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Shivani Kamal
Research Scholar, Department of Human, Development & Family Studies, School of Home Science, Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Vidya Vihar, Raebareli Road, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India

Dr. Khawairakpam Sharmila
Professor, Department of Human Development & Family Studies, School of Home Science, Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Vidya Vihar, Raebareli Road, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India

Purnima Rastogi
Research Scholar, Department of Human Development & Family Studies, School of Home Science, Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Vidya Vihar, Raebareli Road, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India

Nisha Raj
Research Scholar, Department of Human Development & Family Studies, College of Community Science, Punjab Agricultural University, Ludhiana, Punjab, India

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Khawairakpam Sharmila
Professor, Department of Human Development & Family Studies, School of Home Science, Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Vidya Vihar, Raebareli Road, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India

The association between regular yoga and irregular yoga performer's mental health status of young adults

Shivani Kamal, Khawairakpam Sharmila and Purnima Rastogi

Abstract
This study investigated the association between regular and irregular yoga practice and mental health status in young adults. Using multistage random sampling, 150 young adults (18-25 years; 83 females, 67 male) from Lucknow City were categorized as regular (n = 85; ≥3 sessions/week for ≥6 months) or irregular (n = 65) yoga practitioners. Data were collected via self-made sociodemographic and yoga practice questionnaires, and the Mental Health Continuum-Short Form (MHC-SF). Results showed regular practitioners had significantly higher MHC-SF scores (total M = 4.2, SD = 0.8) than irregular practitioners (M = 3.1, SD = 1.1; t (148) = 5.67, p<0.001) across emotional, psychological, and social well-being domains. Urban residence and higher parental education were associated with regular practice. Hatha yoga, preferred by regulars, correlated with better social well-being. A strong positive correlation (r = 0.62, p<0.01) indicated that consistent yoga practice enhances mental health. The study concludes that regular yoga is crucial for maintaining and improving mental well-being in young adults, contrasting with poorer outcomes from irregular practice.

Keywords: Yoga, mental health, psychological well-being, emotional well-being, social well-being, psychological distress

Introduction
A person's mental health is essential to their general well-being, especially for young adults who are entering adulthood and must deal with special obstacles and pressures. Significant life transitions occur during this time, such as starting a new job, going to college, and changing social contacts. These changes can raise stress levels and make people more susceptible to mental health problems (Arnett, 2000) [1]. This population has a continually rising prevalence of mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety, which highlights the critical need for efficient therapies and preventative measures. According to research by Twenge *et al.* (2019) [5], rates of anxiety and depression in teenagers and young adults have increased significantly over the previous ten years, pointing to a developing mental health crisis that needs to be addressed. Yoga has drawn a lot of attention among the many methods for improving mental health because of its comprehensive advantages, which include mental, emotional, and physical aspects (Ross & Thomas, 2010) [4]. In order to promote a state of balance and harmony inside the individual, yoga, an age-old practice with Indian roots, combines physical postures (asanas), breath control (pranayama), and meditation (dhyana) (Iyengar, 1979). This integrative method is believed to address several aspects of health at once, which makes it a particularly desirable choice for anyone looking for overall wellbeing.

An increasing amount of scientific research supports up the benefits of yoga for mental wellness. Frequent yoga practice has been associated with improvements in mood and emotional regulation as well as decreases in stress, anxiety, and depression (Cramer, Lauche, Anheyer, Pilkington, de Manincor, Dobos, & Langhorst, 2013) [7]. It is thought that these effects stem from the interaction of physical activity, mindfulness practices, and relaxation techniques found in yoga, which all work together to foster mental resilience and calmness (Woodyard, 2011) [6]. The effects of yoga and exercise on mental and physical health were compared in a systematic review by Ross and Thomas (2010) [4]. In terms of enhancing a variety of health outcomes, including mental health metrics, they discovered that yoga can be just as beneficial as or even more beneficial than conventional exercise. This implies that the specific blend of physical effort and meditation that characterizes yoga may have special

benefits for improving mental health. Young adults, who frequently seek out accessible, natural ways to manage stress and enhance their well-being, may find yoga to be especially beneficial for improving mental health. Further research is required to examine the precise effects of yoga practice frequency on mental health outcomes, even in light of the encouraging findings. Recommendations and treatments targeted at increasing mental wellbeing in this vulnerable demographic may benefit from knowing whether consistent yoga practice yields greater mental health benefits than intermittent practice.

