



The Benefits of Yoga Nidra: The Yoga of Sleep

Research has shown that this deeply relaxing practice has real benefits for health and well-being.

As we move into the holiday season, stress levels tend to rise—and this year, seasonal strains will come on top of stresses people are already experiencing due to the COVID-19 pandemic. If ever there was a time to encourage and teach your clients to find a calm, centered place within themselves, it is now.

If you were to learn that there was a single practice that scientists had found to reduce anxiety, depression, insomnia and inflammation; ease sleeplessness; lower heart rate and blood pressure; and alleviate arthritis, infertility and aging (Martin 2008), would you want to know more? If so, take a closer look at yoga nidra, which leads participants into a state of deep relaxation.

Across the United States, in places ranging from spas to yoga studios to VA hospitals, yoga nidra is becoming a sought-after and effective practice. Observing a room of yoga nidra participants, you might easily assume they were simply resting on their backs in savasana (corpse pose) and not doing much. In fact, there is a lot more going on than meets the eye.

The Inner Practices of Yoga

Yoga, an ancient system born in India, has firmly established itself as an important player in mainstream fitness in the U.S. It's estimated that more than 55 million Americans currently practice some form of yoga (CompareCamp 2020).

However, when asked what yoga is, most Americans think of a system of physical postures (asanas). Historically, yoga asanas (with the exception of the seated meditation pose) did not become part of the yoga system until 600–800 years ago, when



Yoga asanas (with the exception of the seated meditation pose) did not become part of the yoga system until 600-800 years ago, when they were developed to help practitioners release physical tension so that deeper relaxation—and ultimately meditation—could occur.

it does while sleeping, yet the mind is present and aware of everything in its outer environment. Yoga teaches that in the theta state, the subconscious mind is easily accessed and can be imprinted with whatever knowledge or visualization the practitioner wishes to assimilate. In the delta state, the practitioner rests in pure being—pure awareness—without thought.

Inner Fitness

Barry Shingle, director of guest services and programs at the award-winning Rancho La Puerta Wellness Resort & Spa in Tecate, Mexico, sheds light on the growing interest in “inner fitness” classes.

“I have noticed since 9/11 more and more guests are requesting what used to be considered ‘softer’ fitness classes. At Rancho La Puerta, we have since doubled our meditation offerings and now have packed relaxation classes, sound healing sessions and presenters regularly offering yoga nidra. A significant number of our offerings come under the inner fitness genre.”

they were developed to help practitioners release physical tension so that deeper relaxation—and ultimately meditation—could occur

Although well-known for its physical benefits, yoga also offers many inner practices—such as breathing exercises, meditation and yoga nidra—to help us achieve deep states of relaxation.

Yoga Nidra and Brain Waves

Nidra in Sanskrit means sleep. Yoga nidra is a practice of deep rest in which the practitioner goes beneath the alpha brain-wave state of relaxation into a state where the brain is producing theta or even delta waves (Parker, Bharati & Fernandez 2013). In these states, the body experiences deeper rest than

Some yoga studios are also seeing increasing interest in yoga nidra. Lisa Willett, owner and yoga teacher at Yoga Community in Sonoma, California, began offering one yoga nidra class per week 5 years ago and today offers two or three classes a week. They are among the studio’s best-attended sessions.

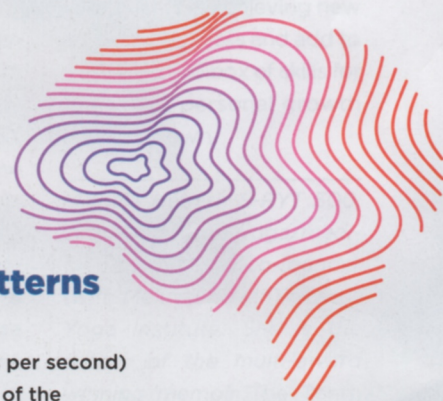
“People recognize that they feel mentally and emotionally better after practicing yoga nidra,” says Willett. “The practice allows people to reach deep states of peace that, in some cases, they have never before experienced. Yoga nidra can be a life-altering practice for people of all ages and will always be a part of our repertoire of offerings.”

Yoga Nidra Practices

To guide practitioners into the yoga nidra state, instructors might use a variety of practices, including the following:

1. slow, conscious diaphragmatic breathing
2. systematic progressive relaxation
3. marma point relaxation

The Ayurvedic system of marma points may be even older than the system of acupuncture points. There are 108 marma points—107 in the body and one in the mind. Physically, the marma points are found where tendons, bones, muscles, joints, veins, nerves and other tissues meet. Yoga nidra practices



Brain Wave Patterns

BETA WAVES

Beta waves (13-30 cycles per second) suggest alert functioning of the waking state and are associated with normal daily activities.

ALPHA WAVES

Alpha waves (frequency of 8-13 cycles per second) indicate deep physical relaxation and mental calmness.

THETA WAVES

Theta waves (4-8 cycles per second) are associated with concentration and meditation, dreams, hypnosis, and hypnogogic imagery.

DELTA WAVES

Delta waves (0.4-3 cycles per second) are most consistent with deep non-REM (dreamless) sleep.

Source: Parker, Bharat & Fernandez 2013.

often include focusing on 31 or 61 points.

In early yogic texts, not much is written specifically about yoga nidra. The practice was passed down orally from teacher to student over many centuries. More recently, as its popularity has grown, yoga nidra has become the object of serious research.

