

Acceptance of Unpleasant Feelings: A Comparative Study Among Yoga Practitioners and Non-Practitioners from Kerala State of India

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Abstract

Acceptance of unpleasant feelings can be useful for managing difficult emotions and improving psychological health. The study reported in this article was undertaken by Patanjali Yoga Research Centre, Kozhikode, Kerala State, India among a randomly selected sample of 100 yoga practitioners and 100 non-practitioners from Kerala using a questionnaire containing the measure of acceptance of unpleasant feelings, and the characteristics of yoga practitioners, namely, sex, age, marital status, whether they did yoga before joining the present yoga class at the yoga centre, and whether they have experienced health problems during the past six months. The results show that yoga practitioners are accepting unpleasant feelings more than non-practitioners, with statistically significant difference in their mean score for acceptance of unpleasant feelings. When compared to the non-practitioners, higher proportion of yoga practitioners have agreed to the items related to acceptance of unpleasant feelings. Statistical significance exists for the difference in mean score for acceptance of unpleasant feelings of yoga practitioners based on their sex, age and marital status. The probable reasons why male, elderly and married yoga practitioners are accepting unpleasant feelings more are mentioned. Whether the yoga practitioners did yoga before joining the present class in the yoga centre or not, and whether they experienced health problems or not during the past six months contribute to 67 % of the variation in the score for acceptance of unpleasant feelings of the yoga practitioners, with statistically significant F value. Those who had done yoga before got a comparatively higher mean score for acceptance of unpleasant feelings than those who had not done yoga before, and those who reported no health problems got a comparatively higher mean score than those reported slight health problems. It will be useful if, in addition to academic and research institutions, yoga centres also undertake studies on the beneficial health effects of yoga and transfer the useful results to people through various media. This can be expected to improve the adoption of these practices, which is especially relevant for a country like India, where the extent of adoption of yoga among people is not much at present.

Keywords

Acceptance, Unpleasant feelings, Yoga practitioners, Non-Practitioners

Introduction

A person accepts unpleasant feelings/emotions if he or she acknowledges and allows to experience them without judgment

or resistance, with a mindset that they are part of one's life and might go after some time. This is also called emotional acceptance, which can be very useful for managing difficult emotions

and improving psychological health. Instead of escaping from unpleasant feelings, monitoring and permitting them to happen can help us mentally. Accordingly, we become less sensitive to such negative feelings, even if they are uncomfortable. This is very relevant in the present-day context, in which the life of many people is over stressed due to heavy and competitive workload, family problems, non-gratification of felt needs etc. The results of a study showed that individuals who accept rather than judge their mental experiences attain better psychological health because acceptance helps them experience fewer negative emotions in response to stressors [1]. Another study showed that accepting negative experiences may protect from experiencing negative affect and depression [2]. A strong relationship between appraisal of the circumstances in life and emotional state of people have been reported [3]. Participants who experienced more of pleasant as well as unpleasant emotions which they wanted reported more life satisfaction [4].

Yoga will contribute to control of thought processes and emotions, helping the practitioners to encounter pleasurable and painful situations with calmness. Yoga is a mind-body exercise having influence on how people think, their attitudes and emotions [5]. It has been reported that yoga helps to increase psychological well-being under conditions of negative emotions or stressors and improves the behaviour of the practitioners [6].

The study reported in this article has attempted to evaluate acceptance of unpleasant feelings by yoga practitioners, in comparison with non-practitioners.

Materials and Methods

The study was carried out by Patanjali Yoga Research Centre, Kozhikode, Kerala State, India among a randomly selected sample of 100 yoga practitioners and 100 non-practitioners (people who are not doing yoga) from Kerala using a questionnaire containing the measure of acceptance of unpleasant feelings [7], and the characteristics of yoga practitioners, namely, sex, age, marital status, whether they did yoga before joining the present yoga class at the yoga centre, and whether they have experienced health problems during the past six months. The average score of all the items in the measure of acceptance of unpleasant feelings was considered as the score for acceptance of unpleasant feelings, as indicated in its measure mentioned above. Higher score indicates more acceptance of unpleasant feelings and vice versa. The data was analysed as proportion reporting, scores and through statistical tests.

Results

Range of Score for Acceptance of Unpleasant Feelings of Yoga Practitioners and Non-practitioners

Table 1 shows the range of score for acceptance of unpleasant feelings of yoga practitioners and non-practitioners.

Table 1: Range of score for acceptance of unpleasant feelings of yoga practitioners and non-practitioners

Yoga practitioners		Non-practitioners	
Range of score for unpleasant feelings*	Respondents (%)	Range of score for unpleasant feelings*	Respondents (%)
69.0 - 71.4	60	40.5	20
73.8 - 76.2	40	45.2 - 54.8	80
Total	100	Total	100

*as % of the maximum possible average score of 6, indicating maximum level of acceptance of unpleasant feelings

Statistical Significance of the Difference in Mean Score for Acceptance of Unpleasant Feelings between Yoga Practitioners and Non-practitioners

Table 2 shows the result of statistical significance of the difference in the mean score for acceptance of unpleasant feelings between yoga practitioners and non-practitioners.

