

Integrating Yoga into Nutrition Therapy

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Introduction

Yoga is an ancient Eastern practice that has been in existence for thousands of years. Americans have westernized the practice of yoga, as classes are popular in studios and gyms around the country. Recently, yoga therapy, which differs from a yoga class, has come to the forefront. Yoga therapy is the application of teachings and practices in a therapeutic context in order to support a consistent yoga practice that will increase self-awareness and engage the client's energy in the direction of desired goals. Yoga therapy training incorporates the following elements:

- Foundational understanding of yoga theory and practice
- Biomedical and psychological foundations
- Teaching and therapeutic skills
- Yoga therapy tools and their applications
- Professional practice that includes legal, regulatory, and ethical issues pertaining specifically to yoga therapy

The goals of yoga therapy are to eliminate, reduce, or manage symptoms; improve function; prevent the occurrence or reoccurrence of underlying causes of illness; improve health and wellbeing; and help clients change their relationship to and identification with their

condition. Yoga therapists are now certified through a governing and accrediting body, the International Association of Yoga Therapists (IAYT), based on evidence-based practice and peer-reviewed literature. In addition, standards of practice that differentiate between a yoga therapist and yoga teacher are now emerging.

RDNs may be interested in becoming yoga therapists, or collaborating with certified yoga therapists within their communities, to offer comprehensive, integrated care for their clients. Just as any other health care provider completes an assessment and develops a plan of care, the yoga therapist's assessment involves collection of information to develop a client-centered, integrated treatment plan. The IAYT has developed guidelines for the yoga therapy assessment which include the following:

- Current health care information relevant to the work of a yoga therapist treating his/her respective population
- Pathologies, co-occurring disorders, drugs, surgical procedures
- Evaluation of the physical, energetic, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of well-being
- Breath patterns
- Posture and movement patterns

The yoga therapy treatment planning process may include a client-centered recovery plan based on the assessment, implementation of the yoga therapy treatment plan, and communication with the treatment team (physicians, psychotherapists, occupational therapists, etc).

Yoga therapy addresses the physical, emotional, and spiritual components of the healing process through innervation of the chakras. The chakras are aligned in an ascending column from the base of the spine to the top of the head, and

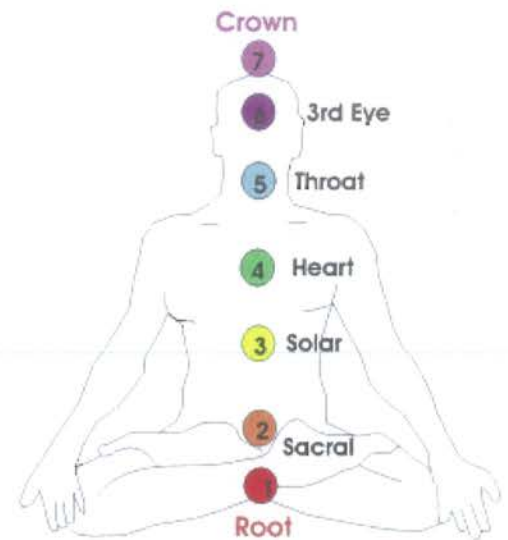


Figure 1. Illustration of the chakras. Reprinted from Wikimedia Commons, 2016.¹

each chakra is associated with multiple physiological functions. (See Figure 1.) The body's chakras parallel two chains of nerve bundles located on each side of the spinal cord. Activating these chakras, through yoga, releases emotional pain imprisoned in the body as physical pain around the spinal cord. An interesting parallel may be created with the chakras to incorporate discussion on a physical, emotional, and spiritual level as it relates to chronic illness and the healing process (See Table 1).

The chakras also mirror the wellness domains that include physical, social, occupational, emotional, environmental, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions.