Contemporary Research

There is some confusion about how the state of yoga nidra differs from simple relaxation. Stephen Parker, PsyD, psychologist, yoga scholar, yoga teacher and author of *Clearing the Path: The Yoga Way to a Clear & Pleasant Mind: Patanjali, Neuroscience,*

and Emotion (Ahyma 2017) explains that much of the U.S. research has been done on relaxation and not specifically on yoga nidra.

“These studies demonstrate that what is often referred to as yoga nidra in contemporary research is often a state of deep relaxation (alpha state)

and imagery generation that is a precursor to yoga nidra,” Parker writes. Through consistent practice, he adds, the practitioner can learn to relax more deeply and move from the alpha state of simple relaxation to theta, where the subconscious can be accessed and programmed.

With mastery of the technique, a shift into the delta state becomes possible.

This suggests that most practitioners of yoga nidra may not go beyond the alpha state of relaxation when they are new to the practice. However, this level should not be discounted,

iREST: A Contemporary Adaptation


iRest, a modern adaptation of yoga nidra, was developed by Richard Miller, PhD, a clinical psychologist, yogic scholar and spiritual teacher, who combined traditional yoga nidra with Western psychology and neuroscience to create the program. There are currently trained iRest teachers in 43 countries (irest.org).

Multiple iRest studies report its benefits for health, healing and well-being in diverse populations, including active-duty soldiers, veterans, college students, children, seniors, the homeless, the incarcerated, and people experiencing issues such as sleep disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, chemical dependency, chronic pain and related disorders.

Branches of the U.S. military have used iRest since 2006, when it was introduced into the Wounded Warrior Program at Walter Reed National Medical Military Hospital in Washington, D.C. Subsequently, as a result of positive research findings, it was adopted by other areas of government, as well.

In 2010, the Defense Centers of Excellence recommended iRest as an effective complementary and alternative medical practice for managing chronic pain and treating PTSD. Based on research into iRest, the U.S. Army Surgeon General listed yoga nidra as a Tier 1 approach for addressing pain management in military care (Nassif et al. 2015).





Additional Yoga Nidra Studies

Yoga nidra lowers ESR.

A 2012 study found that yoga nidra brings down the erythrocyte sedimentation rate, which is a good thing. An ESR test can help determine if you have a condition that causes inflammation (Kumar & Pandya 2012). Arthritis, vasculitis and inflammatory bowel disease are all inflammatory diseases.

Yoga nidra improves blood glucose levels in patients with type 2 diabetes.

Results of this study suggested that subjects who practiced yoga nidra while taking oral hypoglycemics were better able to control fluctuating blood glucose levels and other diabetes-related symptoms compared with those who just took the oral medication (Amita et al. 2009).

Yoga nidra increases heart rate variability.

HRV is a measure of the variation in time between heartbeats. Individuals who have a high HRV may have greater cardiovascular fitness and be more resilient to stress (Markil et al. 2012).

as research indicates that even this state has profound implications for both mental and physical health. In 2011, Harvard Health Publishing released a report showing that certain genes involved in controlling free radicals, inflammation processes and cell death can be turned on and off by the relaxation response (Harvard Medical School 2011).

Swami Veda Bharat of Rishikesh, India, a brilliant sage, yoga scholar and master of yoga nidra, was a keynote speaker at the 2010 Inner IDEA® Conference. He taught that the ultimate state of yoga nidra is devoid of imagery and thought and consists only of awareness of being. In this state, the brain is generating delta waves consistent with the non-REM state of deep sleep. A study conducted at the Institute of Noetic Science in Petaluma, California, found that Swami Veda exhibited a

delta brain-wave state even as he was conversing with the researchers, a seemingly impossible feat (Radin 2005).

Swami Veda's longtime assistant, Lauren, a Minneapolis computer scientist and yogi (who prefers to remain anonymous), demonstrated a practical mastery of yoga nidra when she used it for a 40-minute sinus surgery in lieu of general anesthesia. Her surgeon's signed declaration of this and other yoga research can be found in Swami Veda's book *Yogi in the Lab* (Himalayan Yoga Publishing Trust 2006).

Conclusion

The benefits of yoga nidra are vast, and its contribution to health, both physical and mental, is scientifically well established. Recent studies support the benefits of many basic practices: hydration, proper breathing, laughter and walking. Now yoga nidra

Most practitioners of yoga nidra may not go beyond the alpha state of relaxation when they are new to the practice. However, this level should not be discounted, as research indicates that even this state has profound implications for both mental and physical health.

and deep relaxation can be added to the list.

By adding elements of these practices to your personal training sessions and group classes, you will assist your clients in achieving new levels of calmness and add to a growing toolbox of skills for both their personal growth and your own.

Michele Hébert, E-RYT 500, is a master raja yoga/meditation guide and co-founder (with Mehrad Nazari) of Raja Yoga Institute. She is the author of the multi-award winning memoir The Tenth Door: A Yoga Adventure. Contact her at RajaYogis.net.

Mehrad Nazari, PhD, E-RYT 500, is a master yoga/meditation teacher. He is an executive and corporate adviser in the application of yoga principles in everyday life. He is the author of Enlightened Negotiation: 8 Universal Laws to Connect, Create, and Prosper. Reach him at EnlightenedNegotiation.com.

© 2020 by IDEA Health & Fitness Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduction without permission is strictly prohibited.

References available on ideafit.com.