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# The psychological Effects of Yoga in woman: A case study of three woman at yoga center, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

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## Abstract

Women today play an important role in the socio-economic status. It is challenging for her to balance between home and work without been under stress, she needs a strong body to fit with her new style of life. A growing body of research have emphasized the important role that yoga plays in the overall well-being. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to acknowledge the psychological effects of yoga for women in Malaysia. The present study employed a qualitative research method with case study design through a semi-structured interview with three participants who are practicing yoga for a long time in yoga center. The participants were chosen through a purposive sampling method. Seven emergent themes were found while doing the analysis: coping with stress, positive relationship with others, good temperament, overcoming the problems, the beauty of the world, improvement in sleep, and finally satisfaction with body-image. The results of this study may encourage woman from all over the world to practice yoga.

**Keywords:** *Yoga, Women, Psychological Effect, Themes.*

## 1. Introduction

Yoga is very old spiritual discipline that include breathing techniques, positions, strengthening exercises, and meditation. The word "yoga" has been used since ancient times in India, it is derived from the Sanskrit word "yuj" which means "to yoke", or "to unify. Yoga is a system of training the mind, body and spirit for purification of soul and reach the union with the supreme consciousness. Patañjali defined yoga as "a conscious process of gaining mastery over the mind". Control comprise two aspects – a power to focus on any desired subject or object and the ability to remain quiet for quite some time.

From Islamic point of view, yoga is not just a physical sport, but is it a worship that is directed by its owners to the sun without God. Therefore, we say that yoga is not a sport, but rather a kind of pagan worship that a Muslim is not permitted to offer. But if we perform yoga without worshipping the sun, they are no longer yoga, but are easy exercises practiced by all nations. There is no objection to

doing them then by modifying the conditions mentioned in Yoga and to introduce some new situations to prevent them from being similar and to not to be done at times when the Hindus are keen to perform it as the sunrise<sup>1</sup>.

A growing body of researches have emphasized the important role that yoga plays in the overall well-being. For instance, Chen highlighted the greater role that yoga plays in the management of physical - mental health<sup>2</sup>. Another study conducted by Kumar found that yogic Intervention has been shown a significant effect on General Well Being<sup>3</sup>.

## 2. Statement of the problem

Today, the role of women has changed from been a housewife, a mother or a daughter only, to be an employee in the society, she plays an important role in the socio-economic status. It is challenging for her to balance between home and work without been under stress, she needs a strong body to fit with her new style of life.

<sup>1</sup> <http://islamweb.net> Translated from the website on May 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Chen, K.-M. Fan, J.-T. Wang, H.-H. Wu, S.-J. Li, C.-H. Lin, & H.-S. Silver. Yoga Exercises Improved Physical Fitness of Transitional Frail Elders Nursing Research. (2010), page(s) 364-370.

<sup>3</sup> Kumar K; Yogic Intervention and its Effect on General Well Being. (2012), pp 150-155.

Therefore, the main focus of yoga is to bring harmony between the mind and the body. Regular practice of some postures in yoga gives the women's body necessary power to face the difficulties at work, to have speed recovery after illness or when delivering her body and to restore energy levels.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to acknowledge the psychological effects of yoga for women in Malaysia, and to encourage woman from all the world to practice yoga.

### 3. Delimitation of the Study

This study is limited to participants from the district of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia that is why the findings gained through this study can not be the same in other countries, and with other participants.

### 4. Literature Review

Many researches have emphasized the important role of practicing yoga for women, it is considered to be one of the most effective, and valuable techniques for them to overcome various physical and psychological problems<sup>1</sup>.

Some studies have confirmed the efficacy of yoga in decreasing the level of anxiety among woman. Studies conducted by Vincente Pedro (1978) and Bheeshan (1998) found notable reduction in state and trait anxiety score in subjects due to regular practice of yoga.

Michalsen, A., Grossman, P., Acil, A., Langhorst, J., Lüdtke, R., Esch, T., Stefano, B. G., Dobos, G. J (2005) conducted a study about rapid stress reduction and anxiolysis among distressed women as a consequence of a three-month intensive yoga program. The study used an experimental study. A controlled prospective non-randomized study was conducted in 24 self-referred female subjects who see themselves as emotionally distressed. Subjects were offered participation in one of two sequential 3-months yoga programs.

