

Karma Yoga as a Coping Mechanism for Anxiety

Tanya Goel^{1*}, Rita Kumar², Sheetal Mehrotra³

Abstract

This Research article aims to investigate the effectiveness of Karma Yoga as a coping mechanism for anxiety. Karma yoga, an ancient spiritual practice originating from the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita, promotes service and selfless action devoid of expectations and fear of its result. In the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna advises individuals to perform their duties without fear of its result. "Any action which is performed by a living entity using the mind, body and senses with awareness and consciousness is known as karma". Action done without the involvement of ego or attachment becomes yoga of action which is known as Karma Yoga. Anxiety, as defined by the American Psychological Association, is an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worry, and physiological changes such as increased heart rate. Discrepancies between planned and actual outcomes heighten our apprehension and increase anxiety. For the purpose of this study, a review of 20 research papers was conducted which suggests that the practice of karma yoga reduces anxiety. Additionally, it promotes mental clarity and emotional resilience, which makes it easier for people to deal with life's obstacles. This implies that integrating the principles of Karma Yoga into daily routine can serve as a valuable tool for managing and coping with anxiety symptoms.

Keywords: Anxiety, karma yoga, coping mechanism, selfless actions, stress management

INTRODUCTION

Anxiety has become a prevalent mental health concern in contemporary society, with its effects evident in multiple domains of life, such as interpersonal relationships, academic achievement, workplace performance, etc. While established therapeutic approaches are commonly utilized, there is a growing interest in complementary strategies.

This research delves into Karma Yoga, an ancient Indian practice, as a potential tool for mitigating anxiety before it escalates into a more serious issue.

Mitigating Anxiety: Exploring the Potential of Karma Yoga

Anxiety is an ubiquitous human experience, serving as a natural response to perceived threats or challenges. It manifests as worry and physiological symptoms such as tachycardia (rapid heart rate).

However, when these feelings become persistent and interfere with daily life, they may indicate a more serious concern.

Anxiety is defined as "an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts and physical changes like increased blood pressure" [1]. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) approximately 4% of the global population, or 301 million people, suffer from an anxiety disorder, making it the most common mental illness in the world.

A survey conducted by the National Mental Health Survey (NMHS) found that the current

*Author for Correspondence

Tanya Goel
E-mail: tanya.goel2004@gmail.com

¹Student, Department of Psychology and Allied Sciences, Amity University, Noida, Uttar Pradesh India

²Professor Department of Psychology and Allied Sciences, Amity University, Noida, Uttar Pradesh India

³Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology and Allied Sciences, Amity University, Noida, Uttar Pradesh India

Received Date: November 04, 2024

Accepted Date: December 13, 2024

Published Date: December 26, 2024

Citation: Tanya Goel, Rita Kumar, Sheetal Mehrotra. Karma Yoga as a Coping Mechanism for Anxiety. International Journal of Behavioral Sciences. 2025; 2(1): 22–27p.

prevalence of anxiety disorders in India's adult population is 2.57%, which is a significant portion of the Indian population. The overwhelming prevalence of anxiety emphasizes the need for effective coping mechanisms.

The causes of anxiety are multifaceted, often stemming from unmet expectations and cognitive distortions. It creates barriers to optimal performance and can hinder developmental milestones crucial for future endeavors. Therefore, early interventions are crucial for mitigating the lasting impacts of anxiety on academic and life outcomes of individuals [2].

To illuminate this point further, we refer to the predicament of Arjuna, the warrior prince who faced a moral dilemma on the battlefield of Mahabharata, paralyzed by the distress of fighting against his own relatives, he sought counsel from Lord Krishna and expressed deep-seated worries about the moral implications of war.

In this context, Arjuna's predicament reflects how cognition—his beliefs and expectations influenced his emotional state leading to severe anxiety. Thus, Krishna advised Arjuna to perform his duties (dharma) without attachment to the results, stating, "You have the right to perform your prescribed duty, but you are not entitled to the fruits of your actions" (Bhagavad Gita, 2.47). This counsel illustrates the importance of focusing on the action itself, rather than on its outcomes.

