Perspective

Yoga as Coping: A Conceptual Framework for Meaningful Participation in Yoga

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Abstract

Yoga facilitates relaxation and connection of mind, body, and spirit through the use of breathing, meditation, and physical postures. Participation in yoga has been extensively linked to decreased stress, and as a result, is considered a therapeutic intervention by many. However, few theories exist that explain the link between yoga participation and improved psychosocial wellbeing. The leisure-stress coping conceptual framework suggests that through participation in leisure, an individual can decrease stress while concurrently restoring and building up sustainable mental and physical capacities. Three types of leisure coping strategies exist: palliative coping, mood enhancement, and companionship. The purpose of this article is to propose the leisure-stress coping conceptual framework as a model for explaining benefits received from yoga participation via leisure coping strategies, which may explain or support improved ability to manage stress.

Keywords: yoga, leisure, therapeutic intervention, coping, stress management

Introduction

An ancient Indian practice, yoga facilitates sustainable relaxation and equilibrium of the mind, body, and spirit through the purposeful use of pranayama (breathing), dhyana (meditation), and asanas (physical postures) to enhance physical, emotional, and social wellbeing (Collins, 1998; Granath, Ingvarsson, Von Thiele, & Lundberg, 2006; Ross & Thomas, 2010; Turnbull, 2010; West, Otte, Geher, Johnson, & Mohr, 2004). Researchers believe that the combination of these three components, or the combined use of both mind and body, produces the effects documented with yoga practice (Berger & Owen, 1988; 1992; Van Puymbroeck, Hsieh, & Pernell, 2008).

Hatha yoga is a holistic practice focused on achieving balance, restoration, rejuvenation, and strength for the body, mind, and spirit (Iyengar, 2008; Forbes, 2011). Hatha yoga typically involves steady, repeated movements that are performed in a continuous gentle flow. This flow is in contrast to traditional forms of physical exercise that can be strained or forceful, often demanding a certain stamina or aspect of physical strength, and that may lead to overexertion or injury (Iyengar, 2008). Although there have been a number of research studies identifying improvements in levels of stress or anxiety following a yoga intervention (e.g., Granath et al., 2006; Kirkwood, Rampes, Tuffrey, Richardson, & Pilkington, 2005; Michalsen et al., 2005; Smith, Hancock, Blake-Mortimer, & Eckert, 2007; VanCampfort et al., 2011; West et al., 2004), only a few researchers have identified foundational theories or conceptual frameworks that apply to these findings (e.g., Gard, Noggle, Park, Vago, & Wilson, 2014; Kulkarni & Bera, 2009; Streeter, Gerbarg, Saper, Ciraulo, & Brown, 2012). While these theories and frameworks focus on the effects of yoga on physiological and/or biological responses to stress, there have not been any models that present yoga as a leisure activity as a means for developing psychosocial coping strategies. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to suggest that the Leisure-Stress Coping Conceptual Framework (Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000) may provide substantive explanation of the improvements in stress and coping that may occur following a yoga intervention.

Stress and Coping

Stress is any real or perceived occurrence that threatens an individual’s physical or emotional stability; it can impede or prevent an individual’s ability to appropriately respond to or manage the incident (Gerrig & Zimbardo, 2002). As a consequence of stress, an individual may perceive a disruption in their sense of normalcy, and there is increased likelihood of the stressor negatively impacting the inception or
continuation of a primary or secondary illness (Borsook, Maleki, Becerra, & McEwen, 2012; Chrousos, 2009; McEwen, 2012). An individual experiencing stress will have to identify ways to manage, adjust to, or work through the internal or external distress to reestablish equilibrium and wellbeing. This response and effort to manage or contend with a given stressor is a process referred to as coping (McCrae, 1984).

