

## Perspective

# Yoga Therapy: Informed Consent and Shared Decision Making

David Shapiro, PhD<sup>1</sup>, Lisa Walford, CYT<sup>2</sup>, Marla Apt, CYT<sup>3</sup>,  
Veronica Zador, RYT<sup>4</sup>, Arlene Zeichner, MA, MBA<sup>5</sup>,  
Allen B. Grodsky, JD<sup>6</sup>, Timothy McCall, MD<sup>7</sup>

1. Department of Psychiatry and Biobehavioral Sciences, University of California, Los Angeles, CA

2. Yoga Works Teacher Training Program, Los Angeles, CA

3. Iyengar Institute of Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA

4. Yoga Alliance, Los Angeles, CA

5. Zeichgeist, Digital Media Consultancy, Los Angeles, CA

6. Grodsky & Olecki LLP, Santa Monica, CA

7. Medical Editor, Yoga Journal, San Francisco, CA

Our intention in this perspective is to provide some guidelines for the safety and welfare of individuals who decide to engage in Yoga therapy and also to encourage a pretreatment discussion between the Yoga therapist and practitioner regarding the efficacy of Yoga therapy, which is commonly promoted to benefit specific health concerns and problems.

Yoga is one of 30 practices listed by a publication of the United States' Department of Health and Human Services as "complementary and alternative medicine (CAM)," based on a survey of CAM use in the United States in 2002.<sup>1</sup> This survey was repeated in 2007,<sup>2</sup> and increased use was seen among adults for acupuncture, deep breathing exercises, massage therapy, meditation, naturopathy, and Yoga. Some of the methods are well established and often used in practice by licensed healthcare professionals, such as physicians, physical therapists, and psychologists. A survey conducted in 1998<sup>3</sup> estimated that 15 million American adults had practiced Yoga at least once in their lifetime and 7.4 million during the previous year; the study concluded that Yoga was often regarded as helpful in dealing with a health-related concern. Yoga continues to grow in popularity.

In 2002, Eisenberg<sup>4</sup> discussed the state of CAM in the United States, noting that CAM remedies vary in safety and

effectiveness, and he questioned why the use of CAM was increasing when evidence for the effectiveness of "orthodox" treatments was greater than ever. He concluded that the popularity of CAM reflects biomedicine's failure to fully explain the patient's health problems and provide information that would allow the patient to choose among treatment options. He also concluded that effective CAM practices should be incorporated into care, whether treatments are provided by biomedical or CAM practitioners.

There is a large literature providing evidence for the potential benefits of Yoga in a variety of health disorders.<sup>5,6</sup> However, to our knowledge, Yoga has not been identified or recommended by medical consensus committees as an accepted therapy for any disorder. These committees set the standards for diagnosis and treatment used by physicians and other health professionals in the care of people with health-related problems. Some consensus committees refer to "lifestyle" practices such as weight loss, exercise, or stress management as beneficial in some conditions, usually as complementary to standard medical treatments, but they do

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not refer to Yoga, as far as we know. In early or less advanced stages of some health conditions, and in the absence of significant risk factors, these methods may be recommended as alternatives to medication.

People practice Yoga for the purposes of recreation, exercise, social engagement, stress reduction, or health promotion. In many cases, it is practiced as a way of dealing with health issues, such as backache and other kinds of pain, joint and muscle problems, gastrointestinal symptoms, insomnia, anxiety, and depression. An interest in Yoga philosophy and spirituality may motivate participation. Yoga as therapy has a long history. The International Association of Yoga Therapists, founded 20 years ago in the United States, now has 2,422 members who are actively engaged in the development and promotion of Yoga therapy and research and in setting standards for teachers of therapeutic Yoga. Some of IAYT's members are licensed health professionals.

Yoga therapy is offered by many organizations and is promoted for all kinds of health-related concerns. An Internet search yields thousands of Yoga programs offering treatment for physical and mental disorders, as well as many for the training and certification of Yoga therapists. Unlike modern medicine, which has its foundation in basic sciences, clinical research, and the scientific method, Yoga is a mixture of philosophy, ethics, and beliefs rooted in ancient practices and traditions, with many competing theories and approaches of Yoga "schools." Yoga treatment methods are derived from Yoga conceptions of somatic and mental processes that have not been fully reconciled with or integrated into modern science, mainstream medicine, or other commonly accepted methods of healthcare. Little research has dealt with the mechanisms of the effects of Yoga for any given health condition.<sup>6,7</sup> To our knowledge, other than those who are also licensed health professionals, Yoga therapists are not generally oriented to taking a health history or requiring a general examination or diagnosis by a health professional. There are, as yet, no commonly agreed-upon standards of education and training for a Yoga therapist, no definition of certain Yoga practices appropriate for given health conditions, no preferred use of individual versus group-led sessions, and no methods for evaluating therapeutic outcomes between the different methods or schools of Yoga. Nor are there consistent standards for record keeping and documentation of treatment history.