Karma Yoga: A Path of Selfless Action

Developed millenniums ago, Karma Yoga is a principal tenet within Hinduism. It is the practice of selfless action aimed at serving others without attachment to outcomes. It helps individuals transcend ego and desires, promoting humility, harmony, and a sense of unity, while fostering self-awareness and recognition of one's flaws [3].

It emphasizes selfless action, encouraging individuals to perform their responsibilities without attachment to results or rewards. It aims to foster moral development and a sense of interconnectedness within society by prioritizing obligations to others over personal gain. The focus on serving others not only enhances individual well-being but also supports mental health by fostering emotional fulfillment and reducing anxiety [4,5].

Unlike standard pursuits aimed at individual gain, Karma Yoga focuses our intention on helping others and deriving fulfillment from contributing to the greater good. This approach has been linked to enhanced mental well-being, demonstrating potential to reduce stress and promote emotional regulation [6].

In the modern world, all actions are performed with the aim of achieving some desired results. A Karma Yogi performs his karma without attaching himself to the fruits of his actions. When individuals detach themselves from the results of their work, they can let go of the emotional distress associated with it and focus on the act itself leading to a profound sense of freedom from anxiety.

Although research on the efficacy of Karma Yoga specifically for anxiety reduction is limited, existing studies have shown that individuals with a more detached approach from their actions tend to experience lower anxiety levels and improved levels of overall well-being [7].

Several aspects of Karma Yoga suggest its potential benefits in mitigating anxiety. Firstly, by shifting focus away from self-centered worries and redirecting attention towards the service of others it may decrease rumination, a common feature of anxiety characterized by cyclical negative thoughts. Furthermore, the emphasis on present-moment awareness within Karma Yoga can help individuals diminish their fixation on future anxieties fostering a calmer mental state.

The essence of Karma Yoga lies in performing selfless action in place of normal actions which aids individuals in alleviating the burdens associated with attachment to specific outcomes. This detachment diminishes anxiety levels tied to expectations and enhances overall emotional well being [8]. It not only helps reduce anxiety symptoms but also helps improve emotional resilience and overall psychological well-being, highlighting the transformative potential of yoga for young individuals [9].

In conclusion, the application of Karma Yoga principles rooted in the rich teachings of the Bhagavad Gita, offers an insightful framework for alleviating anxiety. By embracing these principles, practitioners can navigate life's challenges with a profound sense of peace, reinforcing the value of integrating ancient wisdom with modern psychological practices to enhance mental health.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The paper discusses the various dimensions of yoga, including Karma Yoga, which is recognized as the path of selfless action aimed at reducing personal attachment to outcomes and alleviating related anxiety [10]. The objective of the study is to emphasize the significance of integrating yoga, which includes Karma Yoga, into modern medicine as a method of enhancing physical, mental, and social well-being. The review assess the impact of yoga practices on health outcomes of individuals, including a notable sample size of 31,044 participants in a survey indicating that many use yoga to manage mental health and musculoskeletal issues. The findings suggest that practices rooted in Karma Yoga can foster resilience, reduce stress, and enhance overall well-being, thereby complementing conventional medical treatments. The research emphasizes the necessity of clinical validation of yoga's benefits to promote its incorporation into holistic health care strategies effectively.

The Bhagavad Gita part of the Mahabharata epic delineates Karma Yoga in its 18 chapters emphasizing spiritual growth, union with the divine and liberation from the cycle of rebirth [11]. This research study explores the significance of introducing teachings from the Bhagavad Gita and yoga at an early age, particularly during the formative years of childhood as this period is critical in terms of brain development. The Participants included children, adolescents, women, and pregnant mothers, showed significant reductions in anxiety levels on Sinha Anxiety Scale after yoga and Gita classes, demonstrating that these practices could enhance mental health and should be considered for wider application.

The study explores how the practice of Karma Yoga, which emphasizes selfless action without attachment to the outcome results in reduction of job burnout [12]. The data was collected from 207 working professionals from various sectors in India. The findings indicate a positive association between Karma Yoga and happiness, demonstrating that individuals who practice Karma Yoga experience increased levels of happiness. Practitioners of Karma Yoga focus on their actions and the welfare of others rather than solely on personal gains, they are less likely to experience work-related stress and emotional exhaustion. By alleviating feelings of burnout, Karma Yoga also helps decrease anxiety levels leading to an overall improvement in mental well-being as burnout often correlates with heightened anxiety.

