

Chapter 22

Yoga and Polyvagal Theory: Effects and Applications for Well-Being

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores yoga as a salutogenic intervention supportive of eudaimonic well-being with its wide-spread health effects for various patient populations. Autonomic nervous system regulation and resilience are considered as important mediators for the promotion of biopsychosocial health. Polyvagal theory offers a novel perspective on how underlying neural platforms support combined physiological, psychological, and behavioral states—inclusive of eudaimonic well-being. This chapter describes the convergence of neurophysiological ideas of neuroception, interoception, and neural platforms with yoga foundational concepts such as discriminative wisdom and the gunas. This translatory language of eudaimonic well-being and polyvagal theory offers a framework for yoga to be understood and integrated into current healthcare and research contexts while maintaining its unique perspective and foundational wisdom.

INTRODUCTION: CONCEPTUALIZING WELL-BEING

Health and well-being can be considered from two complementary perspectives. The pathogenic viewpoint looks to identify specific causes of a condition or disease. Interventions are then identified to target the pathology. Alternatively, the salutogenic perspective seeks to explore and then direct interventions to support the contributors of optimal health. These two perspectives, salutogenesis and pathogenesis, can be utilized together to facilitate both the alleviation of pathology and the optimization of health (Sullivan & Robertson, 2020).

Yoga Therapy aligns with this salutogenic perspective as it addresses the many contributors to complex or chronic conditions and seeks to promote self-management and lifestyle change. Ananda Balayogi Bhavanani (DSc (Yoga), Director CYTER of Sri Balaji Vidyapeeth) teaches this importance of yoga therapy as a salutogenic intervention as opposed to applying the practices for symptom management from a pathogenic perspective—calling the latter *yogopathy* (Bhavanani, 2011; Bhavanani et al., 2019). When

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yoga therapy is practiced consistent with this salutogenic framework the tools (e.g. *asana*, *pranayama*, meditation, ethical principles) are applied synergistically to uncover the sources of suffering for the promotion of greater well-being.

Eudemonic well-being is a term that is useful for the practical application of the salutogenic perspective. Additionally, this term offers a translatory language for the wisdom teachings of yoga to be understood in current healthcare/scientific contexts. This term comes from Aristotle's teachings of eudemonia describing the sentiment of a person looking back on their life and feeling as if they reached their optimal potential and lived an excellent, purpose-filled life (Aristotle et al., 2004).

Two types of happiness are described by Aristotle- eudemonic and hedonic. Eudemonic happiness stems from this realizing of one's potential and is described as a non-transitory, steadfast contentment or joy. Hedonic happiness is considered a more transitory emotional experience, such as cheerfulness (Aristotle et al., 2004).

The significance of eudemonic well-being is demonstrated by the growing body of research that supports its widespread and positive health effects for various patient populations. These benefits include:

1. Lower levels of fatigue, disability, pain intensity, pain medication use, depressive symptoms, and improved patient functioning and life satisfaction in people with chronic pain conditions (Dezutter et al., 2013; Dezutter et al., 2015; Schleicher et al., 2005).
2. Decreased all-cause mortality independent of factors such as age, physical inactivity, conditions such as cardiovascular disease or cancers (Keyes & Simoes, 2012; Pressman et al., 2019).
3. Eudemonic well-being is differentiated from hedonic wellbeing with its effect on inflammatory and immune processes. While eudemonic well-being is associated with a down-regulation of gene profiles related to healthier inflammatory and immune processes affecting neurodegenerative, cardiovascular conditions and cancers- hedonic well-being is associated with its up-regulation (Cole et al., 2015; Fredrickson et al., 2013; Fredrickson et al., 2015).
4. Eudemonic well-being is correlated with decreased levels of salivary cortisol, pro-inflammatory cytokines, and lessened cardiovascular disease risk, hedonic well-being has minimal effect on these biomarkers (Ryff et al., 2004).

These myriad and distinct health benefits demonstrate eudemonic well-being as an important contributor to physical, psychological, and social health.

YOGA AND EUDEMONIC WELL-BEING

Yoga has demonstrated an effect for improving eudemonic wellbeing (Ivtzan & Papantoniou, 2014). Additionally the component measures of eudemonic well-being (Huta & Waterman, 2014) share a similar focus with foundational philosophical teachings of yoga (Sullivan, 2019; Sullivan & Robertson, 2020). Eudemonic constructs of authenticity, personal expressiveness, self-actualization, and self-realization are both foundational to and can be facilitated through yoga's teachings. Yoga provides a methodology to foster insight into how the relationship to bodily state or condition, thoughts, emotions, and behaviors contribute to suffering. This process helps facilitate greater authenticity, self-expression, and self-actualization as the person finds positive ways to relate to their body and mind as well as to explore actions that improve well-being.

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