



MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING IN SILVER CITIZENS THROUGH YOGA

Meena Ramanathan¹ and Ananda Balayogi Bhavanani^{2*}

¹Coordinator/Yoga Therapist, Centre for Yoga Therapy, Education and Research (CYTER), Sri Balaji Vidyapeeth, Puducherry, India.

²Deputy Director, Centre for Yoga Therapy, Education and Research (CYTER), Sri Balaji Vidyapeeth, Puducherry, India.

***Corresponding Author: Dr. Ananda Balayogi Bhavanani**

Deputy Director, Centre for Yoga Therapy, Education and Research (CYTER), Sri Balaji Vidyapeeth, Puducherry, India.

Article Received on 02/01/2017

Article Revised on 23/01/2017

Article Accepted on 12/02/2017

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Yoga is an applied science that re-establishes the lost balance by enriching our mind. It is a classical Indian form that creates a dynamic connectivity between body, mind and soul. Yoga helps one age better and improves flexibility and strength of the body through simple practices. Mental health may include an individual's ability to enjoy life and create a balance between life activities and efforts to achieve psychological resilience. **Research Findings:** Yoga practice increases hippocampus gray matter volume in non-demented elderly. Comprehensive lifestyle intervention was associated with significant increase in telomere length and improved telomerase activity. A review included all studies of Yoga with older adults and concluded that there were trends toward improvement in strength, balance, gait and flexibility in older adults participating in Yoga. Interventions that are more holistic and comprehensive can address multiple aspects of health in well-being at the same time. **Contribution of Yogic Practices in Old Age:** Yogic practices aim at maintaining and improving the various motor skills and preserve physical, mental and social well-being in the seniors. The effort in trying to achieve the pose helps them gain the benefit which is of primary importance. Yoga is beneficial in prevention and control of common health and emotional problems that are linked with old age creating a positive approach in life. **Conclusion:** Old age can be made not only bearable but also pleasurable as it is not a matter of years but a condition of mind and Yoga brings a healthy state of mind. The simple yet immensely beneficial effects of Yoga slow down or even reverse the ageing process. Yoga may not only add a few years to life but also may add life to the years.

KEYWORDS: seniors, ageing, resilience, wellbeing.

INTRODUCTION

Yoga is a spiritual way of life that transcends all ages. Evolution from "I" to "WE;" from being a limited individual to becoming an expanded universal human being is made possible through Yoga, which is a classical Indian form that creates a dynamic connectivity between body, mind and soul. One can start learning this art at any age; in fact experts believe Yoga helps one age better and improves flexibility and strength of the body through simple and uncomplicated practices as well as to stay physically fit, mentally alert and enhance spirituality.^[1]

Scientific knowledge has been progressing rapidly in all fields of life through physics, chemistry, engineering, biology, medicine and agriculture. The variety and quality of tools and devices employed are improving at an accelerated pace and what was unimaginable and unthinkable a few decades ago is now becoming possible, helping us to expand the range of our

perception to the minutest happening inside our bodies or in the external world. The frontier of knowledge has expanded tremendously in all possible directions. The instruments which are useful in our dealing with things have been wholly revolutionized by science, but the instrument used in our relationship with people, the precious instrument called the mind, remains unchanged. Our inner world of desires, emotions and conflicts has remained chaotic and imbalanced. It needs training and improvement which science unfortunately cannot provide.^[2]

Mental health is a level of psychological well-being or an absence of mental illness. It has been defined in Princeton University's WordNet[®] as the "psychological state of someone who is functioning at a satisfactory level of emotional and behavioural adjustment".^[3] From the perspective of positive psychology mental health may include an individual's ability to enjoy life and create a

balance between life activities and efforts to achieve psychological resilience.

