

A Review of the Psychological Benefits of Yoga

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Abstract

Yoga has been around for than five thousand years but in recent times it has caught everyone in scientific community by surprise by its diverse and distinct capacity to help treat many physiological and psychological troubles. Yoga includes diverse and many techniques practiced by its practitioners. Yoga is also called to be an ancient psychology as it addresses various psychological issues successfully. Many researchers have successfully applied yogic techniques for the treatment of anxiety, depression, stress, PTSD and ADHD etc. Yoga has also been tested for more severe trouble like dementia too where it hasn't shown much of the promise. Of course research provides the proof for the success of yoga still few researchers raise the question about its mechanism and few others show suspicion claiming methodological flaws and lack of clinical samples in others studies. Few others have put yoga in the same category as aerobics. But even after few controversial issues remaining to be resolved, it is well settled that yoga is going to be around and used for better health in coming decades by the population from all walks of life.

Keywords: Yoga, research review, psychological benefits

Introduction

While in Western psychology we typically divide human awareness, mind, or mental functions into three levels of consciousness (that of the conscious, subconscious, and unconscious), yoga adds a higher dimension known as cosmic consciousness in which the base of all philosophical and practical knowledge for the system of yoga psychology is derived. In a complex and fast moving world where psychological problems are increasing faster than we can imagine, yoga remains a natural and readily available approach to maintaining wellness and treating mental health issues.

Objectives

The present research article aims to do a meta analysis of the scientific and established benefits of yoga for the field of psychology. This review will help us understand already known facts and guide us to dig deeper in future researches. In the mean while this paper also discusses the

possible physiological mechanisms of yoga that bring the diverse psychological benefits and also addresses the challenges for future researchers.

Researches in Support of Yoga

The effect of yoga on symptoms of anxiety and depression is one of the well-studied aspects of yoga's effect on the body and mind. A recent research in 2009 says that regular yoga practice (at least once weekly) helps to decrease levels of depression and anxiety significantly. Twice weekly yoga practice for two months showed a significant decrease in levels of depression as well as levels of both state and trait anxiety. For individuals who practiced yoga twice weekly for a period of two months, levels of state anxiety and trait anxiety decreased (Javnbakht & Ghasemi 2009). People also found evidence of improved mood and increased energy after an hour-long class (Woolery et al 2004). Evidence also indicates that yoga has some effect on

lowering levels of anxiety and stress. Some studies also indicate that hatha yoga has a significant effect on lowering levels of anxiety and accompanying stress. Hatha yoga encourages an increased awareness of breath, internal centering, relaxation, and meditation. A study on the effects of hatha yoga showed that the emphasis on breath awareness, internal centering, relaxation, and meditation enabled participants to learn to avoid mental and emotional blockages. These strategies helped participants experience lower stress and anxiety levels in addition to higher quality of life scores (Smith et al 2007). A 2010 literature review of the research on the use of yoga for treating depression said that preliminary research suggests that yoga may be effective in the management of depression. Both the exercise and the mindfulness meditation components may be helpful. However the review cautioned "Although results from these trials are encouraging, they should be viewed as very preliminary because the trials, as a group, suffered from substantial methodological limitations" (Uebelacker et al 2010).

Moreover, a 2005 systematic review of the research on yoga and anxiety presented encouraging results, particularly with anxiety-related disorders such as obsessive-compulsive disorder (Kirkwood et al 2005). Similarly, a present study assessed state anxiety, depressive mood, and subjective well-being and analyses of variance for repeated measures revealed mood improvement following yoga sessions (Netz & Liddor 2003). Other studies have shown that yoga practices reduce anxiety and depression, all the while improving well-being (Narasimhan et al 2011). The yogic practice enhances resilience and improves mind-body awareness, which can help people adjust their behaviors based on the feelings they're experiencing in their bodies.

