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Yoga Nidra and its Relevance to Mental Health: A Review

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ABSTRACT

Mental health disorders represent a major global public health concern and are associated with substantial psychological, social, and economic burden. Alongside pharmacological and psychotherapeutic approaches, there is increasing interest in non-pharmacological, mind–body interventions that are safe, accessible, and cost-effective. Yoga Nidra (YN), often described as yogic or conscious sleep, is a guided meditative practice that induces a state between wakefulness and sleep while maintaining awareness. The present narrative review aims to synthesize available scientific literature examining the role of Yoga Nidra in mental health.

A comprehensive literature search was conducted using PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar to identify peer-reviewed articles published over the last two decades that explored Yoga Nidra as an intervention. Narrative reviews, randomized controlled trials, clinical trials, mixed-method studies, and pre–post intervention studies were considered for inclusion. The selected literature was analyzed narratively to examine the effects of Yoga Nidra on psychological well-being.

The reviewed studies suggest that Yoga Nidra practice is associated with reductions in stress, anxiety, depression, anger, and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, along with improvements in sleep quality, emotional regulation, and overall well-being. Beneficial effects on cognitive functions such as attention, concentration, and memory have also been reported across different populations, including healthy individuals, students, women with menstrual disorders, and healthcare professionals. Preliminary evidence indicates that Yoga Nidra may influence psychophysiological and neurocognitive processes; however, the underlying mechanisms remain insufficiently explored.

Overall, this narrative review highlights Yoga Nidra as a promising, non-invasive complementary approach for supporting mental health and psychological well-being. Nevertheless, methodological heterogeneity, small sample sizes, and limited objective measures emphasize the need for rigorously designed future studies to strengthen the existing evidence base.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Mental health has emerged as a critical component of overall human well-being and quality of life. Contemporary lifestyles characterized by rapid technological advancement, social pressure, and sustained psychological stress have contributed to a steady rise in mental health disorders worldwide. Conditions such as stress, anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, and trauma-related disorders impose a substantial burden on individuals, healthcare systems, and societies. According to global health estimates, neuropsychiatric disorders account for a significant proportion of the overall disease burden, underscoring the growing importance of preventive and supportive mental health strategies [1].

Traditional systems of knowledge, particularly those originating from ancient Indian philosophy, have long emphasized the central role of the mind in human health and behavior. Classical texts such as the Vedas, Upanishads, and the Bhagavad Gita provide detailed conceptualizations of consciousness, mental processes, and states of awareness. These traditions describe the mind as the mediator of perception, cognition, emotion, and volition, and emphasize the necessity of mental regulation for achieving balance and well-being. Yogic philosophy identifies various states of consciousness, including wakefulness, dreaming, deep sleep, and higher states of awareness, and proposes systematic practices to stabilize and refine mental activity.

Yoga is traditionally understood as a holistic discipline aimed at the integration of body, breath, and mind. Through practices such as asana, pranayama, and meditation, yoga seeks to regulate mental fluctuations and promote inner stability. In this context, the regulation of the mind is considered fundamental to both psychological health and self-awareness. Classical yogic texts emphasize that uncontrolled mental activity contributes to psychological distress, whereas disciplined awareness supports clarity, resilience, and emotional balance. These principles have gained renewed attention in modern research, particularly in the exploration of yoga-based interventions for mental health.

Yoga Nidra (YN), often referred to as yogic sleep or conscious relaxation, is a guided meditative practice that induces a state between wakefulness and sleep while maintaining awareness [2]. The contemporary form of Yoga Nidra is largely attributed to the teachings of Swami Satyananda Saraswati, who systematized the practice as an accessible and structured method of

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deep relaxation and mental training [3]. Unlike ordinary sleep, Yoga Nidra involves a deliberate withdrawal of sensory engagement while preserving consciousness, allowing the practitioner to access profound states of relaxation and mental receptivity.

In recent years, Yoga Nidra has been increasingly investigated as a non-pharmacological intervention for mental health concerns. Emerging evidence suggests that the practice may contribute to reductions in stress, anxiety, depression, anger, and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as improvements in sleep quality and overall psychological well-being [2,5,9–11]. In addition to its therapeutic applications, Yoga Nidra has been associated with enhanced cognitive functions, including attention, concentration, and memory, which are essential for adaptive functioning in daily life [6]. Due to its simplicity, safety, and cost-effectiveness, Yoga Nidra has been adopted in diverse settings, including clinical populations, educational institutions, and occupational environments.

