



VIRTUAL YOGA FOR HEALTHCARE WORKERS DURING COVID-19

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Background. When the global pandemic of the COVID-19 virus reached Australia, healthcare workers were put under severe levels of pressure. Alongside the high workload, people working in the healthcare sector, along with the general population, were forced to socially isolate and pause any non-essential activities outside their own home. In response to this situation, The Yoga Impact Charity aimed to alleviate pressure and stress of healthcare workers by offering them online yoga sessions free of charge.

The Yoga Intervention. Healthcare workers (including doctors, nurses, paramedics and administrative staff) were invited to register for the online yoga sessions. The sessions were tailored specifically to healthcare workers by sharing movement and breath techniques to promote calm and self regulation. Initially this offer was circulated to Australian healthcare workers, but extended to the UK after 1 month. The sessions were delivered Monday – Friday, at 6.30-7.30pm Australian Eastern Standard time (9.30-10.30am in the UK). Sessions were delivered via Zoom (an online video meeting service), by 4 different yoga teachers. Once registered, the healthcare workers were able to join as many classes as they liked.

Across the 12 weeks, 59 classes were delivered (1 could not be transmitted live due to technical issues, but it was recorded and shared with participants afterwards). A total of 1105 people registered for the yoga sessions, of these, 629 attended in total.

Assessing impact of yoga sessions. A questionnaire to assess participants' experience of the sessions was designed and made available for participants to complete online after week 4. After week 8, participants were asked to complete the survey a second time. Participants indicated how many times they had completed yoga sessions with The Yoga Impact Charity, and what their previous experience of yoga was. Following this, they were asked to indicate how the yoga impacted aspects of their physical wellbeing, mental wellbeing, sleep quality, and ability to cope with their working day. Finally, they were asked to indicate whether

or not they had enjoyed the session. The opportunity to provide comments was given throughout. The questionnaire took 5-10 minutes to complete.

Participants. A total of 57 individuals completed the survey once, with 9 of these repeating the survey a second time. All participants were over 18 years of age.

Results

First time completing the survey.

Of the 57 participants that completed the survey once, 12 had never practiced yoga before, 24 had practiced previously, but not in the last 12 months, 11 had practiced once a week, 5 twice a week, 5 three or more times a week. The number of online sessions they had completed with TYIC ranged from 1 – 15, with an average of 3.3 sessions.

Mental and Physical Wellbeing. Table 1 presents a summary of responses to each of the questions assessing mental and physical wellbeing, with a selection of comments provided. Participants were asked to think about the last time they practiced if they had not just completed a yoga session).

	Positive response	No difference	Negative response	Selection of comments
Compared to before your yoga practice, how PHYSICALLY RELAXED do you feel now?	More relaxed: 96.5%	No difference 3.5%	Less relaxed: 0.0%	'Adding in self care is essential at the moment. This is my time to do that' 'I feel absolute bliss after every virtual session!!'
Compared to before your yoga practice, how SUPPLE do you feel now?	More supple: 89.5%	No difference 10.5%	Less supple: 0.0%	'I always notice the difference through my back, shoulders and neck.' 'I have noticed improved flexibility and movement just over the past 5 sessions with you!'
Compared to before your yoga practice, how much PHYSICAL TENSION do you feel now?	Less tension: 83.6%	No difference 13.1%	More tension: 3.3%	'I find meditation at the end of the session very helpful.' 'Practising this is very helpful to ease my tense (sic) which is unavoidable in my job.' 'Very relaxed and in a state of calm'

Compared to before your yoga practice, how MENTALLY STRESSED do you feel now?	<i>Less stressed:</i> 86.0%	<i>No difference</i> 13.1%	<i>More stressed:</i> 0.0%	'It really improves my stress levels' 'It seems to dissolve your worries and stresses'
Compared to before your yoga practice, how CALM in your mind do you feel now?	<i>More calm:</i> 93.0%	<i>No difference</i> 7.0%	<i>Less calm:</i> 0.0%	'and feeling more hopeful too'

Effect on musculoskeletal pain. 46.7% of participants reported that they were suffering from some form of pre-existing musculoskeletal pain. **Of these, 53.7% reported that the joint / muscle pain felt better after the yoga session than before** and 43.9% said there was no difference. One person said the joint / muscle pain felt worse after the session; this individual provided the following comment: 'I had a break of about 3 months of no yoga, and my muscles have gotten tighter in that time. When I started Yoga Impact Charity, my muscles were sore as not used to being used. I am taking things easier now as getting back into it as I know long term that it will help me feel better.'

