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Sign of the times...

Stress, anxiety and depression - a modern epidemic?

In 2006, researchers at RMIT University in Melbourne conducted the world’s largest survey of yoga with nearly 4000 Australians completing the half-hour online questionnaire¹. Previously, little was known about the practice of yoga in Australia, whether as a physical activity, a form of therapy, a spiritual path or a lifestyle. This article highlights some of the results.

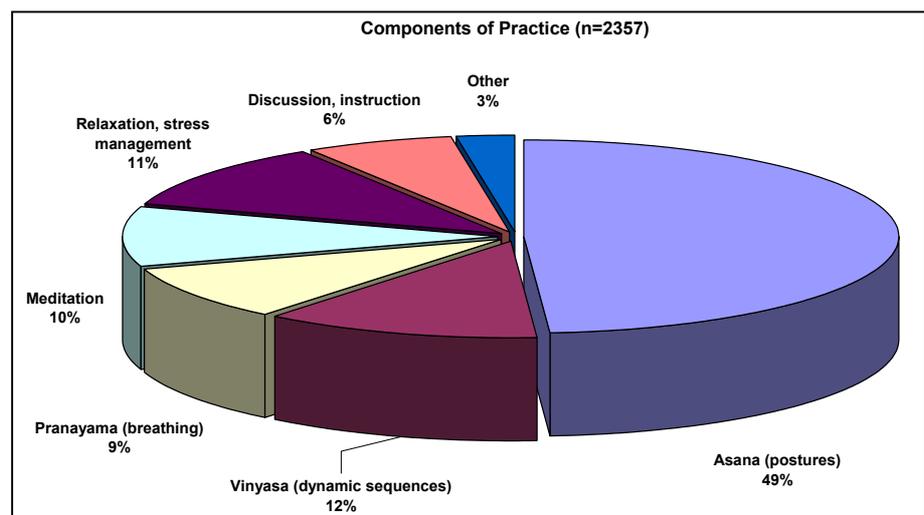
The rise and rise of yoga

Yoga participation in Australia has grown in recent years to be the 13th most popular physical activity not including walking, according to figures from the Australian Sports Commission². Yoga, practised by 2.9% of the population, was ahead of Australian Rules football (2.7%), dancing (2.4%), fishing (2.1%) and martial arts (1.8%). However, yoga participation may be higher when therapeutic use is considered; between 7% and 12%, according to a national study of the use of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) therapies³. In another national survey, yoga and meditation were seen by Australian General Practitioners (GPs) to be similar in both safety and effectiveness to massage, acupuncture and hypnosis, with only massage and acupuncture receiving higher rates of referral or suggestion by GPs⁴. No studies were found on participation in yoga as a spiritual path or lifestyle.

Younger and sexier

The Yoga in Australia survey found that the ‘typical’ yoga practitioner was a 41 year old female (85% of survey respondents were female) who had practised regularly 1-2 times a week (56% of respondents) for about five years, was likely to be tertiary educated (81%) and to have a household income over \$50,000 (76%). Interestingly, about one in seven survey respondents were employed in a healthcare occupation, most commonly nursing, massage and psychology, suggesting acceptance of yoga amongst healthcare professionals.