Yoga's benefits for physical and emotional health are many. Examples of some common western ailments and how yoga benefits these conditions are as follows:

Bone Health²:

- Weight-bearing exercises improve bone health by stimulating the bones to retain

Table 1. The Seven Chakras

Chakra	Physical, Emotional, Spiritual Aspect
Root	Physical vitality, survival
Sacral	Desire, including sexual energy
Solar Plexus	Creation of self, perception and projection of self
Heart	Universal love, compassion, empathy
Throat	Communication, creative expression
Brow	Visualization, third eye
Crown	Totality of being, spiritual perfection

- Yoga is a weight-bearing exercise as many of the poses require clients to lift their own body weight.
- Decreased cortisol as a result of the practice of yoga is followed by increased bone formation and calcium absorption.

Heart Disease³:

- Decreased activity of sympathetic nervous system, followed by decreased heart rate and decreased blood pressure results.
- Decreased activity of the sympathetic nervous system in turn minimizes the “fight-or-flight” response.
- Postures engaged in during yoga focus on opening the heart, increasing blood flow.

Cancer⁴:

- Psychosocial issues are addressed through a body-centered mechanism of treatment.
- Chemotherapy, radiation, and immunotherapy effects are less intense.
- Lymphedema, fatigue, pain, nausea, neuropathy, menopause, osteoporosis, sleep disorders, and anxiety may be alleviated or lessened.

Diabetes⁵:

- Postures involved in stimulating the pancreas are prescribed.
- Increased insulin production in type 2 diabetes may be the result.

Gastrointestinal Disease⁶:

- The parasympathetic nervous system is activated, promoting homeostasis of GI tract.
- The gut-brain axis is addressed.

Eating Disorder Treatment⁷:

- Understanding bad habits and self-destructiveness, exploring

the mind, and growth and transformation as related to habits and addictions occur.

- Increased general self-acceptance along with increased body awareness and acceptance result.

Addiction⁸:

- In recent studies, yoga has been shown to increase the levels of gamma aminobutyric acid (GABA) in the brain by more than 20%. GABA deficiency is related to anxiety. Like serotonin, GABA is a calming neurotransmitter.
- This is important because people dealing with addiction usually exhibit low levels of GABA.
- If an activity such as yoga can increase these levels, even for short periods of time, then people struggling with addiction can more conscientiously focus on their recovery.

Depression and Anxiety⁹:

- The ability to control irrational thoughts and the increased ability to shift attention at will is a result of yoga.
- The ability to use mindfulness and positive self-affirmations leads to the reduction of unrealistic pessimism often associated with depression and anxiety disorders.

Yoga and Mindfulness

Studies have discovered that mindfulness can bring out positive emotions and suppress negative emotions and stress. Practicing mindfulness meditation can boost the immune system and help fight off illness. Mindfulness helps focus, which can combat distractions and improve attention.

A study that looked at stress

reduction showed that mindfulness-based therapy may be useful in altering affective and cognitive processes that underlie multiple clinical issues. The study also indicated that mindfulness teaches clients to use alternatives to avoidant-based coping and recognize underlying reasons for maladaptive behaviors.¹⁰

The cerebral cortex is the center of the brain that is responsible for impulses, irrational thoughts, and behaviors. Mindful yoga and meditation can positively affect the cerebral cortex, improving focus and awareness. Activating the cerebral cortex can diminish impulsivity along with irrational thoughts and behaviors involved in eating behaviors and nutrition beliefs.¹¹

Yoga and Eating

Based on the effect of yoga on the central nervous system, it would understandably follow that yoga can help delay impulses. Through yoga, clients may find themselves in postures that are difficult or awkward. Learning to stay within the poses and work through these postures can help the client, who feels an urge to binge or practice unhealthy food behaviors, delay acting on this urge.

Clients learn to tolerate uncomfortable emotional states without running toward food or drugs for comfort or numbing out by turning away from food. When in various yoga poses, postures are held for a certain length of time while maintaining the breath. Often, clients tend to want to “run away” from uncomfortable situations and/or are ambivalent about nutrition therapy. Practicing yoga can help maintain discipline, help clients to feel and

accept uncomfortable emotions, and avoid overeating and other impulsive behaviors.

