

HOW DOES YOGA AFFECT HEALTH? YOGA TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES

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ABSTRACT

The health benefits of yoga for the physical, emotional and spiritual development of an individual have been shown in a great number of international research. Practicing yoga significantly improves the mood, reduces anger, depression and fatigue, increases resilience, and reduces problematic physiological and cognitive patterns of responding to stress, such as rumination, intrusive thoughts, and emotional arousal. Research about yoga is rare in our countries, so we wanted to examine the yoga teachers' opinions on yoga, yoga's health benefits as well as their motives for practicing and teaching yoga. In order to understand their experiences better, we have applied a qualitative methodology. According to the results, yoga teachers chose to practice yoga for different reasons. The most common motives were the need to balance physical and mental functioning, the need for "depth" and meaning in daily life, personal dissatisfaction, pain, and the need to do something useful for themselves. From their answers, it was evident that the role of a yoga teacher brings many benefits such as continuous learning, growth and development, sharing experiences with students, and a better understanding of themselves, others and life. When it comes to the health benefits of yoga, the participants provided similar answers: improved spine and bone health, good circulation, desired weight loss, pressure regulation, vitality, strength, endurance, re-learning proper breathing, etc. According to the findings, we can conclude that the health benefits of practicing yoga are enormous and bring great benefits to both the yoga teachers and their students.

Keywords: yoga, health, yoga teachers, well-being

INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization (WHO) defined health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, not just the absence of illness and disability" (WHO, 1948). Research has consistently shown that stress contributes to the aetiology of heart disease (Guddeti, Dang, Williams, and Alla, 2019), cancer (Côté and Daneault, 2012), stroke (Zou et al., 2018), and other chronic conditions and diseases (Cramer et al., 2018). Therefore, it is imperative to place a focus on preventative stress management and the reduction of negative emotional states in order to reduce the burden and cost of illness (Stephens, 2017). Yoga is generally accepted as an ancient tradition consisting

of physical postures, breathing techniques, meditation, and moral and ethical principles. Despite the high popularity of yoga among people of different ages, research on the health benefits of practicing yoga is rare in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Turkey. A great deal of international research has consistently demonstrated the health benefits of yoga for the physical, emotional and spiritual development of an individual. For example, practicing yoga significantly improves mood (Noggle, Steiner, Minami, and Khalsa, 2012), reduces anger, depression, and fatigue (Felver, Butzer, Olson, Smith, and Khalsa, 2010), increases resistance to stress (Ramadoss and Bose, 2010), and reduces problematic physiological

and cognitive patterns of responding to stress, such as rumination, intrusive thoughts, and emotional arousal (Mendelson, Greenberg, Dariotis, Gould Rhoades, and Leaf, 2010). Also, it is shown that yoga practices can have a significant positive impact on many health conditions such as asthma (Mekonnen and Mossie, 2010), Diabetes Mellitus (Malhotra, Singh, Tandon, Madhu, Prasad, and Sharma, 2002), anxiety (da Silva, Ravindran, and Ravindran, 2009), hypertension (Tyagi and Cohen, 2014) and reduced pain in patients with arthritis, carpal tunnel syndrome, back pain, and other chronic conditions (Woodyard, 2011). Since there is not enough research conducted among yoga teachers on this subject, we wanted to examine the yoga teachers' opinions of yoga, the health benefits of yoga, as well as their motives for practicing and teaching yoga. In order to better understand their experiences, we have applied a qualitative methodology.

METHOD

Qualitative methodology

Studies using qualitative methodology are usually descriptive in nature since the focus is on the research process itself and on the meaning and understanding of the statements of research participants (Tkalac Verčić, Sinčić Čorić, and Pološki Vokić, 2010). The main features of qualitative methodology are that it has a logical and open approach with the primary purpose of gaining a deeper insight and understanding of research issues. For this reason, we decided to use a structured interview with open-ended questions.

In this research, we wanted to answer the following questions:

1. What was the motivation of the participants to start practicing yoga?
2. How do participants perceive their role as a yoga teacher?
3. What are the health benefits of practicing yoga according to the experience of the participants?

Participants

The study involved seven women and two men, with an average age of 34.3. All the participants were yoga teachers of different yogic styles: Hatha, Vinyasa, and Ashtanga yoga. They have been practicing yoga for an average of 7.1 years. They held classes in a private context. For some of them, it was an additional professional activity.

