

# Seeking solace: Attendance is up at this New York meditative retreat in Garrison

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Molly Babbin, a 20-year-old student at Middlebury College in Vermont, spent January in Peru on a college internship. When she returned to school, she was engaged in a variety of clubs around her passion topic: Climate activism.

“My life was very active and very social. I’m a college student,” she said. “I was joining new groups. It really felt like there was this kind of forward trajectory meeting more people, building relationships.”

In March, that changed drastically when she, like college students around the country, had to abruptly leave campus and go home amid the COVID-19 pandemic.



As the pandemic continued, she felt a mounting sense of helplessness, fueled by being cooped up at home, the social unrest in the country and the toll the coronavirus was taking on people's health and economic well-being.

So in July, when she read about an in-person meditation retreat specifically targeted at people ages 18 to 30, she was intrigued.

The three-day yoga and meditation retreat, held at the Garrison Institute in Putnam County by a group called "Dharma Gates," was the reset she needed.

"We were able to connect with each other in a way that you really can't do over a computer screen," said Babbin, who lives in Connecticut. "It really restored some energy in me after all the months of quarantine. And I think the other

thing is the importance of going to another place when you've been kind of isolated in one place for five or so months.”

In August, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported an alarming level of pandemic-related psychological and behavioral distress across all segments of the U.S. population. Most alarming: One-fourth of young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 said they had considered suicide in the past 30 days, the study found.



Aaron Stryker, a 24-year-old who co-founded Dharma Gates, which primarily works with college students, said he believes meditation can offer tools to young adults navigating difficult emotions.

“Actually, having people around who are happy, just being able to show up and be loving in circumstances that are difficult often helps other people remember how to do that,” he said. “You learn how to sort of hold space for other people’s pain and to actually heal communities.”

## Interest on the rise for retreats

Jonathan Wiesner, who took over as the CEO of the Garrison Institute in January, said in the early months of quarantine the institute began offering “virtual sanctuary” programs like online mindfulness meditation sessions.

“We were expecting about 100 participants and we had a really rather limited Zoom room capacity for them,” said Wiesner, who previously served for 25 years on the board of the International Rescue Committee, one of the world’s leading humanitarian relief organizations. “But a thousand people signed up. It gave us an indication of what the need was from our community.”

David Ellenbogen, a Brooklyn musician and artist director of Brooklyn Raga Massive, had a long wait list for his “Unplugged: A Sound and Yoga Retreat” so he and his co-teachers decided to offer two more sessions at the Garrison Institute in October.

“The concept of our retreat is to unplug and to have a digital detox and to step away from your device and your computers and find a space for a grounding experience,” Ellenbogen said. “And what we found is that there is so much of a desire from people who just find that they're even more plugged in right now.”

Overlooking the Hudson River, the wooded, 93-acre Garrison Institute was converted from a former Capuchin Franciscan monastery in 2003 into a place for meditation retreats, where contemplative-based training could be conducted to address social and environmental issues.

In one of its webinars, which was offered for free during the pandemic, psychiatrist Dan Siegel talked about how contemplative practices can help with processing loss and trauma, build resilience, and cultivate a sense of openness to the realities of challenging times.

Over the past six weeks, the Garrison Institute has worked to safely reopen for in-person contemplative retreats, overnight accommodations and food service by working with health professionals to put into place new protocols.

The facility, which can normally accommodate 165 overnight guests, limited its capacity to 50 to be able to follow all the safety protocols.

Guests are assigned to every other room and bathroom and shower stalls were earmarked for three attendees each. Meals, which are cooked on premises, are now individually boxed.



Carol Calta, of Norwalk, Connecticut, attended the "Unplugged: A Sound and Yoga retreat," over a three-day stay.

Calta, who negotiates technology contracts for her company, said her calendar was overloaded with Zoom calls for just about everything: Work, social interactions with friends and family, and her yoga classes.

As a single woman, quarantining alone has been a challenge, she said.

“It's an extra challenge because I have a very large social network, I have lots of friends and I go out and do a lot of things but with the quarantine, basically, you have the doors shut on all that,” said Calta. “It's been a real adjustment. Yoga helps me keep grounded with all the stuff going on in the world with illness and Black Lives Matter, crazy politics and the economy. There's a balance between how much you protect yourself by staying inside and managing your own mental health.”

The in-person retreat was a game-changer for Calta.

“The place has great energy,” she said. “It's like something you can't explain, but you just go in there and everybody you talk with, you just feel this really positive, good energy and I felt totally recharged.”

Calta felt comfortable attending in person. “They had masks and hand sanitizers everywhere and we had assigned bathrooms so that if there was any problem, they have proper tracing mechanisms in place. They had markings on the floor so you could maintain proper distances between the mats. So I felt super safe.”

Ellenbogen, whose music collective presents Indian classical and cross-cultural music blended with other traditions, said people are looking for connection.



“What once were social interactions are now done over the computer and feel like an extension of work. There's such a need for genuine human connection,” he said. “A lot of people just felt grateful to be able to safely interact with other people. It's been a long time for a lot of people.”

Dharma Gates co-founder Stryker, who graduated from Wesleyan College last year, said he was drawn to yoga and meditation after having mental health issues such as depression and anxiety as a freshman.

He took a gap year and traveled to India to study yoga and work through some of his issues in a way that was not “pathologizing” him through medications.

“I also realized that I'm not the only person in my situation. I feel like a lot of people in my generation are in a rough spot these days,” he said. “It's kind of unclear what we could do that actually would lead to benefit, would actually help the situation and also how to be happy and ethical and live well in the context of the current world.”

*Swapna Venugopal Ramaswamy covers women and power for the USA Today Network Northeast. [Click here for her latest stories](#). Follow her on Twitter at [@SwapnaVenugopal](#). Support local journalism; go to [lohud.com/specialoffer](#) to find out how.*