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EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES THROUGH YOGA: ACHIEVING NATIONAL MENTAL HEALTH POLICY OBJECTIVES

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Abstract

Mental health disorders, affecting one in eight individuals globally, pose a significant public health challenge. In India, the burden of mental illness is rising, with limited accessibility to mental health services and deep-rooted stigma further exacerbating the issue. The National Mental Health Policy (NMHP) 2014 aims to improve mental well-being through a holistic, inclusive, and accessible framework. Yoga, a well-established mind-body intervention, has demonstrated efficacy in managing anxiety, depression, and stress through neurobiological and psychological mechanisms. Integrating yoga into India's primary healthcare system through initiatives such as the National AYUSH Mission (NAM) and Ayushman Arogya Mandirs aligns with the NMHP objectives by enhancing mental health accessibility, reducing healthcare costs, and promoting community-based care. Strengthening healthcare provider training, improving public awareness, and addressing implementation challenges can maximize yoga's potential as a complementary mental health intervention. Further research is required to optimize yoga's integration into public health strategies and evaluate its long-term impact on mental well-being.

Keywords: *Yoga*, *Mental Health*, *National Mental Health Policy*, *Primary Healthcare*, *AYUSH, Public Health*

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Introduction:

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines mental health as "a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community." [1] WHO also defines the counterpart i.e. mental disorders as "a clinically significant disturbance in an individual's cognition, emotional regulation, or behaviour. It is usually associated with distress or impairment in important areas of functioning". According to the WHO factsheet on Mental disorders, one in every eight people is living with a mental disorder in the world. In 2019 estimated 970 million people were suffering from mental health issues, commonly anxiety and depression. This burden is likely to increase due to the rising economic instabilities, frequent disease outbreaks, forced displacement due to war-like conditions and growing climate crisis. [1] Several studies have predicted an increase in new cases and deaths associated with mental health in the near future.[2] These projections concern public health experts as the global economic cost of these conditions is estimated to reach 6 trillion dollars by 2023. Low-and-middle-income countries like India are likely to bear 58% of this cost.[3]

Current scenario of mental health in India

The prevalence of mental health disorders in India has been steadily increasing in recent years, becoming an escalating public health concern. It is estimated that approximately 15% of the Indian population struggles with some form of mental health issue.[4] The National Mental Health Survey (NMHS) 2015-16 revealed that 10.6% of adults experienced mental health disorders, with higher rates in urban metro areas (13.5%) compared to rural regions (6.9%). Following COVID-19 pandemic, studies among school students reported a rise in poor mental health. [5]Additionally, postpartum depression affects approximately 22% of women. [6]Mental disorders are often stigmatized, leading to delayed help-seeking, limited access to care, poor health outcomes, and suboptimal service delivery, sometimes even resulting in human rights violations.[7]Those who do seek help frequently face inadequate care due to a shortage of specialists, low motivation among non-specialist health workers, and stigma-driven disparities.[8]

Current evidence of role of yoga in mental health

Research underscores the significant impact of yoga interventions in alleviating symptoms associated with psychiatric conditions, facilitated by both neurotrophic and psychological