Yoga is an age-old discipline with roots in Indian philosophy. It combines physical postures called asanas, breathing exercises called pranayama, and meditation practices called dhyana to encourage a body-mind harmony (Iyengar, 1979). Since its inception more than 5,000 years ago, yoga has developed into a variety of forms and disciplines, each focusing on unique facets of mental and physical health. By improving flexibility, strength, and balance, the physical postures help to improve general physical fitness. The purpose of the breathing exercises is to control the body's flow of prana, or life energy, which promotes calmness and vitality. Meditation practices cultivate mental clarity and emotional stability by emphasizing mindfulness and concentration. Frequent yoga practice has been linked to several health advantages, such as increased strength, flexibility, and cardiovascular health (Woodyard, 2011) [6]. Regularly performing different asanas, which lengthen and stretch muscles to improve range of motion and reduce stiffness, can increase flexibility. Maintaining positions that work various muscle groups and encourage endurance and tone can help you gain strength. Dynamic sequences that increase heart rate and promote circulation can improve cardiovascular health and total cardiovascular fitness. Significantly, a recent study suggests that yoga may have a significant effect on mental health as well, possibly lowering stress, anxiety, and depression symptoms (Cramer *et al*., 2013) [7]. Research has indicated that practicing yoga helps decrease the main stress hormone, cortisol, which in turn lowers the physiological markers associated with stress (Granath *et al*., 2006) [8]. Yoga's mindfulness component aids in helping practitioners remain alert and in the moment, which can lessen the effects of anxiety and keep the mind from going to bad places. Furthermore, yoga's focus on deliberate breathing and meditation encourages a calm and relaxed state of mind, which balances out the hyperactivity of the sympathetic nervous system linked to stress and anxiety.

Moreover, it has been discovered that yoga raises gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA) levels, a neurotransmitter linked to mood regulation and a feeling of wellbeing (Streeter *et al*., 2010) [9]. The decreases in anxiety and depression seen in consistent yoga practitioners may be due to this physiological shift. In addition to improving mental health, the social components of yoga courses and the encouraging environment that yoga studios frequently provide can also help people feel like they belong and less alone.

There are several different ways in which yoga promotes mental wellness. It is thought that practicing yoga activates the parasympathetic nervous system, which lowers physiological stress markers and promotes relaxation (Field, 2011) [10]. Furthermore, the mindfulness element of yoga improves resilience and emotional control, fostering a more stable and optimistic mental state (Davidson & Kaszniak, 2015) [11]. Even though there is an increasing amount of data to support these advantages, further study is necessary to clarify the precise effect of yoga frequency on mental health outcomes.

This study aims to compare regular yoga practitioners with those who practice yoga irregularly in order to examine the relationship between young adults' mental health and their yoga practice patterns. The goal of this research is to throw light on the relationship between regular yoga practice and mental health by looking at characteristics including anxiety, depression, and overall psychological well-being. The results of this study have the potential to guide mental health therapies and establish yoga as a successful, non-pharmacological strategy for enhancing young people' mental health.

Material and methods Selection of Sample

Multistage random sampling was used to select the respondents. A total of 150 respondents were chosen at random for this study from the urban and rural regions of Lucknow City, of which 83 were female and 67 were male. The respondents were selected from university settings in Lucknow City. The sample comprised 150 respondents (aged 18-25), categorized into regular yoga practitioners (n = 85) and irregular practitioners (n = 65) based on their self-reported frequency and duration of practice, following the framework presented in the dissertation.

Data Collection

Three tools were utilized for data collection:

- A self-made sociodemographic questionnaire to assess the demographic profile of the respondents.
- A self-made Yoga Practice Questionnaire to evaluate patterns of yoga engagement.
- The Mental Health Continuum-Short Form (MHC-SF) by Keyes, 2002.

Tools and Techniques

Self-Made Sociodemographic Questionnaire

This questionnaire was specifically developed by the researcher for the study to collect essential demographic and background information from the participants. Variables collected included age, gender, family type, residence, number of siblings, parental education, parental occupation, and socioeconomic status, providing a comprehensive profile of the young adults involved in the study.

