

Conference Reports

IAYT's Symposium on Yoga Research Heads Online

By Marian Papp, Nicole DeAvilla, and Laurie Hyland Robertson

As most events in 2020 were forced to do, IAYT's Symposium on Yoga Research (SYR) went online for the first time. One principal aspect of this conference has always been its emphasis on professional networking, collaboration, and collegial camaraderie, which the program design itself builds in. For many, the pressing question was therefore whether we'd be able to enjoy the same benefits of this special gathering in a virtual format—would attendees and presenters still experience those personal connections with one another?*

Happily, the answer is a resounding *yes!* As a bonus, the online format made SYR more affordable in terms of both time and money, and 2020 attendance nearly doubled compared to 2019. The first-time attendees we spoke with—or who added their thoughts via chat comments—were inspired and excited to learn from, collaborate with, and meet their peers.

Mangala Loper-Powers, C-IAYT, director of the Ananda Yoga Therapy Training program, was previously only able to attend SYR the year the conference took place back-to-back with IAYT's membership conference, the Symposium on Yoga Therapy and Research (SYTAR). This time around, "I was able to attend the SYR . . . because it was online," said Mangala. "I thoroughly enjoyed being able to participate this year and hope that there will be options for online SYR in years to come." We hope so, too, and that now they've had a taste of SYR's particular alchemy many of the yoga professionals and researchers who made it to the virtual conference will be more likely to carve out space in their schedules and budgets for future in-person events.

Old Favorites, New Formats

This year's program featured expanded special-interest groups, which as usual offered meaningful discussion between presenters and attendees. In fact, many of the viewers we spoke with found that the dialog in these breakout sessions enhanced their learning because they felt able to ask more of their own targeted questions.

Steffany Moonaz, PhD, C-IAYT, again hosted a special-interest group on the "CLARIFY Yoga Research Reporting Guidelines." The development of these parameters, which began at SYR several years ago, is an important step in enabling the field to more widely disseminate credible evidence for yoga's efficacy.

Also offering insightful discussion were this year's two new groups: "Diversity in Yoga Research," led by Jennifer Webb, PhD, and "Yoga in Prisons," with Lisa Uebelacker, PhD, and Nicole Hellenthaler, MPS, RYT-200. As members of the conference Scientific Program Committee, Webb and Uebelacker also moderated several of the later sessions.

Although it wasn't possible to stroll through aisles of research abstract posters and chat with their presenters this time around at SYR, attendees were nevertheless able to take in the latest studies while meeting colleagues from around the world in two "Research Slide Sessions." The systematic presentation of research findings and

Scientific Program Committee member and session moderator Jennifer Webb



experiences, coupled with the chance to hear and learn from everyone's questions, made for a deep dive into current yoga research.

Several research abstracts dealt with brain injury, including a meta-analysis indicating that yoga can help to alleviate chronic symptoms of mild traumatic brain injury (concussion). Another discussed the design of yoga programs to take advantage of neurobiological mechanisms for both physiological and emotional well-being as well as self-regulation. A final notable abstract from among many discussed a pilot trial of prescribing "social yoga programs" because the practice constitutes a multicomponent health intervention.

A Practical Preconference

Pandemic or no, dedicated researchers, nearly all yoga practitioners themselves, continue to explore the evidence behind yoga's effects—and its effectiveness for supporting various health conditions. Coming together in virtual community to celebrate this progress and learn from one another was worthwhile, especially as people were able to participate from around the world! Following are a few highlights of the work presented.

Sat Bir Singh Khalsa, PhD, began the preconference session with an overview of the state of the research field. Yoga studies as we know them began in the 1970s, with the number of review and meta-analysis papers reaching nearly 50 in 2019 alone; this figure will probably increase for 2020. And the number of randomized controlled trials (RCT) has increased exponentially since 2008, indicating that not only the quantity but also the quality of yoga research trials is improving.[†]

Khalsa also talked specifically about the recommendations behind yoga to support different conditions and aims, which today include chronic pain (mainly lower-back), mental health and energy levels (especially fatigue in cancer treatment), as well as improved quality of life and mental health both during and after cancer treatment. A point to remember: Yoga is currently most often recommended as a complementary nonpharmacological therapy, not as a monotherapy "for" particular conditions.

