (such as self harm, substance or alcohol misuse or the like) then the holistic, non judgemental approach yoga offers can be extremely healing and transformative. We often feel that the most important thing we offer in these classes is community, self acceptance, an opportunity to feel ok, be ok and to trust.