In its simplest form, coping refers to an individual’s aptitude to handle stress (Persson & Rydén, 2006). Coping is the effort an individual exerts behaviorally or attitudinally in an attempt to diminish, regulate, endure, or resolve any hazard threatening the individual’s interior or exterior assets (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). It is important to note that coping is defined only as an individual’s effort to work through or regulate the strain or stressor; it is not based on whether the exertion or eventual outcome of the exertion is successful (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986). Coping is complicated in that it is responsive and swayed by both natural and psychological processes of the individual, as well as the multifaceted contextual environment (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Additionally, it is iterative, based on internal and external conditions (Lazarus, 1993b).

Operating under the notion that coping involves both cognitive and behavioral aspects, based on Lazarus and Folkman’s Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping, there are two avenues of coping in which an individual can engage: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Problem-focused coping equips an individual to concentrate on how they might repair the person-environment interaction by modifying either the definitive obstacle or the environment in which the stressor exists (Lazarus, 1993a). Problem-focused coping is primarily implemented when an individual believes there is an action or behavior that can be implemented to modify or eliminate the stressor (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Hutchinson, Loy, Kleiber, & Dattilo, 2003).

In emotion-focused coping, an individual alters their assessed meaning or interpretation of a situation by better governing their emotions, attitudes, or behaviors in response to the stressor (Folkman et al., 1991). Accordingly, while neither the actual stressor nor the conditions in which the stressor is occurring have been alleviated, the level of stress felt by the individual has been significantly decreased due to an adjustment in perception and emotional response to the situation (Lazarus, 1993a; 1993b; Nilsson, 2007).

Universally, there is not one form or method of coping that is superior to another. In fact, one style of coping that achieves large volumes of successful adjustment in one scenario may be equally unproductive and inept in a future encounter. This is because the coping process is vigorously complex and contextually based (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Thus, just as a specific strategy proves successful in one circumstance but not in another, a coping strategy that seems appropriate at the start of a situation may quickly prove not to be effective. Coping requires flexibility. How an individual copes will continuously evolve as their appraisal of the stressor, as well as the environment in which the stressor is present, is revised (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004).

Leisure-Stress Coping Conceptual Framework

Leisure can be active or passive; a particular time, place, or activity; work-related or non-work-related; and is different for all people. Thus, Parr (2006) identified that leisure is relative—its manifestation and designated worth are uniquely defined by the individual. Still, there are some vital components to leisure, namely: intrinsic motivation, personal choice, self-determination, reflection, and growth (Austin, 1998; Carruthers & Hood, 2007; Cooper, 1999; Dattilo, Kleiber, & Williams, 1998; Hood & Carruthers, 2007; Stumbo & Peterson, 1998; Van Andel, 1998).

The leisure-stress coping conceptual framework is based solely on the purposeful use of leisure (Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000). Leisure has been shown to aid in lessening stress while concurrently restoring and building up sustainable mental and physical capacities within an individual (Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000; Iwasaki, Mannell, Smale, & Butcher, 2002). Leisure-stress coping is therefore positively correlated with both short- and long-term coping processes. Within the leisure-stress coping conceptual framework, Iwasaki and Mannell (2000) differentiated between leisure coping beliefs and leisure coping strategies. Leisure coping beliefs signify the extent to which an individual believes that leisure can assist in the coping process and produce a sense of strength and purpose (Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993; Hutchinson, Bland, & Kleiber, 2008; Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000). In contrast, leisure coping strategies signify “actual situational grounded behaviors or cognitions available through involvements in leisure” (Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000, p. 167). In other words, individuals consciously select a specific type of leisure as a tactic for coping, acknowledging leisure as a support and approach for dealing with stress, in the realms of both behavioral and emotional processes (Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000). Thus, in thinking of leisure-stress coping, the focus is not placed on the activity itself; rather the value is in the individual’s confidence and belief regarding the meaning and experience of the leisure activity to buffer and guard against the destructive effects of the stressor.

mood enhancement, and leisure companionship. Considered different types of emotion-focused coping, each of these coping strategies offers a different means of enhanced coping.

