

Positive Effects of Yoga-nidra on Different Aspects of Mental Health

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Abstract

Stress and other psychopathological disorders became a part and parcel of our day to day life and several methods have proposed to cope with and to treat them.. Yoga, which is based on a mystical approach, is one of these methods. Yoga has a history of several thousand years and is one of the philosophical and mystical schools of India. Yoga is not only useful for physical health; it is also useful to maintain our mental health as well. Yoga can also be used to achieve concentration, to increase the mental discipline and to control the personal feelings and desires. Yoga-nidra is of the technique of yoga by which we can attain good mental health.

Yoga Nidra

The aim of this paper is to assess the impact of Yoga nidra on stress through available researches. In Yoga nidra awareness is internalized. Yoga nidra means 'psychic sleep' that means sleep with full awareness. Interestingly while doing practice of yoga nidra the body sleeps but the mind remains awake. During this time we can listen to the instructions. So this state is a state of sleep and wakefulness. Yoga nidra has its origin in the ancient tantric practice called nyasa. It was Swami Satyananda Saraswati (1998) who adapted and presented the practice of yoga nidra in a systematic and scientific way in the 1960s. Yoga nidra has preventive and curative value as far as mental health is concerned. It prevents stress and stress-related disorders by inducing deep physical, emotional and mental relaxation, by training the mind to remain calm and quiet and by rooting out the repressed desires and thoughts from the deeper realms of the mind. Yoga nidra also awakens the inherent creativity and promotes the learning and memory abilities of the practitioner. Researches also show that yoga nidra can be used as a therapeutic technique to cure psychological disorders like depression, anxiety, insomnia, drug abuse etc. and psychosomatic diseases like asthma, hypertension coronary heart disease, etc. In our present scenario, where psychological and psychosomatic problems are on the rise, the technique of yoga nidra may serve as a real godsend for mankind.

Stages of yoga nidra

The practice of yoga nidra is divided into the following stages:

1. **Preparation:** Yoga nidra is performed in the posture of shavasana, with the eyes closed. In this stage, initial relaxation of the body and mind is induced by the awareness of stillness, comfort, posture, position, breath, and listening to the external sounds while witnessing all.
2. **Sankalpa:** As soon as the body and mind are relaxed, the practitioner is instructed to take a resolve according to his or her own wish. The sankalpa should be short, clear and positive. The practitioner repeats the selected sankalpa three times mentally, with full determination, conviction and confidence.
3. **Rotation of consciousness:** At this stage, the awareness is rotated around the different body parts in a systematic and organized manner. The practitioner is asked to remain aware, to listen to the instructions and to move the mind very rapidly according to the instructions without making any physical movements. The rotation of awareness in yoga nidra follows a definite sequence: right side of the body, beginning with the right hand thumb and ending with the little toe of the right foot; left side of the body, from the left hand thumb to the little toe of the left foot; back of the body, from the heels to the back of the head; and lastly the front of the body, from the forehead and individual facial features to the legs.
4. **Breath awareness:** In this stage, one simply becomes aware of the natural breath without making an attempt to change the flow of the breath. One may become aware of the breath by watching it in the nostrils, chest, and abdomen, or in the passage between the navel and the throat. The practitioner becomes aware of each incoming and outgoing breath by counting them mentally.
5. **Opposite feelings and sensations:** In this stage, the physical or emotional sensations are recalled, intensified and experienced fully. Usually this is practiced with pairs of opposite feelings or sensations like heat and cold, heaviness and lightness, pain and pleasure, love and hate, and so on.
6. **Visualization:** In the sixth stage of visualization, the awareness is taken to the dark space in front of the closed eyes, referred to as chidakasha in yogic terminology. The practitioner is then instructed to

visualize some objects, stories or situations in the chidakasha.

7. **Sankalpa:** Once again the sankalpa, which was taken in stage two, is repeated mentally three times in this stage with full dedication, faith and optimism.
8. **Ending the practice:** Before ending the session of yoga nidra, slowly the awareness is externalized by asking the practitioner to become aware of the external sounds, objects and persons. They are asked then to slowly move the body parts and to stretch the body.

Yoga nidra and Mental Health

Mental health is about being able to work and study to full potential, cope with day-to-day life stresses, be involved in some one's community, and live life in a free and satisfying way. A person who has good mental health has good emotional and social wellbeing and the capacity to cope with change and challenges. Mental health problems can affect one's feelings, thoughts and actions, and cause difficulties in everyday activities, whether at school, at work, or in relationships. Feeling down, tense, angry or anxious are all normal emotions, but when these feelings persist for long periods of time, or if they begin to interfere with daily life, they may become mental health problems. The practice of yoga nidra has a number of benefits. It is not only helpful in physical health but it is very beneficial in mental health as well. Here are some research based examples.

Yoga Nidra relieves tension : In the modern world the international problem is not poverty, drugs or fear of war; it is tension and only tension. A high percentage of people remain in a state of tension and frustration as we are living in the age of tension. Some times it is muscular tension and some time it is emotional or mental tension. With the help of Yoga Nidra one can remove all type of tensions. It is said "a single hour of yoga nidra is as restful as four hours of conventional sleep". (Swami Satyananda ,1998)

It reconditions the mind: The sankalpa taken in each session of yoga nidra is perhaps the most effective technique for recondition and train the mind. "Anything in life can fail you, but not the sankalpa made during yoga nidra". (Swami Satyananda ,1998)The sankalpa is taken and sowed in the subconscious mind when it is relaxed and receptive. Swami Satyananda (1998) says, "the sankalpa taken at the beginning of yoga nidra is like sowing a seed, and the sankalpa at the end is like irrigating it. So, the resolve taken in yoga nidra always brings result, if it is taken sincerely".

