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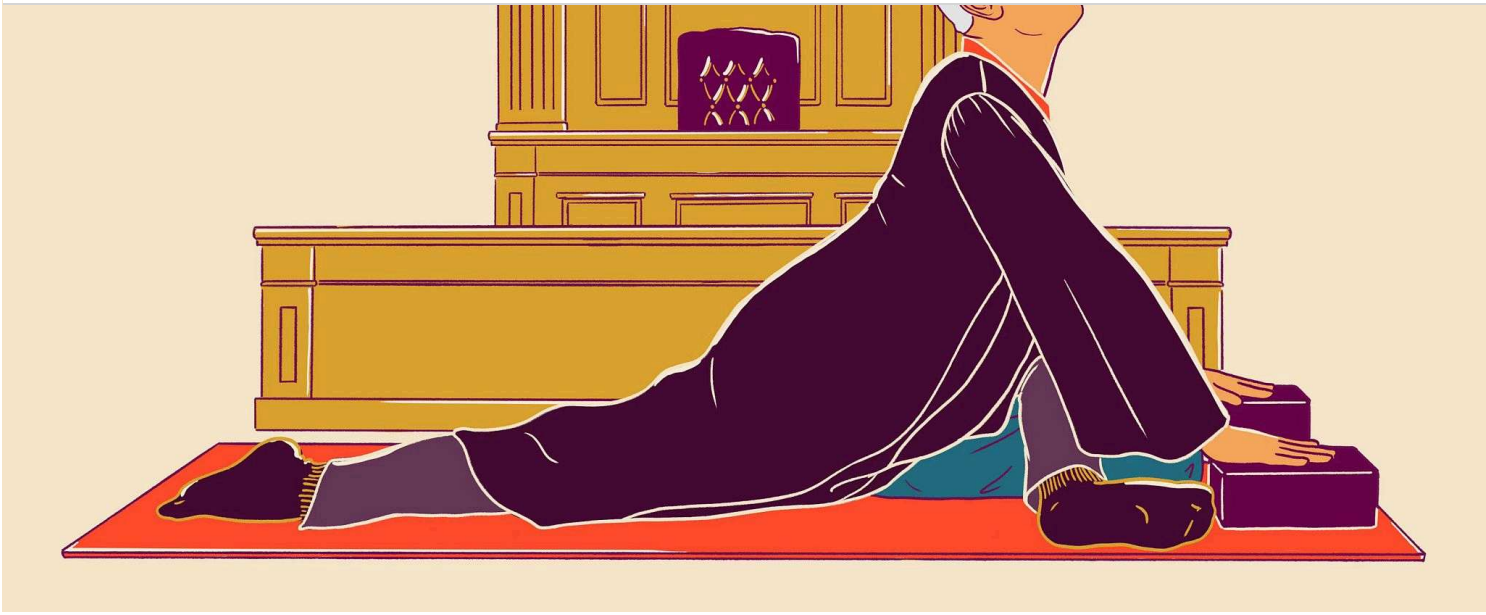
# I Brought Yoga Into My Courtroom. I'm a Better Judge for It

As I got older, the pressures of judging took a toll. Restorative yoga helped me reset — and transformed the way I serve my community

**By Ed Spillane, AARP**

Published March 06, 2026

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*Author Ed Spillane says that the practice of yoga, with its emphasis on stillness, helps make him a more mindful judge in the courtroom.*

MICHELLE KONDRICH

After more than 20 years on the bench as the presiding judge of the College Station Municipal Court in Texas, I could see myself becoming more and more frustrated as I saw defendants' cases not coming to as quick a resolution as I wanted. I remember one case where a defendant refused to cooperate because she was cynical about the court system and where her fines went. "I'll never pay my fine!" she yelled at me. "Take me to jail!"

In the courtroom, I saw that the cumulative stress of listening day after day to people at the hardest points in their lives can wear any judge down. Anger, fear, anxiety and disappointment come into court cloaked in misdemeanor charges, but beneath them often dwells real human pain. I

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That's when I found restorative yoga. In this form of yoga, you are in set poses without movement. Typically each pose is 20 minutes, and during the pose you relax and focus on the present moment mindfully.

During a typical restorative yoga class, I start by lying on the floor, supported by bolsters (large cushions used for support and comfort), and through various poses hold myself in, most importantly, silence. I've learned stillness, focusing on the sensations in my body and ignoring the impulse to get up and do something.

This practice has taught me a vital truth: We cannot restore what we have not first acknowledged. I wanted to return to being a judge who treats each defendant as a unique individual, helping to restore them to better citizenship and to ensure they won't reappear in my court or any other. I acknowledged I was having trouble doing this when frustrated in the moment. I needed to be more mindful, more still, and listen to each defendant.

Restorative yoga has transformed my work and life more than any other activity or training I have pursued. However, other yoga practices have benefited me as well. Yin yoga, where you hold poses over extended periods to stretch connective tissue; yoga nidra, a guided meditative practice where the body sleeps but the mind stays awake; and even a hot yoga class. with the same routine each time. have all broadened my ability

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*Spillane has been presiding judge at College Station Municipal Court in Texas for 24 years.*

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In one case in my courtroom, a young man with multiple citations for possession of drug paraphernalia came before me. In the past, I might have spoken quickly, imposed a fine and moved on. But that day, I slowed down. I listened. I asked him what was going on. We talked about his mother's illness, his dropped college plans and his anxiety. I referred him to a diversion program, but more than that, I offered him dignity. I cannot say restorative yoga gave me a legal answer; however, it did give me the ability to hold space and to respond from a deeper place. I felt more grounded while listening to the young man.

Judging is not only about applying the law. It is concerned with discernment. A judge needs to know the difference between control and care. The ability to see how care can achieve criminal justice "success" versus controlling punishment does not originate from books. It comes from practice. Often before court, I will sit still in my office and just empty my mind while counting my breaths. Even five minutes of this break can do wonders for my ability to enter the courtroom in a refreshed and mindful state. I will sometimes even allow pauses while I am in court during a heated moment. Everyone becomes calmer when there is a pause, no

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The defendant who yelled at me that she was never going to pay any fines and was willing to sit in jail? After I listened to her and talked to her about how jail did not benefit her or the court, she completed a series of job-training classes for community service. She now runs her own hair salon and is a wonderful member of our community.

I still believe in justice, but now I know it begins with restoration: not just of others, but also of ourselves. When I lie back on the mat, eyes closed, I am not escaping the world. I'm preparing to return to it: steadier and more fully present for the people who appear before me.

*AARP essays share a point of view in the author's voice, drawn from expertise or experience, and do not necessarily reflect the views of AARP.*

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*Ed Spillane is the presiding judge of the College Station Municipal Court, Texas. He has held that position for 24 years.*

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