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NATIONAL SURVEY

Practitioners' perceptions of yoga's positive and negative effects: Results of a National United States survey



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Summary Objectives: Yoga is becoming increasingly popular, yet little information is available regarding practitioners' perceptions of effects of their practice. This study aimed to characterize perceptions of both positive and negative changes practitioners reported in physical and psychosocial domains.

Design: Cross-sectional internet-based survey.

Participants: Yoga practitioners (N = 542, including 162 teachers) recruited via email and flyers sent to yoga studios across the United States (US). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 85 years (M = 44).

Measures: Participants rated the extent to which they experienced positive or negative change in physical health and psychosocial dimensions and then listed up to three positive and three negative effects of their practice.

Results: Both students and teachers reported moderately high levels of positive physical changes and psychosocial changes, although teachers generally reported more positive changes. Few negative changes were reported. In open-ended responses, the most commonly reported positive effects were general health and fitness and relaxation. Most commonly reported negative effects were injuries, soreness, emotional triggers/irritability, and expense.

Conclusions: Findings suggest that yoga practitioners generally perceive high levels of positive changes, but some also experience adverse effects. Future research should assess subjective experiences of change alongside more objective measures of improvement.

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Yoga is becoming increasingly popular in the US (Peregoy et al., 2014) and around the world (Raghuwanshi, 2011). Clinical trials have demonstrated its positive effects on many physical, spiritual, and mental health indicators (Ross et al., 2013; Field, 2011). In spite of this, little research has been conducted regarding yoga practitioners' subjective perceptions of the positive and negative effects of their practice. Perceptions of yoga's effects may influence maintenance of yoga practice in current practitioners as well as affect the likelihood of nonpractitioners' initiation of yoga practice.

The small body of literature that does exist on subjective reports of yoga's effects suggests that yoga is generally perceived as highly beneficial. Further, people perceive benefits in a wide range of physical and psychosocial (i.e., psychological, social, and spiritual) health domains. Most published reports of perceived changes from yoga practice comprise general themes elicited from participants in intervention studies (Puymbroeck et al., 2013) or focus groups (Atkinson and Permeth-Levine, 2009).

Most of these reports of perceived changes focus on physical health. For example, older participants (65–89 years of age) in a yoga intervention reported improvement in joint and muscle pain, reliance on medication, strength, flexibility and balance (Patel et al., 2011), while patients with stroke noted improved range of movement and walking ability following a brief yoga intervention (Garrett et al., 2011). Yoga practice has also yielded perceptions of improved physical fitness in practitioners recovering from cancer, including physical function (van Uden-Kraan et al., 2013) and overall wellness (Puymbroeck et al., 2013). Participants in a yoga intervention for chronic pain reported experiencing less intense or frequent pain episodes (Tul et al., 2011).

Common psychological benefits reported include reduced anxiety (Patel et al., 2011; van Uden-Kraan et al., 2013), improved stress management and enhanced peace, calmness and relaxation (Atkinson and Permeth-Levine, 2009; Bryan et al., 2012). In women experiencing major depression, yoga was reported to lead to decreases in stress and rumination, which participants felt would help them better handle future depressive episodes (Kinser et al., 2013). Psychological experiences of yoga frequently perceived by people with cancer included increased mental strength and resilience, increased coping abilities, and feelings of enjoyment and happiness in life (van Uden-Kraan et al., 2013).

Yoga practice has also been credited with increasing perceptions of self-efficacy and social standing. In a study of a 10-week yoga intervention in people who had experienced a stroke, participants reported improved ability to reconnect with and accept their changed body (Garrett et al., 2011). In an intervention for chronic pain, participants perceived yoga as helpful in changing their perception of pain and reported that it helped them to reframe their concepts of life with chronic pain (Tul et al., 2011). Following an 8-week yoga intervention for survivors of breast cancer, participants noted feeling more open and confident, rediscovering their bodies after cancer treatment (Puymbroeck et al., 2013). Increased feelings of self-acceptance and feelings of social support were other common themes in qualitative reports of

yoga's benefits (Atkinson and Permeth-Levine, 2009; Patel et al., 2011; Kinser et al., 2013).

Benefits have also been reported regarding spiritual wellbeing. In the abovementioned study of a community-based yoga intervention for older adults, participants described praying and meditating more often and feeling a greater sense of completeness (Patel et al., 2011) and in the abovementioned study of people with cancer, practitioners reported experiencing increased attention to their inner self, greater awareness of their body, and deeper recognition and understanding of their experiences (van Uden-Kraan et al., 2013).

Very few reports of perceived negative effects of yoga have been published, typically anecdotal reports of negative psychosocial or physical effects. In the abovementioned study of yoga after stroke, some participants noted frustration at not being able to successfully complete some poses due to their physical limitations (Garrett et al., 2011). For women with major depression, yoga interventions occasionally increased negative self-talk and self-consciousness (Kinser et al., 2013). One practitioner noted a heightened awareness of his pain (Tul et al., 2011). Other negative impacts reported were exacerbation of pre-existing injury and reversing the benefits of aerobic exercise (Atkinson and Permeth-Levine, 2009).

However, very little systematic information regarding practitioners' subjective experiences of positive and negative effects is available. Most of the relevant studies were conducted with small samples of participants specifically enrolled in yoga interventions, most of whom were yoga novices reporting on their perceived changes over a fairly short time period (Alexander et al., 2013). Further, most published studies did not quantify the changes, but rather reported anecdotes or general themes that arose from focus groups. We were able to locate only three studies that provided quantitative results: a study of people enrolled in Iyengar yoga interventions for women at risk for cardiovascular disease (Alexander et al., 2013), the abovementioned study of Iyengar yoga practitioners in the US (Ross et al., 2013), and a study of medical patients in Germany, 12% of whom reported using yoga to help with their primary medical complaint (Cramer et al., 2013).

In the cardiovascular risk factors intervention, yoga was perceived by 83% as improving their overall physical function, 83% as reducing stress and anxiety and enhancing calmness, 21% as enriching sleep quality, and 14% as improving dietary habits (Alexander et al., 2013). Among the survey of US Iyengar practitioners, yoga was perceived by 69% as improving their sleep, 85% as increasing their energy, 90% as improving their health, 90% as improving their diet, 57% as improving their weight, 22% as improving their alcohol consumption, 67% as improving their relationships, and 87% as making them happier (Ross et al., 2013). Finally, in the German medical patients using yoga study, 61% reported yoga had been helpful in treating their ailment and 4% reported harms due to yoga (Cramer et al., 2013). These reports are useful, but limited in their range of the effects they inquired about, the select samples, and the lack of inquiry regarding negative effects.

The present study aimed to more fully characterize yoga practitioners' perceptions of physical and psychological changes as a result of yoga practice. We surveyed current

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