Instruments

We administered a structured questionnaire consisting of 17 questions pertaining to teacher experience, and their perceptions of the health benefits of practicing yoga. The participants completed the questionnaire online.

RESULTS

The personal motives of the yoga teacher
When asked why they started practicing yoga, the participants responded with different answers, outlining the following topics: the need to balance physical and psychological functioning, the need for "depth" and meaning in daily life, personal dissatisfaction, pain, the need to do something useful for themselves, et cetera:

"Yoga has had a positive impact on every aspect of my life because, by working on myself, I have improved my physical and mental health. Perhaps one of the most important elements is discipline. Many years of work involved gradually breaking out of bad habits and embracing some healthier ones. Therefore, my attitude towards life, career, and the people around me have changed. Before I started practicing yoga, a high degree of anxiety and social phobia had so much effect on my daily life and career. I gained more control over my emotions, thoughts and body, and therefore over my fate because the emotions usually brought me into various conflicts and deprived me of energy. Everyone has different reasons. I have two reasons. One is the desire to work on oneself, and the other comes from an inner desire for knowledge. With the first, the biggest role was anxiety and social phobia, which kept me in a cocoon that I couldn't express myself the way I wanted and kept me stuck in my daily life and career. Of course, mental work on oneself is inseparable from the physical. It is commonly said that the mind is an abstraction of the body, and the body a reflection of the mind. Therefore, all the energy nodes in the body correspond to the energy nodes in the mind. Yoga includes both physical and mental work. So, with the desire to work on myself mentally, yoga Asanas also improved my physical health."
(Yoga teacher, 33 years old)

Experience of the role of a yoga teacher

The following questions were related to how the participants perceived their role as a yoga teacher. It is evident from their answers that this experience brings them many benefits such as continuous learning, growth, and development, sharing experiences with students, and a better understanding of themselves, others, and life:
"The role of the teacher has made it easier for me to understand life and myself. Better acceptance of everything that comes and goes, and generally balance (not continuous, not yet :) at all the levels of being."
(Yoga teacher, 39 years old)

"Yoga is a lifestyle for me. It is constant work on oneself. I am pleased to be able to share some of this experience with others, to help all those who

want to work for themselves. "
(Yoga teacher, 33 years old)

"This role allows me to work all the time because, when I have sessions, I cannot say that I am not working today and then quit the session. So, that helped me with discipline. It is also a tremendous experience because of all the students' questions, and another perspective that constantly pushes me to learn. "
(Yoga teacher, 33 years old)

"There is a dose of seriousness and responsibility on my part and great happiness when I see all the people who come to my class."
(Yoga teacher, 33 years old)

Some of the participants stated that their role as a yoga teacher helped them to realize that we are all connected, to become wiser, and they were able to fulfil their life mission:

"I understand that we are all one, I see it clearly; I live a simpler and healthier life, etc."
(Yoga teacher, 40 years old)

"I see myself as a conduit. I do not consider that any of the knowledge I convey belongs to me. Also, I do not consider myself wise, but rather that I am a channel that imparts wisdom and experience to students in the class."
(Yoga teacher, 39 years old)

The impact of yoga on health

The main topic of interest in this research was the perception of the yoga teachers about the health benefits of practicing yoga. Because health relates to all aspects of human functioning, we assessed the impact of yoga on the physical, emotional and spiritual aspects of the practitioners' lives. Regarding the physical body, the participants provided similar answers: healthy spine and bones, good circulation, weight loss, blood pressure regulation, vitality, strength, endurance, re-learning proper breathing, etc.

One of the participants states:

"The benefits to the body are enormous: spine flexibility, mobility, and flexibility of joints, strengthening and relaxing of muscles, stimulating and obtaining high amounts of oxygen in the blood, bringing the muscles to an optimal size in terms of height and weight, the functions of regulating internal organs and glands, rejuvenation of the lymphatic and metabolic systems, strengthening the immune system, regulation of blood pressure, and regulation of other systems while the whole body is strengthened and brought into balance and harmony. It also enhances motivation, resolves insomnia,

neurosis, poor posture and impairs normal lung function which can lead to depression, weakness and boredom, and also balance of the physical body, leading to physical, emotional, mental and spiritual balance. It improves concentration although the thoughts become more positive due to all the negative energies thrown out of the body and the ability to control poor temperament and anger.

