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Therapeutic Effectiveness of Yoga for Psychological Health and Well-being

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ABSTRACT

Although widely popular, Yoga has remained underutilized as a therapy for treatment of multiple psychological problems, promoting positive health and well-being. Yoga is as effective as other therapies and sometimes much better than traditional psychological therapies in view of their cost effectiveness, holistic effect, acceptance and popularity among the public, and cultural and contextual sensitivity. Against this backdrop, this paper reviews therapeutic effectiveness of yogic practices on mental health and well-being. It also documents key possibilities and potentials of implementing Yoga as a therapy at educational institutions, hospitals, and family settings.

Keyword: Yoga, mental health, posture, breathe regulation, sounds, meditation

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Introduction

In last few decades, Yoga has become widely popular for promoting wellness and fitness among the general public. Plenty of TV channels dedicate their significant time slots on Yoga shows and live yoga from camps organized at different places in

India and abroad. Many styles and schools of Yoga have mushroomed in different countries and cities. The quest for Yoga is increasing among the general public. Celebrities from Hollywood, Bollywood, and different sports and games practice it to cherish their goals and objectives. The appeal for observance of International Yoga Day by Prime Minister of India with the support of more than one hundred seventy nations was met by UNO to recognize relevance of Yoga for physical and mental wellness. However, despite of its relevance, it remains underutilized by health professionals for improving mental health and wellbeing

Yoga practitioners, researchers and government agencies have noted some key characteristics of Yoga which make it appropriate for addressing related concerns (Kakar, 2003; Kapur, 2001; Kapoor, 2002; Latha; 2005; Misra, 2005; Parashar, 2000; Planning Commission, 2000; Ram, 1987; Ramdeo, 2006; Rao, 2000; Sharma & Sharma, 2008; Sinha, 1990; Singh & Misra, 2012; Tiwari, Agrawal, Kumar & Pandey, 2007; Wampold, 2001; Woodyard, 2011). First, Yoga can induce harmony in mind-body functioning which is getting disturbed by increase in mechanical, unnatural, consumerist ethos and it can do so without being alleged for religious bigotry. Secondly, it has promising potential to address mental health concerns which are difficult for bio-medical model to resolve either due to its inability to do so or due to limited availability of expertise and human resources to address the same in huge population of our country. Thirdly, it can alleviate multiple physical, emotional and social sufferings holistically. Fourthly, Yoga being culturally-sensitive and contextually-relevant eastern religio-spiritual practices, can be considerably more suitable than existing traditional psychological practices. Fifth, it can reduce the expenditure on health care exponentially. Sixth, in view of recent realization of efficacy of any psychological therapy determined by factors either in the environment or inside the client or therapist but not by itself, demand for personalized, eclectic, and intuitive approach is increasing. Seventh, Yogic practices can be used adjunctively and quickly without any side effect. Despite of these multiple advantages, Yoga has remained at periphery in burgeoning literature of its therapeutic relevance for addressing concerns related with mental health and well-being. In comparison to its effect on physical parameters, there is minimal literature to account for effect of Yoga on psychological parameters of health and well-being. In view these multiple benefits and paucity of relevant literature, this paper reviews

therapeutic effectiveness of Yoga for mental health and well-being. It also documents key possibilities and potentials of implementation of Yoga therapy at different sites (i.e., schools, hospitals, family etc.) of therapeutic intervention.

Benefits of Yoga for Mental Health and Well-Being

Yoga was practiced and preached by seers in India to strengthen mind-body functioning for attaining self-realization since times unknown. However, this was Rishi Patanjali who collated, coordinated and systematized Yoga in his classical work-Yoga Sutra (Iyengar, 2005). According to Patanjali, the main objective of Yoga is control of mind. In the sixth chapter, Bhagvad Gita highlights importance of Yoga for removing sorrow and increasing bliss in one's life. The control of the body or mind was only pathway towards attainment of joy in life, freedom from sorrows, mental balance, or peace. Staying in harmony and being in a state of transcendental happiness (unconditionally and eternally) were the main goals of old yogis. According to Yogic philosophy, body and mind are not separate and each of them is extension of other in different dimensions of being and therefore Yoga not only can have positive effects on bodily functions but also mental processes. It increases awareness, relaxation and concentration which may help a person to realize his potentials, cope with normal stresses of life, work productively and fruitfully and make an individual to contribute for society. In last few decades, research on these many dimensions has increased substantially. Many clinically controlled studies, rigorous experimental studies have been conducted in India and abroad.

