

Chapter

How Can Social Expectations and Related Stress among Adolescents and Young Adults be Better Coped with through Practicing Yoga?

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Abstract

In this chapter, I discuss how practicing yoga was experienced by adolescents and young adults and how such experiences seem to contribute to better coping with stress. As a contextualization, I will describe the current challenges for young people, such as social expectations and norms related to school/education, social media, and their life generally. Practicing yoga seems to allow for a “time out” from social expectations, tension, and stress, and thus create space for personal development. The discussed results are drawn from our qualitative study of adolescents and young adults, examining the potential of yoga practice for coping with stress, and the ability to improve mental health and increase well-being. The sample size consisted of 14 adolescents and young adults in Trondheim, Norway, in the age range of 12 to 29 years. There were two major themes identified in the data material: 1. yoga as a self-developmental activity, and 2. yoga as a “break” or sanctuary from social and societal demands. I will be paying attention to the second theme here. I conclude the chapter, that yoga is facilitating the way adolescents and young adults deal with societal demands and stressful expectations, which seems to improve their mental health and well-being.

Keywords: young people and social expectations, yoga for coping with stress, yoga as a sanctuary, yoga as “time out”, qualitative yoga research

1. Introduction

The young generation in Norway, like elsewhere, experiences a lot of pressure to perform well, in school and other areas of life. This leads to feelings of stress, tension, and reduced well-being. In this article, I discuss how the social expectations and stress experienced by young people may be better coped with by practicing yoga. The discussion is based on our study of how yoga is experienced by adolescents and young adults, and to what extent practicing yoga seems to contribute to psychological well-being. As

a background, we will discuss the current challenges for adolescents and young adults and how these contribute to daily stress and impair their well-being. Furthermore, we will address what yoga is and how research discusses how yoga potentially can contribute to adolescents' and young adults' mastery of stress in their lives and well-being. We will illustrate some of the benefits of yoga by sharing narratives from adolescents and young adult's experiences with yoga. The purpose of the study was to examine how practicing yoga was experienced and to understand how yoga may impact coping with stress and psychological well-being in everyday life for adolescents and young adults. Our interview material consists of 14 qualitative, semi-structured interviews with young people in the age range of 12 to 29 years old. Along with presenting the main results from our study, we will discuss and interpret the meaning of our findings.

2. Experienced pressure and stress among young people

There has been much focus on the increased pressures and expectations young people seem to experience in their everyday lives [1]. A recent study reported that mental health has been decreasing among adolescents and young adults during the last three decades [2]. For example, there have been increasing cases of anxiety and depression among young people, as well as lower levels of life satisfaction in the last decade. Experienced stress and depressive thoughts were especially prevalent among young females. These authors interpreted the stress levels and mental health challenges as related to a sedentary lifestyle in front of screens as well as the intense use of social media. Other major stressors for young people were issues of concern, like climate change, social injustice, and threats to democracy. For many, however, the major stressor was increased performance pressure in school, which Krogstad et al. [2] attribute to neoliberal ideology, which has brought more emphasis on competition in recent years.

Another study that focused on adolescents found similar tendencies of stress and mental health challenges, again attributed to performance pressure in school, but also to increased social expectations of success in other aspects of life [3]. As is the case for young people in many countries, most young people in Norway are heavy users of social media [4]. The social media platforms are designed for addiction, so adolescents and young adults often have a high degree of mastery over digital media, these media also, to various degrees, have "mastery" over them [5, 6]. Particularly, the use of smartphones for social media can result in norms of "being on" and constant social availability [7]. This may result in sleep deprivation and increased stress [8, 9]. Sleep deprivation over time may have a negative impact on emotions, and thus reduce young people's sense of well-being [10].

Thus, the lives of young people can be characterized by stress, pressure, and digital overstimulation, creating concern in how such pressures create stressful lives for young people [2]. Still, while stress levels vary, as pointed out by Bakken [11] young people typically experience pressure and stress related to education, and body ideals to look thin, fit, and have a six-pack stomach. Many also internalize expectations of being popular and successful according to norms conveyed by social media. Norwegian young people are heavy users of social media, which has increased through their use of smartphones during the last decade [4]. While difficult to measure, young people generally spend numerous hours in front of screens, both at school and in their leisure time. You hardly see a young person today without a mobile phone in their hand, and many feel expectations about being available 24/7 [5, 6]. The norm of constant availability together with an increasing lack of physical activity led to sleep problems, and both reinforced young people's stress levels and increased their problems [12, 13].