The authors of this report are all long-term practitioners of Yoga, including highly experienced Yoga teachers or therapists, and professionals in law, health research, and medicine. We recognize that Yoga therapy will continue to develop, but that it will take a lot more time and extensive

discussions to adopt agreed-upon standards. Other than occasional injuries, there is little evidence that Yoga will hurt people. However, some participants in Yoga therapy may neglect to seek effective treatments for their condition as offered by physicians, physical therapists, or other licensed health professionals.

In general, Yoga may best be described and promoted as a complementary treatment. It should be made clear in the information provided to participants that the treatment regimen is based on established Yoga principles and practices and associated experiences of Yoga therapists, that Yoga alone may not be sufficient as a cure for their ailment, and that there is no way to be sure the treatment will be effective. For those participants currently engaged in treatment by a licensed health professional, it is appropriate for the Yoga therapist to suggest that they inform their practitioner of their participation in the Yoga program. Some individuals who have had no contact with, or who do not wish to consult, a physician or other licensed professional should be advised to do so.

For full transparency in the agreement between client and Yoga therapist, our recommendation is that individuals entering Yoga therapy be asked to sign a document and engage in a dialogue outlining a number of points about the potential benefits and limitations of Yoga for their problem. This document should be based on the principles of informed consent and shared decision making. These principles are derived from laws and ethical and safety considerations that guide medical practice, as outlined by Wilkes and Johns,<sup>8</sup> in dealing with the use of "off-label" prescriptions, that is, prescriptions that do not conform to FDA-approved use of the drug. In the case of "off-label" prescriptions, the authors recommend that doctors be required to provide full disclosure to patients and encourage them to share in treatment decision making. Although not an exact parallel, Yoga therapy may be viewed as an "off-label" prescription to which the principles of informed consent and shared decision making should be applied.

We conclude by offering a model of a consent document that merits consideration and discussion and that is recommended for Yoga therapy. The consent statement may need to be modified to suit the specific circumstances of a given state, community, program, or condition. The consent form should include a letterhead that contains information about the therapist: name, academic degrees, education, training, experience, and other qualifications, such as certification. This information, in addition to the statements regarding the practice provided to clients in the consent form, conforms to the "California Health Freedom Law" (Senate Bill

SB-577), which allows practitioners of unlicensed healing arts such as Yoga to practice legally.<sup>9</sup>

*Direct correspondence to David Shapiro, 760 Westwood Plaza, Los Angeles, CA 90095. Email: dshapiro@ucla.edu.*

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## Consent to Participate in Yoga Therapy

I, \_\_\_\_\_, consent to engage in Yoga therapy for my health problem. I understand that Yoga therapeutic methods are based on principles of Yoga, scientific data, and the experience of Yoga teachers, and they are not, as yet, considered standard treatments in mainstream medicine or physical therapy. I understand that I should consult with my physician and obtain his or her consent prior to begin-

ning therapy. I also understand that I have been advised to consult a physician if I have not done so.

I understand that, during the Yoga sessions, I will complete the activities designed for my condition. Should any symptoms, pain, discomfort, or other concerns occur or change at any point, I will immediately inform the Yoga therapist, as necessary adjustments in my treatment may be appropriate. I understand that touching or positioning of my body may be necessary to ensure that I am using the appropriate procedure and I expressly consent to such physical contact. If I do not wish to be touched, I will initial the consent form here to notify the therapist, so that a joint decision can be made about whether it is appropriate to continue the practice with that limitation ( ). I understand that there exists the possibility of bodily injury during the sessions. I understand further that the Yoga therapy is designed to benefit my health-related concern but that the treatment cannot be guaranteed to be successful. My progress will be monitored by my Yoga therapist over the course of the sessions.

I understand that my Yoga therapist is not a licensed physician, that the Yoga therapy provided is complementary to licensed healing arts, and that the practices are not licensed by the state. The qualifications of my Yoga therapist are shown above.

I understand that information obtained regarding my health or personal history will be treated as privileged and confidential by my therapist and will not be released or revealed to any person without my express consent, except as required by law. I understand that my therapist may consult with other Yoga therapists or health professionals about my progress to help improve my treatment. In so doing, my identity will not be revealed. Finally, I understand that I am encouraged to ask questions and discuss my progress with the therapist at all times.

(Name)

(Signature)

(Date)