Table 2: Statistical significance of the difference in mean score for acceptance of unpleasant feelings between yoga practitioners and non-practitioners

Mean score for acceptance of unpleasant feelings*	Respondents (%)
Yoga practitioners	Non-practitioners
72.4	46.2
t = 9.91; p < 0.001	

*as % of the maximum possible score

Responses of Yoga Practitioners and Non-practitioners to Various Items in the Measure of Unpleasant Feelings

Table 3 shows the responses of yoga practitioners and non-practitioners to various items in the measure of unpleasant feelings.

Table 3: Responses of yoga practitioners and non-practitioners to various items in the measure of unpleasant feelings

Item	Respondents (%) Response							Total (%)
		Strongly agree	Agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	
Letting unpleasant feelings to happen	Yoga practitioners	20	40	40	Nil	Nil	Nil	100
	Non- practitioners	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	40	60	100

Standing behind unpleasant feelings	Yoga practitioners	20	80	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	100
	Non- practitioners	Nil	Nil	20	40	40	Nil	100
Permitting to experience unpleasant feelings	Yoga practitioners	Nil	20	60	20	Nil	Nil	100
	Non- practitioners	Nil	Nil	Nil	60	40	Nil	100
Usually allowing to accept unpleasant feelings	Yoga practitioners	Nil	80	20	Nil	Nil	Nil	100
	Non- practitioners	Nil	Nil	20	60	20	Nil	100
Believing that unpleasant feelings are justified and important	Yoga practitioners	Nil	Nil	60	40	Nil	Nil	100
	Non- practitioners	Nil	Nil	Nil	60	40	Nil	100
Feeling capable of accepting unpleasant feelings	Yoga practitioners	Nil	80	20	Nil	Nil	Nil	100
	Non- practitioners	Nil	Nil	20	60	20	Nil	100
Allowing to show unpleasant feelings	Yoga practitioners	Nil	Nil	20	80	Nil	Nil	100
	Non- practitioners	Nil	Nil	Nil	80	20	Nil	100

Statistical Significance of the Difference in Mean Score for Acceptance of Unpleasant Feelings of Yoga Practitioners Based on their Characteristics

Table 4 shows the results of statistical significance of the difference in mean score of the yoga practitioners for acceptance of unpleasant feelings based on their sex, age and marital status.

Table 4: Statistical significance of the difference in mean score of yoga practitioners for acceptance of unpleasant feelings based on their sex, age and marital status

Mean score for of yoga practitioners for acceptance of un-pleasant feelings*		t value and statistical significance	
Sex			
Males	Females	3.05; p < 0.10	
75.0	70.6		
Age group (years)			
25-31	54-60	3.05; p < 0.10	
70.6	75.0		
Marital status			
Married	Unmarried	3.65; p < 0.05	
73.2	69.0		

*as % of the maximum possible score

Influence of Two Characteristics of the Yoga Practitioners on Acceptance of Unpleasant Emotions

Table 5 shows the results of regression analysis of the influence of two characteristics of the yoga practitioners, namely, whether they did yoga before joining the present class in the yoga centre or not, and whether they experienced health problems or not during the past six months.

Table 5: Result of regression analysis of two characteristics of the yoga practitioners on the score for acceptance of unpleasant feelings

Characteristics of the yoga practitioners	Regression coefficient (r) and statistical significance	R ² value
Whether done yoga before joining the present class in the yoga centre or not	3.21; p < 0.10	0.67 F = 8.10; significant p < 0.10
Whether experienced health problems or not during the past six months	3.21; p < 0.10	

Discussion

While 60 % the yoga practitioners have a score for acceptance of unpleasant feelings in the higher range of 69 to 71.4 % of the maximum possible score, and 40 % also have a score in the

range of 73.8 to 76.2 % of the maximum possible score, 80 % of those who have not done yoga get a score in the range of 45.2 to 54.8 % of the maximum possible score only, and the remaining 20 % have a score of 40.5 8 % of the maximum possible

score only (Table 1). This indicates that yoga practitioners are accepting unpleasant feelings experienced by them more than non-practitioners.

The positive effect of yoga on the psychology of the practitioners is evident from this finding. It has been reported that yoga practice contributes to a good mental state [8], less mental stress than before its practice [9], and reduces anxiety [10]. Better acceptance of negative /unpleasant feelings by the yoga practitioners could probably be one of the reasons for these psychological benefits.

The results presented in Table 2 indicate that statistically significant difference exists between the mean score for acceptance of unpleasant feelings of yoga practitioners and non-practitioners, with yoga practitioners getting a comparatively higher mean score than non-practitioners. This result once again confirms the influence of yoga in better acceptance of unpleasant feelings by the practitioners.

The following inferences can be arrived regarding various items related to acceptances of unpleasant feelings based on the data presented in Table 3. It may be noted that the one or more responses related to agreement and disagreement by the yoga practitioners as well as non-practitioners have been clubbed together and interpreted below as agreeing and disagreeing with the items.

Letting Unpleasant Feelings to Happen

All the yoga practitioners have agreed that they allow unpleasant feelings to happen to them. However, all the non-practitioners have disagreed with this.

