

## **YOGA FOR SCHIZOPHRENIA**

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### **Abstract**

Yoga comprises numerous mental, physical, and spiritual practices that are designed to control the body and mind and help us to achieve a state of inner harmony, allowing us to better understand and deal with the negative thoughts that we experience and release ourselves from emotional distress. In modern medicine, yoga's benefits for various mental health disorders are becoming the focus of research, and current schizophrenia treatment plans are increasingly turning to yoga as a method of improving medication-based care. Using a combination of asana and pranayama systematic breathing practices, yoga can help us to achieve a state of focus and relaxation that makes it easier to shine a lens on the nature of our thoughts. Understanding this nature and how it affects and distorts our reality is a key part of treating schizophrenia and helping us to realize just how much it's affecting our lives and the relationships that we have with others. One study revealed the ability of yoga to improve social cognition in schizophrenic patients, allowing them to recognize emotional facial expressions better than those who did not practice yoga. As an illness that severely impacts social cognition and destroys interpersonal relationships in the process, yoga is an ideal tool to help individuals suffering from schizophrenia understand how their thoughts are negatively influencing their perception of the world and rebalance them.

**Keywords:** Yoga,Schizophrenia, Cognition, Perception.

### **Introduction**

The word yoga means union, and the practice is a way to harmonize the body, breath, and emotions. But could it help people with schizophrenia feel more grounded and balanced?Schizophrenia is a chronic and severe mental disorder that affects a person's thoughts, feelings, and behavior, according to the National Institute of Mental Health. There isn't much scientific evidence regarding whether yoga can benefit people who have schizophrenia, but a few small studies have shown promising results. What's more, the practice has been shown to help people with other mental health conditions, such as anxiety and depression, says Kelli Bethel, the

director of yoga therapy and yoga at the University of Maryland School of Medicine Center for Integrative Medicine, in Baltimore. Schizophrenia is one of the most severe mental disorders. It is defined by a combination of symptoms that either adds to a person's experience or take away from it, and these are known as "positive" or "negative" symptoms. Positive expressions of schizophrenia include hallucinations, repetitive actions, and delusions, while negative symptoms consist of anhedonia, motivation, and difficulty socializing – and those experiencing schizophrenia require significant support. Despite not being widely studied into the early years of the 21st century (perhaps due to anxiety that meditative approaches may worsen psychosis) evidence suggests that yoga-based interventions offer potential as a safe and efficacious addition to current treatments of psychotic disorders, and can be used as an adjunct approach to improve quality of life and alleviate symptoms.

## **Yoga Therapy and Schizophrenia**

There is no one cause of schizophrenia and no one universally effective treatment pathway for the individuals experiencing it. While antipsychotics are very effective in treating the positive symptoms of schizophrenia, they are less efficacious in the treatment of negative symptoms, and side effects include movement disorders, sleepiness, and hormonal changes. A series of promising recent studies indicate that yoga is a viable option within a multidisciplinary treatment plan for schizophrenia, addressing issues that are difficult to treat with pharmaceuticals. Learning yoga from a teacher or therapist can help people forge a sense of connection and belonging, especially if they learn in a group, which can be hugely beneficial for those who may otherwise become isolated by their mental health issues. Further to this, yogic-based practices have been shown to improve various issues seen in schizophrenia, such as cognitive deficits in neurocognition and social cognition, as well as alleviating depression and anxiety symptoms. With an elevated risk of suicide and suicide attempts amongst sufferers, schizophrenia is a sometimes life-threatening illness that requires a holistic response that takes into account its social, psychological, and physical impacts. Yoga could offer both a form of community support and a channel through which patients can be referred to other mental health services (for instance, if someone feels that they are in danger of an acute episode), while also helping to lessen symptoms, aid in recovery, and prevent relapse.