Quality of sleep. 53.5% of participants reported that the yoga practice had an impact on their sleep. Comments included: 'centres you before bed making it easier to relax', 'Generally sleep better if I have done yoga'. 10.3% believed there was no impact on their sleep, and 36.2% were unsure. Comments from these participants indicated that either there were no issues with their sleep before yoga ('I've not had difficulties sleeping in the past'), or that they felt it likely that benefits may emerge with ongoing practice ('Difficult to tell due to limited practice and shift work but given the effect on my stress level and relaxation state I'm confident it will improve my sleep'; 'If I practiced more regularly it probably would help me sleep').

Ability to cope at work. 70.7% of participants reported that practicing yoga had an impact on their ability to cope at work. Comments included 'When I make some quiet time to nurture myself I cope with everything better', 'I can sometimes take the relaxation/calm from the mat into challenging situations'. 3.5% believed there was no impact, and 25.9% were unsure.

Enjoyment of the yoga sessions. 98.2% of participants reported that they enjoyed the sessions, and only 1 person reported that they were unsure. A full summary of comments from this question is provided at the end of this Impact Report, but in summary, they expressed overwhelming enjoyment, gratitude and appreciation.

Second time completing the survey.

Eleven people completed the survey again. The average number of yoga sessions these people had completed was 12.5 (ranging from 3 – 36). All 11 of them reported feeling more physically relaxed; 9 of 11 reported feeling more supple (2 said no difference); all 11 reported feeling less stressed and more calm. 8 of the 11 participants reported sleeping better (3 said they were unsure). **The overwhelming outcome of the second time responders was with regards to impact on working day, with all 11 reporting that they thought yoga had a positive impact.** The following comments were provided in response to this question:

- 'Knowing I have found an activity like yoga to fall back on and calm myself, it is already stress relieving.'
- 'something to look forward to for myself each day'
- '100%'
- 'I have been ending my days well and that has given me the rest and relaxation needed to keep going back to days that are longer and harder than usual.'
- 'I FEEL REFRESHED'
- 'Trying to be less reactive'

Conclusions and future directions.

The vast majority of participants in the healthcare workers yoga program reported improvements in their own physical and mental health and wellbeing after practicing yoga. When working in a high-pressured healthcare setting, where burnout and stress are common, it is essential to take care of health and wellbeing so that staff members can continue to offer high-quality and much needed care to the rest of the population. Many participants commented on the fact that they would not have prioritised their own self-care, had these sessions not been made available to them.

Approximately half the participants also reported improvements in pre-existing musculoskeletal pains, and quality of sleep. Reducing pain from injury or illness, and promoting healthy sleep, are both essential factors for improving a person's quality of life. These specific avenues of potential benefits warrant further research, as it is not clear why half the participants reported benefits, but the remainder did

not. Different people will certainly respond to yoga in different ways, so understanding what is particularly beneficial for certain outcomes – such as better sleep – is important to understand.

When the healthcare workers responded for a second time, the most remarkable result was that every participant felt that practicing yoga had a positive impact on their working day. It is likely that the people that responded for a second time were the more regular practitioners, and that when yoga is incorporated into a daily or weekly routine, the benefits that are experienced in the context of a yoga session can be extended to life outside of the yoga session. This warrants further research to establish what components of the yoga practice (e.g. the physical postures, the breath work, or perhaps simply taking part in a healthy group activity) are associated with developing skills to maintain a sense of calm and wellbeing in daily life.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the straightforward outcome that virtually all of the participants thoroughly enjoyed their yoga sessions (see appendices for quotes). At a time when stress is running high and pressure on healthcare workers is at a peak, it is so important to encourage these hard-working people to take time-out, connect with others, and do something enjoyable. These yoga sessions offered just that – an hour of relaxation and time for themselves.

Acknowledgements:

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Appendices.