Despite the growing body of literature on Yoga Nidra, the existing research remains heterogeneous with respect to study design, population characteristics, intervention duration, and outcome measures. Furthermore, while psychological benefits have been widely reported, the underlying psychophysiological and neurocognitive mechanisms of Yoga Nidra are not yet fully understood. Narrative synthesis of available evidence is therefore valuable for clarifying current knowledge, identifying research gaps, and guiding future investigations.

The purpose of the present narrative review is to evaluate and synthesize existing scientific literature on the effects of Yoga Nidra on mental health. By consolidating findings across diverse study designs and populations, this review aims to provide a coherent overview of the therapeutic relevance of Yoga Nidra and to highlight directions for future research in the field of mental health and mind–body interventions.

II. SEARCH STRATEGY

The present narrative review employed a comprehensive literature search to identify relevant scholarly work examining the relationship between Yoga Nidra and mental health. Major electronic databases, including PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar, were searched to locate peer-reviewed articles published in the English language over the last two decades. The search strategy was designed to capture a broad range of studies reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of Yoga Nidra research.

Search terms were selected carefully to include key concepts and commonly used variations related to the topic. Boolean operators were applied to establish logical relationships between keywords, with primary search strings including combinations such as “Yoga Nidra” AND

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"mental health." Additional manual searches were conducted by screening reference lists of relevant articles to identify further studies cited in primary publications.

The inclusion criteria comprised narrative reviews, randomized controlled trials, clinical trials, mixed-method studies, and pre–post intervention studies that specifically investigated Yoga Nidra as an intervention. Studies focusing solely on other yogic practices without the inclusion of Yoga Nidra were excluded. Grey literature was also considered when such sources were frequently cited in peer-reviewed articles and contributed contextually relevant information to the topic. The overall approach of the search was narrative in nature and was not intended to follow systematic review or meta-analytic protocols.

A. Search Outcome

The literature search yielded a total of 35 studies relevant to Yoga Nidra, of which 17 peer-reviewed journal articles were considered suitable for detailed narrative synthesis with respect to mental health outcomes. These included five review articles, four randomized controlled trials, one mixed-method study, one clinical trial, and six pre–post intervention studies.

Among the analyzed studies, five investigations involved clinical or symptomatic populations. Of these, three studies focused on women experiencing menstrual irregularities, while two studies examined individuals diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. The remaining studies were conducted on non-clinical populations, including adolescents, students, healthcare professionals, and healthy adults, with participant ages ranging from early adolescence to late adulthood.

The reviewed research spanned publications from 1998 to 2023, with a notable increase in studies on Yoga Nidra emerging after 2008. Psychological variables assessed across studies included stress, anxiety, depression, emotional well-being, sleep disturbances, somatoform symptoms, and indicators of cognitive functioning. These variables collectively represent direct and indirect markers of mental health and psychological well-being.

All selected studies were examined irrespective of methodological variation, as the purpose of this narrative review was to explore and synthesize the reported relevance of Yoga Nidra in the context of mental health. Titles, abstracts, and full texts were evaluated to determine relevance, and findings were compared and narratively integrated to present a coherent overview of existing evidence.

III. YOGA NIDRA AND MENTAL HEALTH INDICES

In recent decades, the prevalence of mental health disorders has increased steadily across

different age groups and populations worldwide. Psychological distress may arise due to a complex interaction of emotional, behavioral, and physiological factors. Conventional approaches to the management of mental health conditions primarily include pharmacological treatment and psychotherapy [18]. Although these approaches are effective for many individuals, limitations such as medication-related side effects, partial therapeutic response, accessibility issues, and economic burden have encouraged the exploration of complementary and alternative interventions.

Non-pharmacological and contemplative practices have gained increasing attention due to their safety, minimal side effects, and adaptability across diverse populations [19]. Within this context, Yoga Nidra has emerged as a guided meditative practice with potential relevance for mental health promotion and psychological well-being. Yoga Nidra involves systematic relaxation and inward awareness, allowing the practitioner to reach a deeply relaxed yet conscious state. The present review focuses specifically on the reported effects of Yoga Nidra practice on various mental health indices.