mechanisms.[9,10] The possible mechanism of effect of yoga on mental health disorders is highlighted in the flow chat fig. 1.[11,12] Yoga addresses key psychological factors such as self-regulation, self-efficacy, interoception, embodiment, motivation, connection, self-compassion, psychological flexibility, positive affect, and mindfulness. These elements are particularly effective in managing anxiety disorders and depression, where yoga has demonstrated substantial benefits.[9,13–16] Yoga-based asanas have emerged as a valuable therapeutic intervention for depression. Studies reveal significant reductions in depression scores following yoga therapy, alongside improvements in biomarkers such as event-related potential (P300) and brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), both of which are linked to enhanced mental health outcomes.[15,17] These findings highlight the multifaceted benefits of yoga, underscoring its role as an effective complementary intervention for mental health care.
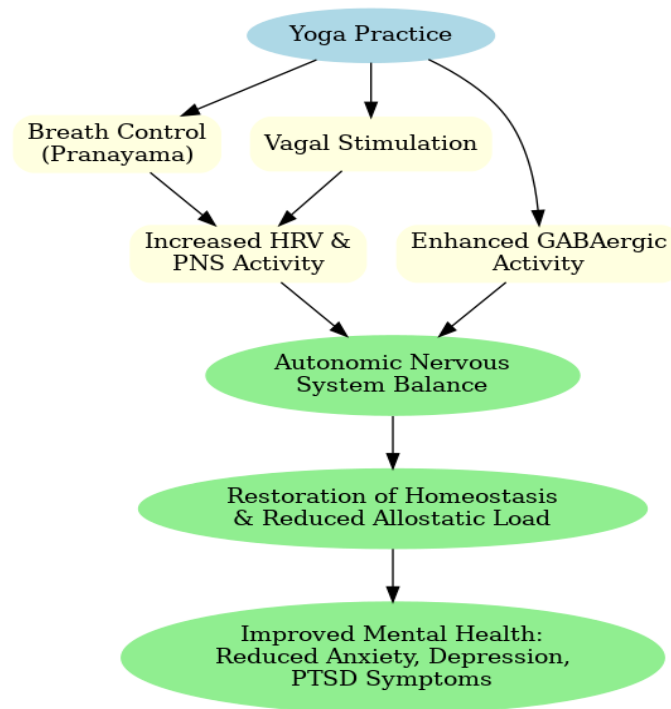

Fig. 1 Mechanism of effect of yoga on mental health disorders

Overview of National Mental Health Policy 2014 and its alignment with the holistic health approach

To address the rising mental health concerns, the government of India revised its national mental health policy in 2014 aiming to promote mental well-being, provide accessible and equitable mental healthcare, and reduce stigma and discrimination. The goals and objectives

under the NMHP 2014 are illustrated in table 1. The policy emphasizes on the holistic approach to an individual's mental health by keeping in account the mind, body and soul while providing care. It highlights the need for an evidence-based comprehensive service to address the needs of people with mental health disorders, along with their caregivers and the service providers. The policy also mentions the importance of aligning the efforts culturally to reach the set objectives. [18]

Goals	• To reduce distress, disability, exclusion morbidity and premature mortality associated with mental health problems across life-span of the person. • To enhance understanding of mental health problems in the country. • To strengthen the leadership in the mental health sector at the national, state and district levels.
Objectives	1. To provide universal access to mental health care. 2. To increase access to and utilisation of comprehensive mental health services by persons with mental health problems 3. To increase access to mental health services vulnerable groups including homeless persons, persons in remote areas, difficult terrains, educationally/socially/economically deprived sections. 4. To reduce prevalence and impact of risk factors associated with mental health problems 5. To reduce risk and incidence of suicide and attempted suicide 6. To ensure respect for rights and protection from harm of persons with mental health problems 7. To reduce stigma associated with mental health problems 8. To enhance availability and equitable distribution of skilled human resources for mental health 9. To progressively enhance financial allocation and improve utilisation for mental health promotion and care 10. To identify and address the social, biological and psychological determinants of mental health problems and provide appropriate interventions

The current level of yoga integration in the public health policy in India

Yoga has been positively integrated into India's public health sector through the mainstreaming of the AYUSH system of medicine. A significant milestone was the establishment of the Ministry of AYUSH in 2014, which spearheaded efforts to promote traditional systems of healthcare, including yoga. The National AYUSH Mission (NAM), launched during the 12th Five-Year Plan, aims to provide cost-effective and equitable AYUSH healthcare across the country by improving access and revitalizing these systems to make them prominent in addressing societal health needs. Under NAM, yoga integration has gained momentum. The mission classifies AYUSH services into two categories: the mandatory/core component and the flexible component. Yoga, incorporated into health and wellness centres—now known as Ayushman Arogya Mandirs—falls under the flexible component, highlighting its role in preventive and promotive health. This structured integration underscores yoga's growing significance in India's public health framework. This integration can be leveraged to meet the objectives of the NMHP 2014.

