



Yogic Spirituality and Positive Psychology vis-à-vis the Mental Health of Adolescents During COVID-19

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Abstract

COVID-19 ushered in a period of uncertainty and insecurity. It has affected the mental well-being of all, but certain groups are more vulnerable, including adolescents. Adolescence is a period of transition from childhood to adulthood in which the mental domain is still developing. The pandemic has had an adverse effect on the mental well-being of adolescents. Their normal routines are severely affected by the pandemic and related restrictions. There is a need for a coping mechanism or resources to empower this group of people. Spirituality has salubrious effect on all dimensions of health. The concept of spirituality is closely related to yoga and positive psychology. The article describes the similarities between yoga and positive psychology. It further posits that spirituality is closely related to yoga and positive psychology. The article also argues that both yoga and positive psychology could be useful in improving the mental dimension of health in adolescents in the COVID-19 era. A thorough study of the literature helped the authors to conclude that yoga and positive psychology definitely enhance mental well-being. The tenets of yoga and positive psychology can be incorporated into the daily regimen of children and adolescents to increase their resilience and mental strength. Further studies with robust study designs could ascertain the benefits of such measures.

Keywords Adolescents · COVID-19 · Mental health · Positive psychology · Spirituality · Yoga

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Introduction

In March 2020, COVID-19 was declared a pandemic (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020). Countries worldwide imposed mandatory lockdowns to control the spread of the disease. Closure of schools, workplaces, and public recreation spots as well as restrictions on movement and social distancing norms were imposed. Quarantines and lockdowns imply a form of isolation that is ‘psychologically distressing and unpleasant’ (Panchal et al., 2021). This isolation has had adverse effects on the mental dimension of health.

Mental Health of Adolescents During COVID-19

Children and adolescents comprise one end of the spectrum of a vulnerable population (Catty, 2020). Adolescents are at an important stage in which they transition from childhood to adulthood. This phase needs support from peer groups that aid in the development of identity (Meeus & Deković, 1995). Lockdowns impose restrictions on movement, thus restraining social contact and support from peer groups. Hence, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased psychological issues such as anxiety, depression, loneliness, fear, stress, irritability, and boredom in adolescents (Bignardi et al., 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, home confinement caused intrafamilial violence and crises, resulting in the risk of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental illness symptoms in adolescents (Guessoumet al., 2020). Due to the prevalence of at-home, online classes during the pandemic, smart phone and internet addiction also increased in children and adolescents (Jones et al., 2021). Depression and trauma-related distress symptoms in junior high and high school students have been shown during the COVID-19 pandemic in China (Zhang et al., 2020). Also, adolescents with pre-existing psychiatric conditions have experienced reactivation or relapse of their condition during the pandemic (Graell et al., 2020). Psychological interventions are thought to be effective as add-on therapy for mental well-being. Both yoga and positive psychology strive to achieve this end. The World Health Organization defines health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, not merely an absence of disease or infirmity. The spiritual dimension is emphasized as an essential aspect of health.

Methodology

The purpose of this article is to study the similarities between yoga philosophy and positive psychology and to posit that both can improve the mental well-being of adolescents, especially during the COVID-19 era. The methodology involved an analytical review of relevant literature to establish the similarities between the two schools of thought. The three authors conducted a thorough study of the primary and secondary references on both yoga philosophy and positive psychology, doing extensive searches in online databases and in books. Another review was undertaken to assess the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of adolescents. Online databases such as Google Scholar and PubMed were searched using the keywords mental health, adolescents, children, COVID, and corona. Relevant articles are cited that address the effects of COVID-19 on the mental health of adolescents. The last part of the article deals with references that show the beneficial effect of yoga and positive

psychology on the mental health of different populations with various conditions. This section is based on a separate search for citations showing the beneficial effects of yoga and positive psychology on mental health. The article posits that yoga and positive psychology can benefit adolescents' mental well-being.