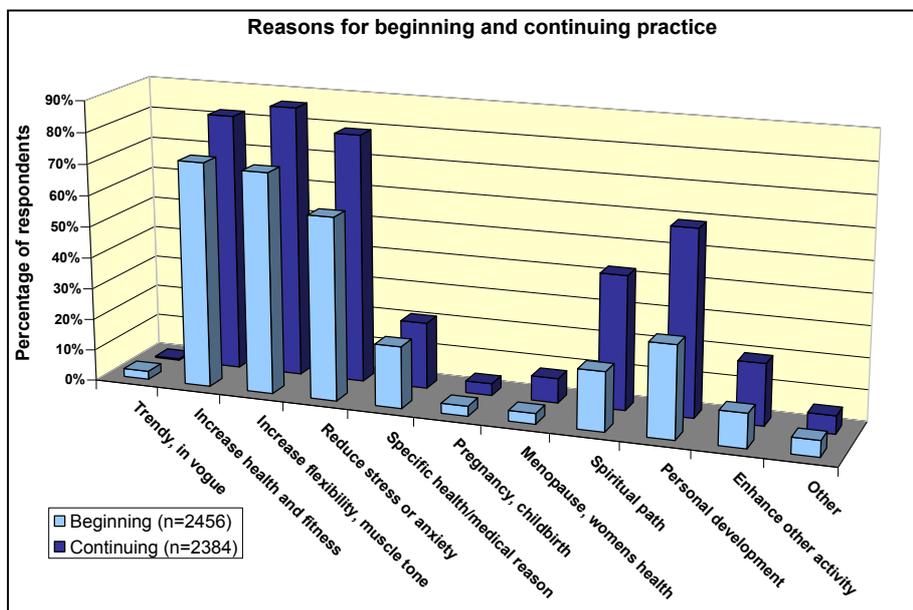
However, the average age of yoga practitioners has fallen overseas⁵ and may be doing the same in Australia, driven by the uptake of stronger, more dynamic forms of yoga, like Ashtanga, Bikram (in a heated room), Power Yoga and Yoga Synergy; appealing not only to younger people but also more to men. Iyengar, Satyananda, the Krishnamacharya tradition (Viniyoga), and other forms of contemporary classical yoga are also very popular in Australia.



The survey found that respondents devoted 61% of their typical practice session to asana (postures) and vinyasa (sequences of postures), with the remaining time devoted to the gentler, more reflective activities of pranayama (breathing techniques), meditation and relaxation.

More than meets the eye

The reasons most commonly given for starting yoga were “health and fitness” or “flexibility and muscle tone” (both about 71%), rising to over 80% as reasons for continuing, confirming that yoga is primarily seen and practised as a physical discipline. However, “to reduce stress or anxiety” was also given by 58% of respondents as a reason for starting yoga, increasing to 79% as a reason for continuing, nearly as common a motivation for continuing practice as the physical reasons.



An even greater differential was found in “spiritual path” and “personal development”. While only 19% initially saw yoga as a spiritual practice, this more than doubled to 43% once practising. Similarly, 29% initially saw yoga as a form of personal development, increasing to 59% as a reason for continuing to practice. Yoga teachers will tell you that this is no surprise; “People come to yoga for the physical but stay for the spiritual”.

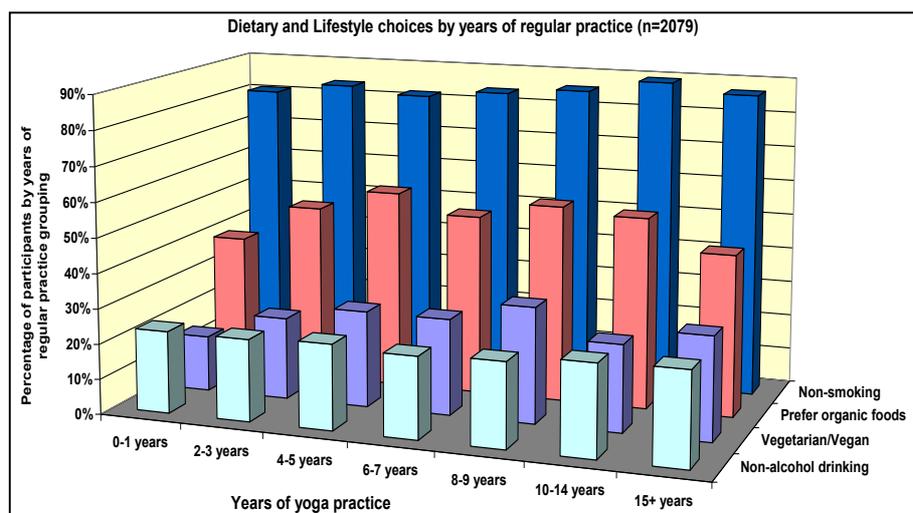
Also worthy of investigation, about one in five respondents indicated they had a specific health or medical reason for practising yoga. More on this later.

Can yoga change your lifestyle?

