

Yoga: An evidence-based therapy

It is very satisfying to see yoga articles in reputed scientific journals nowadays. It was observed in the past that yogic masters taught yoga only to their handful of students and refrained from any publicity on this topic. On the other hand, we have seen an explosion in numbers of quacks who claim to cure anything instantly with yoga.

What we need today is a balanced approach, a receptive and cautious mind and a real enthusiastic action on the scientific findings about yoga.

Randomized controlled studies are the way to learn the science and yoga is meant for a person of action. Tons of information on yoga is not going to help us till we actually start practicing it!

As we are studying more and more aspects of yoga, we keep on getting amazed at their effects. We do not know the exact mechanisms in most of the cases but that should not really bother us! We still do not know exact mechanism of action of many time proven medicines such as metformin and pioglitazone, but that does not deter us from using them.

Yoga has many proven benefits on various aspects and we have a lot of research work regarding the same. And these studies are mainly done by intervention by means of asanas, pranayam, and meditation alone.

Yoga is used for the treatment of cancer patients to decrease depression, insomnia, pain, and fatigue and increase anxiety control.^[1] Yoga's ability to improve cognitive functions and reduce stress makes it appealing in the treatment of schizophrenia, because of its association with cognitive deficits and stress related relapse. In one study, at the end of 4 months those patients treated with yoga were better in their social and occupational functions and quality of life.^[2]

Overall, studies of the effects of yoga on heart disease suggest that yoga may reduce high blood pressure, improve symptoms of heart failure, enhance cardiac rehabilitation, and lower cardiovascular risk factors.^[3] Long-term yoga practitioners have reported musculoskeletal and mental health improvements, as well reduced symptoms of asthma in asthmatics.^[4] Similar findings were also observed by Vempati *et al.*^[5]

Regular yoga practice increases brain GABA levels and is shown to improve mood and anxiety more than other metabolically matched exercises, such as jogging or walking.^[6]

We have a nice review article by Dr. Nirmala Vaze and Dr. Sulabha Joshi with a very good data of yoga on health. The potential benefits on the most important transition of a woman's life, the menopause, are discussed in details.

We also have an interesting study regarding effect of "Self Management of Excessive Tension," a program developed by Swami Vivekananda Yoga Anusandhana Samsthana (S-VYASA) University, Bangalore, on the EQ (emotional quotient) of middle-aged executives. A very meaningful data presented in a very comprehensive way underscores the power of yoga to affect us profoundly and also speaks about the usefulness of the carefully designed program.

A comment on the abovementioned study, it is always desirable to have a control group for such interventions. The control group ideally also should be kept in a residential setup without actually administering the program. Only group support *per se* could reduce stress, develop more emotional maturity and is highly desirable to conclusively prove the effect of any particular program on any personality aspect. We also need to study how long the beneficial effect of such a short course remains in real life situation and we suggest the investigators to re-evaluate the EQ scores after a period of a few months for all the participants. Also, there are at least a hundred commercial program available in the market with various modifications of authentic yoga, and that *per se* is a great concern for many people. In my opinion, this can be a great challenge in front of the science of yoga in future. What we really need is a universal and freely available program for age-specific target groups, for population use. (Just like the "prudent diet"). Either a yoga master or any NGO should take an initiative in this direction.

Finally, we should also be giving a thought to the real yoga master's advice. It is advised that, only the physicality of yoga is known to all of us, and less than 1% of yoga practitioners actually concentrate on the mental and transforming, reprogramming properties of

yoga. It is a way of life; beyond asanas and pranayama. It is not a process of dhyana which one sits for half an hour, and expects to get all the benefits of yoga. Yoga is “chitta-vritti-nirodha” or regulation of impulses and the deconditioning of the mind.

We tend to just repeat the fixed behavior patterns in a particular situation without giving a real thought to it. That’s why we become so predictable, and we tend to get bored with our routine lives. Then, to break the monotony, we try to seek more and more sensual pleasures. They too, become a dull routine for us. Yoga can liberate us from this and finally we find that the real joy was not outside, but it is inside us. The real purpose of yoga is to experience our place and relation with the universe and maintain that awareness for all the waking moments. We hope that our society evolves to be receptive enough for the real, complete yoga some day, and the way to achieve the same passes through studying more and more scientific facts about yoga and the yogic lifestyle.

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