According to a fact sheet of the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health includes "subjective well-being, perceived self-efficacy, autonomy, competence, inter-generational dependence and self-actualization of one's intellectual and emotional potential, among others."^[4] It further states that the well-being of an individual is encompassed in the realization of their abilities, coping with normal stresses of life, productive work and contribution to their community. Cultural differences, subjective assessments, and competing professional theories all affect how "mental health" is defined. A widely accepted definition of health by psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud: the capacity "to work and to love" is considered to be simple accurate definition of mental health'.^[5]

The tripartite model views mental well-being as encompassing three components of emotional well-being, social well-being and psychological well-being.^[6] Emotional well-being is defined as having high levels of positive emotions, whereas social and psychological well-being are defined as the presence of psychological and social skills and abilities that contribute to optimal functioning in daily life.^[7]

Yoga is an applied science that re-establishes the lost balance in the human affairs caused by the one-sided growth of science helping us to overcome its shortcomings by enriching our mind. Yoga is understood as the goal as well as the means to attain an absolutely undisturbed state of consciousness which obviously is a long journey, but every step on the path covers some distance; as the Chinese proverb says: "A journey of 10,000 miles begins with the first step". Yoga is commonly understood as a practice that is physically beneficial, while it is concerned and related more with the mind than the body. Any sign of disease manifested in the body is a result of a mental imbalance or an unhealthy attitude. Srimad Bhagavad Gita defines Yoga as equanimity at all levels which may also be taken as the perfect state of health where there is physical homeostasis and mental equanimity giving rise to a healthy harmony between the body and mind.^[1] 'Regular, repeated, rhythmic practice of Yoga helps ward off mental fatigue, thereby ensuing better physiological functioning', says Ammaji Yogacharini Kalaimamani Meenakshi Devi Bhavanani.

AGEING, AN INEVITABLE ASPECT OF LIFE

Growing old is when you have leisure time for your own self, for recreation (Vihar), to pursue with the hobbies and interests in life as well as for relaxation. Ageing is an inevitable natural process associated with sluggish metabolism, demineralization of bone and decreased energy levels, feeling of weakness and decrease in power of resistance. Injuries take longer to recover with common complaints of arthritis, rheumatism,

incontinence, insomnia, constipation, coughing, difficulty in breathing, bronchitis, prostate enlargement, high blood pressure, diabetes, paralysis, etc coupled with mental depression, loneliness, anxiety, suspicion, self-centeredness, low self-esteem due to wear and tear of the brain tissues. This raises the need for the seniors to stay fit and healthy during this age, though degeneration of the body also set some limits to the types of exercises they can do.^[2]

The transformation back into childhood begins as one grows older and the elders start behaving like an adamant tough-to-handle-teenager, become self-centred and childish, craving to gain attention, expecting to be praised and pampered. Feeling bored and empty with nothing to do is common with the retired seniors who may also be fighting to cope with the death of a spouse, relative or friend. Adapting to these hazardous events makes them lonely. They carry a notion that they are no longer useful to the family or the society and hence start feeling inferior and depressed. Their mobility, range of movement becomes limited than before. The physical stiffness affects their mental health too.

On the other hand, some seniors have a progressive outlook towards life. They are focused in leading a fulfilling life and understand the importance of healthy living eating healthy and indulging in mild exercise forms such as going for leisurely walks or practising Yoga that are simple ways to stay physically and mentally fit. Achieving fitness-happiness goal with a bit of enjoyment along with like-minded individuals does sound interesting, doesn't it?^[8]

A group session of Yoga is a big motivation that helps one to enhance their skills and overcome individual limitations. When they interact with people of their own age and calibre their problems and pain seems infinitesimal in comparison to that of the others around. Group session is a therapy on its own as it enhances the meaning and purpose of their lives. 'Silver Yoga Hour' enlivens and cheers up their spirits, gives them something to 'look-forward-to', something to get dressed up for and many things to share amongst their new-found "Yoga-friends".