The preconference has become an invaluable resource for those starting out in yoga research or wondering about the practicalities of such a path. Uebelacker continued this year's session with a talk about her work producing a manual to be used to increase fidelity

to yoga interventions, with the crucial aim of ensuring the reproducibility of studies. And Webb gave an especially pertinent presentation about how online yoga, in both app- and web-based formats, has changed and grown during the present pandemic.

More Research Highlights

This year many of the main conference sessions suggested what intervention components are likely to factor into success in various settings and with a number of different clinical populations.



Crystal Park, PhD, in particular, touched on this area as she discussed new work on the importance of psychosocial factors and their association with stress reduction.¹ According to Park, four psychosocial resources (mindfulness, interoceptive awareness, spiritual well-being, and self-compassion) are strongly associated with decreased stress. Perhaps this finding can be interpreted to demonstrate the beneficial effects of practicing yoga in group settings.

Park also considered the components that are important to increasing both physical and mental health and optimizing future yoga interventions. In a finding that is unlikely to surprise yoga therapists, Park and colleagues determined that these key factors cover a range of yogic practices: breathwork, concentration, meditation, relaxing asana, challenging asana, mindfulness, and ethical principles.

Erik Groessl, PhD, presented his team's research on chronic low-back pain, beginning with a summary of the evidence from larger RCTs:

- A study by Karen Sherman² showed that yoga is better than a self-care book for reducing chronic low-back pain, disability, and medication use; however, this study of 228 individuals did not indicate that yoga is superior to stretching. (She has also written about yoga intervention design.³)
- Tilbrook⁴ researched 313 individuals and showed that yoga is better than usual care for reducing disability from chronic low-back pain.
- Holger Cramer,⁵ who has performed a number of meta-analyses of different conditions, conducted an RCT of 51 individuals and demonstrated less neck pain, less disability, and better quality of life in a yoga group compared to an exercise control group.
- In an RCT of 56 individuals, Dunleavy et al.⁶ found lower neck disability scores for yoga and pilates groups compared to controls.

Groessl also presented results from a 12-week study with military personnel comparing Hatha and Restorative Yoga in 50 people with chronic low-back and/or neck pain. The 60-minute Hatha Yoga classes, which were given 1–2 days a week and adapted to chronic lower-back and neck pain, included

- slow, deep breathing performed in conjunction with poses,
- an instructor offering demonstrations,
- a goal or positive direction/intention as well as meditation,
- basic postures to warm up the muscles,
- standing poses including balance challenges,
- floor-based poses, and
- final rest of 5–7 minutes in *savasana*.

The study's Restorative Yoga practices included the following key components:

- an emphasis on relaxation,
- little movement and a nonstrenuous format,
- 5–10 poses per session, mostly done lying down,
- eyes often closed,
- bolsters and blankets for comfort and warmth, and
- instructor dialog on breathing techniques or guided imagery.

This feasibility study, which did show the interventions to be workable, concluded that neck pain may respond differently than back pain to some types of yoga. Hatha Yoga seems to produce larger effect sizes on quality of life.

Marieke Van Puymbroeck, PhD, CTRS, RYT-500, presented an international survey on the use of yoga by healthcare providers. Hers was the first study to describe the use of yoga by healthcare professionals as a therapeutic modality. Van Puymbroeck suggested that the components that enable clinicians to safely and effectively provide yoga in healthcare settings include

- cultivating an appropriate environment in which the practices can be received,
- remaining flexible and thinking about the clinical reasoning behind the choice of yoga as a therapeutic tool,
- focusing on individualized client-centered program design,
- providing simple written sequences for home practice,
- attending to clients' musculoskeletal alignment, and (again probably not surprising to yoga therapists among us)
- maintaining a personal yoga practice.

