



Yoga in prisons: A review of the literature



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ABSTRACT

Yoga is becoming increasingly commonplace in many correctional institutions around the world. Unfortunately, despite the prevalence of yoga classes, there has not been a great deal of high quality research outlining the benefits that yoga may bring to incarcerated individuals. This review highlights the methodological strengths and weaknesses of the extant literature and outlines how yoga may be of use in rehabilitation efforts. Although more work is required, the current state of the literature suggests that yoga may be able to help with the rehabilitation of offenders. Yoga has been shown to improve some key variables related to offending (e.g., impulsivity, aggression), as well as showing improvements on variables that could increase offenders' abilities to participate in treatments that are specifically aimed at reducing their risk of criminal behavior (e.g., depression, attention, emotional regulation). Considering the potential that yoga has to add to rehabilitative endeavors, it is in the interests of the correctional field to conduct methodologically robust studies on yoga's outcomes, so that we more precisely determine its potential benefits for offenders, and consequently to the wider community, including through its potential role in reducing offending.

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1. Introduction

It has been about a quarter of a century since the beginning of the 'what works' movement in offender rehabilitation (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). In this time, we have seen many advances in the way that offenders are treated, with great leaps forward in our efforts to reduce reoffending. Many of these changes have arisen from the development

of rehabilitative frameworks that guide professionals in the delivery of offender interventions, such as the Risk-Need-Responsivity model (RNR; Andrews & Bonta, 2010) and, more recently, the Good Lives Model (GLM; Ward, 2002). Both of these frameworks emphasize the importance of matching interventions to the capacities of each offender; what Andrews and Bonta refer to as the *responsivity* principle (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). Despite these frameworks contributing to reductions in recidivism, there is still room for improved outcomes from prison rehabilitation, with international research indicating high rates of reoffending; For example, approximately 50% of released offenders in New Zealand (NZ) return to prison within five years (Nadesu, 2009),

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while in the United States research has found a 46.9% rate of reconviction within three years (Langan & Levin, 2002).

Although we are yet to perfect correctional rehabilitation, the research up until this point has outlined the main problem areas, or *risk factors*, of offenders that when reduced can decrease the likelihood of criminal conduct (e.g., substance abuse; Andrews & Bonta, 2010). Unfortunately, due to funding and other restraints (e.g., staff resourcing), only offenders considered to be of the highest risk of reoffending are usually offered rehabilitation, often leaving those in the medium- or low-risk bands untreated. Another problem area for offenders, which is often under resourced, is the overrepresentation of mental health difficulties for this population (e.g., depression, anxiety; Fazel & Danesh, 2002). As disorders such as depression are not typically considered risk factors for future offending, they are often left untreated. This is problematic due to the fact that they can reduce attentional capacity (e.g. Forster, Elizalde, Castle, & Bishop, 2015; Hartlage, Alloy, Vázquez, & Dykman, 1993), among other difficulties, which could result in an inability to properly engage in regular treatment opportunities, and reduce an offender's readiness for rehabilitation (Ward & Brown, 2004). There is currently a need within correctional facilities for an inexpensive alternative that could be offered to a wide range of offenders and fill the gap in our current rehabilitative practices; although research is required to ensure that the alternative is performing as desired.

Yoga is currently being practiced in prisons around the world (Yoga Education in Prisons Trust, 2015) as a typically informal means to aid rehabilitative efforts; however, only a small amount of research has looked at the effects of yoga on prison populations. This literature review aims to consider the strengths and weaknesses of the extant yoga literature. The review will draw on yoga research that has been conducted outside of prisons, focusing on factors that are considered important for incarcerated populations. The few studies available on yoga within prisons will also be examined, in order to outline the potential benefits of teaching yoga within a corrections context. The focus of this literature review is on yoga, although a brief discussion of research on meditation is included as some forms of yoga incorporate mediation, although the extent to which this occurs varies. As well as looking at improvements related to reducing risk of reoffending, changes that may improve responsivity factors for offenders and improve their capacity to engage in treatment will also be highlighted.

