Clients’ Experiences of Yoga-Integrated Counselling: Implications for Higher Education Settings

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TODAY’S OVERVIEW

❖ Why this topic?
❖ What is yoga?
❖ Current Research
❖ This Study
❖ Implications for College & University Settings
❖ Implementation
❖ Questions & Discussion
WHY YOGA-INTEGRATED COUNSELLING MATTERS?

❖ Why I chose this research:
  ❖ Personal transformation
  ❖ Desire to understand & use in work

❖ Why this research is important:
  ❖ Prevalent use of yoga & mindfulness
  ❖ New integration: yoga in counselling

❖ Why this topic matters today:
  ❖ Yoga facilitates self-acceptance, resilience, social engagement
WHAT IS YOGA?

❖ Yoke, or union, of body and mind
❖ Typically includes:
  ❖ breathing techniques
  ❖ physical postures (asanas)
  ❖ meditation
❖ Integrative practice that develops:
  ❖ body awareness
  ❖ mindfulness
  ❖ self-regulation
❖ Beneficial for physical & psychological well-being

Salmon, Lush, Jablonski, Sephton, 2009; Gard, Noggle, Park, Vago, & Wilson, 2014
RESEARCH TO DATE: YOGA & MENTAL HEALTH

- Stress, anxiety, depression, trauma
- Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction
- Mental health centres
- College and university counselling centres
  - Yoga for Stress Management Program
- Integrated within individual counselling - *Yoga Psychotherapy*
  - “a holistic practice integrating the principles of yoga with traditional psychotherapy, and is different than the more physically based yoga therapy”
  - New practice, relatively unaddressed by research

THE STUDY: YOGA IN COUNSELLING

❖ 6 participants: previous clients of counselling
❖ 1-hour interviews
❖ Descriptive phenomenological methodology and analysis (Giorgi)

Research Question: What is the clients’ lived experience of counselling that integrates the use of yoga?
RESULTS: THEMES OF EXPERIENCE

Theme 1: Yoga components
- inclusion of the body that is mindful

Theme 2: Counselling components
- verbal processing that is nonjudgmental

Theme 3: Structure of components is integrative and transitional

Theme 4: Yoga facilitates
- bottom-up processing
- affect regulation

Theme 5: Counsellor qualities facilitate trust

Theme 6: Whole-person, whole-life approach
INCLUSION OF THE BODY

❖ BREATH WORK

❖ BODYWORK

❖ Movement that is small, simple, nonspecific

❖ "You wouldn't call them postures because they weren't technical postures, but just going through different motions and being aware of what came up when I was doing that you know, what sensations I was aware of and actually just beginning to listen to my body"

❖ BODY AWARENESS

❖ "its about finding an inner connection, and just being aware of bringing awareness to the body"

❖ "as soon as I shift into the breath or the body I have to be in right now, and therefore I am in my own feelings, thoughts, emotions, whatever and not in the expectations that I think I put on myself or that I perceive others to put on me"
MINDFULNESS

❖ Awareness
❖ of body (physical sensation), breath, thoughts, emotions, feelings, memories, external stimuli
❖ that is:
❖ intentional
❖ in the present moment
❖ nonjudgmental and curious

“Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way; On purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.”

Jon Kabat-Zinn
"she trained me to be a lot more curious about what I'm noticing"

"a practice of noticing where I was attempting to attach to [thoughts], where I was attempting to push away from them or distract myself from them, where I was judging, you know, the different thought processes and emotions"
VERBAL EXPLORATION & PROCESSING

❖ curious
❖ nonjudgmental
❖ person-centred
❖ client-directed

“stay with what’s happening and then see what happens next. It’s more like following than imposing.”

“counsellors who use yoga aren’t trying to figure out what is happening, they are following the experience – using the body as a map”
"yoga is the mechanism"

- Inclusion of the body (bodywork, breath, body awareness) in a particular way (mindful awareness) facilitates:
  - **Bottom-Up Processing**
    - Body as access point
    - Verbal exploration
    - Insight & catharsis
  - **Affect Regulation**
    - Short-term: calm, relax, ground when overwhelmed
    - Long-term: develop capacity to be with discomfort
COUNSELLOR QUALITIES

- Qualities: kind, open, light, patient, gentle, lovely
- Embodied the approach
  - curious, nonjudgmental, patient, supportive
- Facilitated trust, comfort, safety
  - in relationship
  - in counselling
WHOLE PERSON, WHOLE LIFE APPROACH

❖ Holistic: Physical, Mental, Emotional Parts of Self

❖ “it’s saying yes to the whole person rather than one part”

❖ “it’s just more integrative I think. Like it’s the whole person, not just some disembodied brain.”

❖ “it’s … the systemic way, to address the deeper root causes of mental, physical, and emotional issues that us human beings face.”

❖ A Way of Life

❖ “It’s not separate from my life. It kind of becomes the underlying curiosity.”

