

Health Promotion through Yoga

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This article discusses how yoga practices promoting health, mental as well as physical? Yoga aims at developing an integrated personality of which the body, mind and spirit are integral components. It does not operate within the old mind/body dualism of Cartesian thought, which separates physical from mental health. Some say happiness depends on physical fitness, mental agility and spiritual verve. Spiritual joys and mental delights are subject to bodily conditions, free from every type of ailment. Yoga is a path to both physical and mental well being and higher spiritual awareness.

The real objective of Yoga is to attain peace and tranquility within those who sincerely practice. Yoga are not only free from stress and anxiety, rather they remain undisturbed like the ocean. Yoga, therefore, is not only a science of mental diseases but a complete science of mental health. It is both preventative and curative of mental disorders and at the same time capable of producing mental peace and cosmic consciousness. As such, it is both a positive and normative science. Yoga is a physical technique which aims to unify the body, mind and soul. It is complete work out that helps strengthen the body, calm the mind and purify the soul. The studies conducted on the discipline suggest that the deep breathing exercises and stretching exercises allow increased blood flow to the brain, improving mental activity and relieving both stress and anxiety. Yoga is considered the best alternative mental illness therapy.

According to Dr. Eleanor Criswell, a licensed psychotherapist who has taught courses

in the Psychology of yoga at California's Sonoma State University since 1969, "yoga is incredible in terms of stress management. It brings a person back to Homeostasis (or equilibrium). For people who have anxieties of many kinds, yoga helps lower their basic physiological arousal level" So it can be say that yoga and mental health have a lasting relationship.

A review of related literature revealed some studies showing the impact of yoga on some psycho-physical aspects. For example a study by Leeylia et.al. (1982) revealed that the exercise modeled on yoga had a beneficial influence on general feelings, mood and psychomotor activity of subjects with psychogenic mental disorders, particularly, the improvement of the subjects' mood was quite evident. Pasic, Tadeusz (1984) reported that modified yoga exercises are being used in therapeutics, mainly in psychiatric treatment and psycho-somatic medicine. It is aimed to evoke feeling of calmness, harmony and beauty in patients. Vishal, Singh and Madhu

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(1987) have found that yoga contributed positively for the memory. It was also observed that there was a marked decrease in anxiety and feeling of insecurity of 20 male participants. Karel, Nespore (1992) with his twelve years of experience with yoga in psychiatry emphasized the usefulness of yoga in the prevention of stress, drug addiction and some other health problems. Khumar, Kaur and Kaur (1993) have observed the effectiveness of shavasana as a therapeutic technique to alleviate depression. Findings revealed that shavasana was an effective technique for alleviating depression and also continuation of treatment for longer period resulted in a significantly increased positive change in the subjects. Vijayalaxmi (1996) have examined that the practice of yoga enhances mental health. Evidence obtained from anecdotal records, clinical observations, epidemic logical research and prospective studies suggest that physical activity may reduce an individual's risk for developing depression and may alleviate symptoms in persons with mild to moderate depression (O'neal et.al.2000).

The body/mind interactional approach is strictly observed in the different practices of Yoga. Patanjali's steps of Raja Yoga bears testimony to this. Of the eight steps, the first four : yama, niyama, asana and pranayama, are exoteric and are considered to be the psycho-physiological preparations for the actual Yoga practices. The practice of Yoga proper, begins with the fifth step, pratyahara, which is withdrawal and control of the senses. Pratyahara, along with the next three steps of Raja Yoga, namely dharana (concentration on one object or idea), dhyana (meditation) and samadhi (sublime equanimity) is esoteric and primarily psychological and psychic. Thus in the eight steps of Raja Yoga the practices at the physical and psychological levels are counterbalanced. They present a bal-

anced combination of the physiological Yoga of vitality with the psychical Yoga of meditation. In fact, no asana, however elementary or difficult it may be, is purely a physical exercise. It is done with full awareness, generally with closed eyes and in rhythm with the breath, resulting in a cohesive integrated functioning between the body, mind and prana.

Certain scientific findings justify many of the yogic assumptions and demonstrate the psychotherapeutic value of Yoga practices. Vahia et al (1972) elaborately dealt with the practice of various techniques of Patanjali and their therapeutic implication in the treatment of psychiatric patients. They found the yogic treatment to be more efficient than psychoanalysis or psychotherapy and behaviour therapy. They later (1973) put forth a new approach termed psycho-physiologic therapy based on the concepts and techniques of Patanjali like asana, pranayama, pratyahara, dharana and dhyana. According to the authors, Patanjali's technique begins with control over the voluntary musculature, subsequently one works over the autonomous nervous system and, still later, over the thought process.

Udupa et al (1973) studied the psychological and biochemical responses to the practice of Hatha Yoga in a group of young subjects. On the basis of the findings they pointed out that the practice of Yoga makes an individual psychologically more stable and mentally more alert. Datey et al (1969) indicated the usefulness of shavasana in the therapeutic management of hypertension. Champa, Rao and Murthy (1975) found shavasana efficacious in relieving anxiety. Patel (1973), using Yoga and bio-feedback, found the yogic techniques useful in the treatment of hypertension. Yoga Nidra, or psychic sleep, is primarily a relaxation technique. Relaxation is useful, not only for mental and cardiac patients, but for all men and women engaged in

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various work. How to relax is a problem for which Yoga Nidra specifies a standard, systematic and scientific procedure. It is a more efficient and effective form of psychic and physiological rest and rejuvenation than conventional sleep. The practise of Yoga Nidra changes the nature of one's mind, cures diseases, restores creative genius and develops the capacity to penetrate into the depths of the human mind.

Thus the findings of clinical research confirm the psychotherapeutic usefulness of Yoga

practices and suggest their superiority to other popular psychoanalytic and behavioural therapies. Psychoanalysis and Yoga differ not only in method but also in their aims. The aim of psychoanalysis is to resolve the conflicts and strengthen the ego so that the individual is better adjusted to the normal demands of situations, but the aim of Yoga is not only to remove mental strains but also to transcend the ego-consciousness so that spiritual consciousness may dawn.

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