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# Review of the Fourth IAYT Symposium on Yoga Therapy and Research

By Sharon Steffensen



## Research Shows That a Daily Dose of Yoga Heals!

*Photos of Bidyut Bose and Kelly McGonigal by Adam Latham (AngelAdam.com)*

This year the International Association of Yoga Therapists' (IAYT's) Symposium on Yoga Therapy and Research (SYTAR) took place September 1-4 at the Asilomar conference grounds in Pacific Grove, California, on the Pacific coast near Monterey. Sessions were held in rustic buildings surrounded by cypress trees. There was no temptation, come Saturday afternoon, to escape to the beach (previous symposiums were held in hotels near the Los Angeles airport). We were already at the beach.



The conference brought together yoga therapists, yoga teachers, researchers, and some of the most brilliant minds in the medical community. Key takeaways from many of the workshops and plenary sessions were that 1) yes, yoga can aid in healing; and 2) for a long-term effect, some form of yoga—conscious breathing, meditation, or yoga postures of any tradition—must be practiced on a regular basis. Many of the sessions addressed pain, the brain, and neuroplasticity (the ability of the brain to change and adapt), in relationship to pain and healing.

In Dilip Sarkar's *pranayama* (breathing techniques) class, for the most beneficial effects, he emphasized the importance of the back being straight, the hands forming a *mudra* (specific hand gesture), and the body being in an *asana*, which he defined as "steady, happy, in a pose," while performing a *bandha* (an inner lock to retain energy). Alternate nostril breathing, which he said is the most powerful balancing pranayama, can reverse hypertension, high blood pressure, asthma, coronary disease, memory loss, neurological disorders, and many other conditions. Some of the mudras he demonstrated were for combating diabetes, muscular-skeletal disorders, holding urine ("when flying on airplanes and the seat belt sign is on"), and balancing our

*doshas* (ayurvedic body type).



Dr. Sarkar is a retired vascular surgeon and an ayurvedic doctor who combines his 40 years of experience in conventional medicine with his knowledge of ayurveda and yoga. He has osteoarthritis in his knees and hips, but at the conference he sat in front of us effortlessly in full lotus position, which he has been able to achieve after consistent practice and a new attitude. “The body is the hardware, the mind is the software.” said Dr. Sarkar. “The spirit is the program. We fix the software through pranayama. Once the software is fixed, the hardware is fixed.. I am the cause and I am the cure.”

Dr. Sarkar recommended a half hour a day of pranayama, including 10 minutes of *kapalabhati* breathing (breath of fire) and 20 minutes of asana. “Charge the body for one hour, and you only need six hours of sleep,” he said.

Dr. Sarkar also gave a keynote on Saturday about research being conducted on the health benefits of yoga that is being published in both mainstream and alternative medical journals and much of which is available online at [pubmed.gov](http://pubmed.gov), a major search site for biomedical research. Ninety out of 125 medical schools are teaching integrative medicine, he said, and the National Institutes of Health and the 25 institutes and centers it comprises are funding research.

Drs. Paula Fayerman and Cathy Stallworth presented a workshop on yoga for lower back and pelvic pain. Here are some key points they made:

- . Strategically worded suggestions affect the brain; speak in positive terms.
- . Stress reduction correlates with structural changes in the amygdala in the brain.
- . Our belief about our pain has power over our experience of pain.
- . When practicing, engage in your own investigation rather than trying to perfect a pose.
- . When designing a practice, include core stability and flexibility of shoulders, hips, and spine. If something hurts, it needs space or support.

Kelly McGonigal, PhD, who teaches yoga, meditation, and psychology at Stanford University and is editor-in-chief of the IAYT’s *International Journal of Yoga Therapy*, said in a plenary session that research shows “yoga is a legitimate option for treating depression and has positive effects on anxiety disorders. It can relieve symptoms of depression, anxiety, eating disorders, chronic pain, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), schizophrenia, autism, and more.”

One-quarter of American adults are suffering from anxiety or depression, said Dr. McGonigal. When adequate GABA (a neurotransmitter) is released, the stress response diminishes. She cited a study that found that people who practiced yoga had a 27% increase in brain GABA compared to subjects reading a book who had no change. In another study involving walking and yoga, the people doing yoga had a larger improvement in anxiety and mood than the walking group. And an article in 2010 in the *American Family Physician* reported that yoga is superior to a placebo for depression, and no adverse effects were reported. Moreover, “no clear, necessary, or sufficient styles, postures, or practice duration were stated,” said Dr. McGonigal. “It all works and it all helps.”



Although stress hormones decrease after yoga practice, it was found that the effects are short-term. There are

immediate, same-day, and next-day effects, said Dr. McGonigal. Anxiety levels don't remain low, so regular practitioners do not have a lower baseline level—it works only if they do the practice. “It's better to practice ten minutes each day than an hour once a week,” she said.

Another factor in depression is the tendency of the mind to evaluate, compare, complain, or create a story about the pain. Dr. McGonigal suggested that when experiencing depression, we should focus less on the evaluating, the inner dialog, and the story and more on our feelings, physical sensations, and sensory experiences. “The more we learn to feel, without getting lost in the narrative,” the less likely we are to become depressed,” said Dr. McGonigal. “Treat voices in the head like sensory experiences, and they quiet down. Bring experience into awareness and accept the experience, but don't get stuck in the dialog.”

