

# IMPACT OF YOGA ON MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

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## ABSTRACT

In today's world the word stress is used very commonly. Stress is an analogous container for a wide range of emotional discomforts that can be attributed to noxious experience. According to the ancient philosophical and religious texts worries are caused by desires and the associated ego involvements called klesha. Stress can be experienced at multiple levels-at physical, psychological, behavioural, emotional and cognitive level of our beings. As stress occurs at mental, physical and emotional level the cure lies in moving all three into a level that can't be stressed i.e. the soul. This level can be best attained through Yoga intervention. The present paper points out that Yoga is one of the most helpful and healthy forms of experience to manage the influence of thinking by turning psychological and physical force into spiritual energy. The present paper also describes the direct and indirect effect of Yoga on stress. Yoga is a promising approach for dealing with the stress response. Yoga helps to improve the mental health of both the young and seniors by reducing stress. Yoga helps to reduce stress through various techniques. With a better control over mind one feels that the world is, after all, not that uncongenial a place to live in. Relaxation, through meditation, asanas and pranam, is very effective in reducing stress that reduces the defence mechanism of the body. The regular practice of asanas and pranayama strengthens the nervous system and helps people deal with stress more effectively by reducing the steroid hormones, uric acid, free fatty acids cholesterol etc.

**Key Words:** - : Yoga, Mental & Physical Health,

### Yoga :

Yoga is a way of life, an art of righteous living or an integrated system for the benefit of the body, mind and inner spirit. This art originated, was perfected and practiced in India thousands of years ago. The references to yoga are available in 'Upanishads' and 'Puranas' composed by Indian Aryans in the later Vedic and post-Vedic period. The main credit for systematizing yoga goes to Patanjali who wrote 'Yoga Sutra', two thousand Years ago. He described the principles of the full eight fold yogic discipline. He composed the treatise in brief code words known as 'Sutras', 'Yoga Sutra' is the most important basic text on Yoga. It is through this basic treatise that the essential message of Yoga spread throughout the world.

Originating in India thousands of years ago, yoga is an ancient set of techniques for improving the body and the mind. As currently practiced in the West, yoga involves the physical practice of stepping the body through a series of poses and postures which help improve strength, flexibility and balance. The practice of yoga relieves muscle tension, lowers blood pressure, and decreases cholesterol levels. It is an excellent stress-relieving practice.

There are many different types of yoga. The practice of Hatha yoga in the West has been influenced by different teachers who have created various schools (i.e., versions) of yoga to which many people subscribe. Iyengar yoga is a variety of hatha yoga developed by B.K.S. Iyengar which focuses on the slow, proper and safe performance of individual postures.

Other forms of yoga include Ashtanga which is a related and also very vigorous yoga format, as well as sport yoga, which offers a hybrid approach based on Hatha yoga and elements from traditional sports stretching.

Yoga is one of the most helpful and healthy forms of experience to manage the influence of thinking by turning psychological and physical force into spiritual energy. Yoga therapy eases oneself from the cramped tension. Concentration is enhanced by Yoga. Yoga therapy cures all diseases and controls the aging process.

### Yoga and Stress :

Stress is a common condition, a response to a physical threat or psychological distress, that generates a host of chemical and hormonal reactions in the body. In essence, the body prepares to fight or flee, pumping more blood to the heart and muscles and shutting down all nonessential functions. As a temporary state, this reaction serves the body well to defend itself. However, when the stress reaction is attenuated, the normal physical functions that have been either exaggerated or shut down in response become dysfunctional in this extreme state. Many have noted the benefits of exercise in diminishing the stress response. A host of studies points to the benefits of such exercise. Yoga, too, has been recommended and studied in its relationship to stress. Several researchers claim highly beneficial results from Yoga practice in alleviating stress and its effects. The practices recommended range from intense to moderate to relaxed asana sequences, plus pranayama and meditation. In all these approaches to dealing with stress, one common element stands out: the process is as important as the activity undertaken. Because it fosters self-awareness, Yoga is a promising approach for dealing with the stress response.

**Yoga and the Stress Response :**

Stress has become a common catchword in our society to indicate a host of difficulties, both as cause and effect. The American Academy of Family Physicians has noted that

stress related symptoms prompt two-thirds of the office visits to family physicians. Exercise and alternative therapies now commonly prescribed for stress-related complaints and illness. Even a recent issue of Consumer Reports suggests Yoga for stress relief. Many books and articles claim, as does Dr. Susan Lark, that practicing Yoga will "provide effective relief of anxiety and stress." (Lark, 1993; 201).