For many clients, part of weight homeostasis is learning to tune in to the body's signals of hunger and satiety. Eating only when hungry and stopping when the body is satisfied will result in the body slowly returning to its natural weight. Individuals who have attempted to control their weight through dieting are fearful of allowing themselves to decide when and how much to eat. Yoga can help those with weight and food issues trust their body and understand the messages given to them. With consistent yoga practice, the physical discomfort of over or undereating potentially becomes more obvious as body awareness increases, and sensations become more apparent. This can make it easier for clients with eating disorders to choose to stop eating before the point of physical discomfort as well as honor hunger and nourish the body.

Yoga also emphasizes mindfulness. Clients learn to experience the taste, texture, and other sensual qualities of food. They also learn to begin to make thoughtful versus impulsive choices related to eating behaviors and daily life decisions. Mindful awareness, which emphasizes "observing" versus "reacting" to daily stresses in life, also comes into play for clients who are repulsed by food. Staying present is another important concept learned in yoga—when the mind starts to wander, clients are taught to draw their attention back to the breath. Although many poses are uncomfortable, others are also meant to be enjoyable, thus teaching clients how to engage into life and "let go" of whatever they are holding on to that may be hindering their health. Clients begin to "take their yoga off the mat" and find their edge—a term in yoga that is used to describe the balance between challenging oneself and overdoing—in everyday life. Finding their physical edge can help peel away layers and may allow them to tap into an emotional and spiritual edge.

The Therapeutic Yoga Asana Practice

An individual with more advanced disease may benefit from a gentler hatha (a system of physical yoga techniques) intervention, along with yin yoga, which focuses on flexibility of the connective tissue as opposed to muscular engagement. Emotions tend to be elicited in these postures, where the client is unable to avoid feeling these emotions based on attachment to their disease.

A larger-bodied individual may find either vigorous or slower-paced yoga will be based on preferences. As part of a thorough assessment, yoga therapists identify risk factors, such as hypertension and type 2 diabetes, which will guide the development of a therapeutic yoga practice. Avoiding intense yoga postures and flows are recommended if the individual is not monitored and managed well in the disease process. For the yoga therapist who practices in a private setting, client self-monitoring of blood pressure and/or blood glucose is crucial with available results guiding the respective day's yoga postures. When a client has a history of gastric implications, including gastric bypass, balloons, or sleeve, a slow hatha practice with modifications may be indicated, along with yin or chair yoga.

Yoga in the Community

As the client transitions back into the community-based yoga, it is helpful for them to identify a place to continue their yoga practice. A gym or studio can be a progression for the client who is higher functioning, weight- and risk factor-normalized/managed, and who is empowered to understand that not all of the postures and word choices directed by the yoga teacher may be appropriate for them. Clients should be at the point in their individualized treatment plan where they are able to filter out general movement or nutrition advice sometimes encountered in fitness settings which may not apply to them. It is important that the private practitioner, who is referring to a yoga teacher or studio in the community, understands the yoga culture of the respective community. Practicing yoga at various studios is

helpful for the referring practitioner to safely advise clients where they might practice yoga in the community. A home practice may also be prescribed for the client.

Conclusion

In summary, the yoga practitioner can observe whether or not the client sinks into the postures, as a metaphor for sinking into their life, or whether they hold back with tension and apprehension. Often, attachment to their respective condition is the root of the tension that clients may be experiencing physically and emotionally. Yoga therapy can help move clients forward with awareness. However, it is difficult for a client to let go or release something if they are unaware of the subconscious behavior or attachment. By observing and recording body language, including the resistance the client may be experiencing, the yoga practitioner can become more in tune with what is going on in the moment. The yoga therapist can then consult with the treatment team in order to garner the team's support in helping the client uncover what may be holding them back from participating fully in their own life.

