

Yoga and Addiction Recovery

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How many of us can go through our entire lives and be able to say that we didn't know someone who struggled with substance use disorder? I am willing to be most, if not all, of us could not make that statement at the end of our lives. Exercise as a whole does wonders for someone in recovery from drug and alcohol addiction. Studies show that people who are more physically active, have a lower incidence of anxiety and depression. So many good endorphins are released with aerobic activity and the sense of accomplishment as you crush one fitness goal after the next does wonders for self-esteem, which often needs rebuilding in a newly sober lifestyle.

In this paper, I will focus on the role of yoga to help someone maintain sobriety while in recovery. Yoga in general brings stress relief, increased physical stamina and strength, time for self-reflection and self-awareness, improved exercise and eating habits, improved self-confidence and self-image, pain relief, better sleep, higher energy, decreased fatigue, and emotional healing. Yoga can help to balance and heal parts of the brain affected by substance abuse, in a natural way. It brings an awareness to the body and self-confidence that can help someone recognize a craving when it occurs and instead of avoiding or giving in to it, allows them to cope and manage the feeling, just because they have shifted their thinking and are more physically aware.

The wonderful thing about yoga is that it can be practiced anywhere and at any time. Many treatments for substance use disorder involve group therapy. Including yoga in the group therapy can be a natural addition that brings another layer of calm and community to the group. But, if a group is not available when you need it, you can easily break out your mat at home

alone, or merely just sit and practice a yogic breathing technique, or pranayama, and get the same calming effect.

Yoga is a holistic healing approach that focuses on eight components: conduct within society, personal discipline, postures/poses (asanas), breathing, concentration, contemplation, meditation, and absorption/stillness. With these properties, it can bring dopamine homeostasis that can directly contribute to long-term management of addictive behaviors. One study on alcohol-use disorders saw a significant reduction in depression scores, cortisol, and adrenocorticotrophic hormone levels in 60 patients who received Sudarshan Kriya Yoga therapy in addition to their regular treatment. Another study with 75 female patients with opioid addiction, saw significantly higher improvement in mood status and quality of life scores in the patients who had yoga in addition to their standard medical treatment. (Kuppili et al., 2018)

Yoga has shown in studies that natural substances are released in the brain that act as strong antidepressants. Depression often accompanies addiction. Scientists have come to link low gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA) levels in the brain to depression. In 2007, a team in Boston conducted an experiment in which GABA levels in the subjects were measured before and after an hour-long yoga session. The sessions were standardized and focused on asanas and breathing. The results after the yoga session showed an average GABA level raise of 27%. One participant in the study who aside from the standardized yoga session, claimed to practice five total times a week, had an increase of 80% in his GABA levels. This can directly translate to the rebuilding of oneself mentally, emotionally, and physically in sobriety. (Broad, 2012, pp. 99–100)

Different substances affect our nervous system in different ways. Long-term use of stimulants can for instance, can induce hypertension, cause blockages in arteries, and cause

cardiac issues. Almost all substances of abuse will affect the dopamine in our brains. Other neurotransmitters will also be affected depending on the substance, causing rewires of the brain, in order for it to maintain function in some capacity. With yoga, we can work on restoring balance to the nervous system.

Breath balances the nervous system, stimulating our parasympathetic nervous system and telling our body to relax. Body relaxation also calms the nervous system. Adding more meditation to a yoga practice, or more relaxing forms of yoga, like restorative yoga or Yoga Nidra can induce the body relaxation. These also bring awareness to the body directly, which then brings along the mind and nervous system. It is a beautiful circle of healing. Changes to the nervous system require new, embodied experiences that are different from the customary anxious or depressed ones that come along with substance use and subsequent withdrawal. These embodied experiences are part of the yoga practice and repetition is required in order to change and grow the new, healthier patterns. (Forbes, 2011)

We spend so much of our lives disembodied, lacking a connection to our physical selves, not being present. This allows for the old ways of doing things, thinking, and feeling to creep back in and throw the mind, body, and nervous system connections out of whack once again. We also put so much emphasis on attaining the goal of whatever we do; including nailing that certain posture in yoga, or maintaining balance, or wanting to feel instantly healed by the practice that we don't allow ourselves to spend time in the building phase, which is where so much of the learning and growth is achieved as lives get rebuilt in sobriety. The in-between times are a time to re-learn who we are within our skin and acknowledge the connection between our mind and physical body. Yoga teaches us to respect our bodies by becoming so intimate with our focus on our body as we move through a practice.