Rationale for integrating yoga into mental health strategies

Current standard treatment provisions for mental health disorders are counselling, pharmaceutical management of the symptoms, hospitalisation, rehabilitation and creating familial support.[19–21] The need for a holistic therapy can be addressed with incorporation of yoga as an alternative or complementary therapy to the medical management. Yoga is a mind-body practice that blends physical movement with a mindful focus, emphasizing self-awareness, breath control, and energy flow.[22] Integrating yoga into mental health strategies is rooted in its historical use as a holistic practice to harmonize mind and body, promoting mental clarity and emotional balance.[23]Yoga therapy can serve as a complementary or alternative approach to medical treatments for mental health issues. Yogic practices such as meditation and mindfulness have been scientifically proven to reduce stress, lower blood pressure, and promote mental well-being.[24,25] Practices like yoga Nidra and meditation promote deep relaxation and reduce symptoms of insomnia, anxiety, depression, and other psychosomatic conditions[26,27]. Yoga incorporates relaxation techniques like Savasana (Corpse Pose) that induce deep relaxation, thereby alleviating stress and its associated health risks [28–30] Moreover, practising yoga in a group setting cultivates a sense of community and social support, which significantly contributes to overall well-being. [31,32]. Beyond enhancing general health, psychological well-being, and physical fitness, yoga also promotes social

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connections and heightened environmental awareness, leading to an improved quality of life.[33–37]

Implementing strategies for integration of yoga in primary health care to achieve the NMHP 2014 objectives

The National Mental Health Program can benefit from incorporating yoga as a complementary approach within primary healthcare systems. Leveraging the framework of the District Mental Health Program (DMHP), community health workers at the PHC level could be trained to conduct regular yoga sessions for the general population, thereby promoting mental well-being. Policies should emphasize the need for evidence-based training in yoga-based mental health techniques for healthcare workers to ensure effective implementation and maximize the therapeutic benefits of yoga.

Integrating the National AYUSH Mission (NAM) with the National Mental Health Program (NMHP) presents a strategic opportunity to leverage allocated funds for promoting yoga as a mental health intervention. States can utilize flexible funds from NAM, which constitute approximately 20% of their budget, to support yoga initiatives aligned with mental health goals while adhering to the restriction of not exceeding 5% of the total allocation for any single component. Yoga Wellness Centres, supported by NAM, receive one-time financial aid of Rs. 0.6 Lakhs for setup and Rs. 5.4 Lakhs annually for operational costs. These resources can be optimized to deliver yoga sessions targeting stress management, anxiety reduction, and overall mental well-being within primary healthcare settings, effectively combining NAM's infrastructure with NMHP's objectives to enhance mental health services.

Community engagement is a key strategy for encouraging the widespread adoption of yoga as a tool for mental health. Frequent public awareness campaigns can be launched to highlight the benefits of yoga, increase awareness of its availability, and dispel common myths, fostering a positive perception. These campaigns can emphasize the mental health benefits of yoga, such as stress reduction and improved emotional well-being, helping to reduce stigma and encourage greater participation. Mobilizing community leaders and influencers to advocate for yoga can further boost engagement while offering free or subsidized yoga sessions will enhance accessibility and motivate more people to participate. By making yoga accessible and promoting its mental health advantages, communities can be empowered to embrace yoga as part of their daily wellness routine.

These implementation strategies can benefit from a robust monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework that assesses the effectiveness and impact of yoga-based interventions within the existing resources and technological infrastructure. The M&E framework can track key outcomes such as reduced levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, as well as improvements in overall mental well-being. Digital tools and health management systems already in place within the healthcare infrastructure can be leveraged for real-time data collection, tracking attendance, and monitoring participant progress. Regular feedback from community health workers, healthcare providers, and beneficiaries can help refine the program and ensure its sustainability.