TRADITIONAL VIEWS

The Chatur Ashrama system is a component of the ethical theories in Indian philosophy, where it is combined with four goals of human life (Purushartha), for fulfilment, happiness and spiritual liberation. Under the Ashrama system, the human life was divided into four stages namely- Brahmacharya, Grihastha, Vanaprastha and Sanyasa - the goal of each period was the fulfilment and development of the individual to attain and manifest the potentiality.^[9] The retirement stage, where the individual hands over household responsibilities to the next generation, takes up an advisory role, maintains relationships with children and community more in the role of a matured mentor, lifestyle is simplified and the

couple may retreat to a quieter place for deeper practices and gradually withdraw from the responsibilities of the worldly living is the third stage called Vanaprasta stage which signifies the transitional phase from a householder's life (with its greater emphasis on wealth, security, pleasure and sexual pursuits), to one with greater emphasis on Moksha (spiritual liberation). The stage is marked by renunciation of material desires and prejudices and focussed on peace and simple spiritual life.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The population of older adults is growing rapidly and new intervention options are needed to address multiple aspects of health and well-being. Few recent studies on the elderly population:

- Lower-income older adults are more likely to be sedentary and can benefit from interventions that increase mobility and physical function. Although many interventions may help sedentary older adults, Yoga may be able to produce broader changes and impact multiple health outcomes simultaneously. Groessl et al concluded that the main features of Yoga such as transportability, home practice, social interaction and spirituality may increase its appeal to older adults and suggested that inactive older adults derive health benefits from free weekly Yoga programs.^[10]
- A review by Roland et al included all studies of Yoga with older adults and concluded that there were trends toward improvement in strength, balance, gait and flexibility in older adults participating in Yoga.^[11]
- Another review of Yoga interventions with older adults focused on randomized controlled trials comparing Yoga to other interventions done by Patel et al., found evidence that Yoga may result in greater improvements in physical and mental scores, flexibility and VO₂max than aerobic exercise interventions.^[12]
- The most relevant program of research in older adults was done by Chen et al. who developed a Yoga program (Silver Yoga) for institutionalized older adults and found that Yoga improved flexibility, walking speed, sleep quality, depression and QOL among Yoga participants. In summary, there is increasing evidence that Hatha Yoga can improve physical function among older adults, while the psychosocial benefits are promising.^[13,14,15,16]
- Yoga appears to have very good potential for impacting multiple aspects of health and well-being such as the physical, mental and social aspects of health and quality of life which are interdependent.^[17] Interventions that are more holistic and comprehensive can address multiple aspects of health and well-being at the same time.^[18,19] Although a variety of behavioural interventions have been linked to aspects of improved health in older adults, mind-body interventions such as Yoga may produce broader

changes and impact multiple health outcomes simultaneously.^[20]

- Elderly participants practiced the protocol that was specially designed for senior citizens, keeping in mind their health status and physical limitations. This included simple warm-ups (jathis), breath body movement coordination practices (kriyas), static stretching postures (asanas), breathing techniques (pranayamas), relaxation and simple chanting.^[21]
- Hariprasad et al found that Yoga practice increases hippocampal gray matter volume in non-demented elderly. Yoga has the potential to be a barrier to age-related neuro-senescence.^[22]
- It was concluded by Ornish et al that telomere shortness in human beings is a prognostic marker of ageing, disease and premature morbidity. Comprehensive lifestyle intervention was associated with significant increase in telomere length and improved telomerase activity.^[23]
- Ramanathan et al recommended that Yoga should be made a part of health-care facilities for elderly as it can enhance the quality of life by improving their overall mental health status. It could provide a healthy and positive alternative from depressing negative thoughts and give them a sense of purpose and hope.^[24] Their study proved the positive influence of Yoga in reduction of depression and anxiety scores and improvement in self-esteem scores in elderly women attributed to changes in central neurotransmitters such as gamma-amino butyric-acid coupled with increased parasympathetic tone and decreased sympatho-adrenal activity.

