

The Utility of Ancient Complementary Therapies in Modern Mental Health Treatment

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According to the NIH, thirty-six percent of adult Americans use some complementary or alternative medical therapy (CAM) in their quest for wellness. Are there CAM therapies that can consistently produce positive outcomes in the mental health arena? This article seeks to answer that question by investigating a long standing CAM therapy, the Yogic Science of Breath.

The Yogic Science of Breath is a 5,000 year old precise, integrated science of self-development and health promotion. Historically, it is the first science to recognize the interconnection between mind, body, emotions and spirit, and the role these relationships play in restoring and promoting optimal health. It offers specific breathing techniques to restore and maintain robust mental health.

How can specific breathing techniques impact mental health?

There is a strong relationship between the breath and one's emotional state. Every emotion creates a specific rhythm or pattern in the breath. For example, when one is afraid the breath becomes fast and shallow. When depressed, the breath is a short inhale followed by a prolonged, heavy exhale. And, when content the breath is light, with even inhalation and exhalation.

Observation reveals that every emotion does create a specific rhythm or pattern in the breath. Emotions and breathing patterns are like opposite sides of the same coin. One can allow the emotions to alter the breath and cause physiological changes that can exacerbate and perpetuate a state of emotional distress. Or through skillful use of the breath, one can actually transform mental and emotional states. Research below demonstrates their beneficial effects for many conditions. A particular strength is that the Yogic Breathing described can be utilized as an adjunctive treatment with other modalities, such as psychotherapy or medication. And in some instances where individuals are unable or unwilling to receive conventional care, it may be considered as an alternative.

Description of CAM Breathing Techniques:

Three precise breathing techniques derived from the Vedic text of India by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar will be described (and presented in more detail at the upcoming GPA meeting). These three techniques work synergistically to relieve emotional distress and create a subjective experience of wellbeing. The breathing techniques include:

1) Three-stage Ujjayi, or "Victory Breath". Ujjayi is a slow and deep breathing practice utilizing slight contraction of the laryngeal muscles and partial closure of the glottis to increase airway resistance and breath control. Three-stage Ujjayi is an advanced form which adds specific inhalation to exhalation ratios, breath-holds and arm postures.

2) Bhastrika, or "Bellows Breath" is vigorous and fast breathing (about twenty to thirty respiratory cycles per minute), with arm movements to increase the depth of inhalation and exhalation.

3) Sudarshan Kriya [Sue-darshan Kree-ya], or "Healing Breath" is the central breathing technique. It is a unique cyclical breathing technique of slow, medium, and fast rates in succession.

Collectively these three techniques are referred to as 'Sudarshan Kriya and accompanying Practices' (SK&P). SK&P is offered through the non-profit Art of Living Foundation, an educational and humanitarian foundation, and non-governmental organization of the United Nations. Over eight million mainstream and special needs individuals in 146 nations have learned these practices. Instructors undergo standardized training and are certified, thus producing consistent results worldwide and making SK&P an excellent candidate for research.

Research Findings:

Depression: In multiple studies SK&P has demonstrated a 68-73% remission rate in the treatment of depression regardless of the severity of depression (Janakiramaiah, Gangadhar, Naga Venkatesha Murthy, Harish, Shetty, Subbakrishna, & Meti, 1998; Janakiramaiah, Gangadhar, Naga Venkatesha Murthy, Harish, Subbakrishna, & Vedamurthachar, 2000; Naga Venkatesha Murthy, Gangadhar, Janakiramaiah, & Subbakrishna, 1997; Naga Venkatesha Murthy, Janakiramaiah, Gangadhar, & Subbakrishna, 1998) or degree of biological brain dysfunction (Naga Venkatesha Murthy et al., 1997; Naga Venkatesha Murthy et al., 1998). Remission was experienced at three weeks and was sustained at three months. It was determined by individual psychiatric assessment and standard psychiatric measures (e.g., Beck Depression Inventory, Hamilton Rating Scale for Depression, Clinical Global Impressions).

In addition, SK&P produced highly beneficial effects on patients' brain and hormone function. Patient EEG recordings of cognitive function improved (Naga Venkatesha Murthy et al., 1998), and plasma prolactin levels increased after the first SK&P session (Janakiramaiah et al., 1998). Further, in a randomized comparison study of melancholia, SK&P used as the sole treatment was as effective as standard antidepressant drug therapy, and almost as effective as ECT. (Janakiramaiah et al., 2000).

SK&P has also demonstrated significant anxiolytic effects (Suarez, 2002) in several populations. Tsunami refugees showed dramatic improvement in PTSD and depression scores after SK&P training. (Descilo et al., manuscript in preparation).

And what about moving people beyond amelioration of pathology to higher levels of satisfaction and fulfillment? SK&P has been found to enhance brain function (Bhatia, Kumar, Kumar, Pandey, & Kochupillai, 2003), resiliency to stress (Sharma, Sen, Singh, Bhardwaj, Kochupillai & Singh, 2003), and overall wellbeing and optimism in healthy populations (Kjellgren, Axelsson, Norlander & Saaticioglu, 2007).

Conclusion: Medical science is currently rediscovering and validating many of the ancient mental health practices from traditional cultures worldwide. SK&P is one standardized practice that is undergoing extensive research to show it as an evidence-based treatment. It is cost and staff effective, well tolerated and self empowering for clients. It can be easily integrated into more standard mental health protocols and diverse community care models. The more science expands its understanding of mind/body medicine and such fields as Psychoneuroimmunology, the stronger the bridge between modern and ancient, traditional and complementary mental health practices becomes.

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