Still, young people themselves often attribute their stress levels and mental health challenges to the demands put on them in the education system. Particularly, young people with middle-class parents felt that the parents reinforced the pressure to perform well in school, and thus contributing to the young people relating their self-worth to their achievements in school [14]. For both the parents and the young people, the concerns were about future security in the form of future educational and job opportunities. However, most Norwegian young people were found to enjoy well-being and were content with their lives [11]. Still, there were identified numerous threats to well-being, such as higher drug consumption, more violence, increased feelings of loneliness, and generally less optimism about the future. Other risk factors were related to increased screen time and social media use, as well as more young people experiencing boredom and less well-being at school.

No wonder that “generation achievement” (“*generasjon prestasjon*” in Norwegian) has become a label for young people [15]. “Generation achievement” refers to a cultural climate of pressure, for example, in school, in sports, related to the body, and in social media [16].¹ School is the main stressor, but young people vary in how much it stresses them. Still, young people experienced it as important to perform well in school and higher education, as getting a job without having an education has become increasingly difficult. Thus, young people express that they feel pressure and a sense of stress related to their future possibilities for jobs and careers [11]. There is a sense of performance anxiety, and young people use words like worrying, sleep difficulties, a sense of hopelessness, and toil to describe how they feel. However, the concept of generation-high performance goes beyond expectations related to perform well at school. There are also expectations to perform well and be successful in other areas of life, like being good-looking, being fit and healthy, and being popular. There is a future disciplining, and a squeeze between educational pressure and other norms for success [15]. Many young people also feel that it is their own fault if they do not succeed in all areas of life, due to the general expectation that individuals have become responsible for their own happiness [12, 17]. Young people have a lot of choices, but the norms of success in all areas of life, reduce their experienced room for action, and induce stress and fear of not being good enough.

As we have seen, there is a general sense of stress in the lives of adolescents and young adults. But what is stress? The concept of stress was coined by Hans Selye, a medical doctor and endocrinologist who wrote numerous books and reports about stress, including the book *The Stress of Life* (1956). He defined stress as a “non-specific response of the body to any demand” [18]. Selye also linked how the body coped with stress to the hypothalamic-pituitary axis. It is important also to realize the psychological aspect of stress, that our perception of stress is in the “eye of the beholder:” what is perceived as stressful by one person, might not be perceived so by another person. For the one who is triggered by a stimulus perceived as a “stressor,” there will be a stress reaction, which typically starts with an alarm reaction, then a resistance phase, and is often followed by an exhaustion phase. As the perception of stress varies it is also possible to define stress as an exaggerated response to a change in the environment, externally or internally [19]. Stress means activation of the sympathetic part of the autonomous nervous system, which can trigger fright, fight, flight or freeze reactions, with the release of related bodily hormones. While sympathetic activation is important to perform well, long-term experiences of stress will drain our mental and physical health.

¹ See also <https://utdanningsforskning.no/artikler/2018/generasjon-prestasjon-ungdoms-opplevelse-avpress-og-stress/>

3. Yoga and its potential impact

In the Western world, yoga is often associated with slim, female yoga practitioners in tight-fitting suits, because that is how yoga is often portrayed in traditional and online media. But yoga is an ancient Indian practice suitable for all people, both women and men, as well as for people of all ages. While many in the West associate yoga with physical exercises (asanas), which require a great degree of bodily flexibility, yoga also includes breathing exercises (pranayama), meditation, and more. In the book *Yogaboken. Pust og bevegelse*, the authors describe yoga as a classical, Indian philosophical system, which also includes a number of methods and mind/body techniques for bringing stillness and self-insight [20]. These techniques include the cultivation of feelings, thoughts, and actions. Moreover, the purpose of yoga is primarily to get to know oneself, to develop awareness, and the ability to perceive. Thus, yoga is about self-discovery and personal transformation.²

Yoga has increased in popularity in recent years and 300 million people are now practicing yoga worldwide.³ As a background to understand how yoga may contribute to well-being and stress reduction, I will describe some central aspects of yoga. Yoga is a Sanskrit word, which means union or uniting, referring to the union of body, minds, and spirit. The often-quoted definition of yoga is “yoga chittivrtti nirodhah,” the second Sutra in the ancient, classical text, Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras*. There are numerous translations of this definition, for example: “Yoga is about stilling the fluctuations of the mind” [21], “Yoga is the stilling of mental turbulence” ([22], p. 16). Modern yoga is very diverse, and there are many yogic traditions. However, a common trait in classical yoga is often Patanjali’s eight limbs or Ashtangas. These limbs consist of: Yamas (social restrictions), Niyamas (internal disciplines), Asana (physical postures), Pranayama (control of life energy through breath), Pratyahara (withdrawal of the senses), Dharana (concentration), Dhyana (meditation), and Samadhi (union or integration) (see [21]). Patanjali eight limbs can also be formulated in one sentence: “Yoga consists of observances, abstinences, posture, control of life force, turning the senses inward, concentration, meditation, and superconsciousness or reintegration” ([22], p. 16). This is the philosophical basis for yoga.