The Mental Health Continuum-Short Form (MHC-SF)

The Mental Health Continuum-Short Form (MHC-SF), developed by Keyes in 2002, was used to assess the mental health status of the participants. This 14-item scale measures three components of positive mental health: emotional well-being (3 items), psychological well-being (6 items), and social well-being (5 items). Respondents rated their experiences over the past month on a 6-point Likert scale (0 = never to 5 = every day). Higher scores on the MHC-SF indicate greater positive mental health, or "flourishing," while lower scores suggest "languishing" or "moderate" mental health. The MHC-SF's reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$) and validity are discussed in the dissertation.

Self-Made Yoga Practice Questionnaire

A questionnaire developed by the researcher was employed to ascertain the participants' yoga practice habits. This tool gathered data on the frequency of yoga practice (to categorize individuals as regular or irregular practitioners), the duration of their practice, and the specific types of yoga they engaged in (e.g., Hatha, Ashtanga, etc.). The detailed design and specific items were created for the purpose of this particular study.

Results and Discussion

The comprehensive analysis of the collected data, as presented in the dissertation ("pdf thesis shivani.pdf", Chapter 4, pp. 17-45), revealed significant patterns regarding the socio-demographic profile of young adults, their yoga practice habits, and the associated mental health outcomes.

1. Socio-Demographic Profile of Participants The study included 150 young adults aged 18-25. The socio-demographic characteristics of the sample, categorized by yoga practice frequency. There is a higher proportion of regular yoga practitioners residing in urban areas and coming from families with higher parental education.

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Young Adults by Yoga Practice Frequency

Characteristic	Total Sample (N = 150) n (%)	Regular Practitioners (n = 85) n (%)	Irregular Practitioners (n = 65) n (%)	χ^2-value	p-value
Gender					
Female	83 (55.3)	48 (56.5)	35 (53.8)	0.10	0.75
Male	67 (44.7)	37 (43.5)	30 (46.2)		
Age Group					
18-21 years	68 (45.3)	35 (41.2)	33 (50.8)	1.25	0.26
22-25 years	82 (54.7)	50 (58.8)	32 (49.2)		
Residence					
Urban	98 (65.3)	65 (76.5)	33 (50.8)	11.21	0.001
Rural	52 (34.7)	20 (23.5)	32 (49.2)		
Family Type					
Nuclear	82 (54.7)	45 (52.9)	37 (56.9)	0.25	0.61
Joint	68 (45.3)	40 (47.1)	28 (43.1)		
Parental Education (Avg.)					
Graduate & above	78 (52.0)	52 (61.2)	26 (40.0)	7.15	0.007
Below Graduate	72 (48.0)	33 (38.8)	39 (60.0)		
Note: χ^2 tests were used for categorical variables to assess differences between groups. Significant p-values (<0.05) are highlighted.					

The table provides a breakdown of participants based on various demographic factors relevant to their yoga practice. In terms of residence, a significantly higher percentage of regular practitioners resided in urban areas (76.5%) compared to irregular practitioners (50.8%), with a p-value of 0.001. Similarly, parental education showed a significant association with yoga practice frequency, with 61.2% of regular practitioners having parents with graduate-level education or above, compared to 40.0% among irregular practitioners (p = 0.007). Gender, age group, and family type did not show statistically significant differences between regular and irregular yoga practitioners.

Yoga Practice Patterns and Associated Mental Health Status

The frequency with which participants engaged in basic yoga types and also examined the mental health status of respondents in relation to these specific types. This combined table provides a more integrated view of practice patterns and their mental health outcomes.

Table 2: Basic Types of Yoga, Their Practice Frequencies, and Associated Mental Health Status

Yoga Type	Practice Frequency (Total f (%))	Flourishing (%)	Moderate Mental Health (%)	Languishing (%)
Surya Namaskar	Regularly: 88 (58.7) Occasionally: 45 (30.0) Never: 17 (11.3)	65.0	25.0	10.0
Pranayama	Regularly: 78 (52.0) Occasionally: 54 (36.0) Never: 18 (12.0)	60.0	30.0	10.0
Siddh asana	Regularly: 36 (24.0) Occasionally: 58 (38.7) Never: 56 (37.3)	40.0	35.0	25.0
Padmasana	Regularly: 23 (15.3) Occasionally: 59 (39.3) Never: 68 (45.3)	35.0	40.0	25.0
Bhadrasana	Regularly: 15 (10.0) Occasionally: 55 (36.7) Never: 80 (53.3)	30.0	45.0	25.0
Simhasana	Regularly: 18 (12.0) Occasionally: 38 (25.0) Never: 94 (62.7)	25.0	50.0	25.0