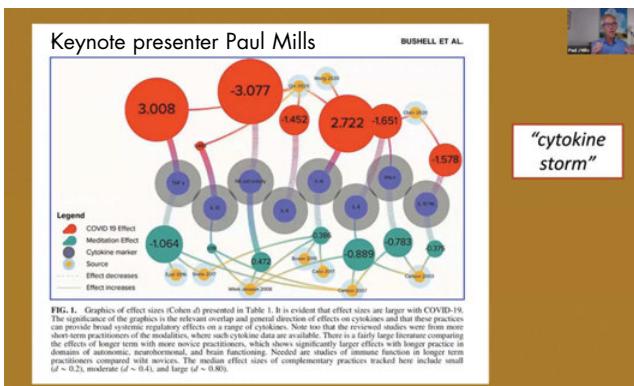
Beth Bock, PhD, presented on "Yoga and Changing Health Behaviors," underlining that yoga's health benefits are similar to those of exercise but that yoga may be more effective in addressing symptoms of fatigue, physical inflexibility, depression, anxiety, and perceived stress as well as improving quality of life. She suggested that yoga produces key physiological changes in type 2 diabetes, among them improved levels of HbA1c (a long-term blood sugar measure), fasting glucose, and stress hormones.⁷

Interestingly, Bock also discussed yoga's beneficial effects on executive function. Because executive functioning involves cognitive processes that regulate, control, and manage other cognitive processes (e.g., planning, problem solving, organizing, and prioritizing), these findings have potentially far-reaching implications for future studies and behavior-change interventions.

A talk by Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, PhD, "Yoga, Body Image, and Disordered Eating," presented examples of using yoga to enhance embodiment. A valuable takeaway from her work is the importance of ensuring a feeling of accomplishment with the

practice of yoga and the inclusion of empowering poses that create joy in movement.

Concluding this list of just some of the wide-ranging SYR 2020 sessions, Paul Mills, PhD, offered a very interesting talk that incorporated pointers toward the answers to pressing questions about spirituality in integrative healthcare. His presentation, “*Yoga Research to Help Fulfill the Promise of Whole Person Medicine*,” also included a striking study on the mechanisms behind how meditation might oppose the cytokine storm phenomenon seen in COVID-19 disease.⁸

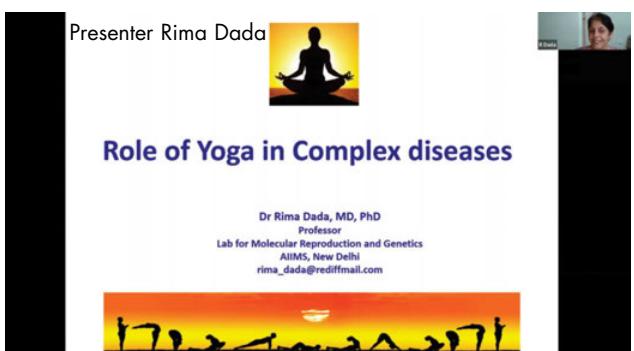


A new definition of integrative health, proposed by Mills and colleagues in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, is of particular interest for the holistically minded yoga therapy community: According to Mills, integrative health should be thought of as a state of well-being in body, mind, and spirit that reflects aspects of the individual, community, and population.

On the topic of best describing yoga and spirituality, Mills suggested that whole-person medicine has a role to play. In fact, he believes that finding our true nature as pure awareness *is* whole-person medicine. Mills has published a number of studies with Deepak Chopra, MD, on this interesting subject, including one on an intensive 7-day ayurvedic treatment at the Chopra Foundation Center. The questionnaire-based findings showed improved well-being as well as increased spirituality, self-compassion, and gratitude.

Yoga Therapy Marches On

Said one attendee, "While we all miss the in-person connections we make at SYR (and the food, the walks to the lake...), I believe everyone found it to be extremely successful and valuable for all of the



reasons that past in-person events have been.” And as Loper-Powers put it, “The speakers and facilitators were great, and it was inspiring to hear all the valuable research that is being done to document the important role of yoga therapy as a recognized and respected therapy in integrative and holistic healthcare.”

In short, was SYR online the same? No. But was it nevertheless amazing? Did the conference provide cutting-edge information? Did it serve to build IAYT's community of yoga professionals and provide important networking opportunities? The answer to all of these questions is YES! 



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*If you missed the live conference, you can now get full access—and C-IAYTs can earn continuing education credit!—through the Conferences menu on iayt.org

[†]A helpful starting point for reviewing these data is Jeter, P. E., Slutsky, J., Singh, N., & Khalsa, S. B. (2015). Yoga as a therapeutic intervention: A bibliometric analysis of published research studies from 1967 to 2013. *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*, 21(10), 586–592.

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