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The Science of Stillness: Investigating the Impact of Yoga on Mental Health Disorders

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Abstract:

Mental health issues like depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) affect hundreds of millions of people worldwide. Although psychotherapy and medication are widely used to manage these conditions, they come with limitations such as side effects, cost, and inconsistent results. This paper explores yoga as a complementary approach to mental health treatment. It examines yoga's neurobiological effects, including its influence on brain structure, neurotransmitters, and the autonomic nervous system. Clinical research on yoga's role in treating depression, anxiety, and PTSD is reviewed, along with comparisons to traditional therapies such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and pharmacological interventions. The paper also discusses case studies and meta-analyses to support yoga's potential in mental health care. While not a substitute for conventional treatment, yoga offers a holistic, accessible, and low-risk way to support mental well-being. The growing body of evidence makes a strong case for integrating yoga into broader mental health strategies.

Keywords: Yoga, Mental Health. Psychotherapy, Human development

Introduction:

Mental health disorders are a growing global concern, with conditions like depression, anxiety, and PTSD affecting nearly one in eight people. Traditional treatments such as medication and therapy have helped many, but they also come with limitations—side effects, high costs, and stigma being just a few. In recent years, people have increasingly turned to alternative and complementary therapies to fill the gaps. One practice that has gained particular attention is yoga.

Originally a spiritual discipline from ancient India, yoga has evolved into a globally practiced method for enhancing both physical and mental well-being. It blends physical poses (asana), breathing exercises (pranayama), and meditation (dhyana), forming a holistic approach that targets the mind-body connection. This paper investigates how yoga impacts mental health on both a

scientific and clinical level. It explores the biological mechanisms involved, assesses its effectiveness in managing common mental health disorders, and compares it to more conventional treatment options.

Yoga as a Mind-Body Practice:

The yoga and yogic practices are comprehensive in nature which involves psychological, biological and spiritual mechanisms and characterized by a new and promising approach with no negative side effects and proven scientific and practical implications covering all people. The researchers have argued that Yogic practices induce brain changes resulting in greater activation in left than right prefrontal cortex (Davidson et al., 2003). Some studies have demonstrated that yoga based exercises are responsible for formation of new neural Yoga and Mental Health: An Underexplored Relationship © The International Journal of Indian Psychology | 24 pathways (Kreiman, Koch, & Fried, 2000). In their study, Lazar et al. (2005) and Lazar (2006) have found that yogic practices affect resonance circuitry which increases thickness in medial prefrontal cortex and insula, especially right side resulting in empathy, interoception and attunement to self and others, logical and intuitive processing (Kreiman, Koch & Fried, 2000). These practices also lead to decreased vulnerability to stress in healthy exercising adults (Baldwin, 1999). In their study on 113 psychiatric patients, Lavey et al. (2005) have found that yogic practices help regulate mood. In another study, these practices have been found to benefit emotionally distressed women (Michaelson et al., 2005)

Yoga is more than just stretching or fitness—it's a multifaceted system aimed at balancing the mind and body. Its roots lie in Indian philosophy, particularly in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, which outline an eight-limbed path toward spiritual enlightenment and inner peace. In modern contexts, yoga has shifted focus from spiritual liberation to mental and physical health, making it more accessible to a global audience.

As a mind-body intervention, yoga encourages a harmonious relationship between mental processes and physiological responses. The combination of physical movement, controlled breathing, and focused attention helps regulate the nervous system, improve self-awareness, and promote emotional stability. Because of these qualities, yoga is being increasingly incorporated into wellness programs and clinical treatments for mental health.

How Yoga Affects the Brain and Body:

Recent advances in neuroscience have made it possible to examine how yoga impacts the brain and nervous system. Studies using imaging technology and biochemical analysis have found significant changes in brain structure and neurotransmitter levels among yoga practitioners.

1. Changes in Brain Structure:

Regular yoga practice has been linked to increased gray matter in brain regions involved in

emotional regulation and memory, such as the hippocampus, prefrontal cortex, and insula. These areas often show reduced activity or structural loss in people with depression or anxiety. A study by Froeliger et al. (2012) found that yoga practitioners had thicker cortices in the prefrontal area, a part of the brain essential for managing attention, self-control, and emotional responses.

2. Neurochemical Shifts:

Yoga appears to positively influence the levels of several key neurotransmitters:

GABA (Gamma-Aminobutyric Acid): Low levels of GABA are associated with anxiety and mood disorders. Streeter et al. (2007) observed a notable increase—around 27%—in GABA levels after a single yoga session.

Serotonin and Dopamine: These “feel-good” chemicals are often targeted by antidepressants. Research suggests yoga naturally boosts their levels, leading to mood improvement (Newberg & Iversen, 2003).

Cortisol: As a stress hormone, high cortisol levels are common in people with anxiety and PTSD. Yoga has been shown to help lower cortisol, indicating a reduction in physiological stress.

