



Role of yoga in stress management: A case study

Vasuki K*, C Kalaiyarasan

Assistant Director of Physical Education, Roever Agricultural College (TRIARD), Perambalur, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

The state of the mind and that of the body are intimately related. If the mind is relaxed, the muscles in the body will also be relaxed. Stress produces a state of physical and mental tension. Yoga, developed thousands of years ago, is recognized as a form of mind-body medicine. In yoga, physical postures and breathing exercises improve muscle strength, flexibility, blood circulation and oxygen uptake as well as hormone function. In addition, the relaxation induced by meditation helps to stabilize the autonomic nervous system with a tendency towards parasympathetic dominance. Physiological benefits which follow, help yoga practitioners become more resilient to stressful conditions and reduce a variety of important risk factors for various diseases, especially cardio-respiratory diseases.

Keywords: yoga, stress management and relaxation

Introduction

In the present scenario, which is characterized by a high degree of dynamism and competitiveness, one is exposed to many stressors in all genres of life. Stress is a complex, dynamic process of interaction between a person and his or her life. Stress is a silent killer, and prolonged exposure to stress may have harmful effects on physical, psychological, social and behavioral well-being of an individual. According to Stephen P. Robbins (2006) ^[4],—stress arises from an opportunity, demand, constraint, threat or challenge, when the outcomes of the event are important and uncertain.

Yoga is a way of life, characterized by balance, health, happiness, and harmony. Yoga practice enables a person to reach a state of mental composure, thereby ensuring that the person has full control over his/her reactions or responses to the external stimuli. Yoga is a science, a discipline which enables the practitioners to achieve a calm and composed mind, good physical health, continuous spiritual inspiration, and creates the ability for congenial social relationships. This research study tries to understand the role of yoga in managing and mitigating stress. Various stressors in the present scenario, and the effects of yoga on the stress caused by these stressors are to be identified so as to consider practicing yoga as an effective stress management technique.

Role of Yoga in Stress Management

The stress response is a complex emotion that produces physiological changes to prepare one for fight-or-flight, to defend oneself from the threat or flee from it. According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, 80% of the workers experience job stress. Keeley and Harcourt conducted a study on,—Occupational Stress: A Study of the New Zealand and Reserve Bank, which revealed that stress is caused by heavy work demands in the job itself, which the unskilled employees lacking the required capabilities, cannot adapt to or modify. Kulkarni has made an attempt to identify various stressors in the present scenario in the article—Burnout published in Indian Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine. It

describes the association of the rapid change in the modern working life with the increasing demands of acquiring new skills, the need to adapt to new kinds/formats of work, continuously striving to raise productivity and improve quality of work, time constraint, and hectic work schedules. These factors are increasing stress among the workforce of organizations. Nevertheless, every problem has a solution. There are different stress management and stress reduction techniques. Yoga is one such technique which is used to cope with stress. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Yoga began to be used as a therapeutic intervention because of the various psychophysiological benefits of the component practices.

Yoga is an ancient, Indian art and science that seeks to promote individual health and well-being through physical and mental exercise and deep relaxation. A person of any age, sex, caste, colour, religion, financial status, health or life condition can practice Yoga and derive its benefits.

The physical exercises (asanas) may increase patient's physical flexibility, coordination, and strength, while the breathing practices and meditation may relax and focus the mind to develop greater awareness and concentration, and reduce anxiety, and thus result in higher quality of life. It may also prove to be helpful in the reduction of distress, blood pressure, asthma, and improvements in strength, mood, and metabolic regulation.

Hatha yoga involves slow stretching of the muscles in exercise alongwith breathing in certain rhythmical patterns. The body positions (asanas) for exercises and meditation can be learned through practice. These asanas are believed to clear the mind, and relax and energize a person. Hatha Yoga is the most preferred style of Yoga by the Westerners, not merely for relaxation and reduction of stress but also for the diminution of pain during certain illnesses. Hatha yoga may serve as a good choice for stress management. Hatha yoga is one of the most common styles of yoga, and its slower pace and easier movements make it more suitable for the beginners. However, all forms of yoga are beneficial for the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health of individuals, and one can choose to practice any form of yoga based on personal preference. Yoga is also widely

recommended for pregnant and nursing women as well as those reaching menopause.

