

# Yoga and Mental Health

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**T**he word “yoga” comes from a Sanskrit root “yuj” which means ‘union’ or ‘to yoke’ or ‘to join’. This union is the merger of the individual consciousness with the universal one, through the proper performance of duties in everyday life. Yoga is a psycho-somatic spiritual discipline for achieving union and harmony between the mind, body and soul. Its relevance in mental health has been mentioned in ancient texts as well. Patanjali in his Yoga sutras says “Yogah chitta vritti nirodhah” which means the primary aim of Yoga is removal of fluctuations of the mind. “Samatvam Yoga Uchyate” which translates to ‘yoga is equanimity of mind in any situation’ is cited in the Bhagavad Gita (5000 BC).

**Yoga has been shown to help improve symptoms in several physical disorders, like diabetes, hypertension, asthma and also in mental disorders like anxiety, depression and psychosis. Yoga practice has been reported to help depressive symptoms since a long time. It lifts the mood and improves interest in activities, attention/ concentration/memory, sleep and appetite.**

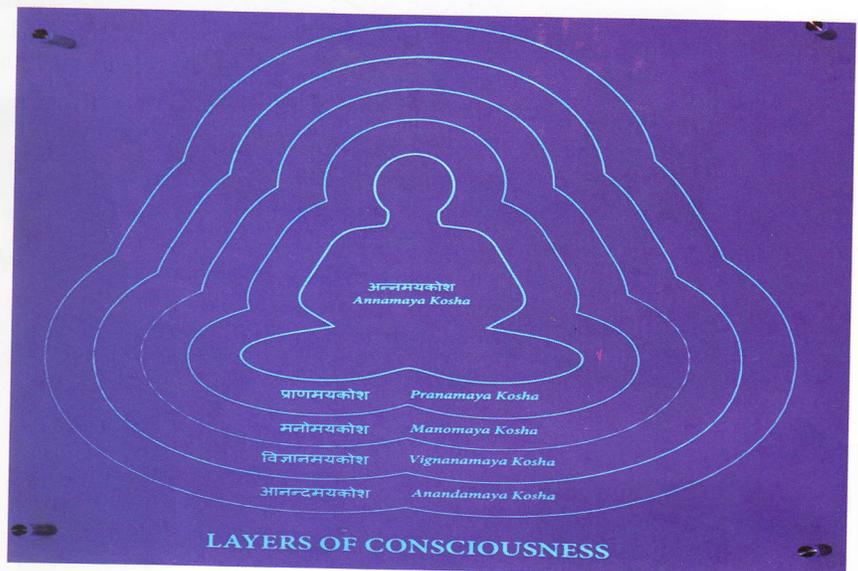


Figure 1: Panchkosas

Yoga is described as a holistic health system in the *Yoga Sutras*, credited to Patanjali (circa 300 CE). Yoga is a life style rather than just asana/pranayama. Also, yoga/asana is not same as exercise. One of the important differences is that in yoga there is always a synchronisation between body movements and breathing along with awareness of self. Also, in exercise, movements are dynamic, speedy and isotonic whereas in asanas it is steady, slow and isometric. During exercise, there is increase in heart rate, blood pressure, respiratory rate and basal metabolic rate whereas in yoga all these parameters decrease.

Yoga is generally understood, particularly in the west, as asana or pranayama but in reality consists of many more components. ‘*Ashtanga*

*Yoga*’ as outlined by Patanjali, consists of eight limbs. These are as follows:

1. Yama (universal ethics)
2. Niyama (individual ethics)
3. Asana (physical poses)
4. Pranayama (breath control)
5. Pratyahara (control of the senses)
6. Dharana (steadiness of mind)
7. Dhyana (meditation)
8. Samadhi (bliss)

As per this model, yoga if practiced in the sequence as mentioned above leads to bliss which is the ultimate state.

### Concept of Disease as per Yoga

Taittiriya Upanishad describes the five sheaths (pancha-kosas) or layers

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of existence in the body from gross to fine level. This is also called as Anatomy of Yoga (Figure 1). They are, namely:

1. Annamaya kosha, “food” sheath (Anna)
2. Pranamaya kosha, “energy” sheath (Prana)
3. Manomaya kosha, “mind” sheath (Manas)
4. Vijñānmāyā kosha, “discernment” sheath (Vijnana)
5. Anandamaya kosha, “bliss” sheath (Ananda)

As per the yogic understanding, diseases are caused by 1. Stress, 2. Wrong diet, 3. Wrong exercise, 4. Bad habits.