A study conducted with a group of medical school students revealed lowered stress overall in addition to less stress on the mornings of exams. Significantly fewer students in the experimental group (those who received the yoga treatment) failed their exams than in the control group. Students in the experimental group said that they had a better sense of well-being, improved concentration, self-confidence, and lower levels of irritability (Malathi & Damodaran 1999). A recent rigorous randomized control trial on yoga in literature comparing kundalini yoga with the relaxation response and mindfulness meditation in obsessive-compulsive disorder patients found a significant treatment difference in favor of kundalini yoga (Connor & Vaishnavi 2009). Learning breathing and relaxation techniques help patients manage pain, depression, anxiety, insomnia, and fatigue. The patients reported that their overall quality of life significantly improved in addition to mood, distress, sleep quality, and severity of cancer symptoms (DiStasio 2008). A yoga intervention program designed for overweight women showed significantly lower instances of binge-eating and higher instances of additional physical activity both during and after the intervention. Women lost weight and most became self-motivated to participate in other forms of exercise outside of the intervention (McIver et al 2009).

In terms of its effects on individuals in educational institutions, recent research has found that yoga benefits students, not only in reducing basal anxiety levels, but also in attenuating further increases in anxiety as they experience stressful situations like exams (Malathi 1999). Additionally, differences in mood before and after class of college students taking different courses (swimming, body conditioning, hatha yoga, fencing exercise, and lecture) were analyzed and results suggest that courses which meet four

requirements involving aerobics, noncompetitiveness, predictability, and repetitiveness may reduce stress (Berger 1988).

A 2010 Cochrane Review concludes that there is insufficient evidence to assess the effectiveness of meditative practices such as yoga in the management or improvement of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Krisanaprakornkit et al 2010). Other research shows that there is little support for yoga as treatment for ADHD alone, but it has merit as a complementary treatment to medication (Jensen & Kenny 2004). The therapeutic healing benefits of yoga were recently discussed by psychologists and physiologists, who posited that regulation of physical movement is a fundamental priority of the nervous system. For this reason, focusing on and developing an awareness of physical movement allows for the mind and body to connect and be in sync. This is beneficial for humans, especially those suffering from psychological conditions such as depression and PTSD (the focus of Van der Kolk's work) because the connectedness of mind and body allow for feelings of control and understanding of their "inner sensations" and state of being (Salmon et al 2009). Another 2008 Cochrane Review concludes that the evidence was insufficient to determine whether adding mild physical activity, such as yoga, to usual care is effective in managing or improving health outcomes in patients with dementia (Forebs et al 2008) while another earlier study found no evidence to support the use of yoga in treatment of epilepsy as of 2009 (Ramaratnam & Sridharan 2000). It has been a firm belief of the yoga teachers and practitioners that yoga is highly useful in helping the women in the troubles during menopause but in a recent study yoga had not been shown to have any specific effect

for the treatment or management of symptoms of menopause (Lee et al 2009).

How Yoga Works

While scientists don't have quite the full picture on how yoga does all that, new research is beginning to shed light on how the practice may influence the brain. The above mentioned psychological benefits of yoga are linked to the release of β -endorphins and the shift caused in neurotransmitter levels linked to emotions such as dopamine and serotonin (Bucksworth & Dishnan 2003). These benefits are most likely in high-intensity practices of yoga. Lower-intensity yoga practices, which includes a majority of yoga, typically spark the "relaxation response" as defined by Dr. Herbert Benson. This response is typified by a "physiological de-activation" of tenseness and control over one's body. Benson related this release of control to the implicit dominance of the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) (Benson et al 1975). Yoga targets unmanaged stress, a main component of chronic disorders such as anxiety, depression, obesity, diabetes and insomnia. It does this by reducing the stress response, which includes the activity of the sympathetic nervous system and the levels of the stress hormone cortisol. Another reason behind the intriguing benefits of yoga practices is thought to be the attainment of a particular mental state called mindfulness. Mindfulness is a state in which one is able to maintain awareness of the present, releasing control and attachment of beliefs, thoughts and emotions. By letting go of one's thoughts and mind, allowing the mind to be calm and at peace, one is able to attain a greater sense of emotional well-being and balance. Researchers have recently begun to take interest in the healing benefits of mindfulness through yoga. Research has indicated that there are health benefits of applying mindfulness-based approaches to pain management, physical functioning,

and ability to cope with stresses in everyday life (Ludwig & Kbat-Zinn 2011). Yoga teaches a new kind of attention. People who practice yoga learn how to accept all the stress-inducing thoughts that flit around in one's head – negative self-talk, worries, snap judgments – as just that: thoughts, and nothing more. Since reacting to our thoughts is typically what gets us into trouble, learning to attend to them and accept them nonjudgmentally is key.

