

The psychobiological effects of yoga/meditation in a prison population

Results:

Yoga and meditation have been shown to be effective in alleviating symptoms of depression and anxiety in healthy volunteers and psychiatric populations. Recent work has also indicated that yoga can improve cognitive-behavioural performance and control. Although there have been no controlled studies of the effects of yoga in a prison population, we reasoned that yoga could have beneficial effects in a setting where psychosocial functioning is often low, and the frequency of impulsive behaviours is high.

Participants were recruited from 7 British prisons, and randomly allocated to either a 10-week yoga programme (yoga group; 1 class per week; N=45) or a control group (N=55). Self-report measures of mood, stress, and psychological distress were collected before and after the intervention period. Participants completed a cognitive-behavioural task (Go/No-Go) at the end of the study, which assessed behavioural response inhibition and sustained attention.

Participants in the yoga group showed increased self-reported positive affect, and reduced stress and psychological distress, compared to participants in the control group. Participants who completed the yoga course also showed better performance in the cognitive-behavioural task, making significantly fewer errors of omission in Go trials and fewer errors of commission on No-Go trials, compared to control participants.

Yoga may be effective in improving subjective wellbeing, mental health, and executive functioning within prison populations. This is an important consideration given the consistently high rates of psychological morbidity in this group and the need for effective and economical intervention programmes.

Published work:

Full Papers:

Bilderbeck, A.*, Farias, M.*, Brazil, I., Jacobowitz, S., & Wikholm, C. (*shared first authorship) (2013). Participation in a 10-week course of yoga improves behavioural control and decreases psychological distress in a prison population. *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, 47, 1438-1445.

Bilderbeck, A, Farias, M., Brazil, I. (submitted). Psychological and cognitive benefits of yoga among UK Prisoners. *The Prison Service Journal*.

Book:

Farias, M. & Wikholm, C. (forthcoming)*. *From Monster to Buddha: How much can we change through yoga and meditation*. Watkins Publishers.

* Expected date of UK/US publication: Spring 2015.

Area(s) of interest:

Yoga, prison, behavioural control, mood, stress

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