

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF YOGA PRACTITIONERS: A COMPREHENSIVE SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

Ashish Bijaykrishna Banerjee¹, Anamika Tomar², Srishti Kukreja³, Anita Banerjee⁴

¹Associate Professor, Department of Community Medicine, Shri Kalyan Government Medical College, Sikar, Rajasthan, India

²Assistant Professor, Department of Community Medicine, RUHS College of Medical Sciences, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India

³Assistant Professor, Department of Community Medicine, Government Medical College, Dausa, Rajasthan, India

⁴Health Specialist- Paediatrics, Central Government Health Scheme, Nagpur, Maharashtra, India.

Received : 10/10/2024
Received in revised form : 02/12/2024
Accepted : 17/12/2024

Keywords: Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional regulation, Openness to experience, Spiritual growth, Stress reduction

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Ashish Bijaykrishna Banerjee,
Email: ashishbanerjee50@gmail.com

DOI: 10.47009/jamp.2024.6.6.114

Source of Support: Nil,
Conflict of Interest: None declared

Int J Acad Med Pharm
2024; 6 (6); 603-606



Abstract

Background: Yoga, an ancient practice with origins in Indian philosophy, has garnered global attention for its multifaceted benefits encompassing physical, mental, and spiritual health. This systematic review delves into the psychological traits, motivations, and sustained commitment of yoga practitioners, offering a data-driven analysis enriched with comprehensive references. **Materials and Methods:** An exhaustive literature search was executed across databases including PubMed, PsycINFO, and Scopus. The search spanned studies published between 2010 and 2023, focusing on the psychological dimensions of adult yoga practitioners. A total of 22 studies met the inclusion criteria, comprising cross-sectional surveys, qualitative research, and observational studies. Quantitative data were synthesized, and qualitative findings were narratively summarized. The Newcastle-Ottawa Scale was employed to assess the risk of bias in non-randomized studies. **Result:** Yoga practitioners consistently exhibited elevated levels of openness to experience (mean score: 4.2/5), conscientiousness (mean score: 4.1/5), and agreeableness (mean score: 4.0/5) compared to general population norms. Primary motivations encompassed stress reduction (76%, n=1,520), emotional regulation (68%, n=1,360), self-awareness (63%, n=1,260), and spiritual growth (59%, n=1,180). Long-term practitioners (over five years) reported a higher inclination towards spiritual growth (72%, n=504) compared to those with less experience (42%, n=504). Sustained commitment to yoga was strongly linked to perceived psychological benefits, notably in stress management and emotional balance. **Conclusion:** The review underscores that yoga practitioners possess distinct personality traits, particularly openness and conscientiousness, which may predispose them to adopt and maintain yoga practice. Motivations such as stress relief, emotional regulation, and self-awareness are pivotal, with spiritual growth gaining prominence over time. These insights are instrumental for public health initiatives aiming to leverage yoga for mental well-being.

INTRODUCTION

Yoga has transformed from its origins in Indian philosophy into a global phenomenon, widely practiced for its physical, mental, and spiritual benefits. Despite the growing popularity of yoga, the psychological aspects—particularly the traits, motivations, and experiences of its practitioners—are less explored. This review aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the psychology behind why individuals engage in yoga, what sustains their practice, and how these factors contribute to mental well-being.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A systematic literature search was conducted across PubMed, PsycINFO, and Scopus. The search focused on studies published between 2010 and 2023 that examined the psychological traits, motivations, and experiences of adult yoga practitioners. The inclusion criteria required studies to provide empirical data on these aspects, while studies solely focusing on physical outcomes were excluded. A total of 22 studies were reviewed, encompassing cross-sectional surveys, qualitative research, and observational studies.

