Do you find yourself repeatedly checking your phone for notifications? Do you find yourself unsettled after scrolling through social media or glancing at the number of unread emails showing on your smartphone? Our individual and collective relationships to this digital age are increasingly in the spotlight. What might the ancient yoga teachers say about this present reality? Given that yoga offers strategies for “tending to one’s own garden,” how does the concept of self-care interact with and find balance with the profound role that sociological forces play, such as the growing challenge of living in a technology-dependent world? How does the technology in our lives impact our individual and collective health and well-being?

Yoga therapy continues to grow parallel to unique sociocultural dynamics such as the rise of technology. As yoga therapy approach-
es this topic, it benefits from always keeping in mind sociological perspectives, especially when supporting individual-level well-being. Viewed through this wider lens, as David Nicholls does in his book *Physiotherapy Otherwise*, the illness–wellness spectrum can be seen as constructed by groups and systems as opposed to solely being an expression of individual biology, psyche, or lifestyle.

Although a comprehensive review of sociology as applied to the profession of yoga therapy is outside the scope of this article, our aim is to view yogic inquiry through a sociological lens to illuminate the growing challenge of navigating a technology-dependent world. Yogic inquiry can be seen as aligned with the concept of critical studies because both arenas remind us to critically examine the belief that science can discover concrete objective data to fully explain the world and our experience of it. A failure to find such balance between open inquiry and blind faith in science could reflect an attempt to impose specific ideas onto individuals and/or society at the expense of others. This latter scenario also risks playing into unhelpful neoliberal notions of personal agency regarding one’s position on the illness–wellness spectrum.

Life in the Digitally Social Age

**Mental Health and Well-Being**

Elliot B. Martin, in his book *Reconceptualizing Mental Illness in the Digital Age: Ghosts in the Machine*, argued that the rise in diagnosed mental health conditions such as ADHD, autism spectrum disorders, depression, anxiety, and rates of suicide correlates to the explosive growth of the internet and related technologies. Although pinning the increase in diagnoses of such conditions solely on technology is erroneous, the topic presents the question of how the digital age (itself inextricably intertwined with Western biases; capitalism; and other sociological dynamics, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and biopolitics) has affected our relationships with others and with the natural world from which we arise and cannot live without. Have we landed in a situation that favors and promotes relationships with commodities, information, and technology over those with people and the larger natural ecosystems that we are a part of and derive life and nourishment from? Such questioning is central to yogic inquiry.

Beyond the rising rates of mental health conditions, a brief look at the most common biomedical strategy for addressing mental health related challenges is warranted. In 1989 the first selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) medication emerged on the market, while Martin notes that the birth-year of the Internet is 1983. With this history in mind, a large-scale review of studies on “the serotonin theory of depression”...
demonstrates a lack of consistent or solid evidence of a causal association between serotonin and depression. The sum of this information points us toward the complexity of causality and the need for models of support (enter yoga therapy) that are capable of addressing a broad set of potentially contributing factors to states such as depression.

Mental illness might be viewed as a defense mechanism that buffers against the chaos of the digital age.

The preceding scenario also encourages us to further consider the upstream sociological factors that assist in more fully explaining epidemic levels of psychological distress. In this age of seemingly digital everything, while we see challenges with the interrelated dynamics of materialism and capitalism, we might also consider that, as Martin said, “[T]he dominant force is not the manufacture of goods, but the manufacture of stimulation and excitement, of simulation, of finance itself, of invisible products (with invisible value paid for with invisible money)” [emphasis in original]. Martin goes on to point out our reliance on “psychological commodities, services designed not to meet unmet needs, but very specifically to create desire, often for ‘needs’ that one had previously been totally unaware of . . .”

Yogic Philosophy

As yogic wisdom warrants, this exploration is not meant to be an uninformed attack on technology or judgment on the global state of humanity. For example, the capacities of technology during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic have carried many benefits, such as maintaining the economy, jobs, and our connection to others. Even before the pandemic, technology made it possible for travelers, immigrants, refugees, and all those living far from their roots to keep in contact with their loved ones and those they have left behind. Yoga reminds us to recognize both the upsides and downsides in our relationship to whatever arises.

