The Integration of Yoga and Psychotherapy

By: Betsy Rippentrop, PhD

Yoga has been around for roughly 5000 years, but has only recently piqued the interest of the Western World. Yoga is now being practiced at the CIA, the FBI, the World Bank, the Chicago Stock Exchange, and is even a part of the yearly Easter Egg hunt at the White House. The popularity of yoga, a true mind-body discipline, continues to grow. It is believed that some 15 million Americans are practicing yoga, which is approximately 8% of the population. To contextualize this, 4% of the population is currently engaged in psychotherapy.

Why should psychologists take note of this growing trend? Science has finally verified what the yogis have known for centuries: it is great for mental health! Broadly speaking, data is showing that yoga can improve mood, sleep, fatigue, anxiety and depressive symptoms, reduce stress, and improve memory in both clinical and non-clinical populations. In some of the most cutting-edge research, findings show that yoga is actually changing gene expression, altering how quickly we age, and creating new neuronal pathways in the brain. Research is showing you don’t have to practice for years either to see results. Many of the beneficial changes show up after just 8 weeks of meditation/yoga.

So why does yoga work? Research hasn’t yet figured out the mechanisms for why it seems to be a panacea for so many physical and mental health conditions. Based on my work as both a psychologist and yoga teacher, as well as nearly two decades of personal practice, I have some hypotheses.

First, yoga begins to connect us more deeply with our bodies. Life is hectic, overscheduled, and a bit overwhelming at times for both practitioner and client alike. The frenetic pace of the 21st century has almost a “numbing” effect on our bodies. We quit listening to deep exhaustion, and instead add more caffeine. We ignore insomnia and a racing mind, and pop an Ambien. We eat fast food because we have no time to cook, and overlook the stomach pain and bloating. Yoga wakes us up to the physical sensations and holding patterns in our bodies. We start to listen to the messages and wisdom the body contains. Tension starts to release in our muscles, blood begins to flow, and our focus on physical sensations breaks the train of our everyday thinking, which calms the mind.

Next, yoga teaches the important practice of acceptance, or non-judgment. To me, this continues to be one of the most challenging aspects of the practice, but also the most healing. Our minds want to continuously label our experiences, and drop them into “good and bad”, or “right and wrong” categories. Western psychological thought might call this “black and white thinking”. Spending time on a yoga mat following a teacher’s guidance provides an
opportunity to soften the judgmental mind and be present with what is. We can keep resisting reality, or we can learn to accept and flow with what life brings; Yoga is a great way to practice this.

Finally, through a yoga practice, we start to reconnect with our inherent wholeness. This is perhaps the most poignant and powerful lesson yoga has taught me personally and professionally. In our traditional psychology training, most of us have taken numerous courses on diagnosis and psychopathology. Clients come to us every day with “problems” of living that result in deep suffering. Although I am not minimizing the real problems humanity experiences, yoga philosophy teaches at the core of our being, we are all complete, whole, and balanced. We are not broken. This idea is healing and transformative for people with whom I have worked. If we can grasp that the wholeness is there, it provides more courage to begin to look at what is covering it up. Focusing on what we need to discard or what is in the way of our wholeness, is more empowering than believing we are broken and need to add lots of new things to our life to become whole. Yoga is essentially a path for letting go, and tuning in to the best parts of ourselves.

In my clinical work, I regularly integrate yoga and psychotherapy and my clients are both open and hungry for a more holistic approach to understanding themselves. I often unroll a yoga mat in my office, and take clients through some poses, or more often, work with their breath and helping them notice where they hold tension and emotion in their bodies. I call this type of work yoga-based psychotherapy. I use psychotherapeutic techniques while concurrently addressing the body. The main focus is on processing thoughts, beliefs, and emotions (like most psychotherapy), however I utilize yoga postures, breathing exercises, deep relaxation, meditation, mantras, and yoga philosophy to augment the already powerful psychotherapeutic framework.

In November 2009, the APA Monitor published an article on yoga as a practice tool for psychologists. Richard Gertz, of Alliant International University, explained in the article that “Psychologists have painted themselves in the corner by only doing talk therapy. There’s much more that can be accomplished if you integrate it with other sorts of modalities, such as biofeedback, relaxation training or yoga.” In the same vein, a 2012 article on integrating complementary and alternative medicine into the practice of psychology in Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, specifically discussed yoga as a complementary technique that psychologists can ethically integrate into their work.

I believe the psychology profession, with its strong history of innovation, is uniquely positioned to be leaders in the movement for more integrative treatments for mind and body. Our clients are open and ready for such exploration.