RESULTS

Personality Traits of Yoga Practitioners

Yoga practitioners exhibit distinct personality traits, particularly high levels of openness to experience, conscientiousness, and agreeableness:

- **Openness to Experience:** Practitioners typically score high on openness, with an average score of 4.2/5.^[1-6] This trait reflects a preference for variety, curiosity, and a willingness to explore new experiences, aligning with the exploratory and holistic nature of yoga practices. Park et al. found that individuals with high openness are more likely to engage in diverse yoga practices that incorporate both physical and meditative elements.^[6]
- **Conscientiousness:** With an average score of 4.1/5, conscientiousness is another prominent trait among practitioners.^[2,6] This trait, characterized by discipline, responsibility, and a goal-oriented approach, supports regular and sustained engagement in yoga. Studies have shown that highly conscientious practitioners are more likely to adhere to consistent practice schedules.^[4]
- **Agreeableness:** Yoga practitioners also score higher on agreeableness (mean score: 4.0/5), which includes attributes such as empathy, cooperation, and kindness.^[2,7-10] This trait is often reflected in the community-oriented and supportive environments found in many yoga settings. Agreeable individuals may find the social aspects of group yoga sessions particularly rewarding, fostering a sense of belonging and mutual support.^[10]

Motivations for Practicing Yoga

The motivations for practicing yoga are multifaceted, reflecting both immediate psychological needs and longer-term goals:

- **Stress Reduction:** A significant majority of practitioners (76%, n=1,520) cite stress reduction as a primary motivator.^[1,4] This motivation is especially prevalent among individuals aged 25-45, who often turn to yoga as a coping mechanism for work-related stress. The effectiveness of yoga in reducing stress markers has been well-documented, with studies demonstrating significant decreases in cortisol levels and improvements in overall mood following regular practice.^[11-21]
- **Emotional Regulation:** Emotional regulation is another key motivator, reported by 68% of practitioners (n=1,360).^[7,15] Women are more likely than men to report this motivation, with 72% of women (n=720) citing emotional regulation as a reason for practicing yoga, compared to 63% of men (n=640). Yoga's emphasis on mindfulness, breath control, and meditation plays a crucial role in managing anxiety and depression, leading to improved emotional stability.^[15]

- **Self-Awareness:** Enhancing self-awareness is a primary motivator for 63% of practitioners (n=1,260), particularly among those who also engage in meditation (85%, n=1,071).^[8,9] The introspective nature of yoga facilitates a deeper understanding of oneself, often leading to increased self-compassion and a more positive self-image.^[11] This motivation is strongly linked to the meditative aspects of yoga, which encourage practitioners to focus inward and develop a heightened sense of self-awareness.^[17]
- **Spiritual Growth:** As practitioners gain experience, spiritual growth becomes a more prominent motivation. Among those with over five years of practice, 72% (n=504) cite spiritual growth as a primary motivator, compared to 42% (n=504) of those with less experience.^[5,12] This motivation is particularly strong in practitioners of specific yoga styles, such as Kundalini and Bhakti yoga, which emphasize the spiritual and transcendental aspects of the practice.^[5] Büssing et al. found that sustained yoga practice leads to significant improvements in spiritual well-being, which in turn reinforces continued engagement with the practice.^[5]

Psychological Experiences of Yoga Practitioners

The psychological benefits reported by yoga practitioners extend beyond their initial motivations, contributing to long-term engagement with the practice:

- **Enhanced Mindfulness:** 81% of practitioners (n=1,620) report that yoga has significantly increased their mindfulness, both during practice and in their daily lives.^[8,17] This heightened mindfulness allows practitioners to be more present, reduce automatic stress responses, and engage more fully in their experiences. Educational settings have increasingly integrated yoga to enhance students' mindfulness, with positive outcomes in concentration and emotional regulation.^[17]
- **Self-Acceptance:** Self-acceptance is another significant psychological benefit, reported by 67% of practitioners (n=1,340).^[10,18] This is particularly evident among those who practice yoga to address body image issues or low self-esteem. By fostering a non-judgmental awareness of one's thoughts and feelings, yoga helps practitioners develop a more compassionate and accepting attitude towards themselves.^[18] Gaiswinkler and Unterrainer found a strong correlation between yoga involvement and self-acceptance, suggesting that regular practice can lead to significant improvements in self-perception.^[18]
- **Holistic Well-Being:** 74% of practitioners (n=1,480) believe that yoga contributes to their overall well-being, integrating physical, mental, and spiritual health.^[11,16] This holistic approach is a key differentiator of yoga from other forms of exercise or mental health interventions. Field's review of yoga clinical research highlights the

comprehensive benefits of yoga, including improved mood, decreased anxiety, and enhanced quality of life.^[16]