There are various aspects of yoga emphasized by different authors, but a common trait is that yoga is about getting to know yourself, and developing your ability for self-reflection [20]. Yoga can also be perceived as a lifestyle, or way of life. The Indian yoga teacher Gitananda writes: “I prefer that you accept Yoga as a way of life, a way of integrating your whole nature, so that all aspects of your life work in harmony, one with another” ([23], p. 1). The above-mentioned eight limbs of yoga are seen as a precondition for yoga as a way of life. The point of integration, as indicated in the Sanskrit word “yui” (union, as mentioned above), is also emphasized by Bhogal in his book *Yoga & Mental Health & Beyond. A Guide to Self-Management*, where he writes: “Yoga literally means ‘Integration’ at all levels of existence. Yoga is both ‘State’ and ‘Process’. As a process, it is a means to Integration. As a state, it is a psycho-physiological balance, signifying a holistic personality integration” ([24], p. 2). Cook-Cottone [25] emphasizes that yoga philosophy views the experience of self as dwelling in two worlds: an inner world of thoughts, emotions, and sensations and the outer world where we interact with and relate to others. When yoga increases our integration, this will promote a more harmonic relationship to the external world, as we become less

² See for example <https://viniyoga.com/about/what-is-viniyoga/>

³ <https://www.thegoodbody.com/yoga-statistics/>

susceptible to social expectations, and often closer to our “true selves.” Thus, yoga can be described as a tool for self-development.

Others have portrayed yoga as a process of conscious evolution through creating a four- or five-fold awareness: This is awareness about the body, mind, and emotions and a meta-awareness, which presupposes an awareness about one’s lack of awareness [23]. Yoga can also be defined as “skill in action,” which increases one’s life mastery capacity, resilience, as weak as emotional balance. Practicing yoga can contribute to balance in the autonomic nervous system, by activating the para-sympathetic part, which is the basis for rest and digestion, more than the sympathetic part, which induces activation and sometimes stresses. The goal of yoga is to achieve autonomic balance, as neither sympathetic nor para-sympathetic dominance is ideal [26]. Thus, yoga has the potential to improve all aspects of our health, including emotional, mental, physical, social, and spiritual [27]. Some authors, such as Gitananda [23] also point out that the goal of yoga is Samadhi or Cosmic Consciousness. Similarly, according to Yogendra and Hansaji “yoga primarily means samadhi, and not union” ([28], p. 4). To these authors, Samadhi is about concentration, in other words our mind is concentrated, content, focused, and stable. In her recent book *Hva er yoga?* (What is yoga?) Wiel [29] acknowledges the diversity in definitions and understandings of yoga. However, she also emphasizes that in yoga one is learning to cope with stress by learning how to regulate oneself.

3.1 Yoga for coping with stress: some research findings

Yoga is an ancient body-mind practice, now regarded as an effective tool to promote general physical and mental health, especially to reduce stress [30]. Several review articles report that people experience a significant reduction in stress after doing yoga [31–34]. Based on the review Sharma suggests that “yoga appears to be a promising modality for stress management” ([34], p. 59). According to Riley and Park [33] both experimental and clinical research refers to yoga as a stress reliever. The latter authors suggest—based on their review of research on yoga and stress, that the psychological mechanisms that may relieve stress when doing yoga include: a more positive attitude toward stress, self-awareness, improved coping mechanisms, more appraisal of control, increased calmness, and also mindfulness, spirituality, and (self) compassion.

If one is to reduce stress among young people through yoga, it is important to understand the causes of stress and how yoga might help to reduce stress [35, 36]. Batista and Dantas [37] found yoga to be one of the most powerful agents for controlling stress. In their recent review article, similarly, a review study of the benefits of yoga for children and young people concluded that practicing yoga improved their ability to cope with stress and reduced their experience of stress and anxiety [38]. In another study of young people, “Students had particularly positive opinions regarding the beneficial effects of yoga on stress, sleep, and relaxation” ([39], p. 1). Another study on yoga in school [40] reported the following psychological benefits for students: “many cited stress reduction; many used yoga to manage negative emotions; and some propagated more optimism” (p. 171). As we mentioned earlier, stress is also about perception, Frank et al. [41] suggested that yoga (sports) reduced the perception of stress and accompanying mental health symptoms, such as anxiety and depression.

