

Need of Yoga based health programs for desk employees at the corporate & IT sector: A Narrative

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Abstract:

This scholarly review focuses on the health challenges and risk factors faced by the employees of the modern corporate world, involved in a desk job. It also provides an evidence-based perspective on how yoga-based interventions might be a helpful way to reduce these risk factors while improving their overall health and well-being. Stress is almost omnipresent nowadays in this economy-driven world. With prolonged sitting, unhealthy dietary and lifestyle habits, Information & Technology (IT) and corporate employees direly need ways to tackle chronic stress, hypertension, back pain, obesity, diabetes, etc. Medical evidence on the efficacy of Yoga for these above-mentioned lifestyle-related health issues suggests that yoga-based wellness programs at workplaces might prove beneficial for individual employees as well as for the employer organization as a whole. Many multinational companies from the developed nations have already started implementing in this direction, while Indian employers are still planning.

Keywords: Yoga Therapy, Hypertension, Back Pain, Obesity, Diabetes, Job-Related Stress.

Introduction:

Employees play a key role in any organization. They should be physically fit and mentally sound to contribute optimally towards organizational goals. Corporate & IT employees nowadays are surviving in a rigid global competitive environment with a sedentary lifestyle and unhealthy dietary and lifestyle habits. Global data shows their physical and mental health is in grave danger, with the rising number of young

and talented people getting affected by metabolic issues, all because of stressful and hectic schedules for their complex and demanding jobs. However, with the employer organizations' support, these problems might be managed by providing health and wellness programs including Yogic practices and lifestyle modifications.

About yoga:

“Yoga is not an ancient myth buried in oblivion. It is the most valuable inheritance of the present. It is the essential need of the today and the culture of tomorrow.” – Swami Satyananda Saraswati. Yoga means unity or ‘oneness’ and is derived from the Sanskrit word ‘Yuj’, which means to join. This unity is described as a union of individual consciousness with universal consciousness. Also, Yoga is an art and science practiced in India for thousands of years, [1] that balances the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual entities of an individual to achieve wholesome health for a higher spiritual experience. [1]

Starting from the physical body, yoga moves on to the mental and emotional levels of the person. At the physical level, it set all the organs, muscles, nerves in harmony and then moves to heal on a subtle level. [2] In the last forty years, hatha yoga has been accepted as a therapeutic science. Studies from around the globe have been conducted to explore the physical, mental and emotional benefits and therapeutic effects of hatha yoga. [3]

The plight of the modern employee:

Technology is a blessing and a curse in itself. With everything getting digitized, it is next to impossible that our work-sectors can remain unaffected by technical improvements. However, there is a hidden cost involved, technology has made working less physically and mentally demanding. One would think that less physical and mental exertion is a good thing, however, it is the other way around. It might sound counter-intuitive, but the truth is that the more comforted the human mind becomes, the higher are the chances of it getting obsolete. This implies to the physical body too. We have grown limbs and toes and fingers and stand up straight because our ancestors evolved them with

their consistent usage for over thousands of generations, unlike the primal apes.

Unfortunately, modern human beings, especially the officials and employees at different institutions involved in desk jobs have become more sedentary. [4] With most of them sitting throughout the day, staring constantly at a light-emitting screen, they remain unaware of the life around and within themselves. The annual statistics report of the health and safety executive (UK) reported about 0.8 million new cases of work-related stress, depression, or anxiety and 0.5 million new cases of work-related musculoskeletal disorders emerged within 2019-20. [5] 83% of US workers suffer from work-related stress. [6]

A study by the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations found that India’s economic development in the past few decades has come at the cost of employee health. With a rapid surge in international economic ties accompanied by an expansion in profits and employee incomes, an aggressive increase in the degradation of the health of Indian employees was seen. The sad part is that despite being aware of the grim situation, not many companies and/or employers are taking any steps to tackle this issue. [7] Although some employers provide their staff with facilities like gymnasiums, fitness consultancy, ergonomic work environment, etc. yet, data is evident on the high prevalence of Lifestyle-related diseases among corporate employees.

