

Role of Yoga in alleviating Stress and Anxiety among Young Adults in India during COVID-19

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Abstract:

The following research paper will discuss the role of Yoga in contributing to improved physical and mental health during COVID-19. The infectious Coronavirus disease was initially declared an epidemic following the outbreak in Wuhan and other states in China. The disease was later declared to be a pandemic with a massive outbreak in international countries such as the USA, UK, India, Germany, Spain, Australia, etc. People reported varying degree of symptoms, from mild symptoms to chronic symptoms. The pandemic resulted in increasing difficulties for families in terms of financial constraints, layoffs, loss of educational opportunities and mental health issues. At the onset of the pandemic, the world witnessed a steep rise in the levels of anxiety and exhaustion, especially among the young adults which were attributed to factors such as 'work from home', work-life balance, increasing pressure from organizations and institutions, online classes and a sedentary lifestyle on account of the lockdown. Since majority of young adults find it challenging to prioritize their health over work, Yoga could provide a powerful balance to their life, given their multiple benefits. The paper will discuss few yoga asanas which could be performed on both yoga mat as well as a chair such as Trikonasana, Suryanamaskara, UttitaParsvakonasana, Virabhadrasana, etc.

Key Words: Anxiety, COVID-19, Stress, Young Adult, Yoga.

Introduction:

The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic has resulted in a standstill for the world. Originated in Wuhan, China, the Coronavirus Disease is defined as a dangerous and infectious disease caused by acute respiratory syndrome (SARS – CoV – 2), a newly discovered syndrome in 2019. The first coronavirus case was reported in Wuhan during December 2019, following which the disease was declared a pandemic once the virus spread across the world. The virus which was originally diagnosed on the basis of common symptoms such as fever, cough and tiredness later included lesser common symptoms such as sore throat, headaches, aches and pains, loss of taste and smell, conjunctivitis, diarrhoea, rashes on the skin and discolouration of toes and fingers. In rare situations, people reported chronic symptoms such as shortness of breath, chest pains and loss of speech or movement (WHO, 2020)¹. However, most people were found to be infected with mild to moderate symptoms and followed general treatment procedures at their homes. More than 340, 000 cases were reported globally around 21st and 22nd March. Countries such as the USA, the UK, India, Australia, Germany and Spain reported increasing cases besides China.

The announcement of the pandemic resulted in the subsequent declaration of an emergency lockdown in several countries. People across certain countries reported problems in terms of financial crisis, unemployment, education, trauma on account of close family and friends testing positive for coronavirus and loss of loved ones to COVID-19. Besides these challenges, the pandemic has also witnessed a sharp rise in mental health issues and ever since, the demand for mental health professionals have been on the rise. Some of the most prominent mental health issues reported by individuals during this pandemic is Anxiety and Stress².

When we experience a feeling of dread, fear and apprehension without any prior knowledge of the event or behaviour that trigger the feeling, it is

known as Anxiety (Britannica, 2019)³. Such feelings of anxiety often involve an anticipation of future threat and may be accompanied by excessive fear and anxiety in extreme situations (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The feelings of anxiety can also be induced by Stress, which is defined as a “non-specific response of the body to any other demand” (Selye, 1956). Feelings of stress arise in the face of life-threatening and challenging events when the body prepares itself to cope with the external threat. The person overcomes stressful situations by amassing all the resources available in the body and thereby elicits the flight-or fight response to restore homeostasis within the body.

In light of the lockdown, some of the tertiary sector activities such as the banking and educational services witnessed an overnight transition from organizational operation to “work from home”, with services such as hospitals and police stations at the forefront, representing the critical frontline services in protecting and safeguarding the citizens of the country from the fatal and rapid transmission of coronavirus. Since young adults currently represent the majority in India, the young adult population has witnessed and borne the maximum brunt on account of COVID-19. Although the transitions in operation were successful, people have reported a spike in Anxiety, exhaustion and nervousness as a result of the increased workload. With unrealistic deadlines and projects, people have found it difficult to schedule time for engaging in exercises and often procrastinate to perform exercises.

In a study conducted to find out the effect of yoga-based exercise on perceived stress, anxiety and quality of life, it was found that yoga exercises had resulted in a decrease in stress and state anxiety levels but did not result in a drop in trait anxiety levels and quality of life (ErdoğanYüce & Muz, 2020)

Objectives:

The paper aims to achieve the following objectives:

- (i) To explore the yoga asanasthat could be practiced during COVID-19 and encourage young adults to practice them.
- (ii) To discuss about the asanasthat can revitalize young adults from anxiety, stress, nervousness and tiredness.

