

Perspective

The importance of research literacy for yoga therapists

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Abstract

Evidence-Informed Practice (EIP) utilizes the three components of expert opinion, research evidence, and client values. It is a recommended training competency for integrative health practitioners in diverse fields, such as acupuncture and massage therapy. Research Literacy (RL) is a necessary pre-requisite to EIP. Many yoga therapists have limited training in these skills, which negatively impacts inter-professional communication and collaboration, as well as further advancement of yoga therapy research and practice. In this article, we propose inclusion of RL and EIP in the training of yoga therapists. Benefits for client care, collaborative care, and the field of yoga therapy are discussed.

Background

The incorporation of integrative healthcare into modern medicine is dependent on the shared understanding and utilization of both research literacy (RL) and evidence-informed practice (EIP). Many yoga therapists are not currently skilled in either of these core concepts used by peer integrative health (IH) practitioners (acupuncturists, massage therapists, naturopaths and chiropractors). This is problematic for a variety of reasons. One reason is that the currently available yoga research literature reflects heterogeneous methodological quality. In addition, inconsistent reporting in research manuscripts reduces the potential for study replication and application to practice. It is therefore imperative that yoga professionals acquire skills to discern how the body of evidence can and should be considered in clinical decision-making. To this end, RL and EIP should be incorporated consistently in yoga therapy training through inclusion of these skills in the International Association of Yoga Therapists' (IAYT) training competencies and through continuing education opportunities for the current yoga therapy workforce.

Definitions

Research Literacy (RL) is a pre-requisite for EIP and has been defined as the ability to access, interpret, and critically evaluate peer-reviewed literature. These skills are not necessarily intuitive, and for most practitioners, they must be systematically taught, practiced, and honed so they can make good use of the available literature. Successful research literacy requires that practitioners be familiar with the multitude of available research sources and basic research methods. They also must be trained to structure clinical questions in a manner that optimizes literature retrieval. Once the literature is explored, it is essential to discern its quality, clinical meaningfulness and relevance to yoga therapy practice, and to use these findings alongside consideration of client concerns, ancient traditions, and clinical experience.

Evidence-informed practice (EIP) has been defined “as the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about the care of individual clients. The practice of EIP requires the integration of individual [yoga therapist’s] expertise with the best available, current external [yoga research] evidence and the client’s unique values and circumstances.”¹

Integrative Health Context

EIP competencies are included in the training of other IH practitioners to enhance effectiveness for improved clinical outcomes.² This includes disciplines such as acupuncture that are, like yoga therapy, deeply rooted in ancient traditions. Practitioners of such practices often see modern research as incompatible with their core philosophies and tools. Because of EIP’s inclusion of expert opinion and client perspective alongside research evidence, however, ancient practice or patient-centeredness are not to be disregarded in the practice of EIP. In fact, without those elements, the basic premise of EIP is lost. Indeed, the research

enterprise as a whole not only includes studies identifying basic mechanisms, but also addresses issues of safety, efficacy and the translational potential of findings to real-life clinical care. Additionally, modern health research has moved toward greater inclusion of patient-centered outcomes and pragmatic “real life” approaches that bridge the gap between controlled laboratory research and common clinical practice.

Importance to Yoga Therapy

Benefits to Client Care. The existing body of yoga research is growing rapidly. In order to understand and utilize this source of information, yoga therapists must be adequately trained. While the research literature alone is not sufficient to guide clinical decision-making, it is an important addition to a yoga therapist's toolbox. Anecdotal trends seen in an individual clinical practice can be verified or challenged through systematic investigation of larger and more diverse samples. Through exploration of research evidence, yoga therapists can also be challenged to reach outside of their most commonly applied practices for greater client benefit. A further issue to consider is that, as yoga research expands, the general public is increasingly aware of research findings discussed in mainstream media. This media coverage can, however, often be intentionally or unintentionally skewed, which can mislead clients seeking care. A yoga therapist's ability to understand the research literature and communicate with clients about its findings and strengths can foster improved shared decision-making between client and provider.

