Yoga Therapy in Practice

Building Bridges for Yoga Therapy Research: The Aetna, Inc., Mind–Body Pilot Study on Chronic and High Stress

Catherine Kusnick, MD,¹ Gary Kraftsow, MA, E-RYT 500,²
Mary Hilliker, RD, E-RYT 500, CYT³

1. Principal, Headlands Consulting, San Juan Capistrano, CA
2. Founder and Director, American Viniyoga Institute, Oakland, CA
3. Director of Administration, American Viniyoga Institute, Wausau, WI

Background

In 2009, Aetna, Inc., invited Gary Kraftsow and the American Viniyoga Institute (AVI) to contribute to a research study on modulating stress. This partnership represented the first formal recognition of the potential role of yoga therapy in modern healthcare by an insurance company.

This project exemplified the power and value of a collaboration in which yoga therapists made the ancient yoga teachings relevant to healthcare research. We must understand our own ancient traditions, learn the language of Western medicine, and recognize opportunities to build bridges to medical disciplines, academic partners, insurers, funders, and policy makers. By sharing our experience, we hope to provide an example through which others may benefit and seek ways to continue advancing evidence-based yoga research.

Bridging Ancient Traditions and Modern Research

On a trip to Madras, India, in 1980, Gary’s teacher, T.K.V. Desikachar, advised him to study Western medical science. As a student of religious studies and Sanskrit, Gary was surprised that Desikachar guided him in that direction. Desikachar envisioned Gary’s critical role in bringing yoga and yoga therapy into Western healthcare in the future. As a result, Gary embarked on an independent study of anatomy, physiology, psychology, and basic principles of Western medical science and healthcare systems to begin building the necessary bridges. The prediction was prophetic.

Twenty years later, through AVI graduate Robin Rothenberg, Dr. Karen Sherman of the University of Washington invited Gary to develop a yoga therapy intervention for a study of chronic low back pain. The investigation, funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), was subsequently reported in the Annals of Internal Medicine. Opportunities opened for collaborations with other researchers, with Gary designing Viniyoga interventions for generalized anxiety disorder and other therapeutic applications.

Recognizing an Opportunity

In 2008, Gary met Mark Bertolini, currently the chairman and CEO of Aetna, Inc. Mark had a deep connection to the practice of yoga and clarity about its potential role in the current healthcare crisis. He shared the vision of a shift
from a physician- and pharmaceutical-centric care model to one that is patient centric, empowering individuals to make conscious choices for self-care to prevent and/or manage chronic conditions.

Mark proposed that Gary design a workplace stress management program and empirically test its effectiveness. The goal of this study was to evaluate Viniyoga and the Mindfulness at Work intervention, each of which had the potential to decrease stress and stress-related insurance claims.

Building the Team for a Successful Research Collaboration

For AVI, a relatively small yoga organization, the opportunity to partake in yoga research with Aetna, Inc., and two other partners, e-Mindful and Duke University Integrative Medicine, was exciting and daunting. Two of the greatest challenges of integrating a yoga study with a corporate partner were building consensus among the markedly different cultures of yoga, research, healthcare, and corporate insurance and executing the study. The participating organizations were vastly different in size, scope of work, expertise, resources, operating styles, and stakeholders. Keys to the project’s success were a collaborative spirit, open communication, and a strong commitment to these values by the leaders of each organization.

A large project team with broad-based skills in project management, knowledge of corporate cultures, and product marketing was used to bridge the missions and goals of the stakeholders. On a granular level, a subteam was formed to contribute skills in medical knowledge, statistical support, research methodology, and working with human subjects, as well as expertise in the two interventions, Viniyoga and Mindfulness at Work. AVI also assembled an internal research team.

While building this internal team, it was essential for AVI to build bridges with AVI-trained faculty, alumni, and friends who had specialized expertise. Gary’s expertise included intervention design, enthusiasm for contributing to healthcare solutions, mentoring of teachers, and an ability to inspire graduates to become involved. Several AVI graduates contributed expertise in the form of designing training and evaluation materials, collecting qualitative and quantitative data, communicating findings, and planning for product marketing.

Learning Western Medical Research Methodology

A number of key principles apply when designing and conducting empirically rigorous research. Studies must be clearly focused, well designed, and systematically executed. The first and most important challenge in launching this investigation was to create a focus for the project and to build team consensus regarding measurable outcomes. Once the large team agreed about the main project goals, the internal research team had to agree on which parameters to assess, duration of the intervention, and the appropriate study population.

Another key to the study’s success was the development of guidelines and procedures to ensure careful and systematic project delivery. This included developing a treatment manual for which Gary wrote the Viniyoga sequences with a specific intention and progression for the study period of 12 weeks. Weekly team teleconferences ensured that the yoga intervention was delivered according to the established criteria.

Insights for the Future

Collaborative research with health insurers is relatively new for the yoga community. With corporate and government support for funding and research, these collaborations will be important for addressing chronic diseases that increase healthcare costs. Yoga therapy schools interested in such research collaborations should consider leveraging expertise within their organizations and building relationships with academic partners, insurers, funders, and policymakers.

The tradition of yoga therapy impacts individuals to take greater responsibility for their health. As yoga therapists and teachers, we are responsible for adapting the teachings of these great traditions to make them relevant and accessible to the practitioner. To build bridges to modern healthcare, we must learn to communicate in the language of Western medicine and use Western research methods without losing the unique insights and integrity of our own traditions. The success of this study is a testament to the vast potential of partnerships and bridge building between the yoga therapy community, academic institutions, modern healthcare, and corporate stakeholders.

Correspondence: Catherine Kusnick, MD  ckusnick@cox.net