METHODOLOGY

Aim

The aim of this research is to study the potential of Karma yoga as a coping mechanism for anxiety

Objective

The objective of this research is to determine whether the use of Karma Yoga can effectively reduce anxiety when used as a coping mechanism.

Paradigm

Interpretivist: This research article is framed within an interpretivist paradigm, focused on understanding the effectiveness of Karma Yoga interventions in reducing anxiety across a diverse

population. It aims to uncover trends in outcomes that demonstrate the mental health benefits that can be derived from these interventions.

Method

This research has utilized reviews of literature, peer-reviewed articles, case-control studies to explore the topic through application of secondary research methodology.

Inclusion Criteria

- i. Studies involving the review of the relationship between Karma Yoga and Anxiety.
- ii. Review of literature before the year 2000.
- iii. Studies published in English language.

Exclusion Criteria

- i. Review of literature older than the year 2001.
- ii. Studies that include participants with severe intellectual disabilities.
- iii. Studies not published in English language.

RESULT

Table 1 summarizes the common themes identified in the literature reviewed regarding the practice of Karma Yoga.

Table 1. Benefits and Applications of Yoga Across Various Domains.

Theme	Key Findings
Mental Health Benefits	Significant reduction in anxiety and depression symptoms, improves emotional stability and mental well-being, can serve as an alternative to traditional medical treatments, Enhances overall mental health through physical, emotional, and spiritual balance.
Workplace Applications	Prevents workplace burnout, enhances job satisfaction and commitment, creates framework for ethical work practices, promotes harmony in organizational workforce, Reduces stress in high-pressure environments.
Psychological Mechanisms	Reduces over thinking and promotes inner peace, Fosters self-control and emotional detachment, Emphasizes sense control and equanimity, Promotes focus on actions over outcomes.
Spiritual and Philosophical Framework	Integrates with other forms of yoga (Bhakti, Jnana), Provides sustainable solutions to daily life stressors, promotes personal and collective harmony, Emphasizes duty and purposeful living.
Clinical Applications	Can be integrated into modern medicine as complementary therapy, supports psychotherapy practices, improves patient outcomes, Benefits diverse populations.

DISCUSSION

The objective of this research article was to study the effectiveness of Karma Yoga as a coping mechanism for anxiety. For the purpose of this study, a total of twenty articles on Yoga and Karma Yoga, categorized into primary, secondary, qualitative, and quantitative research, were examined. Specifically, 9 studies were identified as primary empirical research, while the other 11 were secondary reviews; 13 studies utilized qualitative methods, and the remaining 7 applied quantitative approaches. This diverse methodological framework facilitated a comprehensive exploration of how Karma Yoga contributes to mental health and reduction in anxiety.

The findings suggest that it is crucial to understand the relationship between anxiety and karma yoga as it can offer insights into the potential benefits of this practice [13,14]. Karma yoga is thought to foster feelings of compassion, gratitude, and a sense of purpose, which can aid individuals in managing anxiety.

Limitations in the research include the need for more studies exploring the long-term effects of karma yoga on anxiety and the necessity for more diverse samples to ensure findings are applicable. Research focusing on how the state of Karma Yoga is achieved are also needed for integration of these teachings into daily routines and therapeutic models. Further investigation in this area is vital to deepen our understanding of the benefits of karma yoga. This could involve conducting longitudinal studies, quantitative, and qualitative research to delve into how karma yoga impacts anxiety.

Spiritual practices like Karma Yoga can effectively lower anxiety and improve emotional well-being by creating a sense of purpose and enhancing community bonds [15]. Studies have demonstrated a decrease in anxiety levels among women engaging in yoga practices [16]. Therefore, practicing yoga along with Karma Yoga can help alleviate symptoms of anxiety.

