

The effects of yoga on student mental health

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Credit: University of Colorado Denver

In college, young adults go through a developmental stage in which they experience many waves of success and failures. When failure is not

handled properly, students may experience mental health issues, which may be difficult to overcome. But there is an easy tool that college students can use to fight stress, anxiety, and depression—yoga.

Yoga: Need of The Hour for Student Mental Health

[According to a 2018 report](#) from the American College Health Association (ACHA), more than 60 percent of [college students](#) said they experienced "overwhelming anxiety." Compared to the average population, university students report having more mental health issues. A recent study done in northern Tanzaniashows factors associated with mental distress among undergraduate students are financial problems, family history of mental illness, use of drugs, lack of break or vacation, the pressure of academic work, limited [social support](#), and conflict with friends. These mental health issues are worsened by low levels of physical activity.

Mental health treatment is the need of the hour.

Yoga is a physical, mental, and spiritual practice. It includes the practice of yama (personal ethics), niyama (social ethics), asana (physical postures), pranayama (breathing exercises), and meditation (science of relaxing the mind). In particular, the last three components can improve student mental health by teaching students to balance success and failure.

Yoga is a package that comes with physical and mental practices. Students who are new to yoga may at first focus on asana, the physical exercises or poses. When you practice yoga at a deeper level, you will notice most of its practices are concerned with the mind. Yogic science addresses the entirety of our thought processes: how a thought takes place in the mind, then how emotions magnify the intensity of that thought, and finally how a thought manifests in the form of positive or negative energy.

Here's exactly how yoga affects the mind:

1. Relaxing poses such as shavasana (Corpse Pose), meditation, and slow breathing techniques move our sympathetic nervous system to the parasympathetic nervous system, i.e. from fight-or-flight to rest-and-digest. Activating the parasympathetic nervous system decreases anxiety and produces a calm feeling in the body and mind.
2. While practicing yoga, our brain releases chemicals that make you feel more relaxed than simply walking or sitting. One of these chemicals is GABA. A study published in the [Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine](#) shows that yoga increases GABA levels by 27%.
3. The frontal lobe is the largest part of our brain. Sometimes known as the "control panel," it's responsible for important cognitive skills, including emotional expression, problem solving, memory, and language. The frontal lobe is the area of the brain affected by different mental disorders, because it works behind all our decisions, thoughts, and planning. While doing yoga, the brain slows down the activity of the frontal lobe, thereby preventing and/or alleviating mental health problems.

How Yoga Improves Mental Health

Apart from relaxation, yoga also does a lot to reduce the symptoms of mental disorders. It helps students develop awareness of their thought process, enabling them to perceive the external as well as the internal world (consciousness, mind, and body). This makes students better able to handle any triggers that usually call up mental illness and/or negative emotions.

From body postures to yogic breathing, yoga empowers a student with the ability to remain calm and clear in both unfavorable and favorable

situations. Practicing yoga lets the body's owner get entire control in terms of response, whether it is physical, psychological, or emotional.

How exactly does yoga help improve mental health? There are multiple ways in which yoga can help a [student](#) well-being.

Promote Mindfulness

In its simplest form, mindfulness is about observing the thought patterns of your mind without any judgment or inquiry. Yoga and mindfulness are two sides of the same coin, as both aim to quiet the mind. So, it can be said, while practicing yoga with a certain level of awareness, you're practicing mindfulness.

[A mindfulness-based cognitive therapy \(MBCT\) study conducted by the University of Bristol](#) found that students who practiced mindfulness reduced their anxiety, excessive worry, and negative thought patterns. Mindfulness training also improved their emotional well-being, professional development, and resiliency to stress.

Different meditation techniques practiced in yoga involve mindfulness. For example, pranayama breathing techniques help yoga participants attain a state of mindfulness by focusing on specific ways of breathing.

Build Self-Confidence

All yoga practices and philosophy bring your scattered awareness from the external world to inside you. In this way, yoga makes you more aware of your existence and teaches you that you're completely in yourself. This sense of internalization boosts the self-confidence of students, which may prevent many [mental health issues](#).

In a study to assess attention and self-esteem (SE) in girls using an integrated yoga module (IYM), low-income high school students reported improvement in attention and self-esteem. Practicing yoga enhanced their mental health and led to academic improvement.

Yoga poses such as Plank Pose, Tree Pose, Bridge Pose, and Warrior Pose not only strengthen us physically but mentally as well. These empowering poses can help build self-confidence as they strengthen the body.

Reduce Stress

Stress due to various reasons, including anger, grief, guilt, and low self-esteem, is very common in college students. This stress may lead to many physical and psychological effects, including headaches, muscle aches, nausea, insomnia, and difficulty concentrating.

Yoga effectively works on uniting the body and mind as one unit. It alleviates many physical and mental ailments that cause stress at a subtle level.

To assess the psychophysiological effects of yoga on stress in college students, a study from India suggests some simple yoga practices to reduce stress. These include:

- initial prayer
- kapal bhati (skull shining breathing)
- Sun Salutation
- yoga poses like Mountain Pose, Wheel Pose, Cobra Pose
- pranayama techniques like anulom vilom (alternate nostril breathing), sheetali pranayama (cooling breath), seetkari pranayama (hissing breath)
- OM meditation and ending prayer

[In another study conducted on secondary school students in the Vijayapur district of Karnataka \(India\)](#), the impact of yogic, physical exercises on academic anxiety was assessed. The study found that yoga practice improves positive abilities, emotional competence, and harmonious relationships between each, which reduces stress, anxiety, and negativity among the groups who practiced yoga.

Helps Concentration

Loss of concentration and mental illness are closely related to each other. Symptoms of mental disorders damage many parts of the brain that affect our ability to concentrate on work. Yoga, especially meditation techniques, helps the brain to recover its ability to concentrate. Furthermore, better concentration can also block anxiety and depression from entering the mind.

[In a 2018 study conducted by Annapoorana Medical College](#), researchers found that medical students who practiced yoga have improved attention, concentration, and memory. The suggested result of improved concentration in the yoga group may be due to personality development and relaxation achieved due to yoga training.

Improves Social Development

Yoga is a great social-emotional learning tool for students. In fact, parents in the United States are encouraging their children to practice yoga in school for their social development. More than 3% of U.S. children (1.7 million) did yoga as of 2012, a Harvard health blog shows.

Rapid social change is one of the associated causes of poor mental health. Feeling lonely at college, for example, can lead to symptoms of depression. [A study conducted by a yoga school in India shows the effect](#)

[of yogic practices on the social adjustment of college students](#) in urban areas. Using "social adjustment inventory," the social behavior of students groups (those practicing yoga and the non-practicing students) was measured. The study showed that the yoga group students had improved social behavior and easily adjusted to rapid social changes.

Bottom Line

Yoga as a mental health practice is a tool for university students to tackle various obstacles in their academics and to support them psychologically. Yoga includes physical activity, breathwork, and mind-calming practices that work to settle down overstimulated minds.

Various studies have proven how yoga helps students in critical moments when they most need emotional support. Moreover, the consistent practice of [yoga](#) helps students concentrate easily and build self-confidence.

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More information: Innocent B. Mboya et al. Factors associated with mental distress among undergraduate students in northern Tanzania, *BMC Psychiatry* (2020). [DOI: 10.1186/s12888-020-2448-1](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-020-2448-1)

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