Wang and Szabo [42] found that many types of yoga had positive effects on stress reduction, at least in healthy adult populations. However, they recommended

that one needs to find out about the long-term impact of stress, and also understand the underlying psychological mechanisms causing stress. The latter point is emphasized by Park et al. [36] who suggest that it seems established that yoga reduces stress, but there is a need to understand better the underlying mechanisms. What is the reason for this improvement in the ability to cope with stress and also to feel less stressed? Based on a meta-analysis of 81 articles on how yoga works, Ross and Thomas [43] find that yoga has a positive effect on physical and mental health by downregulating the so-called hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis and the sympathetic nervous system. Yoga's impact on better regulation of the sympathetic nervous system and the HPA system is also confirmed by Pascoe and Bauer [30] in their article with a systematic review of the research on the effects of yoga on stress and mood. They also find that yoga contributes to less depressive and anxiety-related symptoms. The yogic contribution to reducing sympathetic activity, which means less experience of stress and more experience of calmness in body and mind.

In a recent review article on the effects of yoga on young people, Miller and the co-authors [44] conclude that yoga is a promising intervention in relation to children and young people. One of the reasons is that especially breathing exercises (pranayama) and focus on breathing when doing physical yoga exercises (asanas) have an impact on the autonomic nervous system, by reducing sympathetic activation. Young people will therefore feel more relaxed as they are in more para-sympathetic (or rest and digest mode). Thus, yoga can also help to increase attention and the ability to regulate cognitive (thinking), emotional (emotional), and somatic (bodily) impulses and experiences. Practicing yoga can also increase young people's contact with their own body, mind, emotions (feelings), and reaction patterns (see [45]). Based on this study of how yoga can contribute to teenagers' and young adults' mental health and well-being, Hagen et al. find that practicing yoga can increase self-awareness, the ability to self-regulate, and the ability to cope with stress.

4. Purpose of study

The purpose of the study was to examine how practicing yoga was experienced by young people. The title was "Yoga to promote young people's mental health and well-being?" Originally, we intended to focus on teenagers, but due to recruitment problems, we broadened the sample to adolescents and young adults. We formulated the research question: "How can yoga impact coping with stress and increase psychological well-being in everyday life for adolescents and young adult?"⁴ The approach was individual semi-structured interviews, resulting in data that were analyzed through thematic analysis [46, 47].

5. Research design and methodology

In line with the purpose of this study, a qualitative research design was employed. Qualitative research is idiographic (as opposed to nomothetic), as it samples and explores specific instances in detail. Thus, qualitative research focuses on exploring what *can specifically* be the case, and not necessarily what *is generally* the case. The

⁴ The study was performed in 2015, as a "research practice" for senior bachelor students.

aim is to produce knowledge allowing for analytical generalization, which “involves a reasoned judgment about the extent to which the findings of one study can be used as a guide to what might occur in another situation” ([48], p. 297).

5.1 Recruitment procedure and sample characteristics

The interviewees were recruited by a “snow-ball method” and were approached by researchers based on their participation in yoga courses at two yoga centers. There were 14 interview participants, adolescents and young adults in the age range of 12 to 29 years. There were four young men and 10 women. These individuals had varied amounts of yoga experience, ranging from learning yoga and practicing it for at least 5 weeks to practicing yoga for several years. Mainly, their yoga practice consisted of hatha yoga—*asanas* with a focus on breathing—and some guided meditations.

Data was collected through qualitative semi-structured phenomenological lifeworld interviews [47, 49]. The purpose of this type of interview is to gather descriptions of the lifeworld of the interviewee, with the intent of interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena. An advantage of this style of interviewing is its flexibility in the order and formulation of the questions posed, so that one can follow-up on interesting themes that emerge in the interview situation (probing). The interviews were performed based on an interview guide, consisting of open questions, based on insights from yoga research, inspired by yoga practice performed by the project’s lead researcher and supplemented by questions from the other members of the research team based on their research interests. In order to secure a report with the interviewee, we informed the participants of our aims with the interview (**Table 1**).

| Gender | Age | Interviewees’ fictional names |
|--------|-----|-------------------------------|
| Male | 15 | Adam M15 |
| Male | 15 | Brage M15 |
| Male | 25 | Carl M25 |
| Male | 27 | David M27 |
| Female | 12 | Eva F12 |
| Female | 14 | Fiona F14 |
| Female | 18 | Grethe F18 |
| Female | 23 | Hilde F23 |
| Female | 24 | Inger F24 |
| Female | 24 | Julie F24 |
| Female | 25 | Karin F25 |
| Female | 26 | Liv F26 |
| Female | 28 | Marit 28 |
| Female | 29 | Nora 29 |

Table 1.
Overview of participants.