An online survey of more than 20,000 corporate sector employees from India showed that 46% had high stress levels, 30% were hypertensive, 30% had chances of developing diabetes and 43% had skewed BMI. [8] Another survey of 180 employees from multinational companies of a metro city of north India suggests that 30% of subjects had cervical spondylitis and arthritis, 32% had eye problems, 57%

were overweight or obese, 72% had gastric issues and 81% had some form of chronic stress. From the same population, when asked about exercise and physical activity, 72% responded total lack of exercise, 16% replied occasionally and only 12% reported light to moderate exercise 5 times a week. These are quite worrying numbers. With more than 80% of man force being stressed out and 72% being physically inactive, it's only a matter of time that companies will have to start taking critical steps towards their employees' health status. [9]

The Information Technology (IT) employees' health is even worse affected. In a survey, 289 adult males ranging from 30 – 50 years of age working in the IT industry were studied to examine the impact of their work habits and lifestyle on their metabolic health status. Out of the total population studied, 18% had shoulder pain, 17.3% had upper back pain, 21% had lower back pain and 11% had cervical spondylosis. Other than vertebral/spinal issues, 25% had poor vision, 29% were hypertensive, 38% had central obesity and all of them complained about indigestion and/or acidity. Regarding the studied sample, the authors stated that a lack of physical exercise, prolonged work hours, poor ergonomics, improper posture, wrong eating habits and junk food consumption were all at the core of their participant population's health. [10]

Chronic sleep deprivation and Insomnia (diagnosed / undiagnosed) are quite common amongst corporate employees. In another cross-sectional survey of 602 employees working at day shifts in corporate offices of India, 96.4% had undiagnosed insomnia, while 13.8% had it diagnosed by a clinician. From the same study, it was assessed that participants having insomnia had significantly higher rates of accompanying co-morbidities like anxiety, hypertension and depression. [11]

All these above-mentioned findings echo what the World Health Organization (WHO) has to say about non-communicable diseases (NCDs). As per the WHO, raised blood pressure, overweight/obesity, hyperglycemia/high blood glucose levels, hyperlipidemia/ (high levels of fat in the blood) are the four major metabolic risk factors that if not treated in time can contribute to the development of severe and life-threatening health issues like cardiovascular disease (CVD), Cancer, Metabolic Syndrome, etc. [12]

There is a high chance of developing metabolic syndrome among corporate employees due to the nature of their job, i.e., chronic stress, continuous hours of sitting and unhealthy eating and lifestyle habits. At the workplace, increased working hours may act as a risk factor for hypertension. [13] Although it is unclear how, yet it is evident that work stress increases the risk of incident CVD and coronary heart disease (CHD) in healthy workers. [14] Evidence generated from 27 cohort studies covering more than 6 lakh men and women from Europe, the USA and Japan suggests that job strain and prolonged work hours are associated with a moderately high risk of developing stroke and coronary heart disease. [15,16] Other than metabolic risks, there are modifiable behavioral risk factors like tobacco use, physical inactivity, unhealthy diet and the harmful use of alcohol and other recreational drugs that increase the risk of NCDs. Non-communicable diseases. [17]

Considering the consequences of modernization and the risk to human health and well-being by the sedentary office lifestyle, developed countries like the US are sponsoring their employers to host wellness programs for the employees, that involve a variety of population-centric interventions ranging from health education, after-hours sports, mindfulness and yoga to dietary education and lifestyle

modifications, to improve their workforce, not only at the corporate sectors but also in the industrial and commercial sectors as well. [18] Workplace-based programs involving workgroups and teams can help uplift the mental state and physical health of the employees. [19] With such programs conducted regularly, it's not just the employee who will benefit but the companies too will prosper. After all, a healthy employee acts as an asset by encouraging and promoting less absenteeism among peers, while a diseased one becomes a liability due to reduced work output and increased dependency on support from the financing bodies.

Yoga for the Corporate Employee - Evidence till date:

Yoga philosophy coheres with modern psychology on the belief that life today is agonized by three types of stresses, which include mental, emotional and physical tensions. Yogic practices and lifestyle can provide an ultimate solution to all three of these issues of the mind, body and soul. Due to its flexible nature, Yoga can be tailored for different populations differently. In general, Integrative Yoga practice has been shown to improve overall health and well-being. [20]

With a growing scientific body of evidence, yoga is gaining popularity in multiple avenues of the corporate world. Many employers have started considering yoga as a tool to combat stress and lifestyle-related health issues of their employees. [21] Stress can affect lifestyle choices and health behaviors like food consumption and physical activity leading to overweight. [22] Yoga has been effectively used for reducing stress and anxiety for a vast array of populations with and without disease conditions. [23]