Yoga is Future

Only few decades back young generation of India looked at yogic practices and meditations with little suspicion and disrespect and seemed to claim that yoga is only for old people suffering from many diseases. But today young boys and girls can be seen in parks and roofs of their houses everyday doing yoga classes with their elderly counterparts. Yoga has today become a choice of management professional and collage students for stress relieving. A study conducted with a group of medical school students revealed lowered stress overall in addition to less stress on the mornings of exams. Significantly fewer students in the experimental group (those who received the yoga treatment) failed their exams than in the control group. Students in the experimental group said that they had a better sense of well-being, improved concentration, self-confidence, and lower levels of irritability (Malathi 1999).

Novotney (2010) mentioned that psychologists are also examining the use of yoga with survivors of trauma and findings are that it may even be more effective than some psychotherapy techniques. In a pilot study at the Trauma Center at the Justice Resource Institute in Brookline, Mass., women with PTSD who took part in eight sessions of a 75-minute Hatha yoga class experienced significantly reduced PTSD symptoms compared with those participating in a dialectical behavior

therapy group. The center recently received a grant from the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine to conduct a randomized, single-blind, controlled study to further examine whether, as compared with a 10-week health class, yoga improves the frequency and severity of PTSD symptoms and other somatic complaints as well as social and occupational impairments among female trauma survivors (Novotney 2010).

Difficulties in Accepting Yoga with Full Confidence

Of course yoga has been highly beneficial in relieving various troubles and surely made our life a lot happier with regular practices. But still in a number of studies it was found that many times excessive yoga practices or practices without proper guidance can be quite harmful too. A small percentage of yoga practitioners each year suffer physical injuries analogous to sports injuries (Penman et al 2012). In regard to the practice of yoga itself, especially hatha (straining the body) yoga, there are controversies over the legitimacy of "prescribing" yoga for individuals afflicted with particular conditions due to the risk of injury associated with the practice. There have been reports of yoga-related injuries and this is one reason why the practice of yoga as alternative therapy is questioned (Broad 2012). Yoga is marketed as such an innocuous thing, but without care, injuries can absolutely happen. 'Strenuous' yoga has been connected to a form of stroke in young women. Practice of yoga has also been linked to causing hyperextension or rotation of the neck, which may be a precipitating factor in cervical artery dissection (Caso et al 2005).

While much of the medical community views the results of yoga research to be significant, others argue that there were many flaws that undermine results. Much of the research on yoga has been in the form of preliminary studies or clinical

trials of low methodological quality, including small sample sizes, inadequate blinding, lack of randomization, and high risk of bias (Ospina et al 2008, Uebelacker et al 2010). Evidence suggests that yoga may be at least as effective at improving health outcomes as other forms of mild physical exercise when added to standard care. What is found most concerning regarding the legitimacy of yoga as a method of healing is the current lack of specificity and standardization regarding the practice of yoga. One recent study examined the difficulties of implementing yoga-based therapies and methods of healing without any detailed, standardized and vetted descriptions of the asanas promoted as being beneficial for healing. This research calls for the creation of supported intervention practices that could be distributed and applied for use in clinical practice for patients (Salmon et al 2009).

Conclusion

In the light of above researches it can be concluded that yoga's potential to relieve stress, anxiety and depression is beyond doubt. The healing properties of yoga also help people learn to navigate and cope with daily sources of stress. Yoga, in and of its own nature, is naturally a form of psychology. Since yoga has been applied and appreciated by psychologists and physiologists equally, some standardization is needed for its applications. In the further researches yoga and various sports, aerobics must be compared to prove the yoga's efficacy above them. Besides it few standard yoga asanas are needed to be identified that can be useful in particular problems and few standard instructions and precautions are needed to be formulated.

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