In recovery, there is a rewiring of the brain that needs to take place. It becomes necessary to develop a new way of thinking to change the behaviors of the addict. Through mindfulness as part of yogic practice, consciousness is raised, and you become aware of what you are doing while you are doing it. That helps to widen the space between the stimulus and response, allowing for more opportunity to change your response to the stimuli. Recognizing, accepting, and combatting the challenge of what your brain is telling you that you want, and what you actually need is a big struggle at the start. As you continue building and strengthening this mindfulness, it allows for the new story of choices to build its new and stronger pathway in the brain. (Norberg, 2016, p. 36)

Yoga teaches us to control what effect the brain has on the body. By practicing yoga, we teach our brains to be calm and passive, and to accept the feelings of withdrawal and cravings but subdue them, not just flat out ignoring them. When we feel like we just cannot get ahead and feel like a failure, we often turn to drugs and alcohol or other damaging behaviors to cope. Yoga can turn those feelings of self-doubt and damage into optimism, energy, awareness and discrimination bringing about a positive attitude and mental balance. (Iyengar, 2001)

Yoga aims to heal the whole person, relying on finding harmony in the mind-body connection. The mind and body often continue to crave the substances of addiction even after a person becomes and remains sober. With these sometimes powerful cravings, the mindfulness, focus on breath (pranayama), and postures (asanas), can calm the mind while also strengthening and tuning the body. Thus, bringing peace and harmony to the connection.

Yoga requires you to make an effort to unify the mind and body. The awareness of and concentration on your physical body while practicing requires presence in the moment, movements, and breath. While practicing yoga, it is nearly impossible to focus on anything else

but what you are doing and how you are breathing in that very moment. Yoga cannot cure addiction obviously, but it can minimize the physical, mental, and emotional impact of substance use disorder, and other disorders. It allows for a time to heal your heart and mind, bringing in a state of peace and well-being. (Payne et al., 2002)

“The breath is the most important tool in Yoga.” (Payne et al., 2002, p. 33) Breath, or pranayama, in yoga practice has been shown to help cope with the stress and anxiety that often accompanies a craving. Changing your breath to more deliberate, slow, and focused breaths forces you to concentrate on it and makes you more aware of your body’s rhythms. Breathing is the only autonomic function that we can exert control over. Research has shown that when we manually take over our breath, we are given a little bit of control over some of our other autonomic functions as well. Our respiratory system is slowed, increasing absorption of oxygen and the release of carbon dioxide. It also slows the heartbeat and relieves built up tension in our muscles. (Payne et al., 2002)

Yoga breathing has long been proven to provide stress reduction and pain management. Stress is often present with active use, sobriety, and just everyday life. It is an underlying factor for many health conditions. The focus on breath during yoga reduces stress by lowering adrenaline, cortisol, and other stress hormones. It quiets the mind’s distractions (also cravings) and tells the brain to minimize the perception of what is going on around and within you. Yogic breath makes a change to your mental and physical demeanor.

Addicts exist in a constant state of seeking. They are always looking for satisfaction, only to never truly find it. This constant seeking behavior keeps the addictive cycle going. The natural rest, relaxation, and inner focus that comes along with yoga allows us to see through this “seeker identity” and forces a release of the mental and emotional seeking energy. With the continued

yoga practice, being present in the moment, just as you are, however you are that day, allows the addict to stop seeking that future satisfaction and finding of oneself. The compulsion gives way to a natural, and restful presence that extends slowly into all parts of life. (Kiloby, 2017)

The enhanced concentration that yoga requires of you, demanding all of your attention to the present moment, trains you to clear your mind of distracting thoughts and preoccupations. How many of us can be so wound up as we walk into a yoga class, and within minutes of sitting on our mats, beginning to breathe intentionally, and then beginning to move in concert with our breath, we find that it is impossible to think of anything else. We are yanked into the present moment. It requires an internal conversation throughout the practice to listen to our body and not push it past its limits. Feeling those sensations as you hold each pose clears away whatever else might be on your mind, including the anxiety, fear, shame, and self-doubt that an addict feels. It is a time to escape the torture chamber of the addict's mind.