Breathing (Pranayama) techniques help to gain mind control. Rapid and shallow breathing leads to anxiety and fear. Breathing exercises repair this condition, the nervous system calms down, emotions calm down as well as the heartbeat. The parasympathetic nervous system activates. Accordingly, the endocrine system is influenced and the levels of adrenaline decrease. "
(Yoga teacher, 33 years old)

When it comes to the emotional state of the practitioners, the participants agree that yoga helps to control understand and accept emotional states. It helps to achieve emotional peace, release from stress and transform negative emotional states. They also state that practicing yoga is aimed at establishing a life balance: "Doing yoga has a positive effect on emotional health. When all energy centres work at full capacity, the capacity of the brain increases, emotions increase, consciousness is raised. Pratyahara techniques calm the mind and expel negative energies and thoughts. When we get rid of the thoughts of the past and the future, then life begins to come into the present moment, and those thoughts related to the past or the future do not unnecessarily restrain and prevent us. The control of mental energies and mismatched emotions are put in order. Aligning emotions gives you control over your eating habits, etc. Mental and physical work on oneself is inseparable, just as mental and physical benefits are inseparable. They are complementary. "
(Yoga teacher, 33 years old)

Practicing yoga can also affect the spiritual development of the practitioners if they are open to that dimension. From the participants' responses, we can see that yoga helps a person to undergo personal transformation and become a better version of themselves. It also paves the way for a broader realization, a universal state of love, and deep peace and stability:

"Yoga is a great way to open up to new insights, to experience authentic spiritual experiences. In states of deep meditation, we can experience pure spirituality. Those who work long enough, who are dedicated and who do not give up on the first obstacles have a result. Sometimes it is very visible, sometimes it comes a little later, but there is always a result. Yoga works, and if we are honest in our practice, we inevitably transform into a better version of ourselves. When they experience something like that, then people continue to practice. "
(Yoga teacher, 39 years old)

"With all the unmentioned benefits, both physical and mental, with the disappearance of mental stress and

emotional imbalance, the real self is perceived and concentration rises to the inner reality. Internal insight and awareness is awoken. The models of spiritual existence are being developed. "
(Yoga teacher, 33 years old)

"Doing yoga helps us discover the divine spark in us, a sense of purpose and connection."
(Yoga teacher, 27 years old)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

According to our results, yoga teachers generally refer to the positive impact of yoga on the physical and mental aspects of life. Their motives for practicing yoga are different, from the need for a life balance to the search for the meaning of life. These results are consistent with other studies. For example, Park, Quinker, Dobos, and Cramer (2019) noted that the most common reasons for starting the practice of yoga are the need for relaxation and for preventative reasons. A similar study reported that the most common motives are physical benefits such as increased flexibility, a decrease of low back pain, and for mental reasons such as increased concentration, meditation, and a clearer mind after practice (Mocanu, Mohr, Pouyan, Thuillard, and Dan-Glauser, 2018). A study conducted on 56 women between the ages of 50 and 79 showed that 90 minutes of Hatha yoga performed once a week increased their spine mobility and muscle flexibility, regardless of age (Grabara and Szopa, 2015). It appears that the experiences of the role of a yoga teacher are very rarely examined in the research. To our knowledge, there is no research on this topic. Our results show that the role of a yoga teacher is very supportive of teachers and brings many benefits to them, and is perceived by some participants as a life mission.

The main topic of interest in this research is the perception of the yoga teacher about the health benefits of practicing yoga. Because health relates to all aspects of human functioning, we assessed the impact of yoga on the physical, emotional and spiritual aspects of the practitioners' lives. Regarding the physical aspect, the participants gave similar answers: flexibility of the spine and joints, improvement of circulation and blood pressure, regulation of weight and eating habits, regulation of pressure, vitality, strength, endurance, improvement of sleep and proper breathing. Such observations by yoga teachers are consistent with numerous studies. For example, in the study of Hagins, States, Selfe, and Innes, (2013), many of the effects of yoga on the cardiovascular system were confirmed where yoga, as a complementary therapy, has been studied in numerous randomized controlled trials. On average, the total effect of yoga therapy resulted in a decrease in systolic blood pressure by about 10 mmHg, and approximately 8 mmHg decrease in diastolic blood pressure (Hagins, States, Selfe, and Innes, 2013). One of the possible mechanisms of the influence of yoga

on blood pressure is increased parasympathetic activity with the help of yogic breathing techniques, such as alternating breathing through the left and right nostrils (Telles, Sharma, and Balkrishna, 2014). In addition, the American Heart Association published a study that transcendental meditation can reduce the incidence of heart attacks, strokes, and deaths in patients with cardiovascular disease, and suggested that transcendental meditation techniques be considered in clinical practice with patients with lower blood pressure (Brook et al., 2013).