The pathology begins in Manomaya Kosha. Imbalance between likes and dislikes in this level will result in mental illnesses called “Adhis”. At this stage there is no symptom at the physical level. Increase in Ajnana (ignorance about one’s real state of bliss) leads one to perform wrong actions such as eating of unwholesome food, living in unhealthy dwellings, association with wicked, evil thoughts, inflicting injuries etc. which further lead to physical diseases called “Vyadhis”.

### Yoga and Mental Health

Yoga brings about positive health by causing the relaxation of the whole body, slowing down the respiration (making it quiet and deep) and calming the mind, thereby helping in improving attention and concentration. It improves awareness of body, emotions and mind; and the flow of healing ‘Pranic Life Energy’. It increases self-reliance and self-confidence, thereby improving the ability to handle stress. It improves self-regulation thereby helping us take the responsibility of our own health. Improvement in dietary habits and facilitating natural emanation of wastes is also an important part of yoga.

In general, yoga helps reduce anxiety and improve the sense of well-being. It leads to better interpersonal relationships, increased attentiveness,

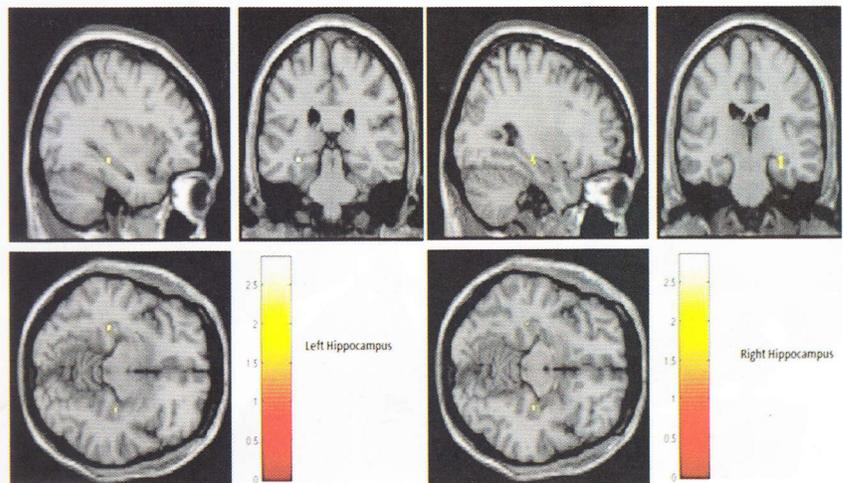


Figure 2: Increase in brain volume (hippocampus - yellow colour highlighted areas) with yoga practise in elderly subjects

lowered irritability levels, and an optimistic outlook in life in healthy individuals.

Yoga has been shown to help improve symptoms in several physical disorders, like diabetes, hypertension, asthma and also in mental disorders, like anxiety, depression and psychosis. Yoga practice has been reported to help depressive symptoms since a long time. It lifts the mood and improves interest in activities, attention/concentration/memory, sleep and appetite. It has been found to have effect on the cognitive/ behavioural aspects due to its mindfulness component. Research at the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences has also shown that the practice of yoga has effects on biological parameters like

increasing the parasympathetic tone, reducing cortisol levels and decreasing the neuro-inflammation in patients with depression. In fact, yoga has been used as a sole treatment for patients with mild to moderate depression in several recent studies in India and abroad. In patients with psychotic disorders such as schizophrenia, yoga practice has been shown to improve socialization, motivation to do activities, occupational functioning, ability to recognize others emotions/feelings, and cognitive abilities. This is probably brought about by the increase in the ‘cuddle hormone’, namely oxytocin, by yoga.