**Leisure palliative coping.** The first leisure coping strategy is leisure palliative coping, in which an individual experiences a momentary break that allows for a brief escape or distraction from the tense situation. The break is supplemented by a period of restoration and recuperation in preparation for re-entering the stressful circumstance with focus and renewed strength (Iwasaki, Mannell, Smale, & Butcher, 2002; Kleiber, Hutchinson, & Williams, 2002). Specifically, in thinking of an individual experiencing a traumatic life event, leisure may not seem like the obvious solution. However, leisure’s role within coping is to offer protection and restitution, both of which advance an individual’s ability to manage stress (Hutchinson, Bland, & Kleiber, 2008). Leisure permits an individual to defend their sense of self by disengaging from their distressed state, displacing the negative with constructive thoughts that redefine the perceived stressor and giving the individual causation for motivation and hope (Kleiber, Hutchinson, & Williams, 2002; Houston, 1987; Hutchinson, Loy, Kleiber, & Dattilo, 2003). Kleiber et al. (2002) advocated that diversionary activities providing momentary departure are correlated with emerging hope, just as enjoyable activities can re-establish and cultivate an individual’s belief that a setback or traumatic crisis can be endured and outlasted (Hutchinson, Bland, & Kleiber, 2008).

**Leisure mood enhancement.** The second leisure coping strategy is leisure mood enhancement, in which leisure plays a vital role in an individual demoting negative perspectives while moving towards establishing and maintaining optimistic attitudes and upbeat emotions when dealing with strain or tension (Kleiber et al., 2002). This strategy is most clearly reflected when working with an individual who has accrued loss, permanent change, or immobilization as a result of a trauma or distressing experience (Kleiber et al., 2002). Some stress or disturbance in life can be anticipated; however, disturbing life events often occur without any indication or warning. In these instances, the use of leisure can be beneficial in providing individuals an opportunity to connect with their past and preserve their sense of normalcy (Hutchinson, Loy, Kleiber, & Dattilo, 2003). Leisure mood enhancement is focused on the active use of meaningful leisure for the purpose of motivating an individual to renew their outlook on life by adjusting to what cannot be changed, while conceptualizing avenues for advancing towards improved life satisfaction and quality of life (Kleiber et al., 2002). If there is a prolonged absence of opportunities for coping through leisure, some individuals are more likely to encounter devastating thoughts of desolation and hopelessness (Hutchinson et al., 2003).

**Leisure companionship.** The third type of leisure coping is leisure companionship. Leisure companionship refers to the idea that through leisure an individual can take part in a shared leisure experience with individuals similar to themselves or individuals going through or having already successfully navigated through a comparable stressful situation. Leisure companionship is based on the idea that a network of support and social contact with others is imperative to an individual’s overall wellbeing and quality of life, particularly when coping with and working through a difficult life experience (Iso-Ahola & Park, 1996; Iwasaki, Mannell, Smale, & Butcher, 2002). Leisure companionship focuses on actively utilizing leisure as a vehicle for facilitating a resounding sense of belonging within the individual so that they can revive their self-worth and sense of relevancy, and can recognize their own competence and vigor (Iwasaki, Mackay, MacTavish, Ristock, & Bartlett, 2006).

Thus, no matter the origin of the activity, nor the kind of activity, participation in leisure aids an individual in developing sustainable coping processes as it creates an accepting atmosphere infused with feelings of community, hope, meaning, and purpose (Hutchinson et al., 2003). Finally, leisure offers an opportunity for personal transformation and identity formation or renovation. This aspect of leisure is often overlooked in the coping and rehabilitation process because attention usually falls on an individual exerting every effort to restore or regain what was permanently lost as a result of the stressful and perhaps traumatic life event.

### Connecting Yoga and the Leisure-Stress Coping Conceptual Framework

While there is substantial yoga literature that exists, the authors of this study have chosen to illustrate the connection between yoga and the leisure-stress coping conceptual framework by exploring a small sample of studies that support yoga as both problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping (specifically using the leisure coping strategies of palliative coping, mood enhancement, and social companionship). In doing so, the authors intend to demonstrate how yoga, leisure, and coping are interrelated and can assist individuals in managing everyday stressors or in coping with residual effects of a health condition. Authors focused on the robust information available for leisure coping strategies, one component of Iwasaki and Mannell’s conceptual framework (2000), as a means for explaining yoga as an action-oriented coping mechanism. Leisure coping beliefs, a second component of Iwasaki and Mannell’s conceptual framework (2000), will not be addressed as leisure coping beliefs focus on individuals’ “psychological
dispositions” that are less applicable to participation in yoga (p. 165).