Yoga teachers have also expressed the view that practicing yoga influences body weight, which is consistent with a randomized controlled study conducted among adult men (Rshikesan, Subramanya, and Nidhi, 2016). In a qualitative study conducted by Ross, Brooks, Touchton-Leonard, and Wallen (2016), the respondents concluded that yoga led to physical and psychological changes which supported weight loss, including increased muscle tone, improved metabolism, decreased stress, as well as increased awareness, better mood, and greater self-acceptance and self-esteem. According to the data collected in our study, the participants reported numerous psychological benefits of yoga.

A large number of studies have confirmed the very significant effects of yoga on mental health. For example, a study conducted by Bonura and Tenenbaum (2014) found that yoga practitioners had better anger control, less anxiety, depression, and greater well-being and general self-efficacy during normal activities compared to the exercise group and the control group of participants. Research has also confirmed that yoga helps bring awareness to cognitive processes (such as thoughts, feelings, beliefs) through increasing meta-awareness and developing self-regulatory techniques such as changing negative thoughts (Cahn and Polich, 2006). In many other studies, yoga has been associated with a general increase in feelings of well-being, quality of life and positive emotions, and a decrease in stress, negative emotions, anxiety symptoms and depression (Pilkington, Kirkwood, Rampes, and Richardson, 2005; Woodyard, 2011).

It has also been shown that practicing yoga can be a potential treatment or additional activity for healing psychiatric disorders such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic disorder and schizophrenia (Balasubramaniam, Telles, and Doraiswamy, 2012; Cabral, Meyer, and Ames, 2011; Kirkwood, Rampes, Tuffrey, Tuff, Richardson, and Pilkington, 2005; Li and Goldsmith, 2012). Several studies have shown that practicing yoga at least once a week is sufficient for psychological effects such as stress reduction (Banerjee et al., 2007; Cowen and Adams, 2005; Michalsen et al., 2005, 2012).

Our results show that practicing yoga brings numerous health benefits at all the levels of human functioning, both for yoga teachers and their students.

Further research should examine, in more detail, how practitioners are transformed and how they can be further supported in the self-exploration and in improving their own quality of life.

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KAKO JOGA UTIČE NA ZDRAVLJE? ISKUSTVA UČITELJA JOGE

Uticaj joga na fizičko, emocionalno i duhovno razvijanje pojedinca utvrđen je u velikom broju međunarodnih istraživanja. Vježbanje joga značajno poboljšava raspoloženje, smanjuje ljutnju, depresiju i umor, povećava otpornost, i smanjuje kognitivne reakcije na stres, kao što su ruminacija, nametljive misli te emotivno uzbuđenje. Istraživanja o jogi su rijetkost u našim zemljama, stoga smo željeli da ispitamo iskustva učitelja joga o jogi, zdravstvenim uticajima joga na zdravlje i njihovim motivima za vježbanje i podučavanje joga. Da bi shvatili njihova iskustva bolje, primijenili smo kvalitativnu metodologiju. Prema rezultatima, učitelji joga odlučili su vježbati jogu iz različitih razloga. Najčešći motivi su bili potreba za balansiranjem fizičkog i mentalnog funkcioniranja, potreba za "dubinom" i značenjem u svakodnevnom životu, osobno nezadovoljstvo, bol i potreba da se uradi nešto korisno za sebe. Iz njihovih odgovora evidentno je da uloga učitelja joga donosi mnoge pogodnosti, poput kontinuiranog učenja, rasta i razvoja, dijeljenja iskustava sa studentima, boljeg razumijevanje sebe, drugih i generalno života. Kada su u pitanju zdravstvene pogodnosti joga, učesnici su dali slične odgovore: poboljšano stanje kičme i zdravlje kostiju, željeni gubitak težine, regulacija pritiska, vitalnost, snaga, izdržljivost, ponovno učenje ispravnog disanja, itd. Prema ovim rezultatima, možemo zaključiti da su zdravstvene pogodnosti prakticiranja joga ogromne i da donose velike benefite učiteljima joga i njihovim studentima.

Ključne riječi: joga, zdravlje, učitelji joga, dobrobit

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