The study used two groups of women, the first group consists of 16 women participated in the first class, the second group with 8 women served as a waiting list control. During the yoga course, subjects attended two-weekly 90-min Iyengar yoga classes. The study found woman who were in the first group and participated in the yoga-training demonstrated pronounced and significant improvements in perceived stress, state and trait anxiety, well-being, vigor, fatigue, and depression. Women suffering from mental distress participating in a 3-month Iyengar yoga class show significant improvements on measures of stress and psychological outcomes.

In contrast, Gawali<sup>1</sup>, S. R., & Dhule, S.S. (2013) conducted a research about the effect of yoga on anxiety levels in working women. The aim of this article is to study of effect of yoga on anxiety score before and after yoga training in apparently healthy working women. The participants were 35 apparently healthy working women aged between 25-40 years who attended two months of yoga training.

Spielberger's state and trait anxiety scale was used to evaluate anxiety levels before and after yoga training. The study showed a statistically significant difference in total anxiety score before and after yoga training, and concluded that regular practice of yoga in day to day life reduces anxiety levels and improves subjective feeling of wellbeing.

One study done by Shu-mei Zhuang, Shi-hui An, & Yue Zhao (2013) aims to evaluate the effects of yoga on mood status and quality of life among women undergoing detoxification for heroin dependence in China. The respondents were seventy-five women aged between 20 and 37-years undergoing detoxification for heroin dependence at AnKang Hospital were allocated randomly into an intervention or a control group. Women in the intervention group received a 6-month yoga intervention. The study found a significant improvement in mood status and quality of life of the control group over time.

Another research conducted by Kim. E. Innes & Terry Kit Selfe (2012) in order to examine the effects of yoga versus an educational film program on sleep, mood, perceived stress, and sympathetic activation in older women with RLS.

Seventy-five women were randomized to receive either an 8-week yoga (n = 38) or educational film (n = 37) program. The research found that yoga group demonstrated significantly greater improvements than controls in multiple domains of sleep quality and mood, and significantly greater reductions in insomnia prevalence, anxiety, and perceived stress.

Similarly, a study conducted by Rui Ferreira Afonso, Hachul, H., Kozasa, E. H., de Souza Oliveira, D., Goto, V., Rodrigues, D., Sérgio Tufik, & Leite, J. R. (2011) regarding yoga decreases insomnia in postmenopausal women. The aim of this study was to evaluate the effect of yoga practice on the physical and mental health and climacteric symptoms of postmenopausal women with a diagnosis of insomnia.

44 Postmenopausal women not undergoing hormone therapy, who were 50 to 65 years old, who had an apnea-hypopnea index less than 15, and who had a diagnosis of insomnia were randomly assigned to one of three groups, as follows: control, passive stretching, and yoga.

Questionnaires were administered before and 4 months after the intervention to evaluate quality of life, anxiety and

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<sup>1</sup> Jadhav, S. G. & Havalappanavar N. B. effect of yoga intervention on anxiety and subjective well-being. (2009), pp. 27-31.

depression symptoms, climacteric symptoms, insomnia severity, daytime sleepiness, and stress.

The researchers found when compared with the control group, the yoga group had significantly lower post treatment scores for climacteric symptoms and insomnia severity and higher scores for quality of life and resistance phase of stress. The reduction in insomnia severity in the yoga group was significantly higher than that in the control and passive-stretching groups.

Dittmann, K. A. (2008) conducted a qualitative research among woman who are practicing yoga, the research found that women who practiced postural yoga reported improvements in body satisfaction, disordered eating, and self-acceptance which they attributed in part to their yoga practice and its associated spirituality.

From the systematic review of the literature review we found some important points to discuss about it.

First, most of the articles discussed earlier in this paper used an experimental design, only one study used qualitative research method.

Second, many recent researches about yoga were conducted among woman from western countries, for example, US, Italy. Limited studies conducted in Asian countries.

However, little research their authors were interested to use a qualitative research method regarding psychological benefits of yoga for women. Therefore, the aim of this study is to acknowledge the psychological effects of yoga in women through a qualitative research method.