Overall, 83.5% of yoga survey respondents were non-smoking, compared to the national non-smoking rate of 77% in 2005⁶, suggesting that yoga may appeal to those who exhibit healthy lifestyle choices, however the non-smoking rate was seen to vary by years of regular practice; from 80.7% amongst participants with 0-1 years of practice, to about 83.8% of those with 6-7 years of practice, and as high as 89% of those with 10-14 years of practice. It is not possible to attribute cause and effect as this was not a ‘same subjects’ comparison and in the presence of many confounding factors, not the least of which was a 2% increase in the national non-smoking rate in the 10 years to 2005, however it is interesting to consider the extent to which regular yoga practice may have a non-smoking influence. By way of example, one in nine of the non-smoking yoga survey respondents indicated that their decision not to smoke was influenced by their yoga practice.

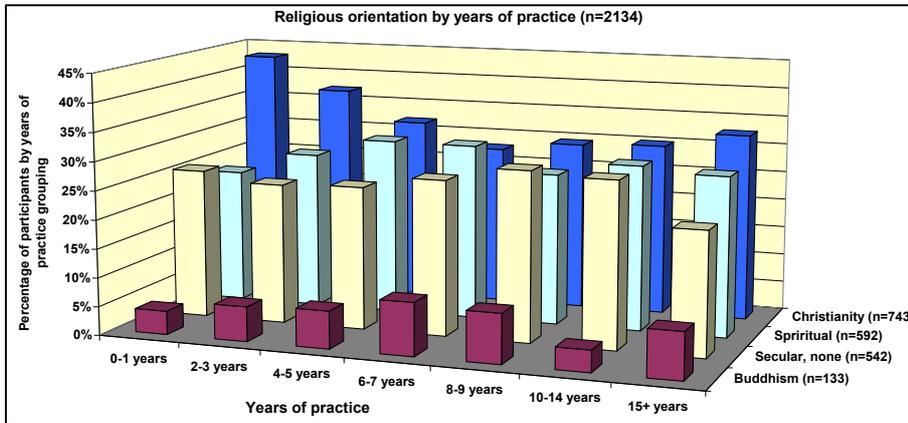
Likewise, 23% of respondents overall were vegetarian or vegan, and 50% had a preference for organic foods.

Vegetarianism also varied with years of practice, from about 15% of novice practitioners to 31% of those who had practised for 8-9 years. By contrast, the proportion of non-alcohol drinking respondents remained relatively consistent at between 23 and 25% over the same period.



Can yoga change your religion?

The religious orientation of yoga survey participants was found to be substantially different from the general population and also varied with years of practice. While 68% of the population identified themselves as Christian in the 2002 Census, only 35% of yoga survey respondents indicated they identified with Christianity, while another 28% held “spiritual but non-religious” beliefs. Likewise, while Buddhism represented about 2% of the Australian population in 2002, about 6% of yoga survey respondents held “Buddhist beliefs”, suggesting that yoga may appeal to people who do not identify with traditional western religions.



Interestingly, the proportion of “Christian” respondents varied by years of practice; from 43% of those who had practised for 0-1 years, to 28% of those who had practised for 6-7 years. Likewise, the practitioners who indicated they held “spiritual but non-religious” beliefs varied from 23% of those with 0-1 years of

practice to 30% of those with 6-7 years of practice. Those with Buddhist beliefs also increased from 4% to 9% over the same period, suggesting that regular yoga practice may impact on spiritual/religious orientation.

However, the apparent ‘trends’ seen amongst yoga survey participants of differing years of practice, also appeared to stabilise or reverse after about 6-7 years of practice, perhaps suggesting that while the non-religious spirituality available in yoga might initially provide a source of greater meaning for those who don’t identify with traditional religions, there may be a point at which the two integrate to some extent. It is theoretically possible that in the longer term, the spiritual path offered by yoga integrates with, or enhances, the religious beliefs we may have been brought up to hold.

