

## Introduction

By Pam Jeter



As members of a community of yoga therapists, teachers, students, and researchers, we share a common purpose. We are here to learn and grow and to impart our knowledge and experience of yoga to those who need it the most, especially those dealing with acute or chronic health conditions.

The Yoga Therapy Research Summaries are provided as a service to our IAYT community to help members navigate the labyrinth of information available concerning the latest scientific studies on yoga therapy for clinical health conditions. The summaries were inspired by the recently published *Principles and Practice of Yoga in Health Care* edited by Sat Bir Singh Khalsa, Lorenzo Cohen, Timothy McCall, and Shirley Telles.<sup>1</sup> This fundamental work includes the most up-to-date research plus clinical applications from the world's premier yoga researchers and yoga therapists. Our intention here is to provide brief overviews that a yoga therapist can use in his or her own practice.

Yoga is an ancient teaching designed to align the mind and body to our essential nature.<sup>2</sup> Patanjali, the eminent scholar of yoga philosophy, laid out a blueprint for our spiritual progression through the integration of the eight limbs of yoga in the Yoga Sutras. According to Patanjali, a primary obstacle for the alignment of mind and body is imbalances expressed through our physical health.<sup>2</sup> A more recent development in Western society focuses primarily on the physical benefits of yoga, including yoga as a means to improve health. Today, most of what compels us to visit a doctor are the physical symptoms of disease. The prevalence of non-communicable chronic disease has reached epidemic proportions and is the leading cause of mortality worldwide. Thus, the emergence of yoga therapy as a discipline to address clinical conditions, accompanied by the emerging research available on yoga for clinical populations, is not only timely but urgent.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), four main non-communicable disease groups contribute to the cause of death in our global society: cancer, diabetes, and cardiovascular and respiratory diseases.<sup>3</sup> These conditions share common risk factors, which include tobacco and alcohol abuse, physical inactivity, unhealthy diets, and chronic stress. Importantly, many of these risk factors are susceptible to behavioral modifications or are preventable altogether. While yoga is not a panacea for the world's ailments, it can have a powerful effect on a person's lifestyle, health, and wellbeing. Furthermore, the health benefits of yoga can reduce the cost of healthcare for individuals, families, and society.

Yoga therapy as we know it today is the individualized application of yoga for therapeutic purposes for a broad range of health conditions in individuals or small groups. Yoga therapy is a more comprehensive, integrated approach that considers not only the client's physical complaints, but carefully considers the state of mind, spirit, and environment through observation and interview. Since the late twentieth century, we have seen tremendous growth in yoga therapy as a profession signaled by the formation of several professional associations, such as the International Association of Yoga Therapists, and schools offering yoga therapy training, including universities such as Maryland University of Integrative Health, as well as an ever-growing number of practicing yoga therapists in the United States.

Yoga research is the systematic application of the scientific method toward identifying the underlying mechanisms for how yoga works; its safety; and whom it may benefit, especially among the multitudes of people dealing with or at risk of preventable chronic health conditions. Yoga researchers are often also yoga students and teachers themselves and have a firm belief (and hope) in the benefits of yoga as a path to better health. The number of research studies specifically examining yoga in clinical settings has tripled in the past ten years.<sup>4</sup> This is a strong indicator for the timeliness and importance of the work and its potential to have far-reaching implications in healthcare in the twenty-first century.

Yoga research and yoga therapy are different but complementary approaches with the same goal, which is to serve clients' highest good. Research outcomes are derived based on third-person measurements and operate at the group level, whereas yoga therapy relies on the individual's direct experience or first-person measures. An example of this is an investigator determining the outcome of a yoga therapy intervention by measuring biological markers, such as salivary cortisol or heart rate variability, averaged across a group of participants, and comparing the results to a separate group that did not receive yoga. A yoga therapist will more likely take into consideration an individual's direct response to yoga therapy by qualitatively assessing their experience at the psychological and physical level, often including their family or work environment. Together, the information from both approaches provides a more holistic view that informs the appropriate course of action for better client outcomes.