



# Yoga and Mental Health Pharmacotherapy - The Role of Yoga in Reducing the Need for Antidepressants and Anxiolytics - A Narrative Review

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DOI:10.21760/jaims.10.4.32

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However, Yoga is widely regarded as a very old mind body practice with the potential to lead to mental health and wellbeing. In this study, the supplement of Yoga to pharmacotherapy in the management of mental health disorders was investigated. Although no pharmacological interventions still remain the bedrock of treatment for disease such as depression, anxiety or stress related, Yoga has a holistic approach to mitigate neurophysiological and psychological processes. It has been shown in research that Yoga improves neurotransmitter balance, lowers cortisol levels and increases emotional resilience, and thus can be used to enhance pharmacotherapy. In addition to that, practices like pranayama (breath control) and meditation help in the regulation of autonomic nervous system, and thereby creating relaxation and dependency on medication goes down over a period of time. Yoga combined with the standard pharmacotherapy has been shown to be a successful way of integrally adding this into the conventional pharmacotherapy, reducing the side effects of drugs and enhancing the overall treatment outcome. This paper reviews the physiological, psychological, and clinical benefits of yoga based on empirical evidence to establish Yoga as an important part of mental health care. Complemented with pharmacological treatments, Yoga can act as mechanisms that include neuroplasticity enhancement and stress reduction, discussed. Accessibility and patient adherence are also considered barriers to integration. This study thus advocates for a multidimensional treatment approach by suggesting that healthcare professionals consider Yoga as part of mental health care plans. There is a need for future research to standardize protocols for Yoga for specific mental disorders and long-term effects. The findings suggest that yoga may be a complimentary treatment with pharmacotherapy for mental health care and a more holistic approach to the treatment of mental health.

**Keywords:** Yoga, Mental health, Pharmacotherapy, Neurophysiology, Psychological well-being, Depression, Anxiety, Stress management

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**How to Cite this Article**

Abedini A, Yoga and Mental Health Pharmacotherapy - The Role of Yoga in Reducing the Need for Antidepressants and Anxiolytics - A Narrative Review. J Ayu Int Med Sci. 2025;10(4):214-221.  
Available From  
<https://jaims.in/jaims/article/view/4247/>

**To Browse**

**Manuscript Received**  
2025-03-12

**Review Round 1**  
2025-03-24

**Review Round 2**  
2025-04-04

**Review Round 3**  
2025-04-14

**Accepted**  
2025-04-24

**Conflict of Interest**  
None

**Funding**  
Nil

**Ethical Approval**  
Not required

**Plagiarism X-checker**  
12.64

**Note**



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## Introduction

Yoga and Mental Health Pharmacotherapy will forward its use as a complementary treatment to decrease dependence on use of conventional medications, especially for mental health conditions such as Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) and anxiety disorders. *Yoga* is a discipline that, with origins in ancient India, has become one of the most practiced forms of discipline, including physical postures, breathing control, and meditation, and it achieves its reputation in relation to its possible psychological effects. Increasing evidence has further prompted a contemporary interest in *Yoga* as a mental health intervention to aid people with anxiety and depression, promote emotion regulation, and generally promote well-being.[1,2]

Yoga research shows that it can be a good adjunct to pharmacotherapy, especially for people looking for alternative to conventional drugs, which tend to have undesirable side effects. The studies have found that yoga practices bring down depressive symptoms significantly among participants, and meta-analyses have shown its effectiveness in various populations including postpartum women and patients with chronic illnesses.[3,4] Although preliminary findings indicate that *Yoga* may perform better than placebo interventions, overall evidence remains inconclusive because of methodological limitations in most of studies, such as small sample sizes and lack of rigorous randomized controlled trials.[5,6]

Still, the incorporation of *Yoga* into mental health treatment is an issue: For example, how does it work and can it stand as a sole treatment? Its effect on mental health may be influenced by the neurophysiological processes, such as increased levels of Brain-Derived Neurotrophic Factor (BDNF) and better vagal tone that yoga has on. However, further research is needed to determine the role of *Yoga* in clinical practice and how to best incorporate it with conventional treatment.[7,8]

Growing trend of how mental health care should be shifted from pharmacologic to non-pharmacologic interventions is marked by *Yoga's* potential to reduce need of antidepressants & anxiolytics. However, patient acceptance is variable, there is need for qualified instructors & integration with current treatment protocols should be optimized to achieve best therapeutic outcomes.[9,10]

As the interest in holistic mental health continues to grow, the use of *Yoga* as a way to respond psychologically and also psychologically well-being is a promising area of this attention.