## **Schizophrenia: A Background**

A widespread misconception regarding schizophrenia is that it refers to a "split personality", which isn't the case. The term schizophrenia literally means "split mind", coined by Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler and intended to convey a disconnection between personality, thinking memory, and perception, rather than a

multiple personality disorder. People with schizophrenia often become withdrawn and lose interest in activities, socialising, and their education/career, before going on to experience psychosis – ultimately finding it difficult to distinguish between their thoughts and ideas, and reality. A person with schizophrenia may begin to hallucinate, often hearing voices or seeing things that are not there, and they may begin to feel as if their thoughts are not their own. Delusions are another key feature of schizophrenia, with people developing unlikely ideas that they hold with complete conviction – such as the belief they are being plotted against, or that their thoughts are being implanted in their minds from an outside source. For some, hallucinations and delusions can create beliefs that (although removed from objective reality and which make it difficult to integrate into society) aren't unpleasant to experience – for example, believing that they are in touch with benign and caring higher forces. However, many will develop ideas and experience hallucinations that are extremely distressing, and make fear and anxiety the dominating influence in their lives. Unlike other mental health issues, schizophrenia affects both men and women equally. It also occurs in every society and culture and most often develops in a person's second or third decade of life. Fifty percent of people with schizophrenia are estimated to have a history of substance abuse, perhaps due to attempts at self-medication. As is common in mental disorders, the exact cause of schizophrenia is unknown. As schizophrenia appears to run in families, it is theorized that a certain combination of genes increases vulnerability to developing this illness – something that is made extremely likely by the fact that if one identical twin develops schizophrenia, the other has a one in two chance of doing the same, even if they have been raised separately. Other factors that have been linked to incidences of schizophrenia in those that are susceptible include drug use, (in particular, exposure to cannabis in early adolescence) stressful life events, and complications in birth, such as premature labor and low birth weight. Some question whether the diagnosis of "schizophrenia" would be more helpfully defined as a small variety of overlapping conditions that are experienced intermittently, rather than a lifelong label – which is perceived by some as an unnecessary burden. In these cases, it can be beneficial to think of a diagnosis as a tool for treating what patients are currently experiencing, rather than a definite condition or label that they will have to live with forever.

### **Why Use Yoga as an Adjunct Treatment for Schizophrenia?**

The case for using yoga as an adjunct therapy has been growing since the first studies on this subject were conducted in the early 2000s. In an early study led by H.R Nagendrayoga-based practices were applied in the treatment of chronically institutionalized patients with schizophrenia. The promising conclusions the researchers came to – that patients were able to learn yoga and derive some benefits in social and cognitive domains without experiencing negative side effects –

led the way for further study and allayed fears of worsening certain symptoms. A 2006 study explored the effect of yoga on ninety patients with schizophrenia alongside traditional treatment, reporting greater improvements in physical and psychological functioning (as well as the quality of life) in those who underwent the yoga-based intervention. Another study, which focused on outpatients receiving stable medication and reporting moderate symptoms, created a 1-month yoga module and advised participants to continue the practice at home for 3 months, while the control group took part in a standard set of exercises. After 4 months, both groups reported improvements in negative symptoms and social functioning, with those who took part in the yoga module experiencing greater improvements than those who didn't. Following this, the largest study on yoga for psychosis took place, with patients divided into yoga, exercise, and wait-list control groups. Here, the yoga group was found to be five times more likely to experience improvement in negative symptoms, while they also experienced improvements in emotional recognition, positive and negative symptoms, and social cognition. This study was later recognized by Britain's NICE guidelines to be of good quality, recommending yoga therapy as a complementary treatment for schizophrenia. One way in which yoga therapy is of particular benefit for those with schizophrenia is in lessening state anxiety and increasing subjective well-being while also reducing both positive and negative symptoms and improving quality of life. As schizophrenia can contribute to feelings of anxiety and depression, and make people feel isolated, the social benefits and positive effects on the patient's well-being of yoga could make a tangible difference to people's experience of life. It's thought that these effects are achieved through a combination of activation of the mirror neuron system and the subsequent social improvements this can involve and an increase in levels of oxytocin in those who practice yoga. With yoga, people experiencing or who have experienced schizophrenia should regain a sense of control over their mind and body, and find an effective self-care tool that allows them an active means through which to manage their illness. With the reduction of symptoms, a greater sense of well-being, and connection to a community, yoga can help people reintegrate into society and live happily and fulfilled life – supported by a holistic and comprehensive treatment plan. If you're a yoga, health, or psychology professional or another interested party and would like to find out more about how yoga can be used to help your clients, you can read more about the use of yoga therapy in the treatment of schizophrenia with *Yoga for Mental Health*. If you are prone to schizophrenic episodes and are interested in working with a yoga therapist, please see our *Minded Clinic*.

