

In the Spotlight

Teaching teens to meditate through movement

Meditation is fast emerging as the first-stop therapy of choice for a growing number of Australians grappling with mental health issues and the daily challenges of contemporary living. Thanks to the surging popularity of Mindfulness—and the health benefits shown by clinical studies—there's now widespread acceptance that meditative practices belong in our arsenal of ordinary coping strategies. And, importantly, Australians are becoming increasingly aware that there's a range of approaches to choose from.

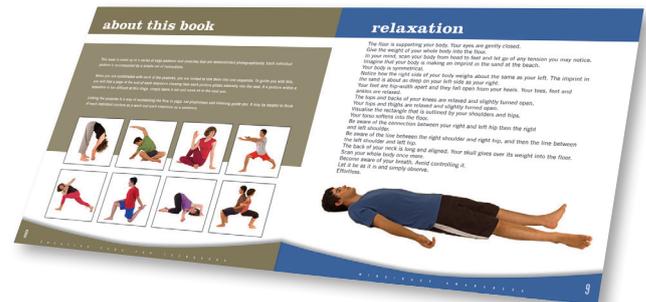
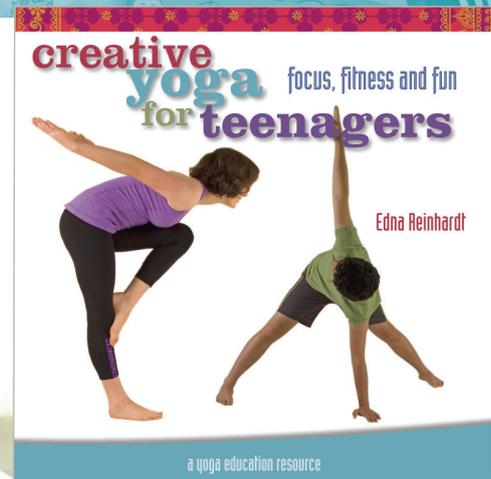
But while some of us have begun to appreciate the value of meditation more recently, there are others, like Edna Reinhardt, who have understood its importance for much longer. Her studio, Over the Moon Yoga and Dance, is a local institution in the rural Victorian township of Castlemaine, where hundreds of children, young people and adults have benefited from Edna's skilful fusion of creativity, relaxation techniques and physical activity.

Edna's expertise is in making yoga, in particular, accessible to teens and adolescents, to help them stay physically well and mentally grounded while coping with the pressures of high school, changing bodies and the conflicting options life has to offer. It's a special skill that perhaps owes something to Edna's own experience as a thirteen-year-old, when she 'happened to meet a German woman who was into yoga and relaxation, much to my father's horror!'

Although their acquaintance lasted just a few months, Edna quickly realised after practising a few yoga postures that 'I really liked it. It resonated with me somehow.' Despite not feeling much regard for her body beforehand, the experience put her in touch with her body in a different way. 'How it felt, and appreciating the strength and suppleness and health of my body... I really appreciated that,' she remembers.

Yoga, of course, retains passing associations with hippies and crystals, but Edna is clear that she doesn't subscribe to 'the esoteric aspects' of its practice. 'I don't think they're relevant to children and adolescents. What does interest me, and which is becoming more interesting to health and mental health workers, is giving young people the inner resources to deal with whatever life presents them with.'

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That concern is clearly becoming more widely shared, with an increasing array of books on the market describing meditative techniques for adolescents. What makes Edna's *Creative Yoga for Teenagers* (co-published with Innovative Resources) a little different is that it focuses on meditation through movement, rather than demanding stillness to focus the mind on physical sensations or thought patterns.

Creative Yoga for Teenagers, Edna points out, is also 'not just about the yoga and it's not just about posture.' Crucially, she has observed through her experience that teenagers, and teenage girls especially, 'like something to be aesthetic.' For this reason, the sequences presented in her book not only allow movements to flow smoothly, but were 'designed with an artistic sensibility.' Working with her students, and drawing on her background as a creative dance teacher, Edna developed the sequences specifically to reflect what the students enjoyed and found felt good.

Since its release in 2010, *Creative Yoga for Teenagers* has been well received by school teachers and PE instructors, and has also sold to customers in Germany and Europe, where communities have traditionally embraced activities designed to promote physical and psychological wellbeing simultaneously. However, it's the feedback Edna has received from students themselves that has surprised her most.

'Often teenagers will say they really look forward to the end of the yoga class when we do the relaxation,' she explains. 'It's the relaxation that seems to be the big thing for them. Just knowing where the 'off button' is and being able to find it for themselves.' Many of her former students 'have kept up the yoga', while one young woman recently mentioned to Edna how much she valued yoga because it helped her in looking after her body, something the young woman saw her contemporaries struggling with.

Edna is well-earthed about yoga's appeal. 'I'm not a yoga fanatic,' she laughs, 'I don't think that everybody should do yoga because I don't think it works for everyone. Some people do tai chi, some people go for walks, or go to the gym. I don't think it really matters, but for some people yoga really does resonate.' When she's teaching children and young people, Edna's primary goal is simply to help them enjoy the feeling of stretching, strengthening and breathing. It's about building the relationship between the body, the mind and the breath, she says, 'because when the three are together, you feel as if you're singing!'