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Social Work Students' Attitudes Towards Using Yoga

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Abstract

Current social work students are in the position of becoming future professionals who will be providing treatment and referrals to clients. It is crucial that social workers are aware of effective treatments and utilize evidence-based practices. The present study aimed to assess opinions and knowledge of social work students towards using yoga in general and as a therapeutic intervention, which is known as trauma sensitive yoga (TSY). An anonymous survey was created in order to determine this. Participants in this study were male and female students at Western Michigan University within the College of Health and Human Services who were all 18 years old or older. The results of the study showed that the majority of social work students support the use of yoga as a therapeutic intervention, but many respondents didn't know specific information about TSY. These findings suggest that it would be beneficial to include TSY in the curriculum for Master of Social Work programs and possibly even provide students with the option of specializing in the area of TSY.

Keywords: social work students, attitudes, yoga

Introduction

Research has shown that individuals who practice yoga recognize benefits in at least three primary areas; health promotion and wellness, disease prevention, and mental health (Desai, R., Tailor, A., & Bhatt, T., 2015; Hegde et al., 2018; Sang, K., 2014; Mensinga, J., 2011). These three areas encompass many specific benefits, such as lowered blood pressure, improved sleep, increased energy, improved immune response, and reduced depression and/or anxiety (Brems et al., 2015). There is a growing body of evidence to support trauma sensitive yoga (TSY), which is a therapeutic intervention for individuals who experience PTSD and other mental health disorders (Justice, L., Brems, C., & Ehlers, K., 2018; van der Kolk et al., 2014; Clark et al., 2014). This form of yoga is unique in that it can be adapted to fit the specific needs of individuals who engage in it.

Trauma is a very prevalent issue in the United States today. It is common for social workers to engage with clients who have experienced trauma and may need treatment for it. Typically, clients who display trauma symptoms are treated with cognitive-based psychotherapies. Clients who may be unresponsive to these traditional treatments may respond better to TSY as an intervention. The purpose of this study was to examine social work students' knowledge of and attitudes towards yoga and TSY. The research question being answered through this study is “would it be beneficial to include information about TSY in Master of Social Work programs?” It is important to explore this area since these students will one day be practitioners in the field providing clients with interventions and referring clients to other services.

Literature Review

Western Michigan University's library was utilized to search the literature relating to the current study. No results were found directly related to social work students and their knowledge/attitude towards yoga. Terms that were used while searching for literature were social work, students, attitudes, knowledge, opinion, yoga, body based interventions, college, program, feelings, intervention, and trauma sensitive yoga. Additionally, the works cited for each source found were read, which assisted in locating more relevant sources. This search took place from November 2019 to January 2020, with some updates in March 2020. Through this literature search, a lot of information was found supporting the use of TSY and yoga in general.

Yoga can be utilized as an exercise, a method of self-care, and even a form of therapy. Traditionally, yoga was a lifestyle with strict guidelines to follow, which required strong devotion. According to Sharma (2014), yoga was first documented in 200 BC, and it consists of an eight-fold path, known as asthangayoga. In western society today, yoga is typically practiced more casually. Practitioners of yoga may experience improvements in both mental and physical health. Sharma (2014) revealed that practicing yoga causes physiological and psychological changes, which result in decreased levels of stress. In 2014, Yoshihara, Hiramoto, Oka, Kubo, and Sudo studied the effects of a twelve week yoga program and found that levels of somatization, depression, anxiety, and hostility significantly decreased. Ambrosini (2018) listed many of the benefits to the body; strengthens and tones muscles, builds endurance, improves flexibility, and improves balance and posture. According to Morrison (2013), there are specific yoga postures that are beneficial for specific ailments, like postures that improve digestion. These benefits that are listed are only a few of the many. Yoga is versatile, and it can be utilized

in different ways to achieve specific outcomes. Recently, yoga was transformed to fit the needs of individuals with trauma exposure (van der Kolk, B., 2012 & Emerson et al., 2011).