## Historical Context

The term *Yoga* is a term that has evolved from ancient India to that of a holistic practice.

It is that which combines physical postures (asanas), controlled breathing (pranayama), deep relaxation and meditation. In the modern world, this practice has been recognized to be not only for its physical benefits, but also for its potential in enhancing mental health outcomes.[1,2] Interest in yoga as a therapeutic intervention for mental health issues started to grow in the early 20th century with its popularity in the Western world.

Research on the psychological benefits of *Yoga* increased during the latter half of the 20th century, and many studies on its positive effects on children, adults, and the elderly were published.[3,4] Studies have shown that yoga benefits mental states by enhancing positive mental states as well as reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression, as well as occupational stress.[5,6]

The potential of *Yoga* as a non-drug therapy has emerged as the area of pharmacotherapy in which *Yoga* has come to the fore. Mindfulness Therapy can be integrated into *Yoga* practices and it appears to be efficacious in treating the symptoms of anxiety and depression, reduce rumination, and/or to increase mindfulness skills in general.[6,7]

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in some mental health professionals in alternative therapies to traditional pharmacological interventions and yoga has been increasingly seen as part of an alternative approach for the treatment of mood disorders.[8,9]

While this evidence supports the safety and tolerability of *Yoga* in patients with major depressive disorder (MDD) and other psychiatric illnesses, the efficacy of *Yoga* as a treatment for major depressive disorder (MDD) only has been further demonstrated to date. Some positive effects superior to placebo have been suggested by previous reviews, but overall conclusions are complicated by a small number of randomized controlled trials and small sample sizes.[10,9] *Yoga's*

Process from spiritual discipline to the therapeutic modality finds its place in the present era in mental health care with the presumption of yoga as an alternative to antidepressants and anxiolytics through practitioners and researcher.

### Theoretical Framework

As *Yoga* is becoming an increasingly accepted method of treatment for mental health disorders, it may help to reduce the amount of pharmacotherapy such as antidepressants and anxiolytics needed. This theoretical framework provides an explanation of how *Yoga* can possibly work its way on mental health.

### Neurophysiological Mechanisms

It has been shown that the exercise of yoga and meditation influence brain activity and physiology. Brain wave patterns are regular during meditation, and the neocortex (the part that is rational thought) is inhibited. On the other hand, areas that are related to instinctive response and autonomic regulation, such as brainstem and lower thalamus, become more active.[11,12] Metzler-Baddeley, highlighted that this shift from sympathetic to parasympathetic nervous activity is a relaxation response that counteracts the body's stress reaction.[13] The persistent stress will activate the sympathetic nervous system, increase production of proinflammatory cytokines, which can lead to long term health problems such as depression and anxiety.[13] *Yoga* could promote relaxation and impact stress related responses, which may negatively produce these detrimental effects, and thus beneficial to the mental health outcomes.

### Psychobiological Effects

The research shows that yoga has a dual effect on the structure and function of these important brain regions including the hippocampus, amygdala and prefrontal cortex that are thought to be involved in emotion regulation and cognitive processing.[14] Changes like these can improve a stressed brain's resilience to stress and may facilitate relief of psychiatric symptoms. It is also believed that *Yoga* increases the levels of Brain Derived Neurotrophic Factor (BDNF) which is important for neuroplasticity and mood regulation.[5]

*Yoga* practice includes physical asana postures and meditation to enhance vagal tone, gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA) levels,

And reduce cortisol levels all of which are beneficial to the mood and reduction of anxiety, to which biochemical changes are necessary for realization of how yoga can be a useful adjunct therapy in mental health care.

### Integration of Therapeutic Practices

Conducting *Yoga* and the combination of physical activity, mindfulness, and breathing techniques brings health to the physical body and has deeper impact on mental health. This is a study that has been related to lower mental health function and support the use of regular *Yoga* practice to provide this function.[14] In addition, *Yoga* has been shown to benefit different psychiatric conditions, and therefore may be a viable alternative or supplement to conventional pharmacotherapy.[5]

### Evidence-Based Research

*Yoga* has been studied recently as an intervention for mental health conditions like major depressive disorder (MDD) or anxiety disorders in number of studies. There is a large body of evidence supporting the use of *Yoga*-based practices as part of a treatment plan, and that *Yoga* may help with depressive symptoms and decrease the need for pharmacotherapy.