A substantial body of literature indicates that Yoga Nidra practice is associated with reductions in stress, anxiety, anger, and depressive symptoms, along with improvements in overall well-being and emotional regulation [12,20–25]. These outcomes have been observed across both clinical and non-clinical populations. Studies conducted among students, working professionals, and the general population have consistently reported significant decreases in perceived stress and anxiety following regular Yoga Nidra practice [14,24]. Such findings suggest that Yoga Nidra may serve as an effective supportive intervention for stress-related psychological disturbances.

Clinical populations have also been examined in several studies included in this review. Research involving individuals diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) has demonstrated reductions in emotional reactivity, anxiety, anger, and hyperarousal symptoms following Yoga Nidra–based interventions [23,25]. Similarly, randomized controlled trials conducted among women experiencing menstrual irregularities have reported improvements in psychological distress, anxiety, depression, and somatoform symptoms when Yoga Nidra was integrated with standard medical care [21,27–30]. These findings highlight the potential role of Yoga Nidra as an adjunctive approach in psychosomatic and stress-related conditions.

Mental health challenges are not limited to patients alone; healthcare professionals are also vulnerable to high levels of stress, fatigue, sleep disturbances, and emotional exhaustion. Studies examining the application of Yoga Nidra–based interventions, including Integrative

Restoration (iRest), among healthcare workers have reported improvements in mindfulness and emotional awareness, although changes in pain perception and fatigue levels have been less consistent [23,25,32]. Increased mindfulness following structured Yoga Nidra interventions suggests enhanced self-regulation and adaptive coping capacity among participants.

Adolescence represents a critical developmental period marked by emotional, cognitive, and behavioral transitions. Limited but meaningful evidence indicates that Yoga Nidra practice may positively influence emotional stability, cognitive functioning, and overall well-being among adolescents [24]. Improvements in attention, emotional awareness, and self-regulation during this stage may contribute to resilience against future mental health challenges.

Beyond psychological outcomes, a small number of studies have explored the neurophysiological correlates of Yoga Nidra practice. Preliminary findings suggest alterations in brain wave activity, including changes in alpha and beta frequency bands following Yoga Nidra–based interventions [22]. These observations imply a shift toward relaxed yet attentive mental states. However, interpretation of such findings remains limited due to small sample sizes and the inclusion of additional yogic practices alongside Yoga Nidra in some studies. Consequently, the isolated neurophysiological effects of Yoga Nidra require further investigation.

During the global COVID-19 pandemic, mental health concerns such as anxiety, depression, stress, and sleep disturbances increased substantially, particularly among frontline healthcare workers. One study included in this review compared the effects of Yoga Nidra and relaxation music in reducing psychological distress during this period and reported superior outcomes in the Yoga Nidra group [33]. These findings emphasize the potential utility of Yoga Nidra as an accessible and cost-effective intervention during large-scale public health crises.

Overall, the reviewed literature suggests that Yoga Nidra may exert beneficial effects across multiple mental health indices, including stress, anxiety, depression, emotional regulation, sleep quality, and cognitive functioning. Despite these encouraging findings, considerable heterogeneity exists across studies with respect to intervention duration, session frequency, participant characteristics, and outcome measures. These limitations underscore the need for further well-designed research to clarify the therapeutic scope and mechanisms of Yoga Nidra in mental health contexts.

IV. PROCEDURE OF YOGA NIDRA

Yoga Nidra is traditionally described as a systematic method of guided relaxation that facilitates inward awareness while maintaining a state of conscious presence. The contemporary structure

of Yoga Nidra practice is primarily attributed to Swami Satyananda Saraswati of the Bihar School of Yoga, who presented it as an accessible technique for deep mental and physical relaxation [3]. Conceptually, Yoga Nidra involves the gradual withdrawal of sensory engagement, allowing awareness to move inward while the body enters a state of profound relaxation.

From a yogic perspective, Yoga Nidra is not intended to function as ordinary sleep. Rather, it represents a distinct state of consciousness in which the practitioner remains aware while the body and mind experience deep rest. During the practice, external sensory inputs are minimized, and auditory perception typically remains the primary channel through which guidance is received [2,17]. This inward movement of awareness is considered central to the psychological effects attributed to Yoga Nidra.