Yoga holds promise as a complementary therapy in cases of tobacco, alcohol and opioid dependence along with routine medical intervention

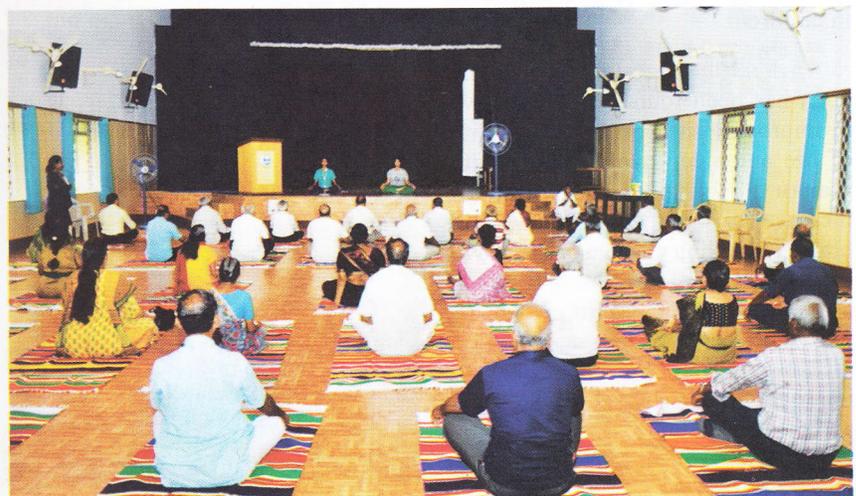


Figure 3: The elderly practising yoga

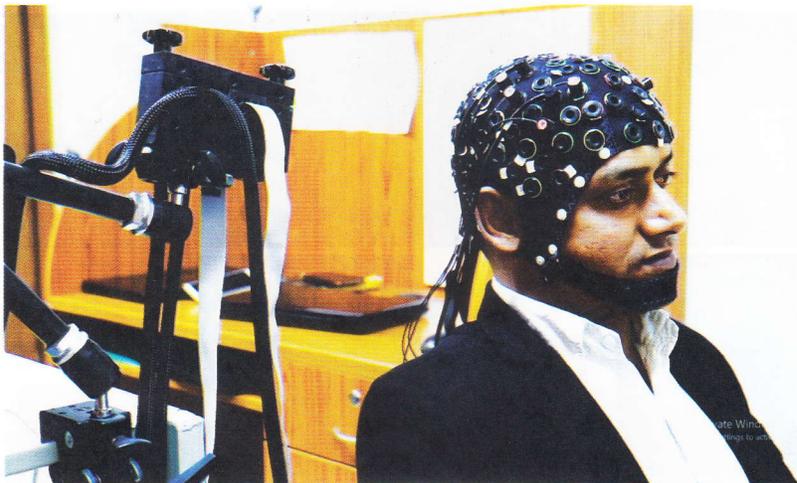


Figure 4a: Brain Mapping tool - to measure the activity of brain following yoga practise

Yoga was practiced in ancient times for overall general well-being and spiritual progress. Current research evidence suggests that yoga can be used as an add-on therapy or in some instances as a sole therapy for psychiatric disorders as well. It not only improves the symptoms, but brings about holistic change in an individual.

and psychosocial interventions, with effects during both the acute withdrawal phase and long term relapse prevention. The mechanisms include direct decrease in sympathetic discharge that accompanies the withdrawal state as well as improvement in negative mood states and stress reduction during the long term maintenance phase that may prevent a relapse.

The systematic methods of concentration taught in yoga practice have been thought to potentially help reduce attention deficits. In addition, yoga may produce a state of calmness and contentment which is lacking in children with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Yoga may offer benefits as an effective tool to increase imitation, cognitive skills and social-communicative behaviours in children.

In healthy elderly individuals, yoga has been found to be effective in improving the domains of quality of life and sleep quality along with memory. Also, there was a small increase in hippocampal volume in brain, indicating that yoga can have neuroplastic effects (better wiring of brain) in elderly (Figure 2). In elderly patients with minimal memory disturbance, yoga has been found to improve perceived stress, mood, sleep and memory (Figure 3).

At the NIMHANS Integrated Centre for yoga, specific yoga

modules have been designed for patients with specific psychiatric disorders based on traditional and contemporary yoga literature and these have been later validated and finalized after consultation with yoga experts. Modules have been developed for depression, schizophrenia, elderly with cognitive problems, Obsessive Compulsive Disorders, and Opioid Dependence Disorder. The Centre is also dedicated to carry out research in the field of yoga and neuro-psychiatric illness (Figure 4a and 4b).