For example, and purposely chosen as a previously mentioned and interrelated topic, yoga’s often-emphasized concept of self-care can be seen as multi-edged. Some brands of self-care may cross over into narcissism or human exceptionalism and miss the relevance of caring for others or the relevance of interdependence with our natural environment. In other cases, self-care messaging, especially in relation to mental/emotional distress, overemphasizes personal responsibility, thereby depoliticizing mental health and missing the profound influence that sociocultural forces exert. Going even further, some could fall into patterns of excessive focus on others’ gardens or even a brand of globality (trying to save the world) that actually fails to tend to the role that our own presence and actions play within the larger ecosystem of which human life is a part.

In Barbara Stoler Miller’s translation of the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna said to Arjuna,

My nature has eight aspects: earth, water, fire, wind, space, mind, understanding, and individuality. This is my lower nature; know my higher nature too, the life-force that sustains this universe. Learn that this is the womb of all creatures; I am the source of all the universe, just as I am its dissolution. Nothing is higher than I am; Arjuna, all that exists is woven on me, like a web of pearls on thread. (5.4–7)

This teaching lays an initial framework to ask (1) how can this and other yogic teachings assist us in disengaging from the distractions and alienations that, albeit unintended, seem baked into the realities of how we use the various digital devices and media at our fingertips, and (2) how can we relate to and harness the utility of digital technologies to nurture genuine interdependence and the embodied needs of ourselves and others?

Also in this Bhagavad Gita translation (7.20), we read that, “Robbed of knowledge by stray desires, men take refuge in other deities; observing varied rites, they are limited by their own nature.” Is it possible that this tendency is reinforced in this digital age? Consider the relevance of Krishna’s later advice to Arjuna (13.26): “[K]now that anything inanimate or alive with motion is born from the union of the field and its knower.” How might this teaching assist us in examining our relationships with the reality of a technologically dependent world?

The kosha model reminds us that beyond the layers that comprise each individual being (body-mind), we are “bathed” in environments. A contemporary presentation of this concept by Marlysa Sullivan, et al. encourages contemplation of the whole of body-mind-environment (BME) interactions. Taking this approach supports both individual and collectivist notions of BME. We can approach the “E” as encompassing not just the natural and social environments, but also our informational, psychological, and medical environments. Given that all of these layers of environment profoundly affect physiological state and thus each person’s lived experience, we can see a recipe for responding to the preceding queries.

Opening Forward

The Applied Science of Mind-Body Medicine

In moving from philosophy into the realm of mind-body medicine science, we can think in terms of a volume dial applied to the stress response as a framework for exploring individualized patterns of physiological state/arousal in relation to one’s digital environment. Threat appraisal, as indexed by physiological arousal, can dial up or down based on changing conditions and patterns, including our interactions with the digital environment. The yogic model is equipped to consider the unique ways in which overall levels of stimulation may generate physiological patterns associated with specific mental health states. Based on each person’s disposition, history, and culture, the impact of our technological world may land with greater or lesser force. On the extreme high end of the dial, people may experience states of sustained intense activation or vigilance.

Beyond individual client assessments, we might ask whether technological advances are outpacing our collective ability to process them. This concept is somewhat akin to evolutionary discordance theory, which proposes that changes in food processing and consumption are contributing to ill health because these changes cause many foods to no longer match our genetic mechanisms for digestion. Specific to engaging with digital media and technologies,
attention may be increasingly fragmented, disheveled, and hard to harness, which in turn can significantly reduce deeper engagement with other people, the natural world, and the everyday fabric of life. Perhaps this overload partially explains the growing interest in mindfulness and yoga? For some, this attraction for a more consciously controlled experience, especially if approached superficially, may reflect fleeting attempts to recapture something lost in these times—perhaps a sense of a sacred origin and a stable environment and culture that reflect authentic presence.

Although the digital age can be seen (at least in many Westernized countries) as having emerged from societies that for many are abiding need for belonging, purpose, and meaning. Although each individual must seek to know their own culture deeply to reinforce and culture that reflect authentic presence.

narrative abuse, or otherwise misrepresent—even unintentionally—the PTM%20Framework%20%28January%202018%29_0.pdf

Martin’s discourse on mental health in the digital age refers to the problem of over-pathologizing human thinking, experience, behavior, and emotion. Mary Boyle and Lucy Johnstone’s power threat meaning framework (PTMF) is a relatively recent effort to decolonize mental health academics and clinical care. Here, decolonization refers to approaching mental health with deliberate consideration of not just jurisdictional/legal and economic freedom, but also cultural, psychological, and spiritual freedom and respect. This orientation is especially critical for persons from populations that have been minoritized. Decolonizing mental health calls for decentering the ways in which dominant populations romanticize, abuse, or otherwise misrepresent—even unintentionally—the narratives and beliefs of individuals and groups of people. At the most basic level, a decolonized perspective requires approaching people’s lived experiences from nondiagnosing, nonpathologizing, nonanalytical, and intentionally normalizing strategies. (The full text of the British Psychological Society’s PTMF publication is available at https://cms.bps.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-07/PTMF%20Framework%20%20January%202018%29_0.pdf)