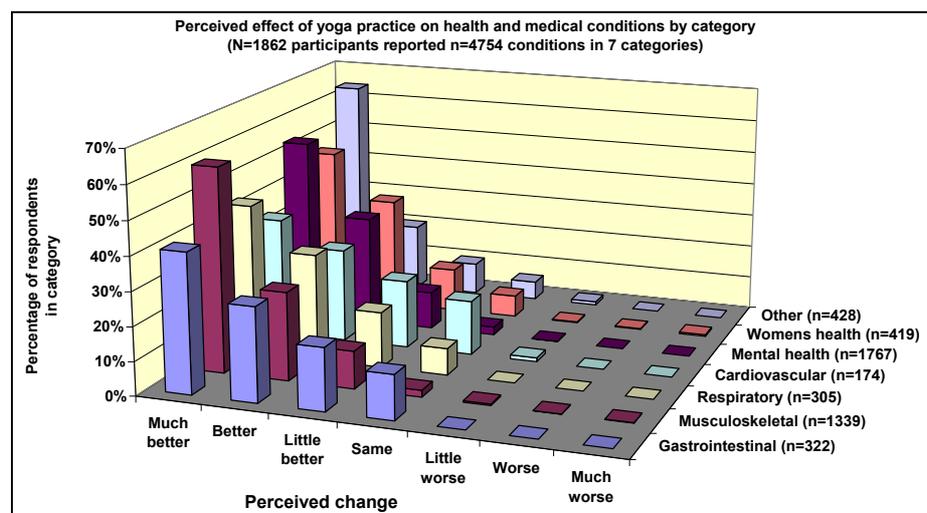
Can yoga change your health?

Of those who reported using yoga to address a specific health concern or medical condition, more people used yoga for mental health issues like stress, anxiety, depression and insomnia, than used yoga for musculoskeletal problems like chronic back, neck or shoulder pain, disc injuries and arthritis. A sign of the times perhaps.

Mental health issues accounted for 24% of all conditions reported, ahead of musculoskeletal issues with 21% of conditions reported.

Women's health was the next largest area (9% of all conditions reported) with reported improvement in menstrual and menopausal symptoms, and assistance during and after pregnancy, ahead of gastrointestinal

(7%), respiratory (6%) and cardiovascular (4%) conditions, with consistent improvement reported across all categories. Weight management (shown in the ‘Other’ category), with nearly 5% of conditions reported was also seen to be assisted by yoga practice.

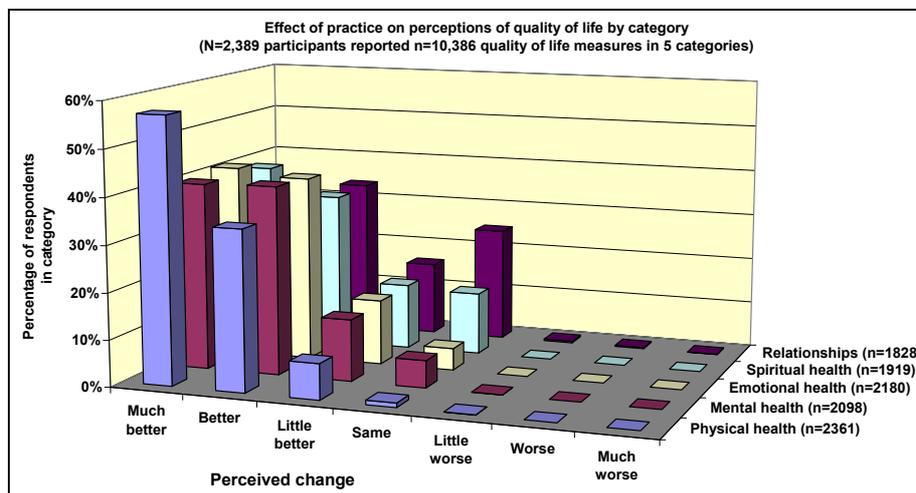


Of all the conditions reported as being addressed by yoga, 53% were rated as "much better" (both conditions and symptoms had improved), 29% "better" (condition improved but symptoms the same) and 12% "a little better" (condition the same but symptoms improved). Overall, 95% of conditions were seen to be improved by yoga practice, with 4.5% unchanged.

Can yoga change your outlook on life?

The answer to this question was an even more emphatic "yes". Perceptions of quality of life were improved by yoga practice in all areas; physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health, and also in relationships, although less consistent with the other categories.

Nearly 60 years ago, the World Health Organisation created a forward-thinking definition of health as, "a state of complete physical, mental, social and spiritual well-being, and not merely an absence of disease or infirmity"⁷. In support of this, many yoga survey respondents took the opportunity provided by the survey to describe the way in which yoga had enhanced their all-round health, from average to good, or from good to excellent. Some reported that they had de-stressed, had given up smoking, stopped eating junk food or stopped fighting with their partner or children as a result of yoga practice. Some typical comments were:



"Generally I am a much happier, emotionally stable person which is a change from how I was before yoga."

