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Yoga therapy in adolescent girls

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Abstract

While any type of yoga can bring health benefits, yoga therapy involves employing a variety of yoga practices to try to improve a health condition or to ease a natural process, such as pregnancy or menopause. Among the yogic tools used therapeutically are asana (the physical postures), Pranayama (breathing exercises), meditation, and guided imagery. Although many people don't realize it, yogis also consider diet an integral part of yoga and therefore of yoga therapy.

Keywords: Yoga therapy, adolescent girls

Introduction

Yoga

Therapeutic yoga is an inherently holistic approach, simultaneously working on the body, mind, and spirit. Various yoga practices systematically strengthen different systems in the body, including the heart and cardiovascular system, the lungs, muscles, and the nervous system. Yoga practices can improve function of the digestive system, foster psychological well-being, and improve oxygen delivery to tissues. Yoga also can help the body more efficiently remove waste products, carcinogens, and cellular toxins.

Most people in the West live stressful lives, and yoga-and by extension yoga therapy-is perhaps the best overall stress reduction system ever invented. Stress has been linked to a wide variety of medical problems, from migraine headaches and irritable bowel syndrome to potentially life-threatening conditions such as diabetes, osteoporosis, and heart disease. Since persistently high levels of stress hormones, particularly cortisol, can undermine function of the immune system, here too yoga can help.

While yoga by itself can alleviate a number of problems, it is particularly effective as a complement to other forms of health care, both alternative and conventional. Studies suggest, for example, that yoga therapy can lessen the side effects of chemotherapy and radiation treatments for people with cancer and facilitate faster recovery after bypass surgery. In clinical trials, many patients with asthma, type II diabetes (formerly known as adult-onset diabetes), or high blood pressure who began a regular practice of yoga were able to either lower their drug dosage, or eliminate some pills entirely. Less medication means fewer side effects, and, sometimes, very substantial cost savings.

One Step at a Time

While yoga is strong medicine, in general it is slow medicine. The key to successful yoga therapy is an incremental approach, which tends to be safer and more effective than more aggressive strategies. It is best to begin yoga [therapy] as medicine slowly and ramp up the intensity and duration of practice only as circumstances allow. For some students, particularly those with serious medical problems, therapeutic yoga might begin with only a posture or two, or a single breathing exercise, until the student is ready for more.

In any yoga therapy session, ideally you only want to teach a student as much as they are going to be able to practice at home. Better to teach a few things well than to have them try to do more with less precision. An exception to this rule would be when you teach a specific series of practices in one session in order to teach the student to relieve a current symptom, with only a small portion of the total practice assigned as homework. More experienced students, of course, may be able to handle much more.

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One Size Does Not Fit All

Probably the most common misconception I see regarding yoga therapy is that there is one particular pose or sequences of practices that is therapeutic for a condition. People often ask me, for example, what pose they should do for lower back pain or for Parkinson's disease. The answer is that it depends.

No two people are alike. People have different strengths and weaknesses, different degrees of overall health and fitness, and different levels of experience with yoga. Even people with exactly the same condition—say breast cancer—may vary in disease severity, their stage of treatment, and the amount of time they can devote to their yoga practice. Many people have more than one condition, and practices you might normally suggest for one problem could be contraindicated for another. Each of these factors will have a major impact on your choice of recommended practices.

As I travel throughout India and the United States to research yoga therapy, I notice that even masters who write books and articles recommending specific sequences for particular conditions often don't use these sequences when they work with students. Instead, they evaluate the individual in front of them and decide what is best on a case-by-case basis. What worked for a student one day may not work the next if they've just had a fight with their spouse or have come down with a cold. Even a style like Kundalini Yoga (in the style of Yogi Bhanjan), which recommends specific sequences (called kriyas) for particular conditions, suggests that teachers use their discretion in deciding when a kriya is appropriate and whether the recommended timings should be modified.

Think of recommended sequences as a jumping-off point to consider how to treat a student, not as cookbook prescriptions. Sometimes you'll choose something that seems like it ought to work, but doesn't work when the student tries it out. Strained breathing, glazed eyes, or difficulty in execution that precludes practicing the sequence at home are all signs that you may need to try another approach. Being mindful and attentive, making subtle observations, and adjusting your prescription accordingly are all practices of a good yoga therapist.