Full list of Comments provided at the end of the survey:

- Thankyou. What a fantastic idea, it's so good to connect with people live
- Loved it. Loved knowing that I'm practicing w fellow health care providers feeling similar exhaustion levels
- I am a final year medical student at the University of Adelaide. I hope its ok that I've joined this program - and would think many of my colleagues would enjoy and benefit from the yoga if you're happy for me to recommend! 2020 has been a very chaotic, stressful year for us - huge changes to our placements/assessments etc (sadly meaning less holidays). We work long hours at the hospitals and of course don't get paid. We received job offers for next year today so its recently become very real. Thank you for providing such a nice service.
- A great big thanks for providing light in the darkness, Namaste :)
- Thank you it was great!
- I have absolutely love them!! I look forward to this time of day.
- love them
- Thank you for providing an excellent resource to health care workers! Much appreciated.
- really good
- Always feel much better after a class
- I tried yoga years ago & hated it. I am so glad I retried yoga last year as I now love it & am getting a lot of benefit. Especially though the pandemic. I do think providing options for postures is good, so those stiff people (like me) don't injure themselves & get turned off.
- I would like to do more yoga, I have been trying some youtube yoga sessions
- All good
- Was A wonderful class, really like the fact you can play your own music and still follow along
- Love that you're looking out for the health care workers
- Yes I was only ever able to attend one session because unfortunately the timing did not work for me, as it was right over dinner time and when I would be cooking dinner. I would love to be able to attend and in future if it was at a different time not over dinner I would come!
- Thanks so much- its a wonderful initiative
- This is such a beautiful gift that you are offering during this time. I'd love it to continue
- Just want to say thank you so much. Very grateful for this generous and beautiful offering
- I really enjoy the education part as well, tonight was about resilience and I will try to carry the information forward into my daily life.
- Thank you so much for your generosity and support for running these sessions. Really appreciate it.
- the yoga sessions have been great - i would have done more except that time has been tricky to attend due to work and home commitments, 730pm start would suit better however, i am extremely grateful for the opportunity to attend the sessions for free.
- It's great to be able to access classes in this difficult time
- Hosts of the classes appear kind and welcoming, instructions have been clear and multiple options for poses/movements of benefit. It's been a fantastic introduction to Yoga classes for me and I would love to continue.
- Really appreciate the great work you're all doing, thanks!
- Thanks so much for this lovely gift. It is so appreciated :)

- No but thank you so much!! I love that you are doing this for us!! :)
- Thankyou so much for extending your generous health care professionals offer to the UK. For people who work shifts so cannot always attend a class at the same time each week this has been an amazing and very accessible way to get some much needed physical and mental relief in this unprecedented global situation.
- Doing more yoga now than ever thanks to these sessions
- I like the time of the class and the hour session. Just enough time for me to be away from my family and not feel pressure to do home stuff
- Thankyou so much for your kind offer of this free virtual yoga practice for us! I have really enjoyed my time here with you all. I really like the variety of instructors and what each one brings! I did think that it would be nice with music; until I realised you link us to a playlist which is great!! One comment, which is honestly so minor but thought I'd mention it since you're asking!! One night the instructor had all Black on and I found it was really hard to see some of the movements whilst wearing all black! I'm watching this on my iPhone so it's a bit hard to see at times! But honestly, i love your practice and am really so grateful to you all. Thankyou again
- I enjoy all of the different instructors and find them all to be so different and great :) Thanks so much i would love to continue virtual yoga when this is finished :)
- Thank you for doing. It's been so great to be able to practice yoga again since COVID
- love it. Thank you for providing this free service to health care workers at this challenging and stressful time
- thank you so much. would be great bit this continues
- I would like more hip stretches eg warrior poses! My hips are very tight. Otherwise perfect.
- Thank you very much x
- It's great, thank you for your generosity! This has been an interesting time to live through!
- Thank you so much to the entire team for being so thoughtful towards all the health care workers like us. It's so good to have the yoga session after a tiring day. It makes me so relaxed physically and mentally. Lets keep supporting everyone :)
- Experience with yoga
- Many thanks, after 12-15 hour shifts much appreciated. Nurses get little support during the pandemic and it was a good break and me time