

## Yoga as an Exercise and alternative Medicine

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### Introduction: -

Yoga is an ancient discipline designed to bring balance and health to the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of the individual. Yoga is often depicted metaphorically as a tree and comprises eight aspects, or “limbs:” yama (universal ethics), niyama individual ethics), asana (physical postures), pranayama (breath control), pratyahara (control of the senses), dharana (concentration), dyana (meditation), and samadhi (bliss).<sup>1</sup> Long a popular practice in India, yoga has become increasingly more common in Western society.

Modified versions of the physical exercises in hatha yoga have become popular as a kind of low-impact physical exercise, and are used for therapeutic purposes. "Yoga" in this sense and in common parlance refers primarily to the asanas but less commonly to pranayama. Aspects of meditation are sometimes included.

Both the meditative and the exercise components of yoga show promise for non-specific health benefits. According to an article in the Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine, the system of hatha yoga believes that prana, or healing "life energy" is absorbed into the body through the breath, and can treat a wide variety of illnesses and complaints. Yoga has been studied as an intervention for many conditions, including back pain, stress, and depression.

A survey released in December 2008 by the US National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine found that yoga was the sixth most commonly used alternative therapy in the United States during 2007, with 6.1 percent of the population participating.

### Positive Psychology

One of the most recent trends in the practice of and research about yoga as alternative therapy is how it relates to the field of positive psychology. Positive psychology is the study of that which contributes to the overall well-being of and supports the optimal functioning of individuals. As more research is released in support of yoga contributing to a better state of being, yoga becomes more in line with positive psychology's focus on developing alternate strategies for healing and bettering individuals' lives. Positive psychology refutes the concept of dualism and scientists in this field believe that the body and mind cannot be separated. This logic indicates that all physical benefits resulting from the practice of yoga are coupled with mental benefits such as development of inner consciousness, positivity, awareness, and appreciation of nature, combining to offer a whole-body therapy. Drawing from recent research on the mental and physical benefits of practicing yoga, positive psychologists have begun to look deeper into the possibilities of utilizing yoga as a positive psychology therapy.

## **Applications**

### **Anxiety and Depression: -**

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. Although researchers are optimistic about the effectiveness of yoga in alleviating depression, a 2010 review of research says that studies to date, while suggestive, are not yet conclusive. However, some research says that regular yoga practice (at least once weekly) helps to decrease levels of depression 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. 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. These strategies helped participants experience significantly lower stress and anxiety levels in addition to higher quality of life scores.

According to a 2009 psychology textbook, a rigorous randomized controlled trial comparing kundalini yoga with the relaxation response and mindfulness meditation in obsessive-compulsive disorder patients found a significant treatment difference, with a large effect size, in favor of kundalini yoga. 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. Similarly, a 2003 study found lower scores of state anxiety and improvement in subjective well being, after a single yoga session. A similar order of improvement was observed after either a session of Feldenkrais exercise or a swimming session. Other studies have shown that yoga practices reduce anxiety and depression, all the while improving well-being.

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.

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.

### **Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder**

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). 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.

### **Back pain**

There is evidence that yoga may be effective in the management of chronic, but not acute, low back pain. A pilot study using a modified hatha yoga treatment showed that this was an

effective treatment for chronic lower back pain, but further examination is needed specifically through studies with larger sample sizes.

## **Cancer**

Practice of yoga may improve quality-of-life measures in cancer patients. It is unclear what aspect(s) may be beneficial or what populations should be targeted.

Other studies show improvements in how participants cope with symptoms from more physical conditions, like cancer. 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. Yoga can also help improve flexibility in cancer patients, which may allow the patients to gain confidence doing basic tasks. In a study performed by Susan DiStasio, women with breast cancer stated that they experienced lower pain on the day they practiced yoga, and men with prostate cancer said their stress decreased through yoga. The positive effects of yoga can be soothing to survivors as well and help them to deal with post-cancer distress.

## **Dementia**

A 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.

## **Epilepsy**

A Cochrane Review found no evidence to support the use of yoga in treatment of epilepsy as of 2009.

## **Hernias**

According to Yona Barash, some asanas can temporarily decrease pressure placed on hernias, while awaiting proper care from a physician.

## **Menopause**

Yoga has not been shown to have any specific effect for the treatment or management of symptoms of menopause.

## **Pediatrics**

A 2009 systematic review concludes that there is insufficient evidence to support the use of yoga for any indication in the pediatric population. No adverse events were reported, and most trials were positive but of low methodological quality.

## **Sport and athletics**

Increasingly yoga is used to train sportspersons and athletes, to maximize performance, improve conditioning, and minimize injury. Yoga is used extensively within British soccer to

minimize injury, with Manchester United star Ryan Giggs one of the most high-profile players to publicly incorporate it in his training regime. Philipp Lahm of Germany also uses yoga. This has led to increased interest in the benefits of yoga in other sports and the rise of sports-specific yoga programs linking yoga with Sports Science, such as those developed by UK-based Yoga Sports Science.

## **Stress**

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.

## **Conclusion: -**

The effects of yoga and exercise seem to indicate that, in both healthy and diseased populations; yoga may be as effective as or better than exercise at improving a variety of health related outcome measures. Future clinical trials are needed to examine the distinctions between exercise and yoga, particularly how the two modalities may differ in their effects on the Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS) and Hypothalamic Pituitary Adrenal (HPA) axis.

## **References: -**

1. <sup>^</sup> Syman, Stefanie (2010). *The Subtle Body: The Story of Yoga in America*. Macmillan. pp. 268–273.
2. <sup>^</sup> Ross, A.; Thomas, S. (2010). "The Health Benefits of Yoga and Exercise: A Review of Comparison Studies." *The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*. January 2010, 16(1): 3–12. doi:10.1089/acm.2009.0044.
3. <sup>^</sup> Feuerstein, Georg (2006). "'Yogic Meditation'". In Jonathan Shear. *The Experience of Meditation*. St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House. p. 90. "While not every branch or school of yoga includes meditation in its technical repertoire, most do."
4. <sup>^</sup> "Which Yoga is for you?". *Yoga Journal*. Beginner's Guide: 80–85. 2010.
5. <sup>^</sup> Raub, J. A. (2002). "Psychophysiological Effects of Hatha Yoga on Musculoskeletal and Cardiopulmonary Function: A Literature Review". *The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*. 8(6): 797-812. doi:10.1089/10755530260511810. "In the practice of yoga, the whole life-energy of the universe is called prana. In hatha yoga, therefore, prana is absorbed by the breath, through the breathing. The manner in which we breathe sets off energy vibrations that influence our entire being."

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