Discussion:

Yoga is defined as an ancient practice of obtaining spiritual and physical harmony. As a science, yoga is a scientific discipline that consists of a systematic enquiry that yields observable results and builds the core immunity. As an art, it focuses on discovering new knowledge within one's subconscious and also heals emotional distress. Thus, yoga is aimed at strengthening both the physical health as well as the overall subjective well-being of individuals. Tracing its history to nearly 5000 years, the word yoga is derived from the Sanskrit word 'yuj' which refers to integrity or unity. The primary objective in the practice of yoga is to bring unity in body, mind and breath. Besides, an important objective of Yoga is in attaining 'self-realization' by gaining mastery over deep exploration of self through meditation (*Yoga | What is Yoga | Yoga Poses | The Art of Living India*, n.d.)

Although yogic practice was introduced in India, much of the culture faded over the years and later gained prominence in the West, especially in countries such as the USA, France and during the 1700s. Yoga was revived in India by the 20th century. Evidence states that the first instance of revival can be traced to the city of Mysuru in the 1930s, with the Raja of Mysuru Krishna Raja Wodeyar granting a portion of the Jagmohan palace to be converted into a yoga centre as a token of curing his illness, following which yoga began to be an established practice across the country. Yoga is now a popular practice in both

India and the USA, with several centres and ashrams established in both the countries.

Engaging in yoga can hold several benefits, of which they include –

- Build immunity and promotes good physical health
- Reduce stress and anxiety
- Reduce weight gain
- Boosts mood
- Improved sleep
- Enables greater adaptability
- Enables relaxation and promotes peace
- Enables new learning
- Enables self-acceptance
- Improved overall performance in daily activities.

Yoga Asanas:

In yoga, an ‘asana’ refers to the physical posture maintained by an individual; thus, yoga asanas are the various postures performed in the practice of yoga to achieve bodily balance. Since young adults have reported an increase in stress and anxiety levels during the lockdown on account of the rising workload, the following asanas will be explained with emphasis on both the traditional and varied techniques to suit the requirements of young adults. The paper will discuss some of the popular yoga asanas, with special emphasis on the contemporary variation of ‘chair yoga’. Although chair yoga was previously developed for senior citizens, the need for chair yoga has reached its peak during the lockdown and can be practiced by all groups, especially students and employees working from home.

1. Suryanamaskara

Known as the most widely practiced yoga asana, Suryanamaskara is the salutation to the sun god and is performed early in the morning. This asana traditionally comprises a 12-step yoga asana or salutation to the sun by stretching the body into different poses. A recent variation of the suryanamaskar is the chair suryanamaskar, adapted to encourage individuals to practice yoga while sitting. This asana involves a host of benefits –it is beneficial in maintaining cardiovascular health, promotes weight loss, reduces anxiety to a large extent, improves blood circulation through inhalation and exhalation during suryanamaskar, boosts the immune system and reduces the risk of COVID-19, regulates menstrual cycle and also contributes to improved cognitive functioning. In addition, chair suryanamaskar acts as a medium to achieve good spinal health and enables good spinal posture through chair suryanamaskar.

2. Marjariyasana and Bitilasana (cat and cow pose)

Marjariyasana and Bitilasana are practiced as warm up asanas and are classified as beginner level asanas, since they prepare the body to perform advanced asanas involving greater flexibility of spine and back. These asanas are simple, yet effective to practice while sitting. The asanas involve two steps respectively, which begins with a straight, seated position during inhalation with an arched back and chin slightly lifted up and followed by exhalation and maintaining the original posture of the spine, with the chin drawn towards the chest. A regular practice of these asanas involves benefits such as improvement in spinal posture and enables relaxation of body and muscles.

3. Utthita Parsvakonasana

The term 'utthita' denotes 'stretched', 'parsva' meaning 'side' and 'kona' meaning 'angle'. Thus, utthita parsvakonasana refers to the asana of stretching the torso towards the side with the bent leg with angle. Traditionally, Utthita Parsvakonasana is performed in a standing pose and is also known as the extended side angle pose. However, it can be performed with a chair. This asana targets the majority of the muscles in the body such as legs, ankles, groin,

abdomen, chest, arms, shoulders and hand. The benefits of the chair UtthitaParsvaonasana include relief from stiffness in back and shoulders, lengthen the legs, activate the core muscles, strengthen and tone abdominal muscles, relieve menstrual problems and improves fertility, strengthen spine, relaxation of the body and promotes calmness.

4. ArdhaMatsyendrasana

The asana is derived from the sanskrit name 'ardha', which means half, 'matsya' means fish, 'indra' which means king; therefore, the asana is known as half king fish pose. Similar to the previous asana, ArdhaMatsyendrasana also focuses on improving the spinal flexibility. The asana is typically performed in a seated position on the yoga mat; however, it can be performed on a chair. The variation of this asana requires a person to sit on a chair facing either the left or right; with the torso facing the chair and hands held on to the chair for support, thereby expanding the spine. As indicated previously, the benefits of this asana are to strengthen the spinal nerves, stretch the back muscles, improve the abdominal functioning and reduce obesity.