Yoga and Positive Psychology in Relation to Spirituality

Spirituality is a concept that relates to “connection or relation to the Divine, God, or Higher Power, which provides a purpose, meaning or reason for being” (de Brito Sena et al., 2021). It is also related to beliefs or faith, experiences, and practices or behaviors. Spirituality also refers to developing peace and well-being, values, and personal growth. It is considered to be an intrinsic component of human beings. Csala et al. (2021) state that ‘spirituality provides a meaning and a framework of life. . . [and] is a way of gaining more self-awareness and improving oneself’ (p. 9). The Bhagavad Gita enumerates the divine qualities as:

Fearlessness, purity of inner being, steadfastness in the path of knowledge, charity, self-control, spirit of sacrifice, self-analysis, disciplined life, uprightness, non-violence, truthfulness, freedom from anger, spirit of renunciation, tranquility, aversion from defamation, compassion to all living creatures, freedom from greed, gentleness, modesty, vigor, forgiveness, fortitude, cleanliness of body and mind, freedom from malice and absence of pride—these are the transcendental qualities. (Tapasyananda, 2003).

Positive psychology is the scientific study of the factors that enable individuals and communities to flourish. Seligman defined positive psychology at three core levels: subjective, individual, and societal (Mukund, 2015). It aims to make life worth living and improve the positive aspects of life. The components of positive psychology include positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. Lagina et al. (2022) designed a series of indicators to measure psychological well-being from a eudaimonic perspective on happiness, as the core value of positive psychology. These are self-acceptance, environmental mastery, autonomy, positive growth, purpose in life, and positive relationships. Self-realization is awareness and acceptance of strengths and weaknesses in the long term. Positive relationship with others is acceptance of all human beings and the capacity for deep friendship, great love, and close identification with others. Personal growth is a dynamic process and involves the continuous development of one's potential. Purpose in life is the zest for living and actively engaging in and having a reflective stance towards life (Jaser et al., 2019). Environmental mastery is the ability to choose and create an environment suitable for mental health (Duckworth et al., 2005). Autonomy is characterized by independence, self-determination, and regulation of behavior from within.

Yoga is an ancient science of self-development. The philosophy of yoga is aimed at teaching an ideal way of life. Yoga practice enhances various aspects of spirituality (Csala et al., 2021). Specific positive values are inevitably imbibed in the yoga way of life. Yoga uplifts the consciousness to a higher level and helps connect with the Divine. It helps the person develop individually and contributes to universal fellowship and world peace. Factors of positive psychology—meaning of life (eudaimonic) and gratitude (hedonic)—have

been found to be positively correlated with the practice of yoga (Ivtzan & Papantoniou, 2014).

Yogic Spirituality and Positive Psychology vis-à-vis the Mental Health of Adolescents

Yoga is one of the ancient philosophies of India. It is defined as the “cessation of modifications of the mind” (Bryant, 2009). Yoga is an umbrella term encompassing practices and injunctions for the individual’s overall development. Yoga is a means to transcend the mundane existence and move towards a higher realm (Nikhilananda, 1956). The ultimate goal of yoga is to overcome human suffering and attain union with the Supreme Consciousness. It helps develop the higher faculties of mind and achieve a state of mental tranquility. Through the techniques of yoga, an individual can be aware of their strengths and develop themselves. Krishna elucidates that the practice of yoga enables one to become free from passions and possess unwavering wisdom (*sthitaprajna*) (Tapasyananda, 2003). In addition, yoga helps to inculcate many positive values and traits. *Yamas* and *niyamas* are practices that help develop values such as integrity and austerity (Bryant, 2009). Meditation emphasizes individual differences in the cognitive analysis of stress and its management, supporting personal changes that help a person attain self-actualization, which is similar to Maslow’s model of psychological needs (Janowiak, 1993).