GUIDELINES OF EXERCISE FOR THE ELDERLY

Physiological ageing comes up with greater rapidity if the individual is sedentary. The decline in bodily functions that accompanies ageing process may be delayed through appropriate physical training, avoiding vigorous and jerky movements thereby reducing the danger of accidents and falls. The exercises taught to the elders should be joyful, provide contentment and satisfaction and must also enhance their self-confidence. More emphasis must be laid on breathing out consciously which is very important. Daily exercise is better than intermittent practice.^[2]

CONTRIBUTION OF YOGIC PRACTICES IN OLD AGE

Yogic practices aim at maintaining and improving the various motor skills and preserve physical, mental and social well-being of the seniors.^[25]

The Jathis (the loosening practices) and Kriyas (breath-body-mind coordinating practices) improve flexibility, create awareness of the body part being manipulated as well as enhance energy circulation. Asanas, the static stretching postures in Yoga are isotonic and isometric in nature; thereby they are non-strenuous, non-fatiguing and can be performed comfortably during old age. The

shortened muscles are stretched gradually and pain in joints is reduced along with an improvement in the range of movement and mobility on the whole. Various muscles are stretched and optimum length of the muscles is maintained helping reduce the pain. Asanas build up proper tone in the muscles and the vital organs function well as a result of improved tone. Asanas nurture and culture the health of the spine by bending forward and backward, twisting sideways and stretching laterally which constitutes part of their regular practice, enhancing the sensory and motor connectivity between the brain and the rest of the body.^[24]

Attaining the final posture or perfection in the posture is secondary. Effort made in trying to achieve the posture helps them gain the benefit which is of primary importance among the seniors. Variations of the pose which may be easier and less strenuous may be performed. Complicated postures are never recommended for the senior citizen, something simple, yet challenging their ability helps boost their confidence levels to a great extent.

Slow, conscious controlled breathing in pranayama helps in adjusting and activating the circulatory-respiratory complex of the body. It also provides them emotional stability. Purificatory processes called Kriyas help in removing imbalances in various secretions of body. The practice of focus, concentration (Ekagratha-Dharana) and meditation in any form reduces the feeling of loneliness and provides peace of mind. Emotional upheavals no longer exist. Directing attention to various parts of the body during relaxation helps improve blood flow to the area being contemplated upon thereby facilitating healing. As the traditional texts emphasise daily practice of yogic exercises bring beneficial results to the silver citizen.^[21]

Yoga is beneficial in prevention and control of common health and emotional problems that are linked with old age. It helps elderly to become more in touch with themselves and their body, enabling them to accept who they are and the state they are in (accept their individual shortcomings and limitations) which improves gaining a positive outlook and approach in life.

CONCLUSION

Swami Gitananda Giri Guru Maharaj states, "Yoga is the science and art of right-use-ness of body, emotions and mind".^[26] Growing old no longer has to mean steadily declining health. The miracles of modern medicine, improved diets, better living conditions and awareness help people maintain their physical health, fitness and promote vitality in their sunset years. Old age can be made not only bearable but also pleasurable. After all, old age is not a matter of years but a condition of mind and Yoga brings a healthy state of mind. Yoga has proven to be immensely therapeutic in preventing deterioration through ageing. Promoting healthy lifestyle in the elderly is vital in helping them maintain good

health and lead happy and independent lives. Yoga has been proven to help alleviate or reduce many of these health challenges, making it an increasingly popular choice in the adult population. The simple yet immensely beneficial effect of Yoga slows down and reverses the ageing process. Yoga may not only add a few years to life but also may add life to the years. Hence practice of Yoga should become an integral part of old age.