This integrates findings on both the frequency of practicing specific yoga types and their associated mental health outcomes. Surya Namaskar and Pranayama were the most regularly practiced (58.7% and 52.0% regularly, respectively), and these practices showed the highest percentages of "Flourishing" mental health (65.0% and 60.0% respectively). This suggests a strong positive impact of these foundational and widely practiced yoga types on overall mental well-being. Conversely, specific asanas like Simhasana and Bhadrasana were "never" practiced by the majority (62.7% and 53.3% respectively) and showed lower percentages of "Flourishing" mental health, with higher proportions in "Moderate Mental Health" or "Languishing" categories for those who did practice them (e.g., Simhasana practitioners had 50% in "Moderate Mental Health"). This could imply that broad, dynamic practices (like Surya Namaskar) and breath control techniques (Pranayama) are more universally beneficial for mental health than isolated, less frequently practiced asanas.

Overall Mental Health Status of Young Adults

It present the overall mental health status of the young adults using the Mental Health Continuum Scale. This provides a general picture of the well-being levels across the entire sample before comparing groups.

Table 3: Overall Mental Health Status of Young Adults (n = 150)

Mental Health Status (MHC-SF Categories)	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Flourishing	75	50.0
Moderate Mental Health	45	30.0
Languishing	30	20.0
Total	150	100.0

This shows that half of the young adult participants (50.0%) reported flourishing mental health. A significant portion (30.0%) exhibited moderate mental health, while 20.0% were categorized as languishing. This distribution indicates that while a good proportion of young adults experienced optimal mental well-being, a notable segment faced challenges to their mental health.

Mental Health Status by Yoga Practice Frequency

The primary objective of comparing mental health status between regular and irregular yoga practitioners yielded significant results. Table 3 presents the mean scores for emotional, psychological, social, and total mental health as measured by the MHC-SF. Regular practitioners consistently scored higher across all mental health domains.

Table 4: Mental Health Scores (MHC-SF) by Yoga Practice Frequency Among Young Adults

Mental Health Domain	Regular Practitioners (n = 85) Mean (SD)	Irregular Practitioners (n = 65) Mean (SD)	t-value (df = 148)	*p*-value
Emotional Well-being	4.5 (0.7)	3.2 (1.2)	6.20	<0.001
Psychological Well-being	4.1 (0.8)	3.0 (1.1)	5.10	<0.001
Social Well-being	4.0 (0.9)	3.1 (1.0)	4.80	<0.001
Total MHC-SF Score	4.2 (0.8)	3.1 (1.1)	5.67	<0.001
MHC-SF scores range from 0 to 5, with higher scores indicating better mental health. SD = Standard Deviation. Independent t-tests were performed to compare means between groups.				

The results consistently demonstrate that regular yoga practitioners report significantly higher levels of mental well-being across all dimensions compared to their irregular counterparts. For instance, in Emotional Well-being, regular practitioners scored 4.5 (SD = 0.7) while irregular practitioners scored 3.2 (SD = 1.2), a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.001$). Similar significant differences were observed for Psychological Well-being (4.1 vs. 3.0, $p<0.001$) and Social Well-being (4.0 vs. 3.1, $p<0.001$). The overall MHC-SF score further solidified this finding, with regular practitioners achieving a mean of 4.2 (SD = 0.8) against 3.1 (SD = 1.1) for irregular practitioners ($p<0.001$). These findings strongly support the hypothesis that a consistent yoga practice is positively associated with superior mental health outcomes in young adults. The significant differences observed in MHC-SF scores across all domains highlight the holistic impact of consistent yoga. Regular practice appears to foster greater emotional regulation, enhanced self-acceptance, purpose in life, personal growth, and positive relationships with others, which are core components of mental flourishing. Conversely, irregular practice may not provide the sustained physiological and psychological conditioning required to achieve these comprehensive benefits, leaving individuals more vulnerable to mental health challenges.

Association of Regular Yoga Practice with Overall Mental Health Status

The further explored the direct association between regular yoga performance and overall mental health status. It stated a significant correlation between consistent yoga practice and mental health outcomes.

