

Workplace yoga can indeed lower employee stress

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People who get to do yoga at work may be less stressed out than their peers who don't, a research review suggests.

At any given time, as many as one in six working people suffer from stress and other symptoms related to mental illness, researchers note in *Occupational Medicine*. Yoga is one of many approaches a growing number of employers are using to combat stress and improve workers' mental health, but research to date has offered a mixed picture of how well these efforts are working.

For the current study, researchers examined data from 13 trials with about 1,300 participants. Some workers in these trials were randomly assigned to participate in workplace yoga programmes while others were not.

Yoga didn't appear to influence heart health, but workplace yoga did have a positive effect on mental health and stress reduction in particular.

“Yoga at work could be one of the chosen programs to reduce stress levels, and usually requires low investment, with minimal equipment,” said lead study author Laura Maria Puerto Valencia of the Bavarian Health and Food and Safety Authority in Munich, Germany.

It’s hard to say, however, how much the yoga itself is responsible rather than the workplace culture at companies that were willing to give workplace yoga a try, said Puerto Valencia said by email.

“Usually a company that allowed or planned a randomised controlled trial of yoga at work is interested in reducing stress levels, increasing job satisfaction and productivity; in consequence, it could be a place with a lower stress environment [compared to] other companies in general,” Puerto Valencia said.

Still, more companies are expanding their approach to occupational health to include not just efforts to avoid accidents and injuries but also services to promote mental health as well as good eating and exercise habits. And the results should encourage companies to include yoga as part of their approach to workplace wellness, the study team concludes.

Mind-body medicine can include a range of health practices that combine efforts to focus the mind, control breathing and move the body in ways that promote relaxation. Yoga is often a component of this approach to wellness. Regular yoga practice has long been linked to better sleep, lower blood pressure, and improvements in mobility and flexibility.

However, the study wasn’t a controlled experiment designed to prove how yoga might directly alter stress levels. Researchers also didn’t calculate the magnitude of stress reduction caused by yoga across all of the smaller studies included in the analysis.

“The take-home message seems to be that yoga is a good practice in the workplace as a means of reducing stress,” said Stacy Hunter, a researcher at Texas State University in San Marcos who wasn’t involved in the study.

Workers who don’t get yoga on the job can still find a way to practice, Hunter said by email.

“Even if yoga classes aren’t provided in the workplace, simple pranayama [yogic breathing] techniques can be practiced at a desk in a cubicle or an office,” Hunter advised. “While most studies in this review included yoga postures, slow, deep, yogic breathing has also shown to elicit a relaxation response which could contribute to a reduction in stress in the workplace.”

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