

Relaxation and Wellness through Yoga Practice

Anette Kjellgren* and Martin Anderson

Department of Psychology, Karlstad University, SE-651 88 Karlstad, Sweden

Psychosocial stress and related pain or illnesses are increasing and many relaxation techniques for reducing this impact are becoming correspondingly popular. One of the commonly used practices is various forms of yoga and yogic breathing exercises. Some years ago we performed a non-randomised controlled pilot study about the yoga training Sudarshan Kriya and related Practices (SK&P) [1]. SK&P is a form of yoga that emphasizes breathing practices (pranayama) in addition to the physical positions (asanas).

This study was setup to further investigate promising results from previous studies of SK&P that were too small or non-systematic to be fully generalizable. The goal was to investigate if SK&P can lead to increased sense of wellness and to develop a protocol that could be adopted for a future full-scale trial. During 6 weeks 103 healthy adult participants were studied: 48 persons (yoga group) partook in a beginner's course in a SK&P program, and 55 persons in the control group relaxed in an armchair for the same duration of time. Before and after this period, assessments were made for variables such as; depression, anxiety, stress, optimism, and bodily pains. There were no significant differences between the two groups at baseline regarding age, gender, occupation, education; sleeping quality, nicotine or alcohol use, but the control group had a lower degree of anxiety and higher degree of optimism before the trial.

The subjects were assessed with validated clinical scales such as HAD (Hospital Anxiety Depression Scale), LOT (Life Orientation Test), and SE (Stress and Energy Scale). HAD measured the degree of anxiety and depression, LOT measured dispositional optimism, SE measured individual's degree of experienced energy and stress. Another scale, EDN (Experienced Deviation from Normal State) was also used to assess the degree of altered states of consciousness during yoga or relaxation. The study also included written reports about the participant's experiences. Criteria for inclusion in the study were: an interest in yoga and relaxation exercises and a willingness to exercise such practice daily for 6 weeks. Participants with an on-going pregnancy, psychiatric disease or being younger than 18 years were excluded.

The yoga group took part in a six-day introduction course in SK&P and for the rest of the 5 weeks did solitary home practice for about 1 hour a day. The participants in the control group meet with the experimenter for the first six days where they received instructions to relax in an armchair in a dimly lighted and silent room, which they performed daily by themselves for the remaining 5 weeks.

The results suggested increased wellbeing for all the variables measured; the participants in the SK&P program had, at comparisons before/after the 6 weeks, significant decreased level of depression, anxiety and stress, as well as significant increased optimism. The verbal reports from the SK&P yoga group consisted of descriptions about, for example, a more optimistic and new outlook on life, feelings of peace and balance, and increased joy after learning this program. Furthermore, they experienced that yoga decreased tensions, unpleasant sensations, as well as the experience of better control over their emotions. They also described that SK&P gave them tools to make it easier to relax and to handle stressful situations and to live more in the present moment. These subjective qualitative reports generally correlated with the findings from the quantitative instruments. Neither was any adverse

effects noted, and compliance was high. In summary, the participants in the yoga group experienced the practices as a positive event that induced beneficial effects.

Another interesting finding was that an increased experience of altered states of consciousness (ASC) during SK&P (compared to resting in an armchair) was observed. Previous research on e.g., relaxation in sensory isolation in flotation tank, or resting outside in a natural environment) have showed that the ASC aspect of relaxation is an important, but maybe overlooked, factor that have a beneficial sustained impact on quality of life [2-4]. During an ASC state many different psychological changes occurs compared to "normal" waking state, typical examples of a milder ASC state can be the feeling of a disappearing border between the body and surroundings, altered perception of time, here-and-now thinking, and emerging of new ideas and creative thoughts etc. Such states are often perceived to facilitate therapeutic processes and sometimes even entail personal transformation [5]. In future studies, examining this aspect, can be a fruitful avenue for getting more information about the beneficial effects of yoga.

The protocol developed for this study was later utilized for another similar study involving Kundalini yoga practice [6]. This study was performed during an 8-week period and had a total of 65 participants that were randomised to a Kundalini yoga group or a control group. The results were consistent to the SK&P study with significant increased optimism, emotional wellbeing and other health-promoting effects for the Kundalini yoga group. However, the effects of the study were somewhat ambiguous, since also the control group (who made daily relaxation on a bed) got significant improvements in health related variables. We later realized that several persons of the control group, unbeknownst to us, also had participated in yoga classes since they were so interested in yoga and were disappointed of being randomized to the control condition. These shortcomings highlight the importance of "having control of the control group" and to always pay attention to extraneous variables that can affect the outcome. Due to these inconsistencies, we never submitted that study for publication; a decision that can be criticised for creating file-drawer problems.

Anyways, both studies suggested that adult participants of normal health can improve their overall wellness and quality of life by learning and applying a yoga program. Easily learned, effective and affordable, these yogic practices can be offered to the adult population at large to relieve psychosocial stress and its related conditions, which may also result in the prevention of both physical and mental disorders. Full

*Corresponding author: Anette Kjellgren, Department of Psychology, Karlstad University, SE-651 88 Karlstad, Sweden, E-mail: Anette.Kjellgren@kau.se

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scale randomised controlled trials are needed to further confirm the validity of these results.

Compared to other forms of physical exercise or relaxation, yoga practices generally combine the physical aspects with rigorous mental discipline through breathing techniques. Amongst the many yoga forms; Hatha yoga, Mantra yoga, Bhakti yoga, Ashtanga yoga, Karma yoga, Raja yoga, Jana yoga, Tantric yoga and so forth, a common denominator is the mindful breathing in synchronization with the movement and physical positions. This achieves a sort of synergy effect of combining physical exercise with relaxation and mindfulness presence which most likely also enhance prevalence of beneficial altered states of consciousness. We speculate that these are important factors possibly making yoga more effective than general exercise or relaxation for overall wellbeing. In the quest for optimal health and wellbeing yoga and other holistic approaches; seeing the whole person made up of interdependent parts all affecting each other have been employed for centuries. To explain and validate how, and if, certain approaches are effective is an important task for future academic research, not the least to make these methods accessible for the general population, through healthcare and rehabilitation.

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