Introduction to Yoga Therapy

You have probably heard the debate over whether contemporary yoga should be considered a form of exercise or a spiritual practice, with each side equally sure of its position. But what about the idea that yoga is a type of medicine?

In India, that idea is not so outlandish. Yoga, alongside its sister discipline Ayurveda, has been traditionally prescribed to treat mental and physical ailments, and not just for things like a bad back or recovery from a muscular injury.

In his 1966 classic, *Light on Yoga*, B.K.S. Iyengar offers sequences of poses for the treatment of asthma, high blood pressure, and diabetes, amongst many others. T. Krishnamacharya and his student, Ashtanga guru Pattabhi Jois, also saw asana as curative and worked with patients with a variety of illnesses.

Because this application of yoga has not been given much attention by research science, it has not been widely practiced outside of India until recently. But with the growth of interest in alternative medicine in the United States, yoga therapy is also on the rise.

What Is Yoga Therapy?

The term "yoga therapy" encompasses a broad range of

different methods and purposes. Most basically, a therapeutic method focuses on healing by prioritizing the health of the student/patient, which is addressed on an individual basis. In terms of physical health, this can be rehabilitative, curative, preventative, or to manage a chronic condition with the goal of improving quality of life.

Yoga therapy takes a whole-body approach, assessing each person's overall health and working with whatever limitations are present. This approach also considers mental health, sometimes using a combination of talk therapy and movement, under the assumption that mental and physical wellness are integrated.

Individual assessments are key, since two people with similar conditions could have very different medical histories or complicating factors that would result in a different course of treatment.

Who Can Benefit from Yoga Therapy

The conditions that may see some benefit with yoga therapy run the gamut: allergies, arthritis, IBS, thyroid conditions, infertility, hemorrhoids, depression, and eating disorders, just to name a few. Anything that might take you to a doctor or alternative medicine practitioner falls under the purview of yoga therapy.

It's important to remember that while yoga might help you cope with certain medical problems, in most cases it will be complementary to, rather than a substitute for, standard medical care. Therefore, you should always continue seeing your doctor and discuss the possibility of incorporating yoga into your regime before starting a new treatment.

The International Association of Yoga Therapists (IAYT), a professional organization for yoga therapists, maintains an extensive bibliography of research materials on common ailments and how they may be treated through yoga. The IAYT also hosts regular symposiums for members and publishes the *International Journal of Yoga Therapy*, which reports on yoga therapy research and offers best practices for therapists.

Finding a Yoga Therapist

Since yoga therapy is dependent on a one-on-one relationship between the therapist and the patient, finding the right practitioner is very important. The IAYT, which has around 2,900 members and 80 member schools, according to Executive Director John Kepner, offers an online database to connect patients with therapists.

As yoga therapy becomes more and more popular there is no shortage of therapists, but this emerging profession has been largely unregulated. In 2013, Maryland University of Integrative Health became the first institution to offer a Master of Science degree in Yoga Therapy.

The IAYT has accredited about 25 additional training programs worldwide, though most are in the United States. In 2016, the IAYT plans to bring to fruition a long-term plan to offer certification credentials to qualified members who have completed a yoga therapy training program at an IAYT accredited institution. They will also grandfather in qualified therapists who can demonstrate their training and/or experience from before the accreditation program began. Though some within the yoga community have objected to this attempt at standardization, it can be seen as a starting place in a process that will help ultimately help consumers find a qualified teacher.

Types of Yoga to Check Out

Yoga training that is particularly applicable to therapy work includes Viniyoga, which continues the work of Krishnamacharya through the teachings of his son, T.K.V. Desikachar. Viniyoga emphasizes customizing a practice to fit an individual's health and needs. Iyengar Yoga also stresses rehabilitation, anatomy, and the use of props to tailor poses to each person's physical ability. Word of mouth from fellow yoga students or teachers can also provide invaluable information about the best therapists in your area.

Conclusion

Thus, yoga improved all the symptom profile in the improvement of overall quality of life. Yoga is relatively simple to learn and is economical, non-invasive with multiple collateral life style benefits. Group and individual practice may also help to improve life style choices and health related attitudes in part, clearly, additional high quality research is warranted to confirm, and further explore the putative beneficial effects of yoga in perimenopausal women.

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