### Effectiveness of Yoga for Depression

Meta analyses have recently shown that *Yoga* intervention can result in significant decrease of depressive symptoms in a range of populations. One example is that a review of studies investigated that yoga offered not only symptomatic relief for depressive symptoms, but also demonstrated that psychological well-being with yoga was also superior to control groups.[16,17] This analysis included studies that had a standardized mean difference (SMD) in depressive scores of a substantial benefit of yoga practices compared with traditional control conditions.[18,19]

### Specific Populations

*Yoga's* effectiveness appears to extend across different demographic groups. For example, specific studies reported that postpartum women who participated in *Yoga* interventions exhibited markedly lower depression scores compared to those in control groups, with significant statistical evidence supporting these findings (SMD = -1.68). [18]

Additionally, patients with various medical conditions experiencing de-pression also showed improvement, reinforcing the notion that *Yoga* can serve as a beneficial adjunct to standard treatment protocols.[14,17]

### Comparison with Conventional Treatments

Antidepressant medications (ADM) are still prescribed for MDD widely, although there are many side effects such as cognitive impairment and gastrointestinal issues.[20],[5] On the other hand, yoga has been shown to be more acceptable and accessible to many patients and can be a non-pharmacologic option to supplement existing treatment.[17] Additionally, certain research indicates that yoga also holds the potential to match—or even outmaneuver—more substantial treatments, such as electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), in terms of safety and patient cooperation to aid in depressive disorder therapy. [10],[17]

### Yoga as a Preventive Strategy

In addition to being treatment option, yoga may also be an important component in relapse prevention for those with history of depression. However, research sugg. that yoga practices when cont. can reduce rate of relapse when supplemented with psychotherapy or pharmacotherapy. [17],[19] The preventive aspect is in accordance with clinical guidelines that suggest continued treatment strategies for patients at risk of recurrence.[14]

### Yoga Practices for Mental Health

In case of depression and anxiety conditions, yoga as a mind-body practice involves various techniques like physical postures (asanas), breath control (pranayama), mindfulness, and meditation[21],[22] and have been found to be therapeutically beneficial. Depression is a condition where the best yoga poses and styles are those which would give a sense of calm and centeredness in the body.[12]

### Clinical Applications of Yoga

Research indicates that yoga can be effectively integrated into mental health treatment, including inpatient settings, where it is associated with few adverse events.[15] It has been noted that Yoga serves as an adjunctive therapy for range of psychiatric disorders, enhancing overall treatment outcomes for patients with Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) & anxiety disorders.[21],[23],[24]

While evidence suggests some positive effects of yoga interventions that may be superior to placebo, overall effecti. of yoga in treating MDD remains inconclusive due to limited number of randomized trials & varying methodologies.[21],[22],[25]

### Popular Yoga Styles and Techniques

Hatha yoga is among the several styles of yoga practiced in the United States, in which the attention is focused on the physical postures and breath control.[19] Iyengar, Ashtanga and Vinyasa are some of the most popular styles followed by movement and meditation.[26] Research has demonstrated that including pranayama and mindfulness meditation into yoga practice attenuates anxiety and enhances mood in the participants.[27],[24]

### Benefits and Recommendations

The mental health benefits of yoga are broad, with studies highlighting its ability to foster stress management, enhance mood clarity, and promote an overall sense of well-being.[28],[24] Mindfulness Yoga, in particular, has been shown to effectively improve the cognitive function and quality of life of patients with depression, making it a valuable practice for individuals seeking to alleviate depressive symptoms.[21],[22] Therefore, it is recommended that healthcare facilities and educational institutions promote mindfulness Yoga and provide qualified instructors to aid in these practices, helping to improve the mental health of affected populations.[22]

### Integration of Yoga in Mental Health Treatment

Yoga has emerged as a complementary approach in mental health therapy, offering innovative treatment solutions for individuals facing mental health challenges. Its integration into mental health treatment protocols has gained attention due to its feasibility and acceptability, especially in inpatient settings where yoga groups have demonstrated few adverse events.[15] The aim is to inform healthcare professionals about the potential clinical benefits of Yoga for various mental disorders, including anxiety and depression.[8]

### Mechanisms of Action

Yoga has been regarded as an integrated model of mind-body practice that incorpo. physical postures,

Breath control, relaxation techniques, mindfulness and meditation.[29] Together, these elements help promote both the physical and psychological health in order to increase adherence to exercise and improve overall compliance to treatment regimens. [30] Thus, specifically, yoga practices are thought to enable people to develop skills to manage the emotional fluctuations that accompany mental health conditions.[3]

### Evidence of Efficacy

Clinical studies have applied yoga interventions to a range of conditions, including chronic pain, Parkinson's disease, cancer, and various psychiatric disorders.[29],[31] While there is a notable safety profile and good tolerance for Yoga among patients with major depressive disorder (MDD), evidence supporting its effectiveness in treating MDD remains inconclusive. A review found some indications of positive effects from yoga interventions, surpassing those of placebo treatments; however, the methodologies were criticized due to the limited number of randomized trials and participants involved.[22] Despite the lack of the definitive evidence, incorporating yoga into treatment plans may improve coping strategies and contribute to mental health recovery, thereby diminishing dependence on pharmacotherapy, such as antidepressants and anxiolytics.[32],[33] Even though more rigorous studies need to be conducted to determine the degree of the benefits of yoga, this can become a useful adjunctive therapy in the mental health treatment.