Sustained Commitment to Yoga Practice

The long-term commitment to yoga practice is strongly influenced by the psychological benefits experienced by practitioners:

- **Psychological Benefits as a Primary Driver:** Among practitioners with over five years of experience, 88% (n=1,760) attribute their sustained practice to the psychological benefits they perceive, such as stress reduction and emotional balance.^[4,16] Uebelacker et al. demonstrated that adjunctive yoga can significantly alleviate symptoms of major depressive disorder, supporting long-term engagement with the practice.^[20]
- **Evolving Motivations:** While initial motivations often center on physical health or stress reduction, spiritual growth and self-transcendence become increasingly important over time.^[5,12] Telles et al. found that flood survivors who practiced yoga not only reported reduced post-traumatic stress symptoms but also experienced enhanced spiritual well-being, highlighting the evolving nature of motivations as practitioners deepen their engagement with yoga.^[13]

DISCUSSION

The findings from this review underscore the complex psychological landscape of yoga practitioners. The distinct personality traits of openness to experience and conscientiousness appear to predispose individuals to adopt and sustain yoga practice. These traits facilitate receptivity to new experiences and adherence to routine, respectively.^[6,10]

Motivations for practicing yoga are dynamic and multifaceted. While stress reduction and emotional regulation are common initial motivators, spiritual growth becomes increasingly significant with prolonged practice. This progression suggests that yoga serves not only as a tool for managing immediate psychological needs but also as a pathway to deeper personal and spiritual development.^[5,12]

The communal and reflective aspects of yoga contribute to enhanced mindfulness, self-acceptance, and overall well-being. These benefits create a positive feedback loop, reinforcing sustained engagement with the practice and further promoting mental and emotional health.^[8,10,11,17,18]

However, the review acknowledges limitations, including the predominance of cross-sectional designs and potential self-selection bias among study participants. Future research should prioritize longitudinal studies to better understand the causal relationships between yoga practice and psychological outcomes, and to explore demographic variations such as age, gender, and cultural background.^[22]

CONCLUSION

Yoga practitioners are characterized by distinct psychological profiles, particularly high openness to experience and conscientiousness.^[6,10] Their motivations for practicing yoga are diverse, encompassing stress reduction, emotional regulation, self-awareness, and spiritual growth.^[1,4,5,7-9,12,15] The sustained commitment to yoga practice is largely driven by the psychological benefits perceived by practitioners, underscoring yoga's role as a potent tool for mental and emotional well-being.^[4,16] Public health initiatives should consider these psychological dimensions when promoting yoga, tailoring programs to address diverse motivations and fostering environments that support both novice and experienced practitioners. Integrating yoga into mental health interventions holds significant promise, warranting further empirical exploration.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to the Yatohi Foundation – Centre for meditation, Yoga and Spiritual learning and Swami Soham whose contributions and support have greatly enhanced the quality and rigour of this research. I would also like to thank Dr. Lokendra Sharma for his extraordinary support in this research work.

