

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

Evaluation of the Mental Health Benefits of Yoga in a Secondary School: A Preliminary Randomized Controlled Trial

Khalsa, S., Hickey-Schultz, L., Cohen, D., Steiner, N., & Cope, S. (2012). Evaluation of the mental health benefits of yoga in a secondary school: A preliminary randomized controlled trial. *The Journal of Behavioral Health Services & Research*, 39(1), 80-90. doi:10.1007/s11414-011-9249-8

SUMMARY: Yoga can be beneficial for a range of outcomes, and students may benefit from engaging in yoga practice at school. Students in a rural Massachusetts high school were randomly assigned to either yoga classes or regular physical education classes to examine the potential mental health benefits of school-based yoga. Students in the yoga group showed greater resilience and mental health benefits than the physical education group, including better anger control and less fatigue.

KEY FINDINGS:

- While students in the control group had decreased resilience on most measures post-intervention compared to pre-intervention, students in the yoga group remained resilient (i.e., no change or slight improvements).
- Students in the yoga group had better anger control and less fatigue than students in the control group post-intervention.
- For students in the yoga group, increased attendance was associated with more positive psychological attitudes, increased sense of life purpose and satisfaction, decreased mood disturbance, tension, and anxiety, and improved attitude toward school.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Collaborate with yoga teachers and studios to provide military youth with access to school-based or low-cost yoga classes
- Educate professionals working with military children about the benefits of yoga for resilience and mental health

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Utilize yoga techniques (e.g., self-control, self-reflection or awareness, flexibility in emotional responding) in school-based programs aimed at anger reduction or stress management
- Offer on-going yoga classes to students within related school courses (e.g., health, physical education)

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Support additional research examining the relationship between yoga practice and student resilience, particularly among children of Service members
- Recommend that student school curricula include time for students to re-focus and reflect

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METHODS

- Students in a rural Massachusetts school (grades 11-12) were enrolled in the study unless they opted out (11%) and were assigned to either the intervention group (i.e., four classes of yoga) or the control group (i.e., three classes of usual physical education).
- Students completed questionnaires regarding their personality, mood states, resilience, stress, and psychological attitudes.
- Students mental health and resilience were compared between the yoga and control groups post-intervention.

PARTICIPANTS

- The sample included 121 Massachusetts public school students (58% male) with an average age of 16.8 years (SD = 0.6).
- Students were assigned to either the yoga group (n = 74) or the control group (n = 47).
- Students were 90% White and 17% low-income.

LIMITATIONS

- Some of the study measures were meant to capture clinically significant mental health concerns and may not have been appropriate for a normative high school sample.
- Since the intervention was only a few sessions long and the benefits of yoga may overlap with the benefits of other physical activity (including those within physical education classes), some effects may have been too small to detect.
- Students were not blind to group assignment, which may have introduced bias into the student self-reports.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Explore the benefits of yoga across a wide range of student outcomes (e.g., academic performance, aggression or victimization, coping with deployment)
- Conduct a similar study with a larger, more diverse sample to assess generalizability of results
- Examine separate components of yoga practice (e.g., mindfulness, breathing techniques, relaxation, self-reflection) to understand the mechanisms through which yoga may increase student resilience

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