

# Muscle to Mind: The Y's Holistic Approach

BY MEGAN JESSUP-VARNUM

MARKETING & COMMUNICATIONS  
MANAGER, EUGENE FAMILY YMCA

The YMCA has long been recognized as a leader in strengthening community health around the world. Locally, the opening of the Eugene Family YMCA's Don Stathos Campus has transformed how individuals in our community access health and wellness resources. Today, more than 18,500 members benefit from the Y's expanded focus on both physical and mental health.

"In every corner of the Y, you'll find people caring for themselves," says Kim Miller, the Y's Health and Wellness Director. "Whether it's a pickup basketball game, a group fitness class, or time in the sauna, the Y offers a supportive environment for everyone's wellness journey."

Six months after the new campus opened, the Y conducted a series of community surveys to determine evolving health needs. The feedback was clear: mental health was a pressing concern. The Eugene Y responded by adding and adapting existing programs to better meet community needs—this time by integrating tools to support mental and emotional well-being.

One such initiative is the newly launched, evidence-based Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program.

"MBSR is about building a foundation of awareness and presence," explains instructor Brant Rogers. "At the Y, we're creating a space where people can learn to respond to stress with intention rather than react from habit."

MBSR is a structured, eight-week training program developed to reduce stress and improve quality of life through mindfulness practices. Participants engage in weekly in-person sessions supplemented by at-home practice and learning materials, including mindfulness, progressive relaxation, mindful movement, emotional intelligence, and letting go of reactivity.



Instruction includes techniques such as body scan meditation, sitting and walking meditation, mindful breathing, interpersonal learning, and gentle yoga. Mindful eating and other experiential learning opportunities also reinforce the program's core practices.

The program is led by Rogers, a seasoned yoga instructor whose training in MBSR began in Massachusetts in the early 2000s. His approach emphasizes self-discovery and resilience through intentional awareness.



"I see students begin to soften the sharp edges of life's difficulties," Rogers notes. "They rediscover joy and clarity as they meet life's challenges with presence and acceptance."

Research consistently shows that mindfulness-based interventions like MBSR can mitigate these effects by increasing emotional regulation and improving physical and mental health outcomes for a variety of ailments.

In 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy, declared loneliness and isolation a public epidemic. He reported that loneliness and social isolation are as harmful to health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, increasing the risk of heart disease by 29%, stroke by 32%, and dementia by 50%.

"We see authentic connections

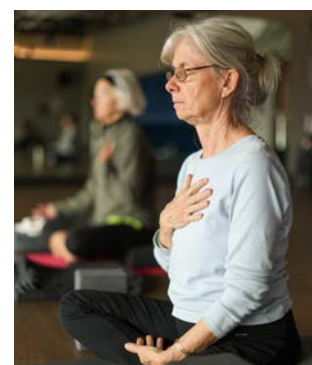
happen within our walls every day," says YMCA CEO, Brian Steffen. "The Y is committed to providing a place that not only improves physical health, but also mental health through genuine interpersonal connections; programs that foster friendships; meditation and movement workshops that build physical strength and mental resilience; and volunteering opportunities for youth, adults, and seniors."

Long-time Y member Brian Birtley, who joined the MBSR course, says, "I think a big part of our mental health problems is our belief that we are alone. For example, if we feel neurotic, we think we're the only one with that problem. Being able to share and recognize similarities in our feelings made me feel more curious about and accepting of myself."

After completing the course, Birtley can now use MBSR as a tool to examine his life and appreciate what he and others are going through, moment to moment.

"We all want results," he says. "But it's the process, the awareness, that is the prize."

At the YMCA, MBSR is more than a class. It's part of a larger vision for holistic community health: a powerful response to a growing mental health crisis. ♦



Top to bottom: Yoga students hold mountain pose, focusing on breath and balance; Brant Rogers leads participants through savasana; Students find inner peace through guided meditation.

*Photos courtesy of the Eugene Family YMCA*