Yoga as Leisure

Identifying a definition for leisure can be challenging as each individual’s perception of leisure differs. However, many scholars agree that leisure is a state of mind and is comprised of autonomy, intrinsic reward, competence, and a sense of relatedness (Caldwell, 2005; Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993; Mannell & Kleiber, 1997; McLean, Hurd, & Rogers, 2008; Neulinger, 1974). In the same way, individuals’ reasoning for participating in yoga typically varies. It is possible that the core components of leisure (identified above) serve as the primary motivations that account for why people choose to participate in yoga.

Yoga as Problem-Focused Coping

Problem-focused coping, or coping by addressing specific symptoms, has been demonstrated in a few yoga research studies. For example, Schmid, Van Puymbroeck, and Kocjea (2010) examined the influence of a 12-week yoga intervention on the fear of falling and balance in older adults, problems that when left untreated can diminish activity and quality of life. The researchers found that fear of falling and static balance improved significantly over the 12 weeks. Qualitative data from this study indicated that participants felt more confident that if they were to lose their balance, they would be able to minimize the consequences. This was a sentiment echoed in a study by Van Puymbroeck, Allsop, Miller, and Schmid (2014) by people with chronic stroke following an 8-week yoga intervention. As one of the participants stated about practicing on the floor, “why would I purposefully want to get down there? My whole goal was to stay up off the floor. It’s not so foreign now, especially once you find out you can do it. It does build your confidence.” (p. 26).

Yoga as Emotion-Focused Coping

Emotion-focused coping influences the way one considers or interprets his or her situation. Some evidence within the yoga literature supports this as the mechanism for improved wellbeing. For example, Kinser, Bourguignon, Taylor, and Steeves (2013) identified improved healthy connectedness with self and others following an 8-week yoga study involving 12 women diagnosed with depression. Several participants identified their depression as being a stressor in and of itself, acknowledging that their depression often caused negative thinking and isolation. However, through their involvement in yoga, participants identified an increased sense of control and competence to acknowledge and handle their life circumstances.

Recent research evaluating the effects of a 10-week yoga intervention on women transitioning through menopause indicated improved mood, decreased irritability, and decreased anxiety among participants (Crowe, Van Puymbroeck, Linder, McGuire, & Watt, 2015). Participants indicated that their overall quality of life had been enhanced as a result of learning postures and breathing exercises that could be utilized in everyday life to assist them in re-establishing a sense of calm and internal stability immediately following a stressful event.

Yoga as palliative coping. Palliative coping offers a brief reprieve from the stressor and results in greater internal strength. This relationship is evident in several published yoga studies. For example, Garrett, Immink, and Hillier (2011) evaluated the effects of yoga participation on quality of life in individuals recovering from stroke. Participants, age 32 to 85, engaged in 90-minute yoga sessions for 10 weeks; sessions involved asana, pranayama, and nidra meditation. Findings indicated that participants felt an enhanced sense of calm and awareness of self, as their involvement in yoga allowed them to “take a break” from everyday circumstances and focus on their physical and emotional health. For several participants, yoga aided in adjusting to the residual effects of having had a stroke and simultaneously facilitated an improved self-confidence and hopeful outlook on their abilities to engage in life events.