❖ “It basically is my life now I would say … it’s a way of life, like a philosophy and maybe a road map with a bunch of tools in the toolbox.”
“We’re so busy watching out for what’s just ahead of us that we don’t take time to enjoy where we are.”

- Calvin & Hobbes
INCLUSION OF THE BODY

Listening to the body (interoception)

Body awareness
  Mindful
  Verbal exploration & processing

Facilitation of meaning making (understanding)

Healing

Mehling et al., 2011; van der Kolk, 2006
MINDFULNESS

❖ Non-elaborative

❖ Mindfulness is not:
  ❖ experiential avoidance
  ❖ over-engagement

❖ Mindfulness-based practices and therapies: MBCT, MBSR, ACT, DBT

Bishop et al., 2004; Mehling et al., 2011
YOGA: THE ACCELERATOR & THE BRAKE

❖ Rothschild's driving metaphor

❖ Access, explore, process
  ❖ Insight & catharsis led to clarity, freedom, & integration
  ❖ Release was sometimes overwhelming
  ❖ Body as "back door"

❖ Contain, ground, regulate
  ❖ Over time, develop capacity to stay with discomfort (expand the window of tolerance)

❖ Speaks to need to be trauma-informed

"yoga in counselling helps to build personal capacity and resilience. When I don't know what to do and I feel out of control in my life, I can come back to my breath and body and connect in. I can pay attention to or even change aspects of my experience (even when nothing external will shift or change). This has greatly increased my capacity to sit with difficult experiences, emotions, and thoughts; to wait to act until I am sure that the action is best for me - rather than acting for the sake of acting to release the tension caused by difficulty."

Rothschild, 2000
IMPLICATIONS

Highlights of Study Results for Higher Education Settings
MINDFUL AWARENESS

- Mindful approach, mindful counsellor, mindful client
- Used independently or with breath or body movement
- Learn by:
  - Direct instruction (psychoeducation)
  - Observation (counsellor’s way of being)
  - Experience (counsellor-facilitated exploration)
MINDFUL AWARENESS

- Facilitates
  - **Approach to self**: curious, accepting, compassionate
  - **Emotion regulation**
  - **Resilience**: capacity to be with discomfort
  - **Orientation to community**
  - **Whole person approach**: listen to the body
SELF-ACCEPTANCE

- Participants developed a curious, accepting, compassionate approach to self.

Negative beliefs, blaming, expectations, judgments, automatic thoughts

“notice” "wonder"

reinforce through practice

more supportive, compassionate and less judgmental toward self

“This is where I’m learning to be gentle with myself and learning to just accept myself as exactly as I am in this moment, whatever that is.”

Hollis-Walker and Colosimo, 2011; Neff, 2003
EMOTION REGULATION

❖ Yoga

❖ calming, soothing, relaxation effect of breathing

❖ breath regulation - vagal tone - parasympathetic response

❖ Mindfulness

❖ develop body and emotional awareness

❖ “nonappraisal strategy”

BECOMING RESILIENT

- **Capacity** to be with discomfort

  - “with yoga too, learning how to actually you know be in discomfort in my body and be able, be ok with that”

  - “the yoga and counselling together have helped me realize that I have capacity to meet whatever happens in the moment.”

- Jon Kabat-Zinn on MBSR research

  - more than reducing symptoms

  - "Stress Hardiness"

Kabat-Zinn, 2013
“Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”

- Viktor E. Frankl
“this yoga and counselling style is really important because it helps me to be able to meet people in my community in a completely different way. I think that if we can learn, if more of us can learn to do that, it would build stronger communities and bigger acceptance of each other.”

How does this happen?

- Generalization of curious, nonjudgmental approach?
- Practice of yoga philosophy and ethics?
- Changes to our nervous system?
YOGA & THE STRESS RESPONSE

- **Fight or Flight:** ↓ SNS response
  - individual-oriented, survival emotions and actions

- **Relax & Socially Engage:** ↑ PNS response
  - group-oriented, prosocial emotions and actions
  - social engagement system (vagus nerve)

Streeter, Gerbarg, Saper, Ciraulo, & Brown, 2012; Craig, 2009; Porges, 2001
IMPLEMENTATION

❖ Suggestions in the Literature
  ❖ yoga classes
  ❖ yoga-based psychoeducational groups

❖ Mindfulness practice
  ❖ formal, informal
  ❖ individual, group
  ❖ student, staff

❖ Implicit: mindful way of relating
❖ Explicit: teaching of mindfulness to students

Adams & Puig, 2008; Milligan, 2006
FINAL THOUGHTS

❖ Teaching, Being, Doing
❖ Presence
❖ Compassion
❖ Capacity
❖ Each moment is a new chance

"What day is it?" asked Pooh.
"It's today," squeaked Piglet.
"My favorite day," said Pooh.
Thank you!

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Questions, Thoughts, Comments?


REFERENCES


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