6. Data collection

Data was collected by means of semi-structured phenomenological life-word interviews [47, 49] in the spring of 2015. The purpose of this type of interview was to gather descriptions of the lifeworld of the interviewee—“the world as it is encountered in everyday life and given in direct and immediate experience, independent of and prior to explanations” ([48], p. 32)—with the intent of interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena.

The interviews were conducted with the aid of an interview guide, consisting of open questions. The guide was for the most part only loosely adhered to, primarily serving the purpose of a checklist to ensure that the intended and desired overarching issues were explored during the course of the interview. The questions of the interview guide were derived from the following set of research questions: (1) Why do the participants seek out yoga? (2) How do the participants experience the yoga practice? (3) What effects do the participants experience that yoga provides? (4) How do the participants view yoga in an overarching social and cultural context? In order to secure a report with the interviewee, a script informing the participants of the aims of the research as well as their rights (e.g., their ownership over the information they provide) regarding the interview was recited.

The interview guide was adhered to more strictly for those participants who had only a limited amount of experience with yoga. For the participants who had more experience the interview guide was more loosely adhered to in order to cover the general research questions. For experienced participants, we opened up with the question “what is your history with yoga?” This question is in retrospect deemed as having proved highly useful. In the interview situation, it elicited rich descriptions where the interviewees were allowed to situate yoga within their own lifeworld and in their own words. This question provided a rich set of leads that were followed up on with further questions aiming at clarifying meanings and exploring connected topics. All of the interviews, with one exception, were conducted in Norwegian, the one exception was conducted in English. Most of the interviews were conducted with two researchers present, with the lead researcher being present in all but one of the interviews.

The interviews were conducted at times and places that were convenient for the interviewees. Parental consent was obtained for interviewing participants below 18 years of age. The interviews were transcribed primarily orthographically, which is considered appropriate when the analysis focuses on what is being said, rather than how it is being said. However, specific nonliteral meanings were attempted to preserve by the use of brackets noting non-textual irregularities that might have been intended to serve as linguistic devices serving communicative purposes (e.g., laughter, pronounced uses of intonation and/or dialect to express irony or self-distancing).

7. Data analysis

The collected data material was analyzed employing thematic analysis [46, 50, 51]. The purpose of thematic analysis in general is primarily to describe and summarize a set of qualitative data in rich detail. The purpose of the current analysis was to construct an understanding of how yoga practice relates to stress and well-being by detailed mapping and examination of a limited selection of meanings. As such, it constitutes a selective analysis focusing on generating themes centrally relevant to address the predefined research question. The interviews were analyzed making use

of the Nvivo 11 Pro software for Microsoft Windows. The data was analyzed by coding for the specific meaning yoga had for the interviewees.

Thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke [46] consists of six stages: (1) data familiarization, (2) initial generation of codes, (3) searching for themes based on initial codes, (4) reviewing of themes, (5) defining and naming of themes, and (6) the writing of the report. While this report is written in English, the analysis is performed on Norwegian interview transcriptions, except for one case where the interview was conducted and transcribed in English. While the overall meaning is conveyed, some of the nuances in meaning can be lost in the process of translating between the two languages. Themes were developed from the perspective of and employing sensitizing concepts like stress and well-being.

8. Findings and discussion

8.1 Yoga as sanctuary from social and societal demands

How yoga relates to perceived social and societal pressures is a highly significant theme running through the data material. Most of the participants describe how they perceive society and their social context in remarkably similar terms, characterizing society and their social contexts as being dominated by a pressure to perform and as promoting and fostering competition. Furthermore, yoga is described by many as either locally as in itself a sanctuary from these demands, or as an arena for temporarily disengaging from them. Two examples from our interviewees:

“That I got a small, fixed time where I just had to relax and... not think about school.” (Fiona, F14).

“It is more like; you can empty your head. (...) Especially during the last thing, then you are not thinking about anything.” (Brage, M15).

