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Dr. Shantanu Mistri

Assistant Professor, Department
of Physical Education,
Vivekananda Satavarshiki
Mahavidyalaya Vidyasagar
University, West Bengal, India

Stress management through yoga

Dr. Shantanu Mistri

Abstract

Stress is a part and parcel in our everyday life. As stress has a negative effect on an individual's health and performance and over all life, so, it is necessary to find an appropriate means for stress management. The present study intended to define the role of yoga for managing different stressors in present day life. There are four basic sources of stress- Environmental stressors, Social stressors, Physiological stressors, and Psychological stressors. Four categories of symptom of stress are also found-Cognitive symptoms, Emotional symptoms, Physical symptoms and Behavioral symptoms.

Yoga is an ancient discipline to promote health and well-being. The asanas provide relief from muscle ache of shoulder, chest and neck, improve digestive ability, stimulate circulation and tone up spinal nerves. Pranayam focuses on controlled breathing and provides vital energy. Meditation brings deep relaxation and inner calmness. Asana, Pranayama and Meditaion are highly effective in removing stress effects and bring back overall harmony. During stress, cerebral cortex sends an alarm to the hypothalamus and it stimulates the sympathetic nervous system. Stress response starts and causes physiological imbalance. Yoga brings calmness and relaxation in the brain. It finds the solutions of the problems by itself. Once the brain is reassured that the danger is over, stress response is replaced by relaxation response.

Keywords: Stress, yoga, pranayama, meditation

Introduction

Stress is an inevitable fact in our everyday life. We often face different situations which are stress provoking and these stressors leave an emotional and physical overwhelmed feeling or stress. Dr. Walter B. Cannon, a Physiologist from Harvard first laid the groundwork for the modern meaning of 'Stress'. He first described the 'fight or flight response' as a series of involuntary physiological and biomechanical changes that prepare us to deal with stress. According to Stephen P. Robbins (2006) [9], stress arises from an opportunity, demand, constraint, threat or challenge, when the outcomes of the event are important and uncertain. 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. There is also a positive stress, called eustress, which refers to the healthy, positive, constructive outcome of stressful events and the stress response. Eustress is a degree of stress which is under the coping ability of an individual. It motivates people to face challenges and facilitate successfully to achieve goals overcoming the challenges (Adhikari, 2010) [1]. Some stress is beyond the coping ability of an individual and deteriorates the performance and leads to numerous physical and mental health problems. This undesirable stress is called distress. Studies revealed that stress has a cognitive reaction and found to result in the inability to concentrate. Performance-related stress symptoms include insomnia, menstrual disorders, fluctuations in body weight, irritation, and depression (Bauer *et al.*, 2003) [2]. Situations or circumstances which are stress provoking are known as stressors. If the source of stress or stressor could be recognize properly well in advance, then necessary steps could be taken to handle them properly.

Yoga is such a technique which is helpful in managing stress. Yoga is an ancient discipline that has been practiced by people in ancient India to reach a state of mental composure, and have full control over the reactions or responses to the external stimuli. Yoga enables its practitioners to attain a calm and composed mind, sound physical health, spiritual wellness, and the ability of congenial social relationships (Thakur, 2016) [11].

Correspondence

Dr. Shantanu Mistri

Assistant Professor, Department
of Physical Education,
Vivekananda Satavarshiki
Mahavidyalaya Vidyasagar
University, West Bengal, India

This study intended to understand the role of yoga in managing stress, identifying the stressors as per contemporary situations and finding the effect of yoga on stress caused by those stressors so as to consider practicing yoga as an effective means for stress management.

Objective of the Study: Objective of the present study was to define the role of yoga for managing different stressors in present day life on the basis of available literature. This was a study of exploratory in nature and the study was conducted based on secondary data collected from various sources like journals, books, magazines, internet resources etc.

Causes of Stress or Stressor

In today's highly competitive and fast changing life we have endless desires. Frustration and conflict created from these enormous desires are the main inner reasons of stress among us (Deshpande, 2012; Keely & Harcourt, 2001) ^[5, 6]. The external sources of stress we experience in our life are called stressors.