Classical descriptions of Yoga Nidra outline a sequence of stages that guide the practitioner toward this unique state. These stages are generally presented as preparatory relaxation, formulation of a positive resolve (Sankalpa), systematic rotation of awareness through different parts of the body, awareness of natural breathing, observation of sensations and emotions, guided imagery or visualization, repetition of the Sankalpa, and gradual reorientation to external awareness [3,8]. The purpose of these stages is not mechanical execution but progressive refinement of awareness and relaxation.

The initial phase of Yoga Nidra emphasizes physical stillness and comfort, typically achieved in a supine resting posture. This is followed by directed attention toward different regions of the body, which is believed to facilitate muscular relaxation and disengagement from habitual mental activity. Awareness of breathing further supports mental calmness by anchoring attention to a natural physiological rhythm. The Sankalpa, or personal intention, is traditionally introduced when the mind is in a receptive and relaxed state, with the aim of influencing subconscious patterns.

Visualization and sensory awareness phases are described as methods for engaging the imaginative and emotional dimensions of the mind without active cognitive effort. These elements are considered important for releasing accumulated mental tension and fostering emotional balance. The concluding phase of Yoga Nidra involves a gradual return to external awareness, allowing the practitioner to reintegrate the relaxed state into ordinary consciousness.

Importantly, Yoga Nidra is regarded as a safe, non-invasive, and adaptable practice that can be applied across different populations and settings [7]. The procedure does not require physical exertion or prior yogic experience, which contributes to its broad applicability in clinical,

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educational, and occupational contexts. Within the scope of this narrative review, the procedure of Yoga Nidra is discussed conceptually to provide context for understanding its reported psychological and mental health effects, rather than as a prescriptive or instructional guide.

V. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The findings summarized in this narrative review indicate that Yoga Nidra has considerable potential as a supportive intervention for mental health. However, several methodological and conceptual limitations identified across the reviewed studies highlight important directions for future research. A prominent limitation includes small sample sizes and variability in study designs, intervention duration, and outcome measures. Such heterogeneity restricts the generalizability of findings and limits the ability to draw firm conclusions regarding the efficacy of Yoga Nidra across different populations.

Future research would benefit from well-designed studies with larger and more diverse samples, including both clinical and non-clinical populations. The inclusion of standardized intervention protocols and clearly defined outcome measures would improve comparability across studies. Longitudinal designs examining the sustained effects of Yoga Nidra practice over extended periods may provide valuable insight into its role in long-term mental health maintenance and relapse prevention.

Another important direction involves the integration of objective assessment tools alongside self-reported psychological measures. While most existing studies rely primarily on subjective scales, the inclusion of physiological and neurocognitive markers may help clarify the underlying mechanisms associated with Yoga Nidra practice. Preliminary investigations suggest possible alterations in brain activity following Yoga Nidra; however, these findings remain limited and require further exploration through focused and methodologically rigorous research designs.

Additionally, future studies may explore the application of Yoga Nidra in specific occupational and high-stress populations, such as healthcare professionals, caregivers, and individuals exposed to chronic stress or trauma. Given its simplicity, safety, and minimal resource requirements, Yoga Nidra holds promise as an accessible intervention that could be integrated into preventive mental health programs. Further research in these directions may strengthen the evidence base and support the broader application of Yoga Nidra within mental health care frameworks.

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VI. CONCLUSION

The present narrative review synthesizes available literature examining the effects of Yoga Nidra on mental health and psychological well-being. Across diverse populations and study designs, Yoga Nidra practice has been associated with improvements in stress, anxiety, depression, emotional regulation, sleep quality, and overall well-being. These findings suggest that Yoga Nidra may serve as a beneficial complementary approach for addressing a range of mental health concerns.

Despite encouraging outcomes, the existing evidence base is characterized by methodological variability and limited use of objective outcome measures. As a result, caution is required when generalizing findings, and further high-quality research is necessary to establish clearer conclusions regarding efficacy and mechanisms. Nevertheless, the consistent reporting of positive psychological outcomes across studies highlights the potential relevance of Yoga Nidra within contemporary mental health contexts.

Yoga Nidra represents a non-invasive, cost-effective, and easily implementable practice that can be adapted for use across clinical, educational, and occupational settings. As interest in mind–body interventions continue to grow, Yoga Nidra may offer meaningful support for mental health promotion and stress management. The present review underscores the importance of continued scientific inquiry into Yoga Nidra to strengthen its theoretical foundation and inform its integration into evidence-based mental health care.

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