“The last thing” referred to here was the closing part of the yoga class where participants practiced Shava Asana, a relaxing pose where one is lying down on the back, with the aim to relax or release tension.

Yoga as a sanctuary can also be viewed more generally, as the practitioners’ accounts demonstrate evidence of employing techniques they have learned from yoga in their real lives as they face these demands during their everyday activities. The theme selected and elaborated on is one of the most central and pertinent to the research questions, and as doing the most justice to representing yoga as perceived by the research participants. The theme is considered well suited to summarizing the findings, as one of the themes incorporating salient topics brought up by the participants, as well as regarding how the data material relates to mental health and well-being. The theme chosen for elaboration and presentation in this chapter is “Yoga as a Sanctuary from Social and Societal Demands.” Related to this theme, yoga as a “safe haven” and as a stress relief are important elements. The theme also overlaps with another central theme in our study, “Yoga as a Self-Developing Activity.”

When analyzing the data, one realizes that the themes constructed can perhaps never do full justice to what is available in the data. Still, one gets the main insight into the way yoga is perceived as a way to deal with the pressure often experienced by adolescents in Norwegian society:

“Yeah... like not only with friends, but with everyone at school that you... feel like... yeah, is... you have to like be... in a certain way and dress in a certain way and such to be accepted, I feel. It is like very much pressure” (Grethe, F18).

However, the reasons for continuing to do yoga is not necessarily the same as those they possessed initially when seeking it out. Yoga does show marked development and progression for some of the individuals in this sample. This is illustrated by describing yoga from start to finish, going through what initially brought these participants to try yoga, and how yoga has developed for some of these participants into an activity that allowed them to come in and stay in contact with themselves. In the words of one of our informants:

“It’s like a breathing room where I just... forget everything else. Where I can, like, just be me. [...] That I..yeah, just forget everything that has happened before and...what is supposed to happen, that I can just relax and... get a break. Catch up with myself.” (Grethe, F18).

“No, it is that you ... you concentrate about only your body and how you feel so... do not think about other things and ... just feel how I am right here and now and... yeah. Quite calm. No stress.” (Grethe, F18).

Other people reported seeking out yoga specifically as an activity for *relaxation and stress mastery*.

Grethe, F18: “It was because I’m a very stressed person, or I experienced a lot of stress in my everyday life, at school especially. And I had heard that yoga could help against stress... or that you become more relaxed. That’s really why I wanted to try it.”

Adam M15: “It was because I thought it sounded very... relaxing, and as a way of removing stress during the day and stuff. Like, if there has been a long school day and then, then, just a lot of things that I found very boring so that I could just... like, forget all of that.”

This theme relates to some of the reasons why the practitioners originally sought out or continued to practice yoga. One reason mentioned by several interviewees was that yoga was a source of physical activity where performance was not in focus.

Karin, F25: “It appealed to me as ... what should I say... a way of being physically active that was not ... contingent on performance in a way.”

Several of the interviewees expressed that the focus on competition in sports was something that was experienced as stressful for them. For example, a mentioned reason for continuing to practice yoga was that it was a source of physical exercise where there is no focus on competition.

Liv, F26: I do not really quite remember what made me continue but I remember that ... yes both that original experience of that it wasn’t about competition, but that I was allowed to move my body.

Quite a few of the participants in this study recount experiences with other forms of physical exercise where the joy associated with these activities was ruined by the increasing pressure to perform and to compete with each other. The emerging focus

on performance and competition was described as having turned these individuals away from more mainstream forms of physical activity and toward yoga. For example, one of the participants who is now a yoga instructor recounts her being driven away from football preemptively because she was afraid of being labeled as “bad” and sorted into the “bad team.”

Liv, F26: “Because in football it’s all about that [competition], they like split the teams into good and bad, and then I just had to quit. Because I was a bit like, that, I did not ‘t want to know if I was good or bad. That’s something that you struggle with enough by yourself. You do not need anyone else telling you that you are not good enough to be with the good team in football. In yoga there was no focus on that.”

Another practitioner who has also become a yoga instructor reported that her source of physical activity, handball, was contaminated by an increasing focus on winning and performing where she was not allowed to participate when she wasn’t among the better players on the team. Due to this, this source of physical exercise became increasingly dominated by and associated with negative experiences and emotions. Yoga offered a means of physical exercise not contingent on performance and not focused on competition where she was allowed to use her body.