In *Stress and its Management by Yoga*, K.N. Udupa outlines his research on normal, healthy subjects and on patients in his clinic. He treated 1007 cases of various stress disorders with a combination practice of asana, pranayama and meditation. He reported : "The patients of high blood pressure, diabetes and asthma, who came to us at an early stage, showed very good improvement. Those who came later, their drug requirement was considerably reduced after starting yogic practice" (Udupa, 1985; 141). Another review of articles published in 1996, summarizes 21 studies on Yoga in modern medicine (Bhala, 1996; 13). This review one more time confirms that, "Yoga therapy seems to be of great value in asthma, cardiac patients, multiple sclerosis, migraine, rheumatoid arthritis and rehabilitation" These are conditions in which stress may play a part in the course of the disease (Sapolsky, op.cit. chapter 8).

Other studies have looked at discrete parts of yogic practice to measure their effectiveness in reducing specific aspects of the stress response. A number of studies examine the physiology of the head-low position. In both rat and human studies examine the physiology of the head-low position. In both rat and human studies, Udupa found that the head-low posture reduced catecholamine (epinephrine and norepinephrine) content of the heart and the blood. It also increased stress tolerance and therefore, Udupa conjectures, may act as a tranquilizer.

Another study produced the interesting finding that fine motor coordination improved more for those who had volunteered for Yoga training than for those who were recruited for the programme. The motivation to learn yoga appeared to influence the magnitude of increase in skill more than other variables (Manjunath, 1999 : 225-9). The physical practice itself is not the only key in a study; the attitude of the subjects is also important.

**Yoga to Stop the Stress Response :**

The recommendations for asana practice to change the stress response are different in different traditions. A Yoga practice that focuses only on physical remedies in limited, for it deals only with physiology and not psychology. Similarly, a practice that is formed around moral precepts and exhortations to change one's lifestyle has distinct limitations, for behaviour modification is not simple. K.N. Udupa suggests, "Thus, a combined practice of physical postures, breathing exercises and meditation in a sequence is the best compromise to meet the present day needs of the society. The results of these practices can be enhanced much more if one follows all the recommended restraints and observances in everyday life." The restraints and

observances he refers to are the yamas and niyamas of classical Yoga. The ethics and morality of the traditional texts help lay a ground work for moderate, compassionate living, but behaviour change is complex and one's personality is rooted in layers of unconscious conditioning.

Some teachers recommend a simple, varied asana practice with specific pranayama techniques. An example of his approach is contained in Swami Shivapremanada's book, "Yoga for Stress Relief". He suggests a three month programme that begins with simple chest opening in a seated, cross-legged, position. He introduces Nadi-Sodhana (alternate nostril breathing), and Ujjayi in the first weeks. He then moves into forward-bending postures, to open the hips, that are dynamic in nature. The following weeks introduce Sarvangasana (shoulder stand) along with variations. This is followed by Setu Bandhasana (bridge pose), then a dynamic Paschimottanasana (seated forward bend). Sitali (tongue curled on inhale) and Shitakari (tip of the tongue to palate) pranayama are suggested. Finally, after 8 weeks, come half-Sirsasana (modified headstand with feet on the ground), Salabhasana (locust), Vyghrasana (cat), Dhanurasana (bow), Ardha-matsyendrasana (simple twist). In the last weeks of the programme one is introduced to Sun Salutation and Kapalabhati (cleansing breath) and meditation and deep relaxation. In other words, a complete, varied Yoga practice. Judith Lasater advocates supported restorative poses, gently opening the chest in moderate, supported back bends, inverting in Viparita Karani, and supported forward bends. Nothing that is exerting or uncomfortable.

Roger Cole, taking a more traditional Iyengar perspective, outlines a rigorous relaxation sequence that aims at changing the physiological response of the stress response. He advocates as follows : "To promote deepest relaxation, one must (1) minimize stimulation of the brain's reticular activating system (RAS), posterior hypothalamus and sympathetic nerve centers in the brainstem, and (2) maximize stimulation of the brain centers that actively inhibit the RAS and promote parasympathetic activity".

Cole's sequence of postures begins with Adho Mukha Svanasana (downward dog), Uttanasana with head support (standing forward bend), short Adho Mukha Vrksasana (handstand) as preparation for Salamba Sirsasana (headstand). Then supported Dwi Pada Viparita Dandasana (back bending off a chair), supported Kapotasana (again, back arching off chair with arms in headstand position on the floor), Setu Bandha Sarvangasana (supported bridge), Salamba Sarvangasana (supported shoulderstand), Halasana (supported plow), Viparita Karani (supported partial Konasana shoulderstand), Supta Virasana (kneeling, reclining), Sukhasana or Padmasana (sitting posture to elevate increase baroreceptor firing and so increase alertness without excess physiological activation) and finally, shavasana. This sequence emphasizes the head-down positions and chest expansion. Cole adds : "Note that

many physiological changes require a good deal of time (e.g., 10 minutes to 1 hour) to express themselves, so devote sufficient time to each relaxation practice. Repeated practice of relaxation techniques improves their effectiveness by reducing novelty, increasing physical and psychological comfort and creating conditioned relaxation responses in the nervous system."

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