Yoga, Cognition and Mental Health

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Regular practice of yoga is implicated in the healthy development of the body, mind, and spirit, leading to a more fulfilling life. The present investigation was designed to study the influence of regular practice of yoga on cognitive skills and mental health. 19 regular practitioners of yoga were matched with controls on age, gender and education level, and compared on outcome measures of Digit Symbol Test, PGI Memory Scale and Mental Health Questionnaire. An ex-post-facto design using t-test for two dependent means was adopted. Results indicated regular practitioners of yoga perform significantly better on tests of attention and concentration, remote memory, mental balance, delayed recall, immediate recall, verbal retention of dissimilar pairs, visual retention and recognition; and have better mental health. The results were discussed in the light of available research. The limitations of the study were also discussed.

Yoga is one of the six orthodox systems of Indian philosophy. Because of its immense qualities, Yoga is no longer merely a philosophy; instead, it is playing the role of a torch bearer which is enlightening the masses with its spiritual and moral appeal and teaching them the way of life. In the current modern lifestyles, yoga practitioners basically practice three out of the eight limbs of Maharishi Patanjali’s Ashtang Yoga, i.e., Asanas, Pranayama and Meditation. Research has proven that regular practice of Yoga helps in the development of the body, mind, and spirit, leading to a healthier and more fulfilling life (e.g., Bhole, 1983; Ray and others, 2001).

For many, yoga is viewed as a physical, mental, and spiritual discipline that confers a sound body and a sound mind (Mohan, 2002). Allegedly, the practice of yoga can help a person achieve his or her full potential and help increase spiritual consciousness. A relationship between the practice of yoga and benefits related to mental health and overall wellness is apparent (Schaeffer, 2002). Apart from the achieving physical health through breathing techniques and postures (Hatha Yoga), one of the mental aims of the practice of yoga, is the ability to maintain cognitive control, specifically in the areas of attention, memory, and arousal control. A common claim is that yoga helps clear the mind and this may have an effect on the ability to attend to relevant stimuli and recall information subsequently (Heriza, 2004). One mechanism by which this may occur is the impact of yoga on improvement of mood and reduction in the levels of stress. It is also known that the practice of yoga emphasizes body awareness and involves focusing one’s attention on breathing or specific muscles or parts of body, possibly improving attentional abilities in general (Oken and others, 2006). Specifically, inverted yoga positions have been associated with claims of increased memory and attention due to increased blood flow to the brain. For example, Schaeffer (2002) claimed “yoga can prevent memory lapses by calming you and enhancing your concentration. It can also improve your powers of recall by increasing circulation to your brain.”

Studies have been conducted to analyze the effect of yogic practices on