Karin, F25: “During the last few years of handball there was a lot of focus on that the teams should win and lalala. And .. I wasn’t the best on the team to put it like that so I was sitting a lot on the bench and it came to be that to be active, it ... moving and using the body and all that became sort of a negative thing because you did not really get to do it. And it was very obvious like, those are good and those are bad. And at yoga ... I do not know why I had an impression that ... I think maybe I had a friend that had been doing it or something like that they said like that there is no focus on anything but what you do yourself.”

A participant who had been practicing dance for many years also found herself driven away from it because it was increasingly being dominated by internal competition and pressure to perform. Yoga to the contrary was perceived by this individual as an arena where she is completely free from the scrutiny and the social evaluation of others, and as an arena where she could just focus on herself without being the focus of others. This feature of yoga practice was something that she greatly appreciated.

Grethe, F18: “I was doing dance before, and I enjoyed that a lot for... ten years. But, in that too there was a lot of pressure. You should be... you should just become better and better and, there was pressure on being best and... if you were good enough you got to stand in the front when we had a show and... So it was very like... and I just could not take that any more. So then I just decided to try yoga instead, and here it’s like, you do not think about how the others look while they are doing those exercises and... that others... I just do not feel that the others are watching me, and how I’m doing and... how good I am. Everyone just focus on themselves. And that is really nice.”

This aspect of yoga, that it is an activity in which there is little pressure to perform, is perceived by one young participant and being communicated clearly during the yoga practice itself. Nobody is forcing you to do anything during the yoga classes, and this is reported as clearly perceived and might contribute to the practice being completely autonomously engaged.

Eva, F12: "I think it's a good thing. That... you can decide a bit for yourself. And if there is something that you do not feel like you can do or that is uncomfortable, in any way, that you have the opportunity to lay down and rather join when there are some things that you know that you can do and that you feel can be a bit easier."

Yoga is an activity that itself is not contingent on pressure to perform and competition seems to make yoga itself a sanctuary from these features and demands from the reality that exists outside of the yoga classes themselves. When asked what is the most important about yoga, one of the participants described it as a haven from the rest of existence.

Grethe, F18: "To me right now it is to... have a haven where, where I do not need to think about anything else. I can just focus on me and to... take a break. To not... I do not experience any pressure here. Here I am... just me."

Yoga offers an arena where the participants get to temporarily disengage from these social and societal pressures, including feeling watched and evaluated by peers:

Grethe, F18: "I like it here so much... I do not think that... here you do not think about how others do things and... I do not feel that they are thinking about how I am doing things either. I think that... that I do not have any friends that go here, I think it helps me, it's my place."

These observations seem to demonstrate and point in the direction that yoga offers for these participants a sanctuary from perceived societal and social pressures, and that yoga is an arena where they get to temporarily disengage from them. This period of disengagement is experienced as rewarding as it alleviates negative emotions and promotes positive emotions. Disengaging also might facilitate functioning by allowing the participants to recharge their batteries in order to be able to meet these demands of society.

The fact that yoga is an arena where there is little focus on performance and competition by one participant described as yoga offering a contrast to the message that she perceives is being communicated by the rest of society.

Karin, F25: "I feel it offers a ... a kind of alternative way of seeing things. It offers ... it is a contrast to ... what I feel is a lot of society and then I do not know ... the whole collective where you ... from society you get all the time 'you are not good enough' in commercials and media and so on to get better, where yoga in a way says 'no!', you are actually already good enough, you don't need to do all of that."

Practicing yoga can also be a way of disengaging from the stresses and demands associated with work and studies.

Nora, F29: "At work I'm too much in my mind, in my brain, so I'm just like ... it's not using my hands much, /Just have to think, think, think all the time [...] And when I'm doing yoga I'm fully, after that I'm just like switching on my body, and this is what gives my mind some rest"

Nora, F29: "When/was doing my PhD, it was ... in the end it was crazy times, and (sighing) it was just a lot of deadlines and, like, you really, ... you were just going crazy, and so on, and at least two hours per day, when I was going to the studio, it was like ... as

soon I was closing the door of the studio, for at least two hours it was like nothing existed, it was just this ... like ... small room with other people. And for me it was like a light in the window because, there was too much pressure, too much stress, and at least these two hours was making me feel happy. So for me it was just like yea, a light of happiness”.

Another participant describes this break, this period of disengaging, as granting her energy.

Marit, F28: “You allow yourself to just be and not do anything. It is a break that grants me more energy. I think .. the brain is a muscle, and it also needs to relax. So it is a break for the brain”.