5. Virabhadrasana

Another important asana in yoga is that of Virabhadrasana. The term Vira translates to the English word 'hero' or 'warrior', 'bhadra' which means friend and 'asana' which means pose; thus, the pose is known as the Warrior's pose. In ashtanga yoga, several variations of this asana are practiced and are commonly performed in a standing position without the use of chair. This asana can be practiced by young adults with a chair for a quick exercise. In Virabhadrasana 1, each leg is placed on either side of the chair (the right leg is placed on the right side of the chair and the left leg on the left side of the chair) with the right leg bent keeping the left leg stretched on the other side along with stretching the torso by raising the hands upwards. In Virabhadrasana 2, the only difference lies in raising the hands sideways i.e., the right hand is extended towards the right and left hand is extended towards the left - hand side. In another variation of

ViparitaVirabhadrasana, the same position is maintained as the previous poses except the right hand is lifted upwards, stretching the torso upwards with the left hand placed on the left leg. Although this asana consists of multiple variations, the benefits remain the same. Virabhadrasana enhances the flexibility of the chest, lungs, spine, and groins, stretches the legs and ankles and improves abdominal functioning, thereby contributing to improved stamina. The asana also alleviates stress and improves mood.

6. Ustrasana

This asana is a warm-up for progressing towards the advanced asanas and is also recommended for beginners in yoga. The term 'ustra' means camel in English and therefore translates to the camel pose in English. The asana is generally performed by sitting down and bending the body backwards, with either hand placed on the respective foot. For young adults busy with work, this asana can be achieved by bending the body backwards with chest forward and an arched spine and holding the chair with both hands on either side. The benefits of this asana are mostly psychological in nature; besides an improvement in posture and stretching the abdomen, chest and spine, it promotes calmness, enhances bodily balance, alleviates stress, improves inner-strength and ability to trust and overall contributes to greater self-confidence. In addition, it enhances an individual's self-awareness and enables individuals to obtain deeper knowledge about them.

7. Trikonasana

The name Trikonasana is derived from a Sanskrit word 'trikona' which means triangle. Therefore, the pose is known as the triangle pose. It is originally performed by stretching the legs apart with one leg placed at 90 degrees and the other leg straight, with one hand placed beside the angular foot and the other hand stretched above with the head facing upwards. In the variation, the posture is the same with only a single difference in the pose; the person stands beside the chair and places one hand on the chair instead of placing it beside the

angular foot. The following consist of the benefits for this asana – a) strengthens the knees, legs, ankles, arm and chest b) stretches the hips, groins, calf, shoulders, chest and spine c) improves digestion d) reduces anxiety and stress e) reduces back pain.

8. Shavasanaand Pranayama

Besides Suryanamaskar, Shavasana is one of the most effective asanas in yoga. The term indicates, ‘shava’ means ‘corpse’ and ‘asana’ means ‘pose’, therefore Shavasana is translated into the “corpse pose” in English. This asana is always performed at the end, after performing high intensity asanas or poses. The primary focus of Shavasana lies in monitoring the breathing response within each individual. The asana is typically carried out by lying down on the yoga mat followed by deep inhalation and exhalation. In the chair variation, an individual performs shavasana in a sitting position, with hands placed on the thighs and meditates with deep inhalation and exhalation. In certain instances, Pranayama or ‘deep breathing’ can also be practiced. The practice of Pranayama involves different techniques which can be practiced alternately on different occasions. Both Shavasana and Pranayama comprise of a host of benefits – relaxes the body and mind, enhances self-awareness, encourages discovery of new knowledge, regulates the respiratory system and enhances cardiovascular functioning. These asanas contribute to improved mood, reduced anxiety and stress and instil calmness within the individual⁴.

Conclusion:

Yoga has witnessed a paradigm shift from the traditional asanas emphasizing on spiritual attainment to the modern practice of asanas and pranayama. Today, yoga has gained worldwide acceptance, with people from different cultures choosing to embrace a holistic and sustainable lifestyle as compared to a materialistic lifestyle. What was previously practiced by ancient yogis is now slowly changing its course. People practice yoga for a wide range

of purposes – some prefer spiritual attainment over worldly desires, as an ailment for health problems and currently for alleviating anxiety and improving overall mental health. As cultures now begin to make a transcendental shift towards a healthier lifestyle during the lockdown, it is only imperative to assume that yoga will play an integral role in almost every family in the years to come post lockdown.

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