Positive psychology theorizes that positive emotions can improve mental well-being and increase positivity. The theme of positive psychology includes “happiness, hope, creativity and wisdom” (Carra, 2013). Eudaimonia is achieved if one is forgiving and grateful concerning the past, mindful in the present, and hopeful for the future. Mindfulness and awareness are essential aspects of the yoga way of life. The concept of engagement explains that when one is engaged in an activity during a state of ‘flow,’ one is absorbed in one’s work, which is characterized by intense concentration. The concept is similar to *Dharana*—locking the consciousness at a particular point. The karma yoga philosophy of work emphasizing ‘intrinsic motivation’ is identical to the notion of flow (Kumar & Kumar, 2013). Meaning in life is an essential aspect of positive psychology. The meaning and purpose of life is one of the axes of spirituality (de Brito Sena et al., 2021). Yoga philosophy provides a profound understanding of life and the purpose of life. Raja yoga techniques, one of the streams of yoga, provide self-awareness to attain the realization of the true self (Friedenheim, 1986).

The ultimate aim of positive psychology is to improve well-being and make life more meaningful and worthwhile. It helps the individual to be more productive. It ensures that the individual is more resilient and develops coping skills in the face of adversity. It helps them achieve better physical health and better performance.

Yoga is proven to enhance overall health and well-being. The spiritual aspect of yoga helps develop an awareness of the self and the ability to transcend the self to attain liberation. Yoga is considered an effective adjunct therapy that can enhance positive psychology constructs. Yoga has been shown to reduce physiological arousal in patients with PTSD and is believed to affect the pathology of PTSD by improving somatic regulation and body awareness, which are required for emotion regulation (Gallegos et al., 2017). Yoga may be an effective and safe intervention for individuals with elevated levels of anxiety (Cramer et al., 2017). The yoga-based mind sound resonance technique (MSRT) has been shown to

enhance psychological and cognitive functions in children (Anusuya et al., 2021). Yoga-based cognitive behavioral therapy modalities could help to minimize the perception of stress sources and stress manifestation as well as total Teachers' Stress Inventory (TSI) scores among teachers of children with autism spectrum disorders (Akanaeme et al., 2021).

Positive psychology tools have been found to be effective in improving mental health. Thus, the combination of yogic spirituality and positive psychology would be a panacea in today's world. In one study, a positive psychology intervention group experienced significant improvements in sexual function, depression, and subjective well-being, suggesting that a nurse-led positive psychology intervention should be implemented for postoperative patients with early-stage cervical cancer. Positive psychology interventions with young children have promoted positive aspects of development, such as gratitude, positive emotions, life satisfaction, accomplishment, positive relationship, or self-esteem (Benoit & Gabola, 2021). Positive psychology and yoga are both focused on enhancing human performance and promoting beneficial psychological states. Yoga and meditation may enhance the states of flow and mindful awareness and reduce confusion in young adult musicians (Butzer et al., 2017).

The tumultuous phase of an adolescent's life is due to the various physical and psychological seen in adolescence (Casey et al., 2010). This is a vulnerable stage as adolescents are going through a transition phase of finding their identity and transitioning from childhood to adulthood. Parental support and recognition and peer support are crucial for their proper development (Meeus & Deković, 1995). The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted adolescents' daily routine and support system. Social acceptance, support, and contact with peers are essential during adolescence. Hence, their mental health has been adversely affected during the pandemic (Panchal et al., 2021). Yoga improves several aspects of health, including mental health, in different groups of people. It has a salubrious effect on mental well-being by acting on the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenalaxis and making parasympathetic nervous system dominant. Positive psychology emphasizes developing the positive aspects of an individual and provides resilience and coping power. Hence, yogic spirituality and positive psychology can resolve problems and enhance the mental well-being of adolescents.

Conclusion

Mental health and well-being is an essential component of health. It is necessary to strengthen the mental aspect of health during the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused adolescents' mental health to suffer considerably. Adolescents are the pillars of the future society. If they are weak and vulnerable, they will be a liability. On the other hand, if they are strong, they will be valuable assets to society.

It has been proven that yoga improves mental health. Positive psychology also brings about the improvement of mental well-being. Building resilience and improving the mental aspect of health will help adolescents face adversities and maintain mental well-being. In the pandemic era, an effort should be made to incorporate yogic spirituality and positive psychology tenets to strengthen the mental well-being of adolescents. The beneficial effects of yogic spirituality and positive psychology on several aspects of well-being and happiness are not fully understood. Clinical trials with good study designs should be conducted to ascertain the efficacy of the interventions.

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