"Yoga and meditation has given me the stillness and grounded-ness I need to manage emotionally stressful times and situations."

"Now that I'm doing a daily practice, I feel like I am at my best all the time. My relationships are better and I can deal with everyday life better because I don't get so stressed about the little things anymore."

"Yoga has helped me take a step back, and see life, with its highs and lows, as just that - life with highs and lows. I can choose to get stressed about it, or just to observe what happens."

"I have had problems with depression for a large portion of my life. Yoga has helped me to deal with the depression and other life issues which arise and which may have previously triggered a depressive episode."

"All my relationships are much better off. Being 'present' was the major hurdle so now I can give my full attention to those I am with."

"Yoga has been the best thing I have ever done for myself! My self-esteem, fitness, flexibility, general health and well-being has improved dramatically. It has created a calmness and clarity within myself which I had been searching for."

"I feel as if I could bang on about yoga for years and I want to take everyone by the scruff of the neck and show them how beneficial it is."

"I find that the regular practice (breathing, meditation and asana) reminds me how important it is to relax and to take time out to just be. I wish I could bottle the feeling that I take home with me after a session."

"Practising yoga increases my quality of life ten-fold. I am calmer, more balanced and more in tune with my physical and spiritual self, making me a better friend, lover and mother."

A final word about mental health

Mental illness encompasses a broad range of conditions. At one end of the spectrum there are emotional or mental disturbances, sometimes manifesting as chronic stress or anxiety, difficulty sleeping, addictions, eating disorders, and towards the other end of the spectrum, behavioural disorders, depression, bi-polar and other major mood and personality disorders.

The Mental Health Foundation of Australia says:

"One in five of us will experience depression at some time in our life. Unfortunately, only about 20% of depressed people are correctly diagnosed because depression can mask itself as physical illness (such as chronic pain, anxiety, sleeplessness or fatigue). Depression can contribute to, and be caused by, many physical illnesses. The World Health Organisation has concluded that by 2020, depression will be the world's major health problem⁸."

In yoga, mental illness is first recognised as the "Adhi" or disturbance that initially exists in the manomaya kosa (the mental/emotional personality), before filtering through the other layers of existence to the annamaya kosa (the physical body) and manifesting as somatic illness⁹. Adhi is characterised by excessive speed, mental restlessness and emotional disruption (stress, anxiety, anger and resentment); in fact modern life seems to be a perfect recipe for creating Adhi.

On a personal note, it's important to recognise that we are profoundly emotional and inherently spiritual beings. Once we validate this, we can begin to untangle the effect our emotions (thoughts and feelings) have on our behaviour. Yoga is an effective way to develop this awareness, starting with the body and the breath but ultimately developing stillness in the mind, inner peace and lasting happiness.

About the survey

The Yoga in Australia survey was conducted between June 2005 and January 2006. Recruitment was through yoga teacher associations, mainstream press, word of mouth, and by widespread distribution of 40,000 promotional postcards to yoga practitioners nationally. Respondents were self-selecting to participate. A total of 3832 respondents completed the half-hour survey including 1265 yoga teachers and 2567 yoga practitioners. The results described in this article do *not* include the yoga teachers due to their vocational interest in yoga.

Despite a large national response, participation in the survey was not random, nor statistically representative of the Australian population, therefore cannot be assumed to represent all yoga practice in Australia. Studios, teachers and styles of yoga that supported the survey project can be assumed to be over-represented. Likewise, being an online survey, groups of people without access to the internet can be assumed to be under-represented.

About the author

Stephen Penman, MAppSc(Research), GC(Tert Teach Learn), is a past President of Yoga Australia (formerly the Yoga Teachers Association of Australia) and was a steering committee member of the Australian Teachers of Meditation Association (ATMA). He is currently undertaking a PhD at University of Western Sydney in the area of Lifestyle Medicine. For more information about the survey, please visit www.yogasurvey.com or email info@yogasurvey.com.

Revised 1/7/10

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