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yoga therapy

by Lisa Kaley-Isley, PhD, RYT-500

holistic healing



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“Can Yoga therapy help with anxiety?” I had just finished observing one of our Yoga therapy students complete his final assessment doing a Yoga therapy session with a client. Earlier in the session, when the client reported she had anxiety and specific fears, the student therapist asked her if she would like her anxiety to be a focus of the session. The client declined saying she planned to try a different, more traditional therapeutic approach to address her anxiety. The therapist went on to focus quite usefully on concerns the client wanted to address in terms of physical tension in her neck and throat. Apparently the therapist’s question had piqued her interest however, because as she prepared to leave the client asked, **“Can Yoga therapy help with anxiety?”**

The therapist’s question suggested to the client that the scope of Yoga therapy could address her mental as well as physical concerns. She knew that Yoga had general effects to relieve her stress. In fact she had begun practising Yoga 10 years earlier primarily to relieve stress. She had experienced the way regular practice shifted her mind set and behaviour from being a driven ‘adrenaline junkie’ to a person who valued and could maintain a more balanced approach to life. What she had not experienced was the way Yoga therapy can have specific targeted effects to address her individual concerns. She also had the now common misperception that Yoga is primarily a physical practice.

Yoga therapy as a modern profession is developing as all emerging professions must do. One of the first steps is to define what Yoga therapy is, thus setting a frame for the scope

of practice. This level of clarity is vital for safe individual practice, training of practitioners, and communication to prospective clients about what they may expect to receive. The client’s question in the scenario above goes straight to this issue: is help with anxiety part of the scope of Yoga therapy? What can I say, request, and expect in a Yoga therapy session?

Defining Yoga therapy requires both differentiating Yoga from Yoga therapy and establishing Yoga therapy within the context of Yoga. This process of discernment has triggered a good deal of reflection and communication in the Yoga community. It has also resulted in some consternation and splitting off as well as some comfort and community building.

The International Association of Yoga Therapists (IAYT) discussion and consensus process resulted in the definition: “Yoga therapy is the process of empowering individuals to progress toward improved health and well-being through the application of the philosophy and practice of Yoga.” This definition asserts 3 key values. Firstly, the therapist’s role is to empower the person to create change in his/her own life. Yoga therapy is not passively received like taking a medication or even receiving a massage; it requires personal effort. Secondly, the goal is facilitation of growth and transformation at all levels of being. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines Health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” Well-being literally asserts that our whole being is well. In the context of Yoga, the 5 koshas describe the interconnected levels of self that encompass the whole of ourselves, and our connection and relationships to the web of life in which we exist. Thirdly, the definition firmly establishes Yoga therapy as a particular application of the principles and practices of Yoga. Yoga therapy draws upon the comprehensive repertoire of yogic understanding and practices

to assist the individual to become more healthy and whole.

The IAYT definition of Yoga therapy sets a broad frame for the work, but it does not specifically differentiate what the special application of Yoga is, or how it differs from a Yoga class or a one-one-one Yoga session. *The British Council for Yoga Therapy* (BCYT) has put forward a more succinct definition: "Yoga Therapy is the use of Yoga where there is a specific health need or needs." In this definition it is similarly stated that Yoga therapy is the application of Yoga to a specific individual, and this is the key concept. What makes Yoga therapeutic is that the tools and techniques applied match the needs of the individual and facilitate his/her movement toward wellness.

Returning to the concerns of the client, yogic strategies designed to specifically address the tension in her neck and throat, stress, anxiety, and phobias would all fall within the potential scope of Yoga therapy. Potential scope because the abilities of the therapist also play a role. A client needs to find a Yoga therapist with training and experience that has prepared him/her to address the client's particular issues.

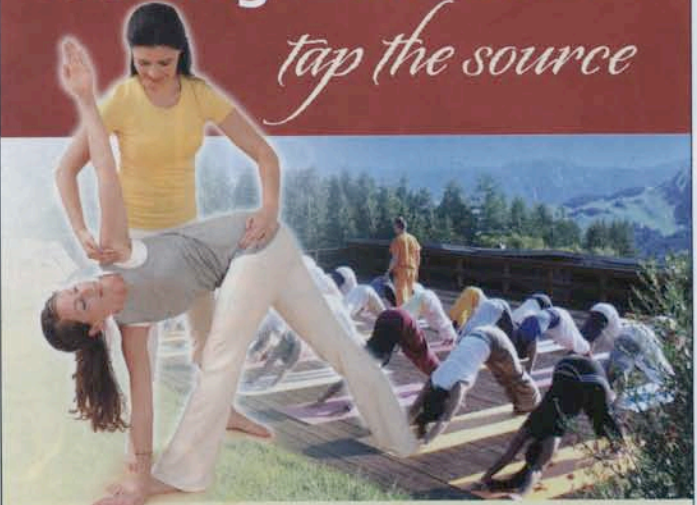
In order to ensure that therapists have the experience and expertise to appropriately apply yogic techniques to the broad range of human concerns, Yoga therapists have engaged in the process of agreeing and establishing minimal training standards for practitioners. The British Council for Yoga Therapy (BCYT) used expert opinion and consensus gathering to develop standards for Yoga therapy training programs in the UK. The BCYT review and accredit training programs to ensure these standards. The UK Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (CNHC) has adopted the BCYT's standards to determine who can register as a Yoga therapist. Individuals who have completed programmes accredited by the BCYT can register. Individuals who completed programmes not approved by the BCYT must demonstrate that their training is equivalent and meets the established standards.

In November a conference specifically focused on Yoga, the mind and mental health concerns was held at SOAS, University of London. The speakers presented the current scientific understanding of the way the brain processes emotional experiences, and the research evidence indicated that Yoga practices are particularly effective for mediating the way the body and brain respond. A sizeable body of literature has developed suggesting that a combination of Yoga asana, pranayama, guided relaxation and meditation can decrease symptoms of anxiety, depression and trauma. The principle beneficial factor identified by multiple speakers was the effectiveness of Yoga practices to stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS), to rest and restore the autonomic nervous system (ANS).


Increasing feelings of calmness are common general effects of Yoga. The task of the individual and Yoga therapist together is to identify, from the vast pool of yogic techniques, the combination that works for the individual. Drawing on the specific interests, abilities, priorities, and preferences of the person, a skilled Yoga therapist can devise a short and simple practice for the client to use at home, work, on the tube, or wherever it is most beneficial, to enable them to shift in ways needed to move toward greater health and well-being. For the client referenced in this article, breathing and meditation elements were added to her daily practice. The meditation was specifically designed to facilitate feelings of safety and connection in the context of a situation that often triggered fear in her. We'll see this week how well it is working for her and if we need to modify the practice or encourage her to carry on.

The Yoga therapy session referenced in this article took place in the Yoga Campus Yoga Therapy Clinic, which operates in The Life Centre studio in Islington. Details from: www.thelifecentre.com.

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