It calms down the mind: The brain is the linking mediator between the mind, body and emotions. In yoga nidra intensifying the awareness of the body stimulates the brain. When the awareness is rotated on the different body parts, it not only induces physical relaxation but also clears the nerve pathways to the brain. It is concluded on the basis of a study that the practice of yoga nidra brings alpha dominance in the brain, which is characterized by mental relaxation. (Sannyasi Mangalteertham ,1998)

It awakes creativity: Several examples from the past indicate that creativity is a characteristic of a relaxed and calm mind. When the mind is totally relaxed, the awareness slowly enters the deeper realms (subconscious and unconscious) of the mind and the person becomes aware of the creative and intuitive faculties. Whether it be Newton or Einstein or Mozart, all made significant and vital contributions in the field of creativity when they allowed themselves to relax deeply enough for the images and forms of their unconscious mind to manifest as solutions to their particular problems.

It improves memory and learning: The technique of yoga nidra can be used as an educational tool for such dull children, where the knowledge is transmitted directly into the subconscious mind. The technique of yoga nidra is helpful in increasing learning and memory capacity. When yoga nidra is used in education, both hemispheres of the student's brain are involved in learning the subject, whereas in classroom teaching the left hemisphere functions more. In this way, the practice of yoga nidra involves the total mind in learning. In a study it is said that, "using the technique of yoga nidra it was possible to teach a foreign language in 1/5th of the time required by conventional methods".(Ostrander 1973) It is also reported that techniques such as rotation of awareness and visualization heighten the capacity for relaxation and interest among schoolchildren.(Flak 1978)

It makes a person able to face stress: Stress is a cognitive or emotional response made by the individual towards any situation, which demands adjustment. The practice of yoga nidra helps in building up the coping ability. The practitioner of yoga nidra slowly becomes aware of the inherent dormant potentialities and thus prevents himself from becoming a victim of distress. The stress-related disorders evolve gradually through four stages. (Udupa 1977) In the first stage, psychological symptoms like anxiety and irritability arise due to over activation of the sympathetic nervous system. The second stage is characterized by related physical symptoms like high blood pressure, increased heart rate etc. In the third stage, the abnormalities manifest clinically in the organ systems. In the last stage, severe symptoms in particular organs result which need long-term medical management. In normal

circumstances, the parasympathetic system takes over after the emergency goes. But mostly it has been seen that the sympathetic system remains active most of the time resulting in the experience of distress (Selye, 1974). In yoga nidra an attempt is made to activate the parasympathetic system, and slowly a balance between the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems is achieved by inducing complete physical, emotional and mental relaxation. In this way the practice of yoga nidra counteracts stress. Yoga nidra has its most widespread application as a preventive measure to be practised by healthy, active people as a means of relieving accumulated tensions, increasing stress resistance and overall efficiency, and preventing the development of stress-related diseases. (Carrington et al, 1980)

It provides a remedy for psychological disorders: In the practice of yoga nidra, the inherent tendency to become tense is rooted out and the individual starts viewing the situation as less demanding. It is also said that the practitioner of yoga nidra becomes his own psychotherapist, recognizing and systematically alleviating his own personal problems and interpersonal difficulties. (Gersten, 1978) Matthew (1981) reported that yoga nidra is a successful therapy for both recent and long-standing psychological disturbances of all kinds, especially high anxiety levels and neurotic behaviour patterns. the practice of yogic relaxation has been found to effectively reduce tension and improve the psychological well-being of sufferers from anxiety. (Bahrke, 1979) It is found that the practice of yoga nidra significantly reduces the anxiety and hostility level of the practicing subjects. (Bhushan & Sinha, 2000) Shealy (1998) concluded that yoga nidra is a successful treatment for insomnia.

It manages psychosomatic diseases: The practice of various stages of yoga nidra, like sankalpa, muscular relaxation, breath awareness and guided imagery, have been found to be a significant and effective mode of therapy for asthmatics (Erskine & Schonell, 1981). Gupta and others (1979) reported that 18 out of 27 asthmatic patients showed improvement in respiratory function and greater freedom of breathing after intensive training in yoga nidra, and 63% had definite relaxation and dilation of the bronchial tubes when tested on a spirometer. In a study it was reported reported that after three weeks of relaxation training the symptoms of colonic irritability significantly reduced. (Jansson 1979) In the case of cardiac patients, it is reported that yoga nidra significantly lowered levels of serum cholesterol in cardiac patients. (Cooper, 1979) Researches also show that the practice of yoga nidra lowers the elevated blood pressure levels of hypertensive patients (Datey et al, 1977; Bali, 1979).

It promotes willpower: Sankalpa improves will power. It helps in building up willpower and optimism because it is sowed in the subconscious and unconscious mind again and again. In this way, by developing confidence, willpower and optimism, by clearing up the unconscious repression, one can fight any disorder even cancer. This fact has been supported by a study in which it was found in controlled trials that a specific form of yoga nidra significantly increased the life span of cancer patients undergoing radiotherapy. (Simonton, 1972)

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