



A narrative review of yoga and mindfulness as complementary therapies for addiction

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Summary This paper reviews the philosophical origins, current scientific evidence, and clinical promise of yoga and mindfulness as complementary therapies for addiction. Historically, there are eight elements of yoga that, together, comprise ethical principles and practices for living a meaningful, purposeful, moral and self-disciplined life. Traditional yoga practices, including postures and meditation, direct attention toward one's health, while acknowledging the spiritual aspects of one's nature. Mindfulness derives from ancient Buddhist philosophy, and mindfulness meditation practices, such as gentle Hatha yoga and mindful breathing, are increasingly integrated into secular health care settings. Current theoretical models suggest that the skills, insights, and self-awareness learned through yoga and mindfulness practice can target multiple psychological, neural, physiological, and behavioral processes implicated in addiction and relapse. A small but growing number of well-designed clinical trials and experimental laboratory studies on smoking, alcohol dependence, and illicit substance use support the clinical effectiveness and hypothesized mechanisms of action underlying mindfulness-based interventions for treating addiction. Because very few studies have been conducted on the specific role of yoga in treating or preventing addiction, we propose a conceptual model to inform future studies on outcomes and possible mechanisms. Additional research is also needed to better understand what types of yoga and mindfulness-based interventions work best for what types of addiction, what types of patients, and under what conditions. Overall, current findings increasingly support yoga and mindfulness as promising complementary therapies for treating and preventing addictive behaviors.

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Introduction

According to the World Health Organization, the global burden of disease attributable to alcohol and illicit drug abuse amounts to over 5% and the harmful use of alcohol claims 2.5 million lives per year.¹ There is growing concern regarding substance use disorders as relapse rates continue to remain as high as 80–95% in the first year after alcohol or tobacco cessation.^{2,3} Although conventional methods for relapse prevention can be somewhat successful, complementary therapies like yoga and mindfulness meditation are increasingly recognized for their ability to enhance recovery from addiction, in part by targeting stress-related cognitions, emotions, and behavioral urges such as craving.^{4–8}

A systematic review conducted in 2009 concluded that although there was promising preliminary evidence for the safety and clinical efficacy of mindfulness meditation training for substance use disorders, conclusive data were lacking due to poor trial quality and other methodological concerns like small sample sizes.⁹ We are not aware of a review that has specifically addressed yoga as a potential complementary therapy for treating addiction or helping to prevent relapse. The specific objective of this paper, therefore, is to examine the current theoretical and empirical basis for yoga and mindfulness meditation as part of an integrative approach for treating and preventing the most common and costly addictions, namely smoking, alcohol dependence and illicit substance use.

We first describe the philosophy of yoga, with a focus on the ways in which yogic breathing, postures, meditation, concentration, and moral and ethical foundations can increase resilience to stress and decrease vulnerability to addiction. We next discuss the relationship between addiction and stress as a conceptual foundation for how yoga and mindfulness may help treat or preempt addictive behaviors, including associated patterns of thinking, emotional processing, physiology, and behavior. Then, we present three exemplary lines of converging clinical research that point to promising clinical outcomes and potentially shared mechanisms of therapeutic change. We conclude by presenting a conceptual model that highlights the clinical utility of integrating traditional elements of *Ashtang* yoga and mindfulness meditation as a way to break the vicious cycle of stress, negative emotions, craving, drug seeking behavior, and withdrawal.

Philosophy of yoga

The Hindu philosophy of yoga as outlined by sage Patanjali in second century BC is based on the eight limbs of *Ashtang* yoga, comprised of *yamas* (ethical disciplines), *niyamas* (individual observances), *asana* (posture), *pranayama* (breath control), *pratyahara* (withdrawal of senses),

dharana (concentration), *dhyana* (meditation), and *samadhi* (self-realization or enlightenment).¹⁰ Contrary to popular Western beliefs and modernization, the ancient practice of yoga involves more than just the *asanas* (postures) or *dhyana* (meditation). These eight limbs are comprised of ethical principles for living a meaningful and purposeful life; serving as a prescription for moral and ethical conduct and self-discipline, they direct attention toward one's health while acknowledging the spiritual aspects of one's nature.¹¹

In the Western scientific literature, yoga is a general term that encompasses breathing techniques, postures, strengthening exercises, and meditation.¹² The most common forms of yoga practiced in the West are the physical postures and the breathing practices of Hatha yoga and meditation.¹³ Hatha yoga is further categorized the Iyengar, Kundalini, Bikram, Ananda, Vivnoya and Anusara style.¹⁴ The breathing techniques of Hatha yoga focus on conscious prolongation of inhalation, breath retention and exhalation.¹¹ Although there is focus on breath-work, and meditation is a component to Hatha yoga, Hatha yoga is more physical in nature than the other various forms of yoga.¹⁵ For example, *asanas* are physical postures which stretch and strengthen different parts of the body, massaging and bringing fresh blood to the internal organs while rejuvenating the nervous system and lubricating the joints, muscles and ligaments.¹⁶ Practitioners scan their bodies to become aware of stiff muscles, which they can then loosen until the posture is correctly attained.¹⁷ The abdominal breathing technique and focus of awareness onto the body are the mental component, with the focus of awareness to the present *asana* and physical experience helping to center the self in the present moment.¹⁷ This kind of present-focused sensory awareness resonates with the Buddhist philosophy of mindfulness meditation, which is the foundation of a secular, widely available course known as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR).¹⁸

A more meditative form of yoga is called the Raja yoga or "Union by mental mastery."¹⁷ According to Swami Vivekananda, the term "Raja yoga" means the method of mental concentration which involves the ability to check and bring the mind under control through the practice of the eight steps described by the sage Patanjali in his text "Yoga Sutras".¹⁹ One of these steps is *Pranayama* or breath control. The three sorts of motion of *Pranayama* are, one by which we draw the breath in, another by which we throw it out, and the third action in which the breath is held in the lungs, or stopped from entering the lungs.¹⁹ *Pranayama* is known to increase parasympathetic tone, decrease sympathetic tone, improve cardiovascular and respiratory functions, decrease the effects of stress and strain on the body, and improve physical and mental health.^{20–22}

Integrated yoga practice traditionally involves meditation, exercise and spiritual teaching; the integrated form

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