2. Overview of yoga

Yoga is an ancient practice originating in India that aims to unite the mind, body, and spirit. It has been asserted that yoga can help alleviate many ailments (both physical and mental) for centuries in the East, as well as more recently in the West (da Silva, Ravindran, & Ravindran, 2009). Records of yoga postures date back millennia, but one of the founding texts that modern yoga stems from, *Yoga Sutras*, was written around 200 B.C. by the sage Patanjali (Riley, 2004). Patanjali described the system coined *Ashtanga* or *Eight-limbs*, which consisted of ethical standards (*yamas*), self-discipline and spiritual observances (*niyamas*), postures (*asanas*), mindful breath control (*pranayama*), sensory transcendence (*pratyahara*), concentration (*dharana*), meditation (*dhyana*), and divine consciousness (*Samadhi*). It is from these eight elements that modern yoga is derived, with the most common features being postures, breathing exercises, and meditation (da Silva et al., 2009). There are now many variations on what is considered "yoga", with each school emphasizing different elements, and different types of yoga being suggested for different people (Saraswati, 1981). In order to better understand how yoga may be able to play a part in offender rehabilitation, it is important to become familiar with the leading frameworks that currently guide interventions with this population.

3. Rehabilitative frameworks

The two leading rehabilitative frameworks have identified important areas of consideration when working with offending populations. The RNR model (Andrews & Bonta, 2010) is based on preventing negative behaviors through targeting *criminogenic needs*. These are factors that have been associated with an increased likelihood of offending. Among the posited criminogenic needs are a number of factors that research suggests may be influenced through yoga (outlined more thoroughly below); these include substance abuse (Khalsa, Khalsa, Khalsa, & Khalsa, 2008), antisocial personality patterns such as aggression (Deshpande, Nagendra, & Raghuram, 2008), emotional reactivity (Froeliger, Garland, Modlin, & McClernon, 2012) and self-control (Bilderbeck, Farias, Brazil, Jakobowitz, & Wikholm, 2013); and improved school or work outcomes made possible through increased concentration (Derezotes, 2000).

The GLM (Ward, 2002) is an alternative strength based rehabilitative framework, which posits that the emphasis should be placed on the promotion of the individual's life goals and values; attained by providing offenders with the internal and external resources to achieve their *primary goods* in a prosocial manner. Yoga may be compatible with the advancement of many primary goods such as inner peace and freedom from stress and anxiety (Sharma & Haider, 2013); excellence in work (Derezotes, 2000); pleasure and feeling good in the here and now (Bilderbeck et al., 2013); as well as improving community through joining yoga groups, and spirituality through meditative practices.

An important aspect for both of these frameworks is the tailoring of programs to an individual's learning capacities. The research outlined below indicates that yoga may be of use, not only through impacting the targets of treatment programs, but also through increasing offenders' abilities to partake in treatment interventions, thus allowing for greater improvements on domains of interest. As RNR and the GLM are often considered to be the leading rehabilitative frameworks in correctional settings, the influence that yoga practice may have, in conjunction with these, is very promising. If used to augment regular treatments, yoga may be able to help improve rehabilitative outcomes and reduce the frequency of criminal recidivism. We now turn to look more closely at the state of current yoga research, in order to better understand how yoga may fit into the above rehabilitative frameworks.

4. Physiological models/outcomes

Several studies have looked at a number of physiological outcomes of yoga practice (e.g. Brown & Gerbarg, 2005; Friis & Sollers, 2013; Froeliger et al., 2012; Rocha et al., 2012; Vadiraja et al., 2009). As this review is mainly aimed at yoga's potential in prisons, the research reviewed here is only meant as an overview of the relevant physiological outcomes, rather than an exhaustive list of all of the research in this area. With that being said, many of the outcomes identified could be useful when working with offenders due to the prevalence of difficulties (e.g., heightened stress levels) within this group compared to community samples (Mansoor, Perwez, & Ramaseshan, 2015).

Levels of salivary cortisol can be used as objective measures of stress, with reductions indicative of lower stress levels. The practice of yoga has been shown to reduce levels of salivary cortisol in both healthy military men, and in Indian women undergoing breast cancer treatment (Rocha et al., 2012; Vadiraja et al., 2009). The right dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (RDLPFC) has been shown to activate when individuals exert cognitive control over their emotions (Froeliger et al., 2012). There has been preliminary evidence showing that the practice of yoga can lead to reductions in RDLPFC activation in response to negative emotional stimuli while completing a Stroop task (Froeliger et al., 2012). This lower activation was explained as an ability to disengage emotional reactivity when completing another task; in other words, an improved control over emotional reactivity. Improvements have also been found in autonomic control (important for preparing oneself for fight-flight

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