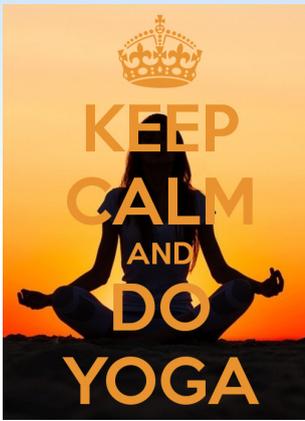




How Yoga Benefits Mental Health

Don't let the poses scare you!

There is hard science behind how yoga affects the brain. Thanks to MRIs and various other kinds of brain scans, doctors have proof that this thousands of years old practice does indeed have medicinal value, not just physically, but mentally and emotionally as well.



Yoga is a system of poses, breathing, meditation and mindfulness training that can be transforming in multiple ways. Physically, you build muscle, tone up, strengthen your immune system, lower blood pressure, and build stamina and gain a host of other benefits. Although all of this has all been fairly well accepted in the Western world, what has taken a bit longer for scientists to accept and prove is that yoga can

also help manage mental health issues as well. Anxiety, PTSD and depression are all conditions that a regular yoga practice can help you manage. How do all those complicated looking poses and stretches do that? By affecting the brain chemistry, by giving you tools such as breathing exercises to calm yourself during a panic attack and by changing the way you view the world through becoming mindful and learning to observe your emotions, separate them from yourself and analyzing them.

That all sounds very vague, so let's bring in some of the science. Yoga affects the GABA levels, among other things. GABA are neurotransmitters, which is how the brain cells communicate. GABA is an often overlooked neurotransmitter that doesn't get as much attention as the other inhibitory neurotransmitter serotonin, but it's equally as important for mental well-being. GABA is often referred to as "nature's Valium." If you don't have enough GABA, you can become stressed, depressed and overwhelmed. So how does yoga help? Yoga increases GABA, which in turn, makes you feel better, according to a 2010 study, "Effects of Yoga Versus Walking on Mood, Anxiety, and Brain GABA Levels: A Randomized Controlled MRS Study (see details in the sidebar)."

Effects of Yoga Versus Walking on Mood, Anxiety, and Brain GABA Levels: A Randomized Controlled MRS Study

RESULTS: The yoga subjects (n = 19) reported greater improvement in mood and greater decreases in anxiety than the walking group (n = 15). There were positive correlations between improved mood and decreased anxiety and thalamic GABA levels. The yoga group had positive correlations between changes in mood scales and changes in GABA levels.

CONCLUSIONS: The 12-week yoga intervention was associated with greater improvements in mood and anxiety than a metabolically matched walking exercise. This is the first study to demonstrate that increased thalamic GABA levels are associated with improved mood and decreased anxiety. It is also the first time that a behavioral intervention (i.e., yoga postures) has been associated with a positive correlation between acute increases in thalamic GABA levels and improvements in mood and anxiety scales. Given that pharmacologic agents that increase the activity of the GABA system are prescribed to improve mood and decrease anxiety, the reported correlations are in the expected direction. The possible role of GABA in mediating the beneficial effects of yoga on mood and anxiety warrants further study.

Admittedly, it is a small study, but it is one of many that has shown that yoga changes the brain chemistry in a positive way. Brain scans taken before and after meditation shows increased gray matter concentration within the left hippocampus, the posterior cingulate cortex, the temporoparietal junction, and the cerebellum. All these regions are involved in learning and memory, emotion regulation, sense of self, and perspective taking. Meditation teaches you how to be calm, how to look at the world in a way that decreases stress and worry. It teaches you that there are things you can't control, no matter how much you wish you could and having anxious thoughts about them

will only negatively affect you, which hurts you in the end, not helps. Learning how to do that can help decrease your anxiety, your instinctive fear responses and therefore, lower panic attacks and stress – all of which are good things. Yoga classes are being taught in schools, correctional facilities and mental health facilities and they unanimously have the same effect on those who do it: Decreases of stress, anxiety and negative behaviors and an increase in calm behaviors and mental well-being. Yoga is inexpensive, you can do it anywhere, and it is something that has no negative side effects. If you are experiencing mental health struggles, it may be a good path to explore.



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