A 5-day resilience, integration, self-awareness and engagement (RISE) program showed improvements in job satisfaction, self-compassion,

empowerment, mindfulness, positive affect, resilience and a decrease in negative affect and perceived stress when compared to controls. Outcomes were measured before and after the 5 days program. [24] A randomized controlled trial with a large sample of 129 American insurance company employees showed significant improvements in sleep quality and perceived stress for the experimental group attending 12-weeks of yoga when compared with a control group receiving no intervention. [25] Another 6-week yoga program in a large British university showed a significant increase in resilience to stress, and substantial improvements in confidence, energy, elation, clear-mindedness and composure. [26] A Lifeforce yoga program showed a 53% decrease in depression scores and a 64% decrease in total mood disturbance, assessed before and after two weeks of the practice. These results were consistent even after two months. [27]

Evidence suggests that yoga can also be effective in the management of low back pain. [28] An 8-week program of yoga showed significant improvements in psychological well-being and reduction in stress and back pain among a randomized group of adults working at a British government association. [26] Cardio-respiratory fitness gets improved with the elevation of metabolic and heart response, and Intensive practice of Surya Namaskar for more than 10 minutes significantly improves all three of them. [29]

A systematic review included randomized Controlled Trials, quasi-experimental studies and pilot studies that concluded that yoga can reduce high blood pressure. [30] Studies suggest that yoga is an effective therapy for hypertension. [31] and can be recommended as an effective intervention for reducing blood pressure. [32] Yoga can be beneficial in the treatment of overweight. [33] and has an effective role in improving metabolic syndrome. [34] [35]

Nowadays, youth in different job sectors use alcohol and other intoxicating substances to subdue their day-to-day stress. Whether due to the influence of their peers or lured by the western culture, they somehow get into a vicious cycle of substance use. These habits slowly turn into dependence and/or addictions, which later hamper the health of the youth, which should have otherwise been exuberating with life force. These tendencies invite several Lifestyle-disorders as a side effect. Although falling under the realm of cognitive and behavioral therapy (CBT), yogic interventions for alcohol and substance use/dependence have shown success in the past, [36] however, further exploration is needed in this regard.

Yoga practices aim to train the mind through different practical applications like asanas, pranayama, meditations, Satsang/kirtans, etc., and move the consciousness towards a happier and more blissful state through inner and spiritual experiences. A review of the literature suggests how workplace spirituality might help strengthen organizational lithic and help improve overall employee performance. Some levels of spiritual involvement increase morale and happiness amongst the employees and assist them to be more fulfilled, creative and productive leading the way to outstanding performances and thus directly influencing the growth of the whole institution. [37]

The Science behind Yoga:

Although the renowned Indian philosophical system of Yoga is considered to be a means for salvation, showing elaborate methods and techniques to attain the final motive of attaining liberation of the soul, Yogic scriptures also provide an in-depth explanation to the different causes of suffering and give ways to overcome these sufferings of body, mind and spirit, preparing one for spiritual practices leading to self-realization. All

different yogic systems in some way or another help its practitioners to attain emotional and mental stability along with bodily strength, agility and vigor, gradually increasing the life force energy within, for optimal utilization of human potential.

The age-old traditional Indian science of life – Ayurveda, agrees in unison with the Yogic scriptures and conjunct to say that disease happens as a result of an imbalance between the subtle entities of either the Panchkoshas (five subtle inner sheaths/faculties of body, vital force, mind, intellect/wisdom, blissful soul) or the Trishariras (threefold aspects of existence: the physical, the astral and the causal body). At a much gross/physical level, diseases happen either due to an imbalance of Tridoshas (Wind, Bile and Phlegm) or the Sapta Dhatus (Seven Essential Elements that make up the body: chyle, blood, flesh, adipose, bone, marrow and semen) [38]

This fact from the ancient Indian system of medicine is being acknowledged by modern medicine as well and is evident with the emergence of new disciplines like “Whole Person Health” which considers multiple factors that might be responsible for the occurrence of disease in an individual while helping improve health at interconnected biological, behavioral, social and environmental domains, unlike the traditional medicine that only looks at separate organs or body systems. Whole person health considers preventing diseases throughout one’s lifespan while restoring health and promoting resilience. [39]