## 5. Theoretical framework: Cognitive Behavioral Theory

The cognitive-behavioral theoretical framework of human functioning is based on the premises that thoughts, emotions, and behaviors are inextricably linked and that each of these aspects of human functioning continuously impacts and influences the others. Specifically, cognitive-behavioral theory posits that thoughts about the self, relationships, the world, and the future shape emotions and behaviors<sup>1</sup>.

In turn, feelings and behaviors shape thoughts and thought processes in a kind of ongoing reciprocal feedback loop. Moreover, cognitive-behavioral theory posits that cognitive-affective-behavioral processes are similar and analogous across human beings and human experience. However, the content within the cognitive-affective-

behavioral processes is specific, unique, and personal to the individual<sup>2</sup>.

How human beings construct the reality of their life and the meaning human beings give to their life, their self, their relationships, their environments, and their future is distinct. This distinctiveness comes from uniquely individual experience, knowledge, and memory. When this cognitive-affective-behavioral system works well, human beings are able to take in information from their experiences and their environment, process and manage that information, and then use the information to direct emotions and behaviors toward meeting their needs and goals in ways that are adaptive, efficient, and functional<sup>3</sup>.

However, serious difficulties in human thinking, feeling, behaving, and functioning can occur when there are problems in thoughts and thought processes<sup>4</sup>. Central to cognitive-behavioral theory is the notion of cognitive mediation—that the meaning people bring to and take from their experiences shapes how they feel and respond.

Our cognitive activity is an active and crucial part of both positive and negative functioning. When our emotions and behaviors are guided by thoughts and beliefs that are seriously unhelpful in some manner, it is likely that we will have difficulty meeting our needs, pursuing our goals, and experiencing life in a satisfied, comfortable manner. When our needs are unmet and goals are not achieved, we are then likely to experience distress and anguish, which in turn may reinforce or create new problems in thoughts and beliefs, as well as our emotional and social experience and views of ourselves and what the future holds.

As a counterpoint to this, cognitive-behavioral theory also posits that we human beings have the capacities to monitor, examine, and change our thoughts, beliefs, and thought processes. We have the ability to think about thinking, and thus we have the capacity to alter and replace problematic, inaccurate, or in some other way unhelpful thoughts. By directing attention to and modifying thoughts and beliefs, we can also change and direct emotions and behaviors to better meet our needs and goals toward more beneficial outcomes<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Beck, A. T. Cognitive models of depression. In R. L. Leahy & E. T. (2002), pp. 29–61; Dobson, K. S., & Dozois, D. J. A. Historical and philosophical bases of the cognitive behavioral therapies. (2001), pp. 3–39.

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<sup>2</sup> Alford, B. A., & Beck, A. T. The integrative power of cognitive therapy. (1997); DeRubeis, R. J., Tang, T. Z., & Beck, A. T. Cognitive therapy. (2001), pp. 349–392.

<sup>3</sup> Alford, B. A., & Beck, A. T. The integrative power of cognitive therapy. (1997); Berlin, S. B. Clinical social work practice: A cognitive-integrative perspective. (2002).

<sup>4</sup> Beck, J. S. Cognitive therapy basics and beyond. (1995).

<sup>5</sup> Berlin, S. B. Clinical social work practice: A cognitive-integrative perspective. (2002); Dobson, K. S., & Dozois, D. J. A. Historical and philosophical bases of the cognitive behavioral therapies. (2001), pp. 3–39.

This premise that people can think about their thinking, which A. T. Beck (1996) terms metacognition, is foundational to the change processes in cognitive-behavioral therapy.

## 6. Method

The qualitative research method is used in this study, because it is the best approach that provide complex textual descriptions of how people experience a given research issue.

The case study design was used in this study to answer the following question:

How yoga can be effective in promoting a psychological well-being for women?

A semi-structured interview was conducted to gain information about the psychological effect of yoga in women, in response to a series of context which included stress, relationship with others, mood, ability to deal with problems, perceiving the world, sleep, body-image, and concentration.

Three women practicing yoga for a long time participated in this study. The first participant was an Indian woman at the age of 30 years old, the second informant was a Chinese woman at the age of 50 years old and they were practicing yoga in one of yoga centers in jalan Ampang, Kuala lampur, Malaysia.

The last participant was a Malay woman at the age of 28 years old practicing yoga in cheras, Kuala lampur, Malaysia. The participants were chosen through a purposive sampling technique.