PTMF attempts to shed light on why people sometimes experience distress, confusion, fear, despair, and troubled or troubling behavior. This framework summarizes and integrates evidence around the role of various kinds of power in people’s lives, the kinds of threat that misuses of power pose to us, and the ways we have learned as human beings to respond to threat. In biomedically oriented mental health settings, these threat responses are framed as symptoms. PTMF looks at how we can make sense of these difficult experiences, and how messages from the dominant society can increase our feelings of shame, self-blame, isolation, fear, and guilt.

Does this framework sound familiar? While updated with contemporary research, the underpinnings of PTMF are not new and can be found within the yoga therapy framework. As such, PTMF might be seen as an effort to course-correct a challenged system of mental healthcare toward something with greater capacity to restore dignity amid the changing and powerful sociological forces that are primary drivers contributing to mental health ailments. Martin even suggests that mental illness might be viewed as a defense mechanism that buffers against the chaos of the digital age. Yoga therapy is primed to assist in addressing the potentially adverse effects of our digital lives on well-being at both the individual and collective levels. Consider the following two questions in exploring what skills and resources people might have and how we might pull all of these ideas and responses together into a cohesive narrative: (1) What is your story, and how does it all fit together? and (2) What are your strengths, and what access to empowering resources do you have?

Although yoga therapy (as arising out of a specific wisdom tradition) aims to be innately aligned with the preceding discourse, deliberate learning and attention are needed to ensure that each yoga therapist’s strategy for supporting others is living up to the intention and context of cultural humility. For example, as alluded to earlier, there is a sociocultural tendency to over-assign causality at the individual level, especially in the West. The result can be a form of over-emphasizing self-care out of the larger context of influence, including as it applies to the digital age. Failing to appropriately consider contributing factors carries significant potential to undermine one’s personal sense of individual or moral agency.‘ Remembering complexity and interdependence reminds us that antidepressants are not going to remedy the racialization and minoritization of individuals, fix gender disparities, or curb sexual violence. Similarly, mindfulness alone is not going to address poverty, a shame-based workplace, or bullying and the shadow projections of cancel culture on social media.

**Right Relationship with Technology**

Does the recognition that health is significantly affected by the environment in which we live, work, and play imply disempowerment or incurability? Does such understanding negate the potential benefits of self-care, psychotherapy, or psychiatric support? No. Redistributing causality away from (solely) individual agency assists in undermining stigma and shame and opens doors to a greater sense of autonomy in each person. This frame supports each individual to determine the realistic actions and practices they wish to commit to while maintaining alignment with their unique belief system and values. Offering skilled support to assist yoga therapy clients in separating these intention-aligned actions from conscious or unconscious attachments to specific or desired outcomes further supports the yogic strategy for living within present conditions (including what can be a chaotic digital environment).

From the preceding, and prefaced with the reminder that yoga therapy deeply values the container of an attuned therapeutic relationship, we can aim to support the inherent potential for growth in awareness in each person we serve; this includes framing and responding to each individual’s experiences of technology and the vast amounts of information and energy that it carries. A starting point for working with yoga therapy as it relates to our digital lives is to offer strategies that frame contemplative inquiry (guided by the yogic codes of ethical conduct, the yamas and niyamas) around our current relationships with technology, social media, and so on. Such inquiry supports the development of committed actions that align with personalized values and ethics, including in ways that are mindful to not make exaggerated claims around yoga therapy’s role in any given person’s mental health needs. Said another way, we encourage yoga therapists to consider the potential utility of other
avenues and resources for the fullest possible picture of support for any given individual.

Although our focus here has largely been on mental health, physical health (and its inseparability from mental health) also demands acknowledgment of larger patterns and forces; such recognition assists in appropriately ascribing causality and supporting the development of agency in context. The philosophy, practices, and science of yoga can be applied to the complex sociocultural dynamics of the present digital age. While solutions are always in flux based on continuously arising and dissolving energies for individuals and societies, it behooves us all to continue this dialogue about the ongoing co-creation of consciousness as we navigate the rapid ongoing evolution of technology.

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References

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