The asanas of yoga can help to release repressed emotions, causing chakra blockages. So much of addiction is from repressed emotion. We store these emotions at the root (base of spine), pelvis, stomach, sternum, heart, throat, and head. As we move and flow through asanas, not only bringing awareness to the body and out of outside distractions, we stretch and open these parts of the body, releasing the pent-up energy and emotion that is stored. Practicing yoga, in tandem with counseling, can really help to open and deal with repressed emotion and unresolved trauma. (Kiloby, 2017)

Asanas also act to help relieve and detoxify some of the body's organs in sobriety. Certain postures can help relieve the toxins that have been stored in our organs for quite some time. Alcoholism leads to complications in the brain, liver, heart, and lungs. It also depresses our immune system and causes hormone deficiencies, sexual dysfunction, and infertility. Drug

addiction can lead to delirium, depersonalization, panic attacks, paranoia, and impaired memory. (Iyengar, 2001) Many of the same asanas can ease the effects of both long-term alcohol and drug use.

Think of bending postures to massage the internal organs, twisting postures to wring out organs and pent-up emotion in our spine, hip opening postures where we particularly carry a lot of emotion, and inversions to redistribute stagnant blood and energy back into the core to energize the circulatory and respiratory systems. Inversions can lower blood pressure, decrease heart rate, relax the arteries, and reduce levels of the stress hormone noradrenaline. Relaxing postures can allow you to release all mental and physical effort. The stretches release muscle tension that come along with anxiety. Addiction and withdrawal symptoms can induce the body's fight-or-flight response, pulling us away from the peace and calm our mind and body so desperately want to return to. These asanas combat and calm addiction symptoms, also decreasing cortisol levels which damper immune system function. (Payne et al., 2002)

So much of addiction has to do with negative thoughts of oneself. Self-defeating thoughts and a feeling of never quite being good enough, so you self-medicate to numb those feelings, which then completes the never-ending cycle of feeling hopeless, self-medicating to feel better, then feeling ashamed because of the substance use, to then self-medicate more. Negative thoughts keep us sick and tired. Another part of yoga is the practice of a positive intention, acknowledging the importance of attitude and environment. You can practice daily mantras to carry with you to welcome positive thoughts, feelings, and actions into your life. It is imperative to acknowledge something good in your life each day and experience gratitude. (Payne et al., 2002) Some days that practice will be easier than others. Especially in early sobriety, when you are learning all kinds of new processes and getting to know yourself mentally, physically, and

emotionally all over again, or even for the first time in your adult life. Whether you repeat these positive thoughts quietly to yourself, or even read them aloud, they can be highly beneficial in personal growth.

Yoga Nidra is a phenomenal practice that incorporates all of the aforementioned ways to calm the body and mind when trying to combat addiction symptoms. It incorporates a positive affirmation, a visualization, and a systematic rotation of consciousness to specific parts of the body. Yoga Nidra translates to “Yoga sleep.” (Payne et al., 2002, p. 53) It can bring in line a beautiful harmony of mind, body, and emotion. It is a great practice to start your day with, to send you on a good start. Or do right before bed, allowing the feelings of gratefulness for having made it through the day and going into a restful sleep with a positive affirmation in your head.

As you can see, yoga is so powerful at restoring peace to a mind and body tortured by addiction. It is more widely becoming a suggested practice to do along with medical treatment, counseling, and group therapy for addiction recovery. It allows a time for community in class, and a time to take a break from yourself. It is a wonderful tool to help rewire yourself to get you used to living in the moment, instead of seeking the next thing, quieting the “seeker” mind. Actively being on your mat is not all that yoga is. It is a lifestyle that can help even the most hopeless find hope and health with breath, affirmation, familiarizing yourself with your body, and gratitude and appreciation for this very moment. The times you are able to make it to your mat should be celebrated. It is a time you have set aside to care for yourself, taking control of your own healing process. Namaste.

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