The data collection of this study was conducted in May 2017 within three days, where the researcher met the participants in one of the yoga center for 10 minutes, and before starting the interview, the researcher explained about the study and its objectives.

A set of questions developed by the author was used as a guide to carry out the interview, in order to have deep understanding about the psychological effects of yoga in women.

The interview questions for this study contained six questions (see table 1).

Table 1. Sample of the interview questions

<p>Q1&amp;2. Did you experience any stressful moment? If yes, can you please tell me how yoga helped you to overcome the stress?</p> <p>Q3. Did your practice of yoga influence your relationship with others?</p> <p>Q4. Can you tell me how yoga affects your mood?</p> <p>Q5&amp;6. Has your practice of yoga influenced your ability to deal with any problem? If yes, please tell me how?</p>
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The interview was conducted by the author, and it was transcribed as a first step in the analysis procedure by using a digital voice recorder, a thematic analysis has been applied for the data analysis.

The participants of this study were given a coding name when quoting their statements. (See table 2).

Table 2

Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3
P <sub>1</sub>	P <sub>2</sub>	P <sub>3</sub>

## 7. Research Findings

The findings of this study were developed through the thematic analysis, fifty-five categories have emerged from the raw data, and were categories into seven themes, which are: coping with stress, positive relationship with others, good temperament, overcoming the problems, the beauty of the world, improvement in sleep, and satisfaction with body-image. The themes developed in this study, clarify the psychological effects of yoga in women.

The themes were then discussed by including quotations from yoga interview without mentioning participant's names.

### Theme 1. Coping with stress

From the raw data, one of the important themes has emerged, which is coping with stress, stress can affect woman negatively, if it was overwhelming and interrupting her psychological well-being. As the participants mentioned in the interview, yoga can help to overcome the stress. For instant, P<sub>1</sub> said:

*“Yes, yoga helped me to overcome the stress by keeping me centered and balanced. And it was very helpful to change my way of thinking to cope with stress. So much more able to cope with stress and work”*

While P<sub>2</sub> said:

*“Yes, it helps me, it's really calms my mind, when I do the asanas for postures, and the breathing it is really calms my mind”*

P<sub>3</sub> said: *“Yes, I have beside my prayers and zikr, the breathing techniques help as well”*.

From the three participant’s experiences, yoga helps coping with stress, especially the breathing techniques as mentioned by two of our participants by keeping the women calm, centered and balanced.

## **Theme 2. Positive relationship with others**

The participants of this study mentioned that yoga helped them to build a positive relationship with others. As P<sub>1</sub> said: *“yoga helped me to build a positive relationship with my friends and my husband, my family. I am more social now”*

Similarly, P<sub>2</sub> claimed: *“yes, really. When I do yoga classes. I feel close to my friends. My attitude changed. I see live different”*

On the other hand, P<sub>3</sub> claimed that: *“I would think so, I supposed its how I am able to focus my mind. For example, being attentive to others when they are talking”*

From the participants’ experiences, yoga helped them to be more social, to be attentive to others while talking, and to be close to friends. As in yoga classes, all the practices stay close to each other, so they learn how to work as a group, and help each other.

## **Theme 3. Good temperament**

One of the psychological effects of yoga in woman is having a good temperament. All of the three participants mentioned about the effect of yoga on their mood. For example, P<sub>1</sub> said: *“yes, it is make me much more calm, much more happier”*

P<sub>2</sub> stated that: *“yes, it affects my mood. If I am too exaggerated, or too stressful, I just practice the breathing and the post. It is really makes difference”*.

While P<sub>3</sub> said: *“Yoga help me in balancing my hormones, especially before menses. The mood swing”*.

From the participants’ view, yoga helped them to be happy, calm, and control their mood during the menstruation.

## **Theme 4. Overcoming the problems**

In addition to build a positive relationship with others, yoga also helps in overcoming the problems by using some strategies. For instant, P<sub>1</sub> use the breathing techniques as a mediator to solve any problem.

As she said: *“I know what strategies to use to solve my problems now, before I never knew how to solve problems or issues. With yoga, it make more clear in my mind, and able to think of ways to solve problems. The breathing techniques of yoga help with making me much calmer, so*

*when getting upset in any situation, the breathing techniques make me feel much more quiet, and centered. Which make it easy for me to solve problems. So the breathing techniques and meditation”*.