There are four basic types of stressors

- **Environmental Stressors:** Environment can create tremendous pressure to adjust with different situations. Environmental stressors include noise, pollution, crowd, excessive traffic, unsafe living etc.
- **Social Stressors:** We experience stress from different social responsibilities like employee, parent, spouse, etc. Some other social stressors include financial problem, deadline, mal adjustment, demand of time and attention, loss of loved one etc.
- **Physiological Stressors:** Different situations affecting our body are experienced as physiological stressors. It includes adolescence, aging, menopause, illness, lack of exercise, sleeplessness etc.
- **Psychological Stressors:** Our brain perceives situations as pleasant, difficult or stressful.

Whatever the situation may be, our thought determines whether it is beyond of our coping ability or not. Some of the psychological stressors include fear, worried for future events, unrealistic expectation etc.

Symptom of Stress

It is very important to know how to recognize the stress level as 'Beyond our control' or having any adverse effect on our health and well-being. As per available literatures, the common signs and symptoms of stress can be stated categorically as follows-

- **Cognitive Symptoms:** Common cognitive symptoms of stress are memory problem, concentration problem, constant worrying, anxious and negative thoughts etc.
- **Emotional Symptoms:** Common emotional symptoms found under stress are agitation, irritability or inability to relax, sense of loneliness, unhappy felling etc.
- **Physical Symptoms:** Common physical symptoms during stress are muscle aches, especially in neck, shoulder and chest, dizziness, sweating, rapid heartbeat, butterfly in stomach, loss of sex drive etc.
- **Behavioral Symptoms:** Common behavioral symptoms found during stress are too much or too less sleep and eating, nervous habits, isolation, addiction to drug and alcohol etc.

Management of Stress

Yoga is an ancient Indian art as well as science to promote health and well-being. A person of any age, sex, caste, religion, can practice yoga to get benefit from it. Yoga is an exercise which enhances physical, mental, and spiritual relaxation by the way of Asana, Pranayama and Meditation (Bhavanani *et al.*, 2014) ^[3]. Through regular practice of yoga, an individual may be able to cope with stress and perform better in highly stressful situations (Kulkarni, 2006; Louie, 2014) ^[7, 8]. Yoga is a discipline that helps to relax and purify the body, mind, and the spirit. The asanas provide relief from muscle ache of shoulder, chest and neck, improve digestive ability, stimulate circulation and tone up spinal nerves (Saraswati, 2013) ^[10]. These asanas are believed to clear the mind, and relax and energize a person, 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. This leads to a change in emotional and visceral functions which further facilitates a change in intellectual and somatic functions of an individual (Bhole, 1977) ^[4]. Pranayama (breathing practice) involves focusing on breathing in and out of air. Research has confirmed that consciously directed breathing is beneficial in stress reduction. Meditation brings deep relaxation and inner calmness in the individual. As stress is mainly the emotional imbalance, meditation is highly effective in removing negative emotions (Adhikari, 2010) ^[1].

Discussion

Hans Selye was the first researcher to identify what happen during the 'fight or flight response' in our body. He found that in any problem, it may be real or imagined, our cerebral cortex (mid brain) send an alarm to the hypothalamus. Then the hypothalamus stimulates the sympathetic nervous system to make a series of changes in our body. As a result our heart rate, breathing rate, muscle tension, metabolism and blood pressure increase. Blood circulation is redirected to big muscle as a preparation for 'fight or flight'. Pupils of eyes dilate to sharpen our vision more acute. This is called a stress response. Yoga brings calmness and relaxation in our brain. As a result, it can find the solutions of the problems or situations by itself. As soon as our brain is reassured that the danger is over, it ceases to send a panic message to our nervous system. Within a minute heart rate, breathing rate, muscle tension, metabolism and blood pressure get normalized. This is called a relaxation response. The stress response is replaced by a relaxation response.

Conclusion

As per available literatures, regular practice of yoga is found to be an effective technique to mitigate stress and enhance an individual's overall health and well-being. Therefore, it can be concluded from the study that yoga is an effective means for reducing and managing stress caused by various stressors in the present day scenario and overall well-being of an individual with a wholesome personality.

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