In training the mind (through yoga, meditation, or restorative techniques), said Dr. McGonigal, “There is a decoupling between evaluation and experience . and the area of the brain associated with direct experience becomes larger. Through practice, the mind reshapes itself to be in a new default, which is more free from suffering.”

To summarize her main points:

- . Moving, breathing, and meditating create physiological and psychological changes that increase resilience and wellbeing and relieve depression and anxiety.
- . Yoga may be a protective factor that requires a daily dose.
- . What we are doing with yoga therapy is teaching people to attend to direct experiences to be free from suffering caused by *vrittis* (fluctuations) of the mind.

Lori Rubenstein, DPT, is a physical therapist, yoga therapist, and educator who spoke about “neuroplastic yoga” for chronic pain and how the brain processes pain. The three factors relating to pain are sensory (feeling the pain), affective (emotions associated with the pain experience), and cognitive (thoughts related to the pain experience). “Pain is a conscious experience that depends on the brain's evaluation of all kinds of input (biological, psychological, and social factors),” said Dr. Rubenstein. In addition, when experiencing chronic pain, even more channels in the brain are opened, and more pain is experienced.

“Pain in the brain is not psychological; it is physiological,” said Dr. Rubenstein.” “Pain is a protective mechanism, causing a response. You feel pain where your brain thinks the problem is. Pain depends on how much danger your brain thinks you are in, not how much you really are in.” In addition, since pain is processed in the brain, the memory of pain can linger, and the patient can't tell the difference between the pain in the body and pain in the brain. “Treat the brain . and the patient can ‘reframe the pain’ to view it differently,” she said.

Dr. Rubenstein led us through a visualization exercise in which we focused on an area of our body where we felt discomfort. “Go back to a time before the pain started,” she instructed. “Remember the experiences. Where were you? What were you wearing? Who is there?” I had been feeling tightness in my hips for some time. Sitting cross-legged with my knees high off the floor, as the exercise progressed, I felt my knees coming closer to the floor. After about ten minutes, I could, for the first time in six years, sit in half-lotus.

Clinical psychologist and yoga therapist Bo Forbes also addressed neuroplasticity as it relates to psychotherapy, saying we need mindfulness-based practices. When the nervous system is in overdrive, the gateway to change is closed,” she said. “The brain learns from experience and practice.” Her suggestion: “Practice as often as possible over time to break negative, repetitive, compulsive patterns (called *samskaras* in yoga), and replace them with behaviors that are prosocial or prointimacy.” It is the frequency, not necessarily the duration, she emphasized.

“Psychotherapy marries direct experience with meaning, or making evaluation,” said Bo. “Mindfulness says, ‘Let’s sit with this experience. Let’s breathe into it.’ It will come and go. It will actually pass.” A study conducted in 2006 found that two-thirds of people on antidepressants still have symptoms. Yoga is a powerful set of tools for establishing new behavior, said Bo. “It interrupts stories and ‘meaning-making.’ Stop meaning-making. Do the practice, feel the difference. Go from being reactive and be more compassionate. Introduce a new paradigm. This is the perfect time for psychotherapy to integrate yogic skills.”

The final plenary, “Healing Ourselves, Healing Our Communities,” was presented by



Bidyut K. Bose, PhD, E-RYT, founder and executive director of the Niroga Institute in Oakland and Berkeley, California. Niroga is a non-profit organization that brings transformative life skills to [students](#), [vulnerable youth](#), [cancer survivors](#), seniors, and people battling addiction. The work of Niroga directly uplifts thousands of people every week in schools, juvenile halls, homeless shelters, cancer hospitals, and rehab centers.

Dr. Bose began with some disturbing statistics:

. 1 in 2 youths in urban high schools is dropping out. The lifetime cost of a high school dropout is \$260,000. With one million youths dropping out each year, the cost is \$260 billion annually, or \$2.6 trillion over 10 years.

. 3 out of 4 people released from detention (prison and juvenile halls) go right back in.

. 1 in 30 Americans is either in prison, on parole, or on probation.

Through the techniques of yoga, Dr. Bose is teaching youth how to manage stress and increase self-control. Self-control predicts academic achievement, whereas low self-control is a significant risk factor for a broad range of personal and interpersonal problems. Chronic stress disrupts prefrontal cortical processing, diminishing attention control, emotional regulation, adaptive coping strategies, and the ability to feel empathy, he explained.

“Ten percent of our lives is determined by what happens to us; 90% of our lives is determined by how we respond,” said Dr. Bose. “The space between stimulus and response is self-mastery. Yoga is a transformative life skill.”

The mission of the IAYT is to establish yoga as a respected and recognized therapy. That goal is rapidly being accomplished. Recently, the *International Journal of Yoga Therapists* has been added to journals in the prestigious US National Library of Medicine’s database, accessible on PubMed.gov. (Key in “yoga therapy” on the website and you get more than 1,680 citations in the medical literature.) The IAYT has received a major research grant from the National Institutes of Health’s National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine. And the IAYT has released a draft of the Proposed Education Standards for the Training of Yoga Therapists.

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Three weeks after the symposium, a symposium on yoga research was presented by IAYT and the Kripalu Institute for Extraordinary Living and hosted by the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. For more information about the IAYT, visit [iyat.org](http://iyat.org).

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