REFERENCES

1. Bhavanani AB. Yoga Chikitsa: Application of Yoga as a therapy. Pondicherry, India: Dhivyananda Creations; 2013.
2. Ramanathan Meena. Applied Yoga. Pondicherry, India: Aarogya Yogalayam; 2007.
3. Princeton University. WordNet. Princeton University; 2010. Available from <http://wordnet.princeton.edu>. Accessed on 5 December 2016.
4. World Health organisation fact sheet on "Mental health: strengthening our response". Fact sheet N°220. www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs369/en. Accessed on 5 December 2016.
5. Sigmund F. Das Unbehagen in der Kultur. Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag Wien., 1930; 101.
6. Keyes CL. The mental health continuum: from languishing to flourishing in life. *Journal of Health and Social Behaviour.*, 2002; 43: 207–22.
7. Joshanloo M. Revisiting the Empirical Distinction Between Hedonic and Eudaimonic Aspects of Well-Being Using Exploratory Structural Equation Modeling. *J Happiness Stud.*, 2016; 17: 2023-36.
8. Wiesmann U, Rölker S, Ilg H, Hirtz P, Hannich HJ. On the stability and modifiability of the sense of coherence in active seniors. *Z Gerontol Geriatr.*, 2006; 39(2): 90-99.
9. Bhavanani AB. A primer of Yoga theory. 4th ed. Pondicherry, India: Dhivyananda Creations; 2014.
10. Groessl EJ, Schmalzl L, Mazzi M, Iszak F. Yoga for Low-Income Older Adults: Silver Age Yoga. *J Yoga Phys Ther.*, 2013; 3: 131.
11. Roland KP, Jakobi JM, Jones GR. Does Yoga engender fitness in older adults? A critical review. *J Aging Phys Act.*, 2011; 19(2): 62-79.
12. Patel NK, Newstead AH, Ferrer RL. The effects of Yoga on physical functioning and health related quality of life in older adults: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *J Altern Complement Med.*, 2012; 18: 902-17.
13. Chen KM, Tseng WS. Pilot-testing the effects of a newly-developed silver Yoga exercise program for female seniors. *J Nurs Res.*, 2008; 16: 37-46.
14. Chen KM, Chen MH, Hong SM, Chao HC, Lin HS, Li CH. Physical fitness of older adults in senior activity centres after 24-week silver Yoga exercises. *J Clin Nurs.*, 2008; 17: 2634-46.
15. Chen KM, Chen MH, Lin MH, Fan JT, Lin HS, Li CH. Effects of Yoga on sleep quality and depression

- in elders in assisted living facilities. *J Nurs Res.*, 2010; 18: 53-61.
16. Chen KM, Fan JT, Wang HH, Wu SJ, Li CH, Lin HS. Silver Yoga exercises improved physical fitness of transitional frail elders. *Nurs Res.*, 2010; 59(5): 364-70.
 17. Strout KA, Howard EP. The six dimensions of wellness and cognition in aging adults. *J Holist Nurs.*, 2012; 30: 195-204.
 18. Jeste DV. Promoting successful ageing through integrated care. *BMJ.*, 2011; 343: d6808.
 19. Von Korff M, Katon WJ, Lin EH, Ciechanowski P, Peterson D, et al. Functional outcomes of multi-condition collaborative care and successful ageing: results of randomised trial. *BMJ.*, 2011; 343: d6612.
 20. Ross LA, Schmidt EL, Ball K. Interventions to maintain mobility: What works? *Accid Anal Prev.*, 2013; 61: 167-96.
 21. Bhavanani AB, Ramanathan M, Trakroo M. Single session of integrated 'silver Yoga' program improves cardiovascular parameters in senior citizens. *J Intercult Ethnopharmacol.*, 2015; 4: 134-37.
 22. Hariprasad VR, Varambally S, Shivakumar V, Kalmady SV, Venkatasubramanian G, Gangadhar BN. Yoga increases the volume of the hippocampus in elderly subjects. *Indian J Psychiatry.*, 2013; 55: S394-S96.
 23. Ornish D, Lin J, Chan JM, Epel E, Kemp C, Weidner G, Marlin R, et al. Effect of comprehensive lifestyle changes on telomerase activity and telomere length in men with biopsy-proven low-risk prostate cancer: 5-year follow-up of a descriptive pilot study. *Lancet Oncol.*, 2013; 14: 1112-20.
 24. Ramanathan M, Bhavanani AB, Trakroo M. Effect of a 12-week Yoga therapy program on mental health status in elderly women inmates of a hospice. *International Journal of Yoga.*, 2017; 10: 24-28.
 25. Madanmohan T and Bhavanani AB. Physiological Benefits of Yogic Practices: A Brief Review. *International Journal of Traditional and Complementary Medicine.*, 2016; 1: 0031-43.
 26. Gitananda Giri Swami. *Yoga: Step-by-Step*. Satya Press: Pondicherry, India; 1976.