Yoga is mostly sought and evaluated for efficacy in treatment of depression, anxiety, stress and insomnia (Granath, Ingvarsson, von Thiele, Lundberg, 2006; Oken et al, 2006; Pilkington, Kirkwood, Rampes, Richardson, 2005; Woolery, Myers, Stemlieb, Zeltzer, 2004). It's utility for quietening arousal and tension arising out of hectic schedules of modern tech savvy life is immense (Mc Call, 2007). Yoga induces harmony, sense of balance, tranquillity and relaxation in body and mind. The practice of Yoga facilitates proper balance and coordination between sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system, right and left hemispheres of the brain and neural mechanisms and biological functions of the body. There is abundance of studies which clearly spell out linkages of stress with heart disease, cancer, stroke, diabetes and many other ailments and disorders (Schneiderman, Ironson, & Siegel, 2005).

Therefore, a focus on stress management can only not reduce negativity in emotional state but may also reduce burden of diseases (Arora & Bhattacharjee, 2008; Granath, Ingvarsson, von Thiele, Lundberg, 2006; Woodyard, 2011).

Yoga also lowers many other negative emotional states or difficulties related with mental health. It reduces irritability (Arora & Bhattacharjee, 2008; alienation, and body image disturbances (Singh, 2012). It practice makes addicts to shift from self-inflicted harm to care of their bodies. The practice Yoga helps people in quitting smoking, alcohol and many other addictions (Boudette, 2006; Kissen & Kissen, 2009). It appears to be useful in the recovery from eating disorders. According to a study, Yoga practitioners report less self-objectification, and fewer disordered eating attitudes compared to non-Yoga practitioners (Dittman & Freedman, 2009). In patients suffering with life threatening illnesses also, it has also been found to reduce stress, fatigue and insomnia (Carson et al., 2007; Woodyard, 2011).

In a study on Yogic life style intervention for a period of two weeks, which included practice of asanas, pranayama, meditation and consumption of yogic diet, significant reduction was noted in anxiety and depression in persons suffering from gastrointestinal disorder (Mishra & Sinha, 2001). In another study which also included regular sleep, positive dietary habits, chanting mantras, practicing postures and breathe regulation for a period of two weeks among school adolescents, significant reduction in anxiety, alienation, negative body image and stress was noticed (Singh, 2012). Rani and Rao (2005) noted significant decrease in depression participants of an intervention programme which included some elements of Yoga (including postures, breathing practices, cleansing activities, physical gestures). Broota et al. (1995) compared the efficacy of three relaxation techniques: Broota Relaxation Technique, Jacobson's Progressive Muscle Relaxation and a Yogic relaxation practice (Shavasana) in reducing symptoms of hypertension and found that Yogic relaxation technique was most effective. The promising possibility of effectiveness of Yoga with behaviour therapy in treating Obsessive Compulsive Disorder has also been subsequently noted (Datta & Broota, 2000).

Yoga invigorates a healthy sense of self (Woodyard, 2011). In a recent study among adolescents at a residential school, vast promotive effect of Yoga for physical fitness, self-esteem, clarity of life goal, adjustment, subjective well-being, empathy

and academic competence was noted (Malathi, Shah & Patil, 2000; Singh, 2011). In one of the prospective controlled study conducted at Integrated Health Clinic, AIIMS, Delhi significant improvement was noted in subjective well-being of normal and diseased sample in age-range of 21-70 years after a brief Yoga based life style intervention only for 10 days (Sharma, Gupta, & Bijlani, 2008). Regular practice of Yoga decreases time taken to fall asleep, increase in total number of hours of sleep, and feeling of being fresh after sleep in the morning (Manjunath & Telles, 2009).

Although Yoga cannot provide treatment of many chronic ailments but it can uplift patient's mood and therefore play an important role in management of wellness in patients suffering with different critical illnesses. Among cancer patients, it can increase acceptance, energy, relaxation, quality of sleep and quality of life (Carson et al., 2007; Cohen, Warneke, Fouladi, Rodriguez, Chaoul-Reich , 2004; Ragvendra et al., 2007). Additionally, inculcating momentary awareness which is part of yoga makes them to accept situation of their life as it is.

We have been discussing at great length about Yoga. But what are practices which are subsumed or part of Yoga? Available research and experience of practitioners has pointed to following particular practices: posture, breathe regulation, using sounds, and meditation.

Postures

Yoga postures are different from ordinary exercise. They emphasize relaxation quite as much as they do tension. The yoga postures are not only a series of physical positions but exercises in mental awareness. We find an astounding variety of structured postures in several spiritual texts of India. Yoga Sutra devoted only three sutras for postures and did not provide any more description on categorization and classification of postures. But some other texts indicate about manifold forms of postures developed from careful observation of positions of different creatures and their species-specific concomitant physical or mental capacities.