Pranayam (breathing practice) is an exercise of concentration as it involves focusing on breathing in and out of air. Research has confirmed that consciously directed breathing has following benefits: reduced stress, serene mind, sound sleep, lower blood pressure, proper digestion, clear sinuses, smoking cessation, improved sports performances, relief from constipation and headaches, reduced allergy and asthma symptoms, relief from menstrual cramps, and emotional stability.

According to Dean Ornish, in his book, *Reversing Heart Disease*, "almost all of these (stress reduction) techniques ultimately derive from yoga." Yoga integrates the concepts of stretching, controlled breathing, imagery, meditation, and physical movement. Yoga is a way of life. It is not merely a tool for stress management but it is also practiced to ensure good physical and mental health and to live a meaningful life. Yoga is a system of healing and self-transformation based on wholeness and unity.

The word yoga itself means to "yoke"- to bring together. It aims at integrating the varied processes with which we understand the world and ourselves. It touches the physical, mental, psychological, and spiritual domains that we live in. Yoga recognizes that without integration of these, spiritual freedom and awareness, or what the yogis call "liberation," cannot occur. Yoga has several health benefits, it has the potential for personal and spiritual transformation, and it is easily accessible. These features make it a practical choice for anyone seeking physical, mental, psychological, and spiritual integration. There is a rising interest in Yoga all over the world. Among the numerous different Yoga styles, Hatha yoga is the most familiar to Westerners. It is the path of health which uses breathing techniques and exercises which involve various postures to improve physical and mental integration. Various forms of yoga facilitate improvement in focus, concentration, cerebration, self-control and will-power of an individual. In Britain, yoga practice in the workplace is common.

Yoga is not a religion or a mere exercise, it is a system of integrated techniques and mind frames designed to mitigate stress and bring about a general consonance throughout one's body. This infuses feel-good vibes in the mind and body of an individual. Unlike other good things in the world, Yoga does not come with a side effect.

Yoga, a mind-body practice, is considered one of many types of complementary and integrative health approaches. It converges physical and mental disciplines, thus helping an individual achieve harmony of body and mind. This helps relax and manage stress and anxiety.

Conclusion

Stress has become a part and parcel of the present day's life. Various stressors, *viz.* increasing demands at home and work, managing relationships and family responsibilities, job insecurity, time constraint, hectic work schedules, work-life balance, need for continuous skill improvement, pressure to raise the productivity and increased competitiveness lead to stressful conditions. Stress has an adverse effect on an individual's physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual wellbeing. Stress has a negative effect on an individual's health and performance. It can lead to various health and work-related problems. With almost everyone being affected by stress in the present

scenario, it necessitates the use of appropriate stress management techniques.

Therefore, it can be concluded from the study that yoga is an effective tool for reducing and managing stress caused by various stressors like increasing demands at home and work, work-life balance, job insecurity, time pressure, increased competition for talent, need for continuous learning and skill improvement, managing relationships and family responsibilities etc. Yoga practice facilitates stress reduction and stress management, and results in the overall well-being of an individual with a wholesome personality.

References

1. Burnard P. Stress: Beyond burnout. *Nursing Standard*,1991;5:46-48
2. Keeley K, Harcourt M. Occupational Stress: A Study of the New Zealand and Reserve Bank. *Research and Practice in Human Resource Management*,2001;9(2):109-118
3. Kulkarni GK. Burnout. *Indian Journal of Occupational & Environmental Medicine*,2006;10(1):3-4.
4. Robbins SP. *Organizational Behaviour* (11th ed.). Delhi, India: Pearson Education Pvt. Ltd, 2006.