Benefits to Collaborative Care. Allied health professionals and integrative health providers speak the language of EIP. By enhancing yoga therapists' skills in these areas, communication and shared decision-making will become simplified and more efficient. Greater trust in and consideration of yoga therapists' knowledge and skills by other healthcare providers can improve referral opportunities. As yoga therapists aim to work in conventional and integrative care settings such as hospitals and clinics, basic proficiency in research literacy will become critical to successful implementation of team care efforts. This will be of particular benefit for patients with limited resources, as a greater incorporation of yoga therapy into healthcare setting may improve access and offset cost burdens.

Benefits to the Field of Yoga Therapy. Educational RL standards will help to promote inter-professional collaboration between yoga clinicians and researchers. The incorporation of existing research to improve outcomes will ultimately improve the acceptance and integration of yoga therapy

into modern healthcare. This introduction to RL could also spark interest for a new generation of practicing yoga therapists to further develop research skills. Such clinician-researchers might conduct clinic-based research, publish case reports, and complete literature reviews. The expansion of yoga research literacy and its impact on clinical practice may have far-reaching implications benefiting yoga therapy's visibility and utilization for modern society as a whole.

Considerations for Application

Current challenges and opportunities.

- While there has been much growth in yoga research in recent years, it is still a nascent field and the evidence has limitations. While there is relatively substantive evidence about yoga's efficacy for various health outcomes,³ our understanding of the mechanisms driving those changes is still limited.⁴ Additionally, much of the early yoga therapy research suffered from small sample sizes, poor study designs, lack of control groups, and inadequate reporting. More recent research has aimed to address these shortcomings and yoga research is increasingly conducted with greater rigor. Yoga research is increasingly considered a respectable academic pursuit, which enhances the cadre of qualified career researchers working in this area.
- The application of yoga research to clinical practice requires transparent and thorough research reporting, as well as RL and EIP training for clinicians. While reporting guidelines for yoga research are currently in development, many yoga research manuscripts currently lack sufficient detail for useful clinical application. Yoga therapists, and all clinicians, must be taught to read and interpret the literature, but also to determine its usefulness in clinical practice, which requires detailed research reporting.
- Yoga therapists must understand that the building of evidence is not a linear process and there is never complete certainty in the found associations, though their strength grows over time.
- There is a common misperception among yoga professionals that research is too reductionist for application to holistic practice and whole-person approaches. While individual studies cannot address all relevant elements of yoga therapy practice, these contribute to a larger body of evidence that points towards broader trends. Taken as a whole, the research literature is stronger and more relevant than any single study alone.
- RL is a lifelong practice. Similar to yoga, there is always more to learn and explore. One must be open to encountering evidence that may be contrary to assumptions based on prior evidence or experience. While

inclusion of RL and EIP in yoga therapy training will improve skills and practices, it should be followed with continued training and practice for greater mastery.

Recommendations.

Given that RL and EIP are essential skills for yoga therapists as the field progresses, these should be systematically included in yoga therapy training programs. To this end, RL and EIP should be added to the IAYT competencies, as is already the case with other integrative health fields. This information should be introduced early in yoga therapy training and emphasized throughout, so that yoga therapists are exposed first-hand to the relevance of yoga research to their developing practice. This includes utilization of EIP during the practicum phase of training, so that students begin to habitually consider the literature with each new clinical inquiry. It is essential that yoga therapy programs include qualified faculty to teach these competencies. Such faculty should have experience and training in the conduct and analysis of clinical research as it pertains to yoga therapy and integrative health more generally.

Below are recommended competencies adapted from the Project to Enhance Research Literacy (PERL), conducted by the Academic Collaborative for Integrative Health (<https://integrativehealth.org/usersguide>).

Evidence-informed practice

General Competency Statement: Explain, evaluate, and apply scientific evidence in the context of evidence-informed practice, which includes: 1) research evidence, 2) expert opinion (i.e. ancient text, yoga training, clinical experience), and 3) patient/client preferences; and apply evidence-informed decision-making in yoga therapy practice.

1. Explain the role of scientific evidence in yoga therapy practice.
2. Describe common research methodologies within the context of both clinical and mechanistic research, focusing on an assessment of yoga therapy.
3. Discuss contemporary issues in yoga research, including those relative to evaluating whole practices, diverse approaches, client-centered approaches and health outcomes (objective and client-reported).
4. Analyze the yoga research base including the indications and contraindications for specific practices.
5. Apply fundamental skills in research evaluation, including quality assessment tools.
6. Demonstrate evidence informed decision-making in clinical care.

References

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