Rao (2000) contends that due to attention to coordinated breathe and body movements involved in performance of any yogic posture, emotional blockages are released through access to consciousness. In addition, its effects on the body operate through autonomic processes (Rao, 1995). Recent empirical evidences have noted

multiple positive effects of postures in reducing anxiety, stress, psychological disorders and enhancing several outcomes related to well-being (Rao, 2000; Singh, 2012).

Breathe Regulation

Breathe has been thought of as a significant tool for positive experience and well-being. Next to postures (*Asanas*), regulation of breath (*Pranayama*) was considered of crucial significance for increasing mental acumen. These increase muscular strength of lungs and purify blood by increasing supply of oxygen and expelling carbonic gases. The spine and spinal muscles are source of action and lungs are receiving instruments of breathing technique. There are three components of all breathing practices: inhalation, exhalation and retention (Iyengar, 1993, p., 30). In some, deep breathing through both nostrils is practiced; in some others forceful expulsion of breath is emphasized and in other types alternate breathing from nostrils is carried out. There are some other techniques in which some syllables are repeated with inhalation, retention or exhalation of breath. There are also some highly advanced practices in which there is no actual breathing but merely visualization of receiving vital energy through conscious efforts.

Sounds

Mantras have great significance in the mental and spiritual evolution of harmony. Particularly, 'Om' has been specially signified in vedic texts. It was considered as 'syllable' of the God. Repetition of 'Om' was realized as effective remedy for problems at three-fold levels of existence- physical, mental and supramental (Sivananda, 2001). The chanting of 'Om' results into reduced B.P., fatigue, depression and increased synchronicity in the body, econcentration, memory and self-concept (Bernardi et al., 2001; Singh, 2012)

Meditation

There is a spate of work on a variety of meditation techniques. These include focusing attention on present moment or a fixed stimulus such as one's breathe, use some imagery, or observe own thoughts rather than suppress or engage with them. Meditation has found to yield positive contribution to well-being among a wide rage of healthy people and persons with mental problems (Murphy and Donovan, 1999;

Shapiro et al., 2002). In short duration of practice, it leads to reduction in arousal by inducing changes in heart rate, respiration, skin conductance, cortisol levels, and by increasing alpha waves. In long term, it has been found to lead to increased health, cognitive functioning, creativity, empathy, and in management of conditions such as hypertension, chronic pain, anxiety, and depression (Singh, 2012).

Discussion and Conclusion

This review suggests huge arena of possibilities and potential for using Yoga as a therapy. Being culturally and contextually sensitive, it would be suitable in Indian context. It can empower individuals in a positivistic manner to be participant in resolving their own problems and increase wellness and to optimize inherent human potentials (Gladding, 2009; Myers, Sweeney & Witmer, 2000). The diagnosis of health concerns and recommendation for practice of Yoga accordingly can infuse a new sense of efficacy at multiple settings (Singh, 2010). Yoga can emerge as a new therapy for curative, curative, preventive and protective objectives in clinics (Datta & Broota, 2000; Rani and Rao, 2005; Rao, 2000). There is immense potential of utilizing Yoga for managing multiple chronic problems (i.e., cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, cancer etc). By inducting Yoga based interventions, different but interrelated domains of health: psychological health (subjective sense of well-being), social health (role fulfillment and social effectiveness), personal health (realization of individual potential), and physical health (physical-physiological functioning) can be maximized among adolescents (Yarcheski, Mahon & Yarcheski, 1997). It can help them to get of much unhealthy behavior. In view of plasticity and suitability for change in behaviours, induction of Yogic practices has been favoured during adolescence in many indigenous perspectives in India (Koller, 2006, p.97).

Yoga can offer immense help in sustaining wellness during several moments of turbulences and turmoil which are often characteristic feature of adolescence. It can help in addressing concerns related with examination anxiety, frustrations, conflicts which feature spectrum of dail life experiences in schools. Every career related decision is influenced by one's understanding of own personality, abilities, interests, values, background, circumstances. In view of linkages between Yoga and awareness, Yogic practices can help adolescents to figure out what they are and what they want out of their education and career.

There is need for proper policies and formal regulations for implementation of Yoga on a broader scale with suitable modification as per the requirements of the specific settings. The involvement of government and non-governmental agencies in such programmes can provide motivation and support. Being a collectivistic culture the efficacy of such intervention increases if the changes take place in group context. This review brought out the fact that by developing Yoga as a therapeutic tool, multiple problems related with mental health and well-being can be resolved effectively which may empower them without heavy toll of expenditure and wastage of our precious resources.

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