Research by Rastogi & Pati in the year 2020 highlights the effectiveness of a structured 'Karma Yoga' instrument, which demonstrates that engaging in selfless actions leads to better emotional regulation and decreased anxiety levels, highlighting the therapeutic value of Karma Yoga.

CONCLUSION

According to the research reviewed, it was found that a negative relationship exists between practicing Karma Yoga and anxiety (i.e. Practicing karma Yoga leads to a reduction in anxiety levels). Karma Yoga and various forms of yoga have been shown to significantly reduce symptoms of anxiety and improve overall mental health. This implies that incorporating Karma Yoga principles into daily routines could serve as a valuable tool for managing and coping with anxiety symptoms.

Interventions based on Karma Yoga can be used by therapists for anxiety patients. By focusing on selfless actions and letting go of personal outcomes, Karma Yoga may cultivate a sense of purpose and meaning in life, ultimately leading to lower anxiety levels. Karma yoga is a beneficial practice for those seeking to decrease anxiety and enhance their mental well-being. By dedicating themselves to selfless acts and service, individuals may experience a decrease in anxiety and a heightened feeling of purpose in their daily lives.

In summary, the relationship between anxiety and karma yoga is intricate and varied.

While there is evidence to suggest that understanding and practicing Karma Yoga leads to a reduction in anxiety, more research is needed to fully grasp the mechanisms at play and determine the lasting effects of this practice on mental health.

REFERENCES

1. Kazdin AE. Encyclopedia of psychology. American Psychological Association, editor. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association; 2000 Mar 15.
2. James-Palmer A, Anderson EZ, Zucker L, Kofman Y, Daneault JF. Yoga as an intervention for the reduction of symptoms of anxiety and depression in children and adolescents: a systematic review. *Frontiers in pediatrics*. 2020 Mar 13;8:78.
3. Nachimuthu P. YOGA, A WAY OF LIFE. *JOY: The Journal of Yoga*. 2005 Sep 1;4(4).
4. Mulla ZR, Krishnan VR. Karma-yoga: The Indian model of moral development. *Journal of business ethics*. 2014 Aug; 123:339–51.
5. Sharma JK, Sharma KK. Karma Yoga: A Philosophical Therapeutic Model for Stress Management. *International Journal of Education & Allied Sciences*. 2011 Jan 1;3(1).
6. Kayal R. Role of integral yoga on mental health. *International Journal of Physical Education, Sports and Health*. 2016;3(5):28–31.
7. Acharya S. Teaching of gita and yoga in ICDS can reduce anxiety in modern society. *International Journal of Advanced Research in Management and Social Sciences*. 2017;6(12):115–30.
8. Rastogi A, Pati S. Towards a Conceptualization of Karma Yoga. *Journal of Human Values*. 2015;21(1):51–63.

-
9. Kaur M, Kaur SP. Effect of Yogic practices on stress among adolescents. *Educational Quest-An International Journal of Education and Applied Social Sciences*. 2014;5(3):197–200.
 10. Santra G. Yoga and the need of its integration in modern medicine. *J Assoc Physicians India*. 2022 Dec;70(12):80–4.
 11. Acharya S. By what mean we can we use the teaching of gita and yoga in modern day to reduce anxiety. *International Journal of Advanced Research in Management and Social Sciences*. 2019;8(2):21–43.
 12. Pati SP, Rastogi A, Kumar P. Arresting burnout: The role of Karma yoga. 2017 Jan.
 13. Mehrtash S, Koçak S, Altunsöz IH. The effect of yoga on stress, anxiety and depression among turkish adults: A preliminary study. *Pamukkale Journal of Sport Sciences*. 2015;6(1):39–49.
 14. Keshavan MS, Hegde S, Bhargav H. Doing good well (Karma Yoga, the path of selfless action): Psychotherapeutic lessons from the East. *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*. 2024 Aug 30:104201.
 15. Sruthi M, Mishra AK, Harti SS. Yoga and its path to spirituality—A review article. *International Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*. 2022 Sep 20:26–9.
 16. Javnbakht M, Kenari RH, Ghasemi M. Effects of yoga on depression and anxiety of women. *Complementary therapies in clinical practice*. 2009 May 1;15(2):102–4.