### Guidelines for Practice of Yoga

Yogic practices should be practised on an empty or on a very light stomach. Ideal time for practice would be in the early morning but it can also be

practised in the evening. Patience is an important requirement for yoga. Regularity of practice is an essential both in the physical and mental aspects of yoga.

Classically, yoga practices are started with the prayer by salutation or invocation to the object of interest. This will be followed by slow movements with breathing awareness and loosening exercise to prepare the lungs and muscles for asanas and pranayama practices, and also to avoid muscle soreness.

Then, there will be practice of Asanas/Bodily postures with mindfulness. The type of asana depends on the need of the subject. Generally, the *asanas* are practised in the sequence of standing, sitting, prone-lying and supine-lying position asanas. It should not be practised in haste or by applying any sort of undue force and under any urgency. Jerks should be avoided. It should be performed

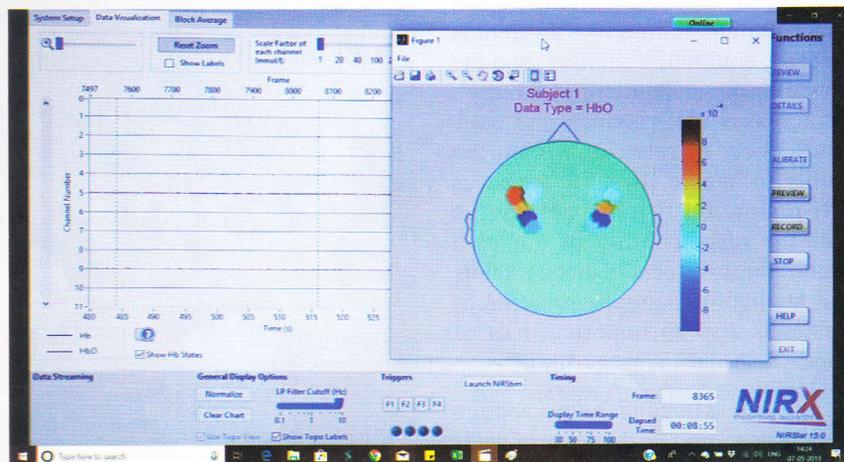


Figure 4b: Brain Mapping - Brain activity recording

with body and breath awareness. There should be coordination between breath and movement of body parts. Final position of *asanas* should be attained slowly step-by-step and should be maintained with closed eyes for developing an inward awareness within the body. It must be maintained for as long as one is comfortable. Breathing should be as normal/natural as possible unless instructed specifically otherwise.

Asana practice is followed by Pranayama/Regulated breathing practice. Then, direct contemplative practices/Meditation (Dharana and Dhyana) may be done. Post meditative relaxation with positive suggestion will be the penultimate step. The practice is usually ended by making a wish/praying with good wishes and pure feelings for all beings of the universe.

**The Components of Yogic Way of Life for Positive Mental Health Are As Follows:**

- Ahara (Food) – Mitahara should

be practiced. The quantity should be enough to fill two quarters of the stomach, another one quarter should be filled with liquid and the remaining quarter (one-fourth) should be left empty for free flow of air. Food needs to be eaten with positive state of mind with utmost concentration. We need to consume freshly cooked, nutritious, nourishing food in the natural form.

- Vihara (Relaxation) - Yogic practices of asana, pranayama and meditation relaxes body and mind. Sound sleep, recreational activities are also important for relaxation.
- Achara (Conduct) - Positive emotions, positive attitudes, good habits and control on desires help in making us strong, both, individually and socially. Yogic principles of Yama (restraint) and Niyama (observance) help to develop control on our desires

and emotions and bring about peace and harmony.

- Vichara (Thinking) - Yogic practices like pratyahara and dhyana (meditation) help us in controlling our thoughts and thereby promoting optimism in life.
- Vyavahara (Behaviour or actions) – Karma Yoga proposes that we should perform right actions with full dedication without worrying about the results.

**Conclusion**

Yoga was practiced in ancient times for overall general well-being and spiritual progress. Current research evidence suggests that yoga can be used as an add-on therapy or in some instances as a sole therapy for psychiatric disorders as well. It not only improves the symptoms, but brings about holistic change in an individual. □

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