While P<sub>2</sub> use the strategy of accepting the problems and try to solve it.

*“When practicing yoga, I developed thing that can just like accept the fact, accept the problems. And actually we are the only one who are creating the problems. So my strategy is to accept the problem, and let go on with the problem”*.

When the woman manages to solve all the problems that she can face it, she becomes more confident of herself.

## **Theme 5. The beauty of the world**

The participants of this study claimed that with their practice of yoga, they see the world differently. As P<sub>1</sub> said:

*“Much more positive, excepting people, and not judging people. Before practicing yoga, the way that I see the world was very negative, I was unhappy”*.

Similarly, P<sub>2</sub> said that: *“I see everybody and the world so beautiful, I notice the energy of everyone, even if trees or any other things that has live. I think positively. I can see meanings in everything”*.

From the participants’ experiences with yoga, they see the world beautiful, everything has a meaning. The positive view of the world, can eliminate the possibility of experiencing any depression or anxiety for women.

## **Theme 6. Improvement in sleep**

Having difficulties in sleeping can lead to a negative sequence especially for the mood. From the participants’ experiences when they started practicing yoga, they never experience any difficulties in sleeping.

All of the three participants answered our question, which is if they experience any difficulties in sleeping during the time when they start practicing yoga, their answers were as the following: P<sub>1</sub> said that: *“No, I sleep much better, my breathing is lighter when I am sleeping, no snoring”*. Similarly P<sub>2</sub> said: *“No, I sleep much better, my breathing is lighter when I am sleeping, no snoring”*.

And finally, P<sub>3</sub> said: *“No, I didn’t experience any sleeping difficulties prior to yoga. I do feel more relax after yoga class, and that help me sleep really well”*.

From the participants’ view, yoga helps in improving sleep.

## Theme 7. Satisfaction with body-image

A finale theme that the author identified from the data analysis is related to satisfaction with body-image. Participants in this study were all satisfied with their body. For instant, P<sub>2</sub> claimed that:

*“Yoga is not for the body how it looks. I see my body different, I feel happy my body, I can know my body now, by practicing yoga, I start loving my body the way it is”.*

As this comment indicate that yoga helps woman to see her body differently, she starts loving it the way it is.

## 8. Discussion of the findings

The findings of this study revealed that yoga can be effective in promoting a psychological well-being for woman.

Yoga can help woman to cope with stress by keeping the mind centered and balanced. As it is supported by the research of Michalsen, A. et all (2005), the study found woman who were participated in the yoga-training demonstrated pronounced and significant improvements in perceived stress.

Yoga helps woman in building positive relationship with others, with regards also to the positive view of perceiving the world. The Cognitive-behavioral theory support our findings posits that thoughts about the self, relationships, the world, and the future shape emotions and behaviors<sup>1</sup>.

Yoga can promote a good temperament for woman, as when practicing yoga, women start to experience the happiness, and the calmness. Our findings were supported by the study of Shu-mei Zhuang et all (2013), which they found a significant improvement in mood status and quality of life of the control group over time.

According to Balodhi and Mishra (1983) the disciplines of yoga as outlined by Pantanjali are techniques, like behavior therapy techniques, which teach greater cognitive control, and therefore help the individual to control, modify, or eliminate “pathological states and reactions” (p. 197).

Practicing yoga can reduce any sleep disturbance for woman. Kim. E. I et all (2012) found that woman in the yoga group demonstrated significantly greater improvements than for those of control group in multiple domains of sleep quality.

Finally, yoga helps women to be more satisfied with their body-image. This finding was supported by Dittmann, K. A. (2008). The author found that women who practiced

postural yoga reported improvements in body satisfaction, and self-acceptance which they attributed in part to their yoga practice and its associated spirituality.

## 9. Conclusion

In a nutshell, this study was about to acknowledge the psychological effects of yoga in woman. Seven themes emerged from the interview transcription based on the research questions.

The findings of this study suggested that yoga can be effective in promoting a psychological well-being for woman by helping her to create a positive relationship with others, and to perceive the world in a beautiful way, yoga can help woman to deal with problems and cope with stress successfully. It also helps woman to be satisfied with her body-image. With all this benefit of yoga, women can never experience any psychological problems.

Hence, additional research is needed to explore the benefits of yoga in the psychological and physical well-being qualitatively.

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