Role of Primary Healthcare Centres (PHCs) and Sub-centres (SC) in addressing Mental Health through integration with yoga

Promotive and preventive services are most effectively delivered at the PHCs/SCs, which serve as the first point of contact for individuals, families, and communities within the national health system. PHCs/SCs are highly accessible and conveniently located near people's homes and communities, minimising indirect costs such as travel expenses to urban centres and lost productivity. This makes primary healthcare the most cost-effective option for individuals and the nation.[38]

Providing mental health services through PHCs ensures local access to necessary treatment and support. Primary healthcare workers, equipped with referral pathways and ongoing supervision, offer quality care. This ensures that mental healthcare provided in primary care settings is far more effective and sustainable when supported by a robust secondary level of care. [38,39]

Integrating yoga into primary healthcare centres (PHCs) can promote awareness about effective lifestyle management, encouraging healthier habits. This proactive approach can help reduce the prevalence of various diseases by addressing their root causes and fostering overall well-being. [40]

Barriers to Effective yoga and Mental Health Integration in Primary Care and their solutions

- **Knowledge-practice gap-** A nationwide survey revealed that though 92.6% of people perceive yoga as useful for lifestyle modification, only 11.8 % have adopted the practice of it.[41]

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This knowledge practice gap needs to be filled for optimal utilisation of the services offered. And by upscaling the outreach awareness campaigns. Additionally, integrating yoga into mobile health applications or virtual sessions can extend its reach to underserved areas.

- **Lack of training for healthcare providers-** One significant challenge is the lack of training for healthcare providers in yoga-based mental health interventions. Many primary care workers may not have the expertise to effectively incorporate yoga into patient care.

  To address this, comprehensive training programs and including yoga in medical curricula are necessary to ensure healthcare workers are equipped with the necessary skills to deliver evidence-based practices.

- **Stigma around yoga**- Yoga faces stigma in certain communities, often due to its association with spiritual practices, which can hinder its widespread acceptance.

  Public awareness campaigns emphasizing the scientifically-backed mental health benefits of yoga can help dispel myths and reduce stigma, making it more accessible to diverse populations.

- **Limited resources and infrastructure-** Limited resources and infrastructure within primary healthcare centres also pose challenges, as many PHCs may lack the space, equipment, or trained yoga instructors.

  However, the National AYUSH Mission (NAM) provides funding for Yoga Wellness Centres, which can be utilized to create dedicated spaces and offer ongoing support for yoga-based mental health interventions.

- **Insufficient research on Yoga in Primary care-** There is also a lack of research specifically focused on the integration of yoga in primary care settings, which could limit its implementation.

  Conducting pilot studies and gathering data on yoga's impact in these settings would help build a stronger evidence base to justify further funding and support.

- **Inconsistent Implementation across regions**- Another issue is the inconsistency in how yoga is implemented across regions, which can create disparities in access.

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Establishing national guidelines for yoga integration into mental health care and setting up a centralized monitoring and evaluation framework can ensure uniformity across regions, while still allowing for local adaptation of interventions.

- **Patient reluctance to participate-** Finally, patient reluctance to participate in yoga-based interventions may arise due to unfamiliarity with its benefits.

  Engaging community leaders and influencers to promote yoga programs and offering introductory workshops can help increase patient engagement and participation.

Together, these solutions provide a comprehensive approach to integrating yoga into primary healthcare and mental health programs, fostering a more inclusive and effective healthcare system. [40,42,43]

Conclusion

Mental health disorders are on the rise, with one in eight individuals affected globally, marked by disruptions in behavior, cognition, and emotional regulation. In India, this growing prevalence has become a significant public health concern. The National Mental Health Policy (2014) was established to address this issue, setting clear goals and objectives. Access to current strategies like counseling, treatment, and rehabilitation remains limited, worsened by stigma. This highlights the need for a holistic, culturally acceptable, affordable, and accessible approach. Yoga, an ancient Indian practice, offers a holistic, cost-effective, and culturally acceptable solution, proven effective in managing anxiety, depression, stress, and other psychological disorders. Its integration into primary healthcare through the National AYUSH Mission and Ayushman Arogya Mandir (formally known as Health and Wellness Centers) can support the objectives of the National Mental Health Program (NMHP) by enhancing access to care, reducing the burden on specialist services, and promoting mental well-being. Policymakers should prioritize yoga in mental health strategies, provide healthcare professionals with training in yoga-based interventions, and engage community leaders to reduce stigma and encourage participation. Further research on yoga's long-term benefits, its impact on specific mental health conditions, and its integration with other treatments is essential to optimize its role in public health programs, ultimately improving mental well-being and public health outcomes.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST -NIL

SOURCE OF SUPPORT -NONE

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