It is interesting to notice that experienced yoga practitioners seem to have divorced themselves from what they perceive as controlling regulations of society. Another interesting feature is how yoga for some of the individuals who initially engaged in yoga as a sort of physical therapeutic relief or exercise ended up finding something more in it, in particular a mental inner strength aspect, and also strength to resist societal norms and expectation.

Liv, F26: “I’ve met in the yoga community a lot that I that is something of that I appreciate the most. Adult people who, yea they are searching, they are in the seeker community, but they are also open and honest in their bodies. They are not so preoccupied by following fashion or following that which the rest of society necessarily says you have to do.”

Some of the younger participants seemed to experience and being aware of these demands just as much as the more experienced participants, but these demands were not internalized in the same manner.

Finally, we see an example of yoga being employed in everyday situations for emotional and behavioral self-regulation. One boy reported using techniques from yoga to emotionally self-regulate by improving his own subjective experience of a frightening situation he had to go through; being inside an MR machine.

Adam, M15: “When I was at an MR-examination, then I felt that I had a lot of use for it. Because then I started thinking about yoga and the lay-still exercises, rather than thinking that I was in e very tiny room. [...] Then I used it [yoga] to think about something else than that I was scared, so I used it to rather think about that I could just relax and... not be afraid for something that wasn’t really anything to be afraid of?”

This interviewee was explicitly asked what yoga gave him in a situation where he was scared:

*Adam, M15: I think it makes me much calmer than if I had not been to [yoga].
I have a way out if there is something that I do not like doing.*

This way it can be said that he sought the sanctuary from yoga practices during something he had to go through in his everyday life. The tools from yoga seemed to allow this informant to be calmer and cope better with a stressful situation.

Two yoga practitioners in our sample who are also instructors point toward a possible threat to well-being that relates to yoga as a sanctuary. One of the instructors

talks of yoga practice for some as being used as an escape from their troubles rather than dealing with them. These observations seem to point in the direction that yoga offers for these participants a sanctuary from perceived societal and social pressures, and that yoga was an arena where they could temporarily disengage from them. This period of disengagement seemed to be experienced as rewarding as it alleviated negative emotions and promoted positive emotions. Disengaging could also facilitate functioning by allowing the participants to recharge their batteries in order to be able to meet these demands of society.

9. Conclusory remarks

The theme emphasized in this chapter illuminated how yoga seemed to provide a sanctuary from social and societal demands. Our interview citations revealed that a number of the young people were experiencing various forms of pressure and stress in their everyday lives, that they felt a need to take a “time-out.” Examples mentioned included social expectations related to school, peer pressure and norms, and the competitiveness in sports related to being good and contributing to the winning team. While doing yoga these individuals got to disengage from everyday stresses and demands, and yoga seemed to provide them with a break that allowed them to relax and recharge their batteries. The theme of yoga as providing a sanctuary is inter-related to another theme that could be identified in this data material, namely yoga as a self-developmental activity. The latter theme relates to functioning well and experiencing subjective well-being.

Performance pressure, especially in relation to perceived social and societal demands, was one of the dominant themes in this study. In this chapter, it was explored as its own dedicated theme named “Yoga as Sanctuary from Social and Societal Demands.” A few of the interviewees in our study expressed a concern that yoga could let practitioners escape from their troubles rather than doing something about them. These potential pitfalls of yoga as a sanctuary, as the subjective emotional benefits reaped by mentally escaping from life, might prove detrimental to functioning. However, recharging batteries and developing different values do not necessarily mean escaping from troubles related to fulfilling social expectations. It could also empower these young people, such as when interviewees employed techniques learned during yoga practice in their everyday lives to cope with stress in better ways and with increased emotional and behavioral self-regulation.⁵

The “Sanctuary” through yoga provided the young people in our study with a space to relax, and also made them realize how stressed they were. For some of the interviewees in our sample yoga practice gained another dimension of intrinsic motivation by yoga offering relaxation, time out, and pleasant mental states while negating unpleasant mental states. With yogic tools for relaxation, it also became easier to look inward; getting to know themselves better. This “coming to know who they are” could potentially allow them to live more autonomously and authentically. By improving their self-awareness and by experiencing a break from social pressure and stress through yoga, it seemed that many of the adolescents and young adults in our study could face their life’s journey ahead with more ease and inner strength. Thus, our study indicate that yoga has the potential to improve young people’s mental health and well-being.

⁵ For a more thorough discussion on the manifestations of self-regulation, see Hagen et al. [45].

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Conflict of interest


The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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