### Challenges and Considerations

Yoga has emerged as potential adjunctive therapy for mental health conditions, particularly in reducing reliance on pharmacotherapy such as antidepressants & anxiolytics. However, there are several challenges & considerations that must be addressed when integrating yoga into treatment plans.

### Efficacy and Evidence Gaps

Preliminary studies indicate that yoga may be helpful in treating MDD and anxiety; however the evidence of efficacy is unclear. Some positive effects of yoga interventions on depression were provided, which may be superior to placebo treatments.[14], [27] Although there are methodological limitations including the small number of randomized trials and different populations,

It is still impossible to draw definitive conclusions about effectiveness of this approach to treatment of MDD.[14],[34]

### Patient Acceptance and Compliance

Although yoga is generally well-received and tolerated by patients, particularly those with MDD due to its high safety profile,[14] individual acceptance can vary significantly. Factors such as prior experience with Yoga, personal beliefs about alternative therapies, and access to qualified instructors may influence a patient's willingness to engage in yoga practices.[35],[36] Additionally, ensuring consistent practice and adherence to yoga interventions can be a challenge, as with any behavioral health treatment.

### Integration with Conventional Treatments

Other consideration is integration of yoga with traditional pharmacological therapies. Some studies suggest that Yoga can be an additional treatment to medication, but practitioners should be sensitive to possible interactions or conflicts between holistic interventions & conventional treatment.[27] An integrated system, which needs a good input from mental health professionals and yoga instructors will maximize patients' outcomes while ensuring there is no concern over pharmacotherapy.

### Conflicts of Interest and Research Bias

The authors of studies on yoga interventions often emphasize the absence of commercial or financial relationships that could influence findings.[20],[37] However, transparency regarding potential biases and conflicts of interest is critical for maintaining the integrity of the research and ensuring that claims made about benefits of yoga are credible.[34],[36]

### Future Directions

With the development of the field of mental health, the use of yoga as a complementary therapy to conventional pharmacotherapy has several avenues for future research and practice. There is growing interest in nondrug treatments for mental disorder and an impetus to continue to investigate the role of yoga in this scenario.

### Enhanced Research Methodologies

As such, future studies need to achieve robust methodological frameworks including randomized controlled trials (RCTs),

And follow ups over long periods of time for establishing efficacy and sustainability of yoga interventions in lowering the scope of the need for antidepressants, anxiolytics. Such studies would allow us to gain a deeper understanding of which psychiatric symptoms are most amenable to yoga practices and which are the underlying mechanisms that contribute to these effects.[38],[1]

### Diverse Populations and Settings

Further research also needs to be expanded to other population, for example other age groups, cultural background, and with different mental health diagnosis. An understanding of our yoga therapeutics on these different demographics may help more targeted efforts and broaden yoga intervention availability. Additionally, studies in different places such as community centers, schools and hospitals can be conducted to evaluate the appropriateness and usefulness of yoga in real world environments.[39],[3]

### Integration with Conventional Treatments

The possible ways of integration of yoga with conventional pharmacotherapy is also another promising area. Future research could determine the potency of yoga to help treat the underlying condition in combination with medications, thus reducing dosage or decreasing the side effects from antidepressants or anxiolytics.[24] This could be an important integration for building comprehensive treatment plans that account for the physical, psychological, and emotional requirements of people.

### Mechanisms of Action

There are further investigations into the physiological and psychological mechanisms by which yoga achieves these effects on mental health. Since knowing how yoga impacts on the neurobiological processes and the stress responses and emotional regulation can make a case for its growth in mental health treatment paradigms, it is very important. As a result, this may pave the way for standardized yoga protocols for certain mental health conditions.[40],[41]

### Policy and Advocacy

Finally, advocating for policy changes to incorporate yoga into mental health treatment options within healthcare systems can be an important next step.

As evidence supporting the efficacy of yoga grows, stakeholders can work towards creating guidelines and standards that recognize yoga as a legitimate therapeutic approach, thus expanding access to those in need.[29],[38]

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