Table 5: Correlation between Regular Yoga Practice and Overall Mental Health Status (n = 150)

Variables Correlated	Pearson Correlation (r)	p-value
Regular Yoga Practice vs. Overall Mental Health Status	0.62	<0.01
Note: A significant positive correlation indicates that as the regularity of yoga practice increases, so does the level of mental well-being among young adults		

The study found a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.62$, $p<0.01$) between regular yoga practice and overall mental health status. This strong association highlights that as the regularity of yoga practice increases, so does the level of mental well-being among young adults. This quantitative evidence reinforces the qualitative differences observed in MHC-SF scores, providing robust support for the beneficial role of consistent engagement.

Summary

The information presented here summarizes the study's findings regarding the participants' socio-demographic characteristics, yoga practice patterns, and their mental health status. Regarding the socio-demographic profile, the study included 150 young adults aged 18-25 from Lucknow City. The sample showed no statistically significant differences across gender, age group, and family type between regular and irregular yoga practitioners. However, there was a significantly higher proportion of regular yoga practitioners residing in urban areas (76.5% vs. 50.8% for irregular practitioners, $p = 0.001$). Similarly, parental education played a role, with 61.2% of regular practitioners having parents with graduate-level education or above, compared to 40.0% among irregular practitioners ($p = 0.007$).

In terms of yoga practice patterns, Surya Namaskar (58.7% regularly) and Pranayama (52.0% regularly) were the most frequently practiced basic yoga types by the overall sample. In contrast, specific asanas like Simhasana (62.7% never practiced) and Bhadrasana (53.3% never practiced) were less common.

The mental health status of the young adults, as measured by the MHC-SF, indicated that 50.0% of the overall sample reported flourishing mental health, 30.0% had moderate mental health, and 20.0% were languishing.

A key finding was the significant difference in mental health scores between regular and irregular yoga practitioners. Regular practitioners consistently demonstrated significantly higher levels of mental well-being across all dimensions compared to their irregular counterparts. Specifically, for total MHC-SF score, regular practitioners had a mean of 4.2 (SD = 0.8) while irregular practitioners scored 3.1 (SD = 1.1) ($t(148) = 5.67$, $p<0.001$). Similar significant differences were observed for Emotional, Psychological, and Social Well-being (all $p<0.001$).

Furthermore, the study explored the association between specific yoga types and mental health outcomes. Respondents who regularly practiced Surya Namaskar (65.0% flourishing) and Pranayama (60.0% flourishing) showed the highest percentages of flourishing mental health. This suggests a stronger positive impact of these foundational practices.

Finally, a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.62$, $p<0.01$) was found between regular yoga practice and overall mental health status. This strong association highlights that as the regularity of yoga practice increases, so does the level of mental well-being among young adults.

Conclusion

This study underscores the critical importance of consistent yoga practice for maintaining and enhancing the mental health status of young adults. Emotion regulation, fostered through regular engagement in yoga's holistic practices (asanas, pranayama, and meditation), is vital for overall psychological well-being. The findings confirm a strong positive association between regular yoga performance and superior mental health outcomes, while irregular practice is linked to poorer results. This implies that regular, sustained engagement provides the necessary physiological and psychological conditioning for achieving comprehensive benefits like improved emotional regulation, self-acceptance, personal growth, and positive social relationships.

The influence of socio-demographic factors such as urban residence and higher parental education on the likelihood of regular practice suggests potential disparities in access or awareness that need to be addressed. Moreover, the differential impact of specific yoga types, with foundational practices like Surya Namaskar and Pranayama showing stronger associations with flourishing mental health, highlights areas for targeted promotion. This analysis contributes to understanding the intricate link between mind-body interventions and psychological well-being, enhancing knowledge for effective mental health promotion strategies.

Strengths

The study's strengths lie in its focused comparison between regular and irregular practitioners, providing direct evidence for the benefits of consistency. The use of the Mental Health Continuum-Short Form (MHC-SF) offers a robust measure of positive mental health, beyond just the absence of illness. The findings provide clear implications for promoting yoga as an accessible, non-pharmacological strategy for improving young adult mental health.

Limitations

The present study was conducted using a cross-sectional design, which precludes the establishment of causal relationships between yoga practice and mental health outcomes. The reliance on self-reported data introduces a potential for social desirability bias. Furthermore, the study was conducted exclusively in university settings in Lucknow City, India, using a specific sample (n = 150); therefore, the results may not be generalizable to broader young adult populations or other geographical/cultural contexts. The study did not delve into the specific mechanisms (e.g., neurobiological changes) through which yoga confers its benefits.

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