## **Certain Yoga Poses May Have Mental Health Benefits**

Yoga has been shown to have many benefits for health and well-being, and certain types of poses are especially soothing for people with mental health, Bethel says. Forward folds, for example, are a good way to stretch while still feeling safe, because you are protecting your vulnerable core, she explains. Seated Forward Bend (Paschimottanasana) is an example of a forward fold. Sit on a mat on the floor with your legs extended in front of you. Reach your arms up to the ceiling, then hinge from your hips as you fold over your legs. Come down as far as is comfortable, being sure to relax your neck and shoulders. Hold the pose for a few seconds or a few minutes, then raise it back up. Grounding poses can also benefit people with mental illness, says Bethel. Mountain Pose (Tadasana), for example, enables you to feel more connected to the earth and to your environment. To do it, stand with your feet together, arms down by your sides, and your head straight. Now feel your spine and head lift slightly toward the ceiling while you press your arms and feet down toward the ground. Keep your breathing relaxed. Stay in this pose as long as is comfortable for you.

## **Yoga Breathing Can Also Be Calming**

When people think of yoga, they typically think of physical poses. But many of the benefits of yoga, especially for people with mental health issues, can come from doing breathing practices, which can be especially soothing. “Physical poses are great for building strength, and they can be a moving meditation. But yoga is more than a gym workout,” Bethel says. She especially likes a breathing exercise where the exhalation is twice as long as the inhalation. Simply sit comfortably and inhale slowly through your nose to a count of perhaps three or four. Then exhale for twice as long. Do 8 or 10 breaths total before returning to normal breathing. If focusing on your breath or changing its cadence makes you anxious, you should stop. Breathwork never creates more anxiety. If it does, this is not the right time for you to be doing it,”

## **Deep Relaxation May Also Have Mental Health Benefits**

Many yoga sessions end with Corpse Pose (Savasana), which is a pose meant to create deep relaxation. This pose is very important for integrating the benefits of the breath and movement practices, and should not be skipped, Bethel says. Plus, if you’re feeling ungrounded, deep relaxation may help your nervous system rebalance itself, she explains. Bethel has observed that sometimes people who have mental health issues aren’t always comfortable doing deep relaxation for too long, or they start feeling fidgety. But even if you only practice Corpse Pose for a minute or two, you will reap some of its calming benefits, she says. In the traditional Corpse Pose, you lie flat on your back with your legs resting hip distance apart and your arms



relaxed alongside your body with your palms facing up. One relaxation exercise you can do in Corpse Pose is to focus on one part of your body at a time. While lying on your back, bring your awareness to your left foot, then your left shin, then your left knee, until you have covered every major part of your body. When you finish this deep relaxation, consider doing a very short meditation, Bethel says. You can do this while still lying in Corpse Pose, or sitting up. Bethel suggests doing a “my favorite place” meditation, where you pick an image that brings you joy and mentally take yourself there. See the sights, smell the smells, feel the sensations. For people with mental health issues, this type of meditation is preferable to letting a teacher mentally guide you to places like a beach or a mountain, because certain images such as a beach or a mountain may be triggering.

## **Conclusion**

An integrating yoga-based aerobic and strength exercises into comprehensive schizophrenia treatment programs reduces psychiatric symptoms of the disorder, acute anxiety, and psychological distress. An additional study found that yoga programs designed specifically for patients with psychosis, which leave out the practice of meditation, produce cognitive benefits in individuals with schizophrenia without causing any sorts of side effects. Using postures, breathing exercises, and relaxation techniques, yoga programs for those with schizophrenia aim to provide a physical means of calming and connecting with the mind in a positive way. In fact, meditative practices, usually an integral part of yoga, can provoke psychosis in individuals suffering from psychosis—a perfect example of why using the physical body to connect with the mind is so important when applying yoga as a treatment for schizophrenia. Similar to Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, yoga can help individuals achieve a level of focus that allows them to ground themselves into reality and take control of the disconnect that exists between how they perceive the world and how it actually is. Research shows that yoga can reduce stress and increase vagal tone, which refers to activity in the parasympathetic nervous system and is responsible for maintaining the body’s homeostasis. Ultimately, yoga can balance our body in a way that connects us with our thoughts and shows us how they relate to the world, improving negative symptomology, cognition, feelings of well-being, and quality of life. Medication can take us only so far on its own; in order to truly take control of our schizophrenia, we must have a thorough understanding of what is taking in our minds and how these thoughts are affecting our perception of the world around us.

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