Similarly, following a 12-week yoga program, 22 women who struggled with binge eating and were considered obese acknowledged experiencing meaningful outcomes including an improved ability to focus on the present and an opportunity to reflect on their feelings and decisions made regarding eating and exercise habits (McIver, McGartland, & O’Halloran, 2009). Researchers suggested that the therapeutic benefits experienced by participants were achieved due to (a) the atmosphere created within the yoga sessions being a safe, non-judgmental environment; (b) modified yoga poses permit all (regardless of physical size or ability) to confidently engage in the activity; and (c) the yoga program curriculum excluded traditional ideas of diet and exercise and thus opened opportunity for new perspectives and insights regarding avenues for attaining and maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

Yoga as mood enhancement. Operating on the theory that yoga can positively shape an individual’s psychological wellbeing, West, Otte, Geher, Johnson, and Mohr (2004) randomized 69 participants into one of three 90-minute sessions: a biology lecture control group, Hatha yoga group, or African dance group. Both Hatha yoga and African dance significantly decreased negative emotions and feelings of stress.
To determine if a single class enhanced mood, Shapiro and Cline (2004) examined differences in emotional disposition before and after participation in a single yoga class. Eleven individuals, age 23-59, participated in nine 90-minute sessions of yoga. Prior to the start of and following the intervention, participants reported their positive and/or negative feelings in 15 areas, including perceived levels of anxiety, depression, frustration, stress, confidence, optimism, and fatigue. Researchers found that negative feelings declined, positive feelings improved, and energy-related feelings were heightened following the intervention.

**Yoga as social companionship.** A number of studies have found that yoga provides a venue for coping through companionship. Differently stated, shared experience with similar others can provide stress management. Researchers looking at the experiences of individuals with breast cancer participating in a 12-week yoga program identified that the importance of social support should not be undervalued with regards to an individual’s wellbeing (Moadel et al., 2007). The findings of this study revealed that while yoga may not alter social wellbeing, it does provide participants an opportunity to feel a sense of community and cultivate relations among individuals working through shared circumstances. These findings are similar to those of Van Puymbroeck, Burk, Shinew, Kuhlenschmidt, and Schmid (2013), who found that female breast cancer survivors felt tremendous camaraderie with their yoga cohort because they had all “joined the [cancer] club” and implicitly understood the challenges each had faced (p. 312).

Danhauer et al. (2008) implemented a pilot study to determine potential therapeutic influences of a 10-week restorative yoga program in the lives of 51 women diagnosed with either breast or ovarian cancer. Their research findings indicated that social camaraderie was experienced and that the opportunity to give and receive support from others with the same health condition was one of the most valued aspects of the program and motivated continued participation in the yoga intervention. In fact, when asked to comment on suggested areas of program improvement, participants indicated that the program should expand to include persons with other types of cancer because the program offered them a support network, generated friendships, and permitted discussion about shared difficulties, challenges, and victories specific to their encounters with cancer.

Social companionship via participation in yoga is also experienced in older populations, as demonstrated by 12 women, ages 65-89, living in a retirement community who took part in a 12-week yoga program (Patel, Akkihebbalu, Espinoza, & Chiodo, 2011). Research findings suggest that it was not necessarily the yoga practice itself (e.g., postures, breathing exercises) that created positive results; rather, yoga was the vehicle for increased fellowship and supportive relationships among those living in the retirement community. Participants indicated that their involvement in yoga exposed them to a new activity they had never tried before, allowed them to share new knowledge with friends not participating in the program, and facilitated the development of new and/or deeper friendships with people their own age. The director of the retirement community even commented on changes observed as a result of the yoga program taking place: residents of the facility—those that participated in the program, as well as those who had not—had formed stronger connections with one another and looked after each other more closely. Also, as a result of the psychosocial and physiological benefits associated with the yoga program, the director found that residents developed aspirations to pursue new activities that involved being more physical and socially engaged.

**Summary**

Yoga is unique in that it is welcoming and inclusive of all persons of all ages, gender, physical and mental capacities, and life circumstances. Prior to now, theoretical and conceptual foundations that provide some explanation for coping mechanisms facilitated by yoga have been lacking. This paper offers a new perspective that the concept of leisure-stress coping may provide a sound conceptual framework to suggest the mechanisms by which yoga provides problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping through palliative coping, mood enhancement, and social companionship.

**References**


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