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Literature Review

YOGA FOR DEPRESSION

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Literature Review and Rationale for Yoga for Depression

Yoga has its origins in Indian culture. Hatha yoga, the system on which most Western yoga is based consists primarily of postures, breathing exercises and meditation. The postures improve body awareness, focus, flexibility and strength, the breathing calms the nervous system, body and mind and improves focus and relaxation, and the meditation aims to calm and clear the mind. When combined, the emergent benefits of Hatha yoga can be transformative and lead to substantial improvements in a person's quality of life.

Yoga practice is not something that stays on the yoga mat. What a person learns during their Hatha yoga practice will spill over into their life. This is one of the reasons that yoga classes are seen as having different benefits than stretching, strengthening or cardio classes. Yoga impacts the body-mind-spirit.

Explanations of the benefits of yoga from a Western perspective are mostly theoretical at this time. The reductionism of Western science is new to yoga, which for thousands of years has been more involved in 'the science of one'. Yoga practice has focused on self-study, individual growth, and remembering that we are a divine being, more than on averaging the benefits of the yoga classes or individual components of yoga across large participant samples. Traditional yoga was also used as a form of rehabilitation. However there were few empirical studies of its effects.

Recently there have been scientific investigations reporting many benefits of yoga. Theories for these benefits tend to focus on such things as modulation of the autonomic nervous system, reduction in sympathetic tone, activation of underused neuromuscular systems, improved self-efficacy, and stimulation of the limbic system. Basic science suggests that these theories may be true, however few have been scientifically validated.

Research Summary

The following is a summary of the findings of recent scientific investigations of the effects of yoga practice on depression.

In 2005, Pilkington et al, wrote a review of the research evidence regarding yoga and depression. They concluded that “the initial indications are of potentially beneficial effects of yoga interventions on depressive disorders.” They noted methodological inadequacies and recommended that further research was warranted due to the generally beneficial outcomes. At this time then, the best-evidence is that yoga provides some benefits for some people with depression.

Woolery et al (2004) found that after 10 one hour Iyengar yoga classes over a five week period that there was a significant decrease in Beck Disability Index scores. Shapiro et al (2007) in a study of people with major unipolar depression found that after eight weeks of three sessions/week, 65% were diagnosed as in complete remission. Michalson (2005) found that after three months of two- 90 minute/week Iyengar classes, there was a significant reduction in depression, and improvements in reported perceived stress, well-being, vigor, and fatigue.

The specific aspects of yoga practice that have been reported as most beneficial vary between investigators as well as between yoga teachers. Those components studied and showing some benefit are yogic breathing (Brown et al 1993, Janakiramaiah2000), savasana/corpse pose (Khumar 1998), and backbends and inversions (Michalson 2005 et al, Woolery et al 2004). Other techniques suggested as important, though not scientifically investigated include specific breathing techniques such as ujjayi breathing, gentle contract relax during savasana, postures including legs-up-the-wall, bow pose, maha mudra, plow pose, shoulder stand, vajrasana, and sun salutations, and yoga meditation and yoga nidra.

Yoga meditation has not been well studied. There are numerous techniques for this. Quieting the mind, and becoming aware of repeated negative messages are expected to be beneficial for those with depression and anxiety.

Adverse Effects

Within the research reports of yoga for depression and for anxiety, there are few comments about adverse effects of yoga on those with either condition. Some authors suggest that yoga participants have access to a mental health profession to discuss specific responses to yoga techniques. Practical experience has demonstrated that participants often have responses to yoga for which they want clarification or reassurance.

Anecdotal reports suggest that there has been an increase in injuries during yoga classes, as yoga has become more popular. One common explanation is that this has been due to factors such as the limited training and limited experience of many yoga teachers, and yoga being treated by the participants and teacher as just another kind of exercise in which to sweat, push ones-self and get more flexible.

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Related research

Grover et al (1987) investigated whether the benefits of yoga were related to a person's initial attitude towards yoga. They found that initial attitude to yoga did not predict the extent of benefits from the yoga. They also noted that participants' attitudes towards yoga became more positive the longer they attended classes.

Recent brain neuroplasticity research suggests that physical activity supports neuroplastic changes. Learning new skills and coping strategies is enhanced in adults when those individuals exercise. It appears that the best exercise is that which one can repeat, in which one finds some enjoyment and reward, and most importantly exercise which is novel.

Increased physical activity has many benefits. Penedo & Dahn 2005 performed a review of the literature regarding exercise and well-being. Their conclusions included that increase physical activity or exercise increases self-efficacy, improves over sense of well-being and improved self-perception. Foxx (2000) reported similar findings of improvements in psychological well-being.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The best evidence is that yoga will provide benefits for people with depression. Yoga provides novel movement patterns and breathing exercises which will enhance learning of all new skills and coping strategies. The movement aspects of yoga can assist in improving self-perceptions, self-efficacy and general sense of well-being. Given that these benefits have been shown to occur over weeks of yoga classes scheduled 2-3 times each week, this pattern of class attendance should be used.

There is no clear evidence which aspects of yoga are best suited for which individuals. As such, small classes in which participants can be given more individualized attention would be beneficial.

Ongoing contact between the participants and their mental health professionals is recommended for guidance, for explanations of responses to the yoga and for reassurance.

Finally, it is recommended that future sessions of yoga for clients at the XXX be guided by ongoing communications between the mental health staff, the participants and the yoga teacher.

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