The above-mentioned imbalances can be due to many reasons, ranging from mental/emotional disturbances arising from traumatic experiences, improper lifestyle, bad eating habits, excessive indulgence in sensual pleasures, etc. All these have their effects on the body, mind, and breath and show a range of symptoms

like sadness, lack of interest in daily chores, impaired breathing, disturbed mental state, and improper flow of the life force energy. This too is a topic worth investigating, as nowadays “Psychosomatic Diseases” is a hot topic of discussion among medical researchers. [40]

Asanas remove the physical discomfort accumulated during the day. This can be due to long sitting in the chair of an office-bound individual engaged in a desk job. Asanas are described as specific body positions which open the energy channels and psychic centers. The body becomes stiff because of blocked Prana and the accumulation of toxins. When the prana begins to flow freely, toxins start getting removed from the body. [2] The ‘gross’ form of the mind is the body and the ‘subtle’ form of the body is the mind. The practice of asanas harmonizes these two. Asanas release mental tensions while toning the body. [2]

The mental causes of the disease include chronic stress and emotional blockages which disturb the nervous system and impair the flow of nerve channels carrying energy throughout the body. In the long run, these interruptions in the flow of energy cause weakness of organs and lack of their functioning, resulting in psychosomatic diseases. These mental stressors can be dealt with by regular practice of dhyana (meditation) and yogic relaxation (yoga Nidra) which calm down the mind and allow free flow of vital life force throughout the body. Some guided imagery and deep meditations also provide release of emotional blocks, freeing one from deeply rooted stress pent up over the years. The philosophical counseling of bhakti-yoga/devotion and Gyan yoga/knowledge helps one to be in unison with his/her mind and emotions simultaneously evoking feelings of detachment and dispassion for excessive and needless worldly desires, preparing

one to abstain from or prevent the damage from future stressors.

Yoga helps in reducing stress by balancing the parasympathetic and sympathetic parts of the central nervous system. Neuroimaging studies show that regular meditation practice might help activate the prefrontal cortex, which is supposed to be the control Centre that over-runs the default mode network, which is responsible for the fight or flight mechanism. [41] When approached with an unprecedented danger, the autonomic nervous system triggers various hormonal cascades, releasing stress hormones to cope up with the heightened anxiety and distress. This activation of the sympathetic nervous system and the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis along with elevated levels of Cortisol and Adrenaline/Epinephrine, all help in overcoming the stressful situation by preparing the body to either fight or flight. Afterward, when it is perceived that one is free from danger, the parasympathetic nervous system comes into play, and inhibits the production of stress hormones, putting the body in a rest and digest mode. However, long-term psychological, social and emotional stress is much worse than short-term physical stress. [42] during chronic stress, the brain is unable to cope up and adjust accordingly, and keeps sending mixed/confused signals to the different neuro-endo-psycho-immune centers of the body, asking them to be prepared for “Fight or Flight”. This confusion continuously keeps activating the stress response, releasing cortisol and adrenaline/epinephrine and keeps firing the fight or flight response by activating the Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal axis, repeatedly.

Unfortunately, people nowadays have adopted the consumerism mindset, hence, are motivated by commercial profits which are attained only by those taking up stressful jobs and devoting their life and career in the pursuit of wealth and

pleasures. Residents of most of the developed countries and many of the developing countries have little to do with the quality of their life and the state of their minds. They are rather more concerned about the quantity of money in their bank accounts. With everyone following this rat race for power and money, there is a dire need for self-introspection and realignment of our inner faculties. It is urgent and important for the modern man to understand the fundamental difference between Pleasure Happiness. Time and again, we have to get connected to our roots, our origins, where we come from, where we truly belong, who we truly are. This is only possible through self-discipline and the pursuit of true knowledge i.e., “Yoga”.

Conclusion:

The inclusion of yogic practices as a major part of corporate culture may greatly contribute to the health of employees with the goal reaching of the Organization too.

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Big tech companies have already incorporated yoga in their workplace environment to promote their employee health and performance excellence. Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras mention nine obstacles on the path of spiritual progress: Ailments (mental and physical); Dullness; Doubts; Procrastination; Laziness; Over-Indulgence; Delusion; Inability to achieve expected position; and Inability to maintain the achieved status/position. These nine hurdles can be extrapolated to the current technology-driven corporate world with stress being the key influencer. They can be overcome by the one who consistently practices yoga for a long period and with devotion and firm heartedness i.e., “Abhyaasa”. As said by Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar Ji: “A disease-free body, quiver-free breath, stress-free mind, inhibition-free intellect, obsession-free memory, the ego that includes all, and soul which is free from sorrow is the birthright of every human being.”

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