3. Nervous System Regulation:

Yoga practices, especially breathwork and meditation, have a calming effect on the nervous system. They help shift the body from a state of high alert (sympathetic mode) to a more relaxed state (parasympathetic mode). This is particularly useful in treating anxiety and trauma, where the “fight-or-flight” response is often overactive.

Yoga’s Role in Treating Specific Disorders:

Clinical studies have explored how yoga affects people living with mental health conditions. The following sections review the research on yoga’s effectiveness in treating depression, anxiety, and PTSD.

1. Depression:

Yoga has shown strong results in managing depressive symptoms. A meta-analysis by Cramer et al. (2017) looked at 23 randomized controlled trials and found that yoga significantly reduced depression severity compared to standard treatment or no treatment. Hatha yoga—focused on postures and breath—was especially effective.

Another study by Uebelacker et al. (2019) found that adding yoga to an existing antidepressant regimen led to greater symptom reduction and overall well-being over a 10-week period. Participants also reported better sleep and more energy.

2. Anxiety:

Yoga’s calming effects make it an effective tool for managing anxiety. In a review of 17 clinical trials, Li and Goldsmith (2012) found that yoga consistently helped reduce symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder, panic attacks, and social anxiety. People reported feeling more in

control of their thoughts and less reactive to stressors.

A well-cited study published in JAMA Psychiatry in 2016 compared Kundalini yoga to stress education and found that yoga participants experienced significantly lower anxiety levels after 12 weeks.

3. PTSD:

Yoga has also been used successfully to help people with PTSD. A specialized form called Trauma-Sensitive Yoga (TSY) is designed to help trauma survivors reconnect with their bodies in a safe, non-threatening way. Unlike traditional talk therapy, TSY uses movement and breath to rebuild trust in bodily sensations.

Van der Kolk et al. (2014) found that women with chronic PTSD experienced significant reductions in symptoms after just 10 weeks of trauma-sensitive yoga. They also reported better emotional regulation and sleep.

How Yoga Compares to Conventional Treatments:

While conventional treatments like CBT and medication are widely used and well-studied, they don't work for everyone. Yoga offers a different approach that may complement or even enhance these methods.

1. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) vs. Yoga:

CBT aims to change negative thought patterns and behaviors. Yoga similarly promotes awareness and emotional control but adds a physical element that CBT lacks. This makes yoga especially helpful for people who find it hard to express their emotions verbally or who prefer somatic healing methods.

A study by Kinser et al. (2020) compared yoga and CBT for women with depression and found that both approaches were effective. However, the yoga group reported greater satisfaction and stress relief.

2. Medication vs. Yoga:

Pharmaceutical treatments for mental health often target neurotransmitters like serotonin and dopamine. While effective for many, they can cause side effects such as fatigue, weight gain, or sexual dysfunction. Yoga influences similar chemical pathways in the brain but without these drawbacks.

Still, yoga should not be seen as a complete replacement for medication, especially in severe cases. Instead, it can serve as a valuable addition to a broader treatment plan.

Case Studies and Meta-Analyses:

Yoga and Depression in College Students:

In a 2015 pilot study, Sharma et al. looked at Indian college students with mild to moderate depression. After participating in a six-week yoga program, students showed significant

improvements in mood, sleep, and academic performance. They also reported feeling more focused and less overwhelmed—suggesting that yoga may be particularly beneficial for young people dealing with stress.

Global Meta-Analysis:

A 2020 Cochrane Review evaluated 81 studies on yoga's impact on mental health. The authors found consistent evidence that yoga helps reduce depression and anxiety. Though the quality of studies varied, the overall trend strongly supported yoga's role as an effective, low-cost mental health intervention.

Limitations and Challenges:

Despite the positive findings, yoga isn't without its challenges in a clinical context.

Variation Across Studies: Different styles, session lengths, and participant backgrounds make it difficult to compare results across studies.

Placebo Effects: Some of the benefits may stem from social interaction, routine, or personal belief in the practice.

Access and Inclusion: Yoga may not be easily accessible to all due to financial, physical, or cultural barriers.

Skepticism in Medicine: Some mental health professionals still view yoga as alternative or unscientific, though this perception is gradually changing with more research.

Conclusion:

Yoga offers a promising complement to traditional mental health treatments. Its blend of physical movement, controlled breathing, and meditation provides both immediate relief from stress and long-term benefits for emotional health. The scientific evidence—from neuroimaging to clinical trials—supports yoga's effectiveness in improving symptoms of depression, anxiety, and PTSD.

While it's not a standalone solution for serious mental illness, yoga's low cost, accessibility, and holistic approach make it a valuable part of any mental health strategy. As more people seek sustainable and integrative forms of care, yoga is well-positioned to play a meaningful role in the future of mental health treatment.

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