Standing Behind Unpleasant Feelings

While all the yoga practitioners agree that they are able to stand behind unpleasant feelings, 80 % of non-practitioners disagree about this.

Permitting to Experience Unpleasant Feelings

80 % of yoga practitioners agree that they permit themselves to experience unpleasant feelings. But all the non-practitioners have disagreed with this.

Usually Allowing to Accept Unpleasant Feelings

While all the yoga practitioners agree that they usually allow themselves to accept unpleasant feelings, 80 % of non-practitioners have disagreed that they do so.

Believing that Unpleasant Feelings are Justified and Important
While 60 % of yoga practitioners are able to accept that unpleasant feelings are justified and important, all the non-practitioners have disagreed with this.

Feeling Capable of Accepting Unpleasant Feelings

All the yoga practitioners have a mindset of accepting unpleasant feelings. However, 80 % of non-practitioners do not agree about accepting unpleasant feelings in life.

Allowing to Show Unpleasant Feelings

80% of the yoga practitioners and all the non-practitioners have disagreed that they allow themselves to show unpleasant feelings. This may be considered to be logical, since even if people

are willing to accept unpleasant feelings, they may not like to express them in their behaviour. This may be probably because they feel that others may develop a negative attitude towards them if they do so.

Table 4 shows that statistical significance exists for the difference in mean score for acceptance of unpleasant feelings of yoga practitioners based on their sex, age and marital status. Males get a comparatively higher score than females, indicating better acceptance of unpleasant feelings by male yoga practitioners. Similarly, elderly people in the age group of 54 to 60 years accept unpleasant feelings more (higher score of 75) than younger people in the age group of 25 to 31 years (lower score of 70.6). Further, married yoga practitioners are found to accept unpleasant feelings in a better manner (higher score of 73.2) than those who are unmarried (lower score of 69).

Females are usually more emotional than males. Based on their experience in life, elderly people might have got used to ups and downs in life, unlike young people who are nowadays exposed to stressful, competitive type of work, which can affect their mental state. This applies to unmarried people also, who will be mostly youngsters. All these reasons may probably be attributed to the observed trend regarding better acceptance of unpleasant feelings by male, elderly and married yoga practitioners in this study.

Whether the yoga practitioners did yoga before joining the present class in the yoga centre or not, and whether they experienced health problems or not during the past six months were found to contribute to 67 % of the variation in the score for acceptance of unpleasant feelings of the yoga practitioners (R^2 value of 0.67. $F = 8.10$; significant $p < 0.10$). The regression coefficient (r) of these two characteristics is also statistically significant (Table 5). Those who had done yoga before got a comparatively higher mean score for acceptance of unpleasant feelings than those who had not done yoga before, and those who reported no health problems got a comparatively higher mean score than those reported slight health problems.

Conclusion

While majority of the yoga practitioners have a comparatively higher range of score for acceptance of unpleasant feelings, most of the people who have not done yoga have a score in the lower range only, indicating that yoga practitioners are accepting unpleasant feelings more than non-practitioners. Statistically significant difference observed between the mean score for acceptance of unpleasant feelings of yoga practitioners and non-practitioners, with yoga practitioners getting a comparatively higher mean score than non-practitioners confirm the influence of yoga in better acceptance of unpleasant feelings. When compared to the non-practitioners, higher proportion of yoga practitioners have agreed to the items related to unpleasant feelings, namely, letting unpleasant feelings to happen, standing behind unpleasant feelings, permitting to experience unpleasant feelings, usually allowing to accept unpleasant feelings, believing that unpleasant feelings are justified and important, and feeling capable of accepting unpleasant feelings. Statistical sig-

nificance exists for the difference in mean score for acceptance of unpleasant feelings of yoga practitioners based on their sex, age and marital status. Under the study, males are found to accept unpleasant feelings more than female yoga practitioners, elders people accept unpleasant feelings more than younger yoga practitioners, and married yoga practitioners accept unpleasant feelings in a better manner than those who are not married. Females are usually more emotional than males. Based on their experience in life, elderly people might have got used to ups and downs in life, unlike young people who are nowadays exposed to stressful, competitive type of work, which can affect their mental state. This applies to unmarried people also, who will be mostly youngsters. All these could be the probable reasons for the observed trend regarding better acceptance of unpleasant feelings by male, elderly and married yoga practitioners in this study. Whether the yoga practitioners did yoga before joining the present class in the yoga centre or not, and whether they experienced health problems or not during the past six months contribute to 67 % of the variation in the score for acceptance of unpleasant feelings of the yoga practitioners, with statistically significant F value. The regression coefficient (r) of these two characteristics is also statistically significant (Table 5). Those who had done yoga before got a comparatively higher mean score for acceptance of unpleasant feelings than those who had not done yoga before, and those who reported no health problems got a comparatively higher mean score than those reported slight health problems. It will be useful if, in addition to academic and research institutions, yoga centres also undertake studies on the beneficial health effects of yoga and transfer the useful results to people through various media. This can be expected to improve the adoption of these practices, which is especially relevant for a country like India, where the extent of adoption of yoga among people is not much at present.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest

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