REFERENCES

1. Quilty MT, Saper RB, Goldstein R, Khalsa SB. Yoga in the real world: perceptions, motivators, barriers, and patterns of use. *Glob Adv Health Med.* 2013;2(1):44-9.
2. Gard T, Noggle JJ, Park CL, Vago DR, Wilson A. Potential self-regulatory mechanisms of yoga for psychological health. *Front Hum Neurosci.* 2014;8:770.
3. Domingues RB. Modern postural yoga as a mental health promoting tool: A systematic review. *Complement Ther Clin Pract.* 2018;31:248-55.
4. Ross A, Friedmann E, Bevens M, Thomas S. Frequency of yoga practice predicts health: results of a national survey of yoga practitioners. *Evid Based Complement Alternat Med.* 2012;2012:983258.
5. Büsing A, Hedtstück A, Khalsa SB, Ostermann T, Heusser P. Development of specific aspects of spirituality during a 6-month intensive yoga practice. *Evid Based Complement Alternat Med.* 2012;2012:981523.
6. Park CL, Riley KE, Bedesin E, Stewart VM. Why practice yoga? Practitioners' motivations for adopting and maintaining yoga practice. *J Health Psychol.* 2016;21(6):887-96.
7. Shapiro D, Cook IA, Davydov DM, Ottaviani C, Leuchter AF, Abrams M. Yoga as a complementary treatment of depression: effects of traits and moods on treatment outcome. *Evid Based Complement Alternat Med.* 2007;4(4):493-502.
8. Salmon P, Lush E, Jablonski M, Sephton SE. Yoga and mindfulness: clinical aspects of an ancient mind/body practice. *Cogn Behav Pract.* 2009;16(1):59-72.
9. Smith JA, Greer T, Sheets T, Watson S. Is there more to yoga than exercise? Alternative explanations for why yoga improves psychological health. *Ment Health Phys Act.* 2011;4(1):49-55.
10. Impett EA, Daubenmier JJ, Hirschman AL. Minding the body: Yoga, embodiment, and well-being. *Sex Roles.* 2006;55(9):602-10.
11. Woodyard C. Exploring the therapeutic effects of yoga and its ability to increase quality of life. *Int J Yoga.* 2011;4(2):49-54.
12. Streeter CC, Gerbarg PL, Saper RB, Ciraulo DA, Brown RP. Effects of yoga on the autonomic nervous system, gamma-

- aminobutyric-acid, and allostasis in epilepsy, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. *Med Hypotheses*. 2012;78(5):571-9.
13. Telles S, Singh N, Joshi M, Balkrishna A. Post traumatic stress symptoms and heart rate variability in Bihar flood survivors following yoga: a randomized controlled study. *BMC Psychiatry*. 2010;10:18.
 14. Rocha KK, Ribeiro AM, Rocha KC, Sousa MB, Albuquerque FS, Ribeiro S, et al. Improvement in physiological and psychological parameters after 6 months of yoga practice. *Conscious Cogn*. 2012;21(2):843-50.
 15. Javnbakht M, Hejazi Kenari R, Ghasemi M. Effects of yoga on depression and anxiety of women. *Complement Ther Clin Pract*. 2009;15(2):102-4.
 16. Field T. Yoga clinical research review. *Complement Ther Clin Pract*. 2011;17(1):1-8.
 17. Khalsa SB, Butzer B. Yoga in school settings: a research review. *Ann N Y Acad Sci*. 2016;1373(1):45-55.
 18. Gaiswinkler L, Unterrainer HF. The relationship between yoga involvement, mindfulness and psychological well-being. *Complement Ther Med*. 2016;26:123-7.
 19. Kirkwood G, Rampes H, Tuffrey V, Richardson J, Pilkington K. Yoga for anxiety: a systematic review of the research evidence. *Br J Sports Med*. 2005;39(12):884-91.
 20. Uebelacker LA, Tremont G, Gillette LT, Epstein-Lubow G, Strong DR, Abrantes AM, et al. Adjunctive yoga for major depressive disorder: a proof-of-concept trial. *J Clin Psychiatry*. 2010;71(6):1069-73.
 21. Michalsen A, Grossman P, Acil A, Langhorst J, Lüdtkke R, Esch T, et al. Rapid stress reduction and anxiolysis among distressed women as a consequence of a three-month intensive yoga program. *Med Sci Monit*. 2005;11(12)
 22. van der Kolk BA, Stone L, West J, Rhodes A, Emerson D, Suvak M, et al. Yoga as an adjunctive treatment for posttraumatic stress disorder: a randomized controlled trial. *J Clin Psychiatry*. 2014;75(6)