Mensinga (2011), acknowledges the fact that there is a growing body of knowledge on yoga within other professions, and that there is little research on yoga within the social work profession. It is becoming more common for professionals in various fields to incorporate yoga into practice. Recently, TSY has been incorporated into treatment modalities used by counselors, social workers, and medical professionals. TSY is a form of yoga used as an intervention for individuals with traumatic exposure. It is different from traditional yoga because the techniques are specially adapted to address the needs of the individual(s). Macy, Jones, Graham, and Roach (2018) discuss the fact that it is becoming increasingly more common for advocates and clinicians in service settings to add trauma sensitive yoga interventions in their treatment regime. TSY may be recommended for treatment of anxiety symptoms, depression symptoms, and post traumatic stress disorder (Neukirch, N., Reid, S., & Shires, A., 2019; Nolan, 2016; & Macy, Jones, Graham, & Roach, 2018).

Several recent studies have shown the effects of a TSY intervention with different populations. Four different studies revealed reductions in PTSD symptoms after a TSY intervention was used along with another form of therapy (Clark et al., 2014; West et al., 2017; Murphy et al., 2019; Nguyen-Feng et al., 2019). Research by Neukirch et al. (2019) resulted in a reduction of PTSD symptoms, depression, anxiety, and stress for individuals who participated in an eight week TSY class. Three studies examined TSY specifically for women diagnosed with PTSD who survived intimate partner violence (van der Kolk et al., 2014; Price et al., 2017; Rhodes et al., 2016). Participants in each study experienced reductions in their PTSD symptoms. Two studies implemented TSY interventions with youth who suffered from PTSD (Spinazzola et

al., 2011; Cochrane et al., 2019). These studies resulted in significant decreases in PTSD symptoms. There are also two studies that examined TSY interventions for veterans, which proved to be beneficial (McCarthy et al., 2017; Cushing et al., 2018).

Searching the literature for knowledge of yoga in students of social work revealed no results, suggesting there is a need for further research in this area. Instead, this search revealed studies that showed the ways in which knowledge of yoga benefits medical students. Two studies stress the importance of medical students having knowledge of yoga, and even suggest that the concepts of yoga be taught during medical school (Brems et al., 2016; Brems et al., 2015). Yoga is recognized as a form of complementary and alternative medicine, so it is recognized as an intervention in the medical field, and is therefore considered a valid subject for medical students to study. This same reasoning is applicable in the social work setting. Clients who may not respond to traditional treatments, whether it is medication or therapy, need other treatment options available to them. Yoga is a valid alternative because of all the benefits previously discussed.

As the studies show, TSY can be used with diverse populations and in different settings. Social workers are ethically obligated to utilize both best practices with clients and evidence-based practices. Based on the research previously discussed, it can be seen that TSY is an effective intervention for individuals who present with PTSD and symptoms of anxiety and depression. Pascoe and Bauer (2015) noted that not only are current medications used to treat these symptoms ineffective for some, but that they are also associated with negative side effects, so there is an actual need for safer and more effective treatments. Interventions used in therapy, such as EMDR, CBT, and exposure based therapies, aren't always effective either. It is crucial

that social workers have a solid knowledge of yoga and consider TSY as an alternative intervention for clients.

Methodology

The reason this exploratory study was done was to help the researchers understand social work students' attitudes towards yoga and TSY and determine whether or not it would be beneficial to include TSY classes as an option in the Master of Social Work curriculum. The participants were undergraduate and graduate students at Western Michigan University in the College of Health and Human Services. Social work students are being asked about their attitudes towards yoga specifically because they will one day be in a position of providing interventions and referrals for clients. They are the future of the social work profession, so it is important to understand how the relatively new treatment method of TSY will be utilized in the future.

The survey utilized for this research was created online through the website *SurveyMonkey*. It was administered through this website via select instructors who forwarded the survey to students enrolled in their classes. The survey consisted of 22 questions that were multiple choice, open-ended, or closed-ended. Some of the questions asked of participants were “what do you associate with yoga,” “are you currently taking any yoga classes or have you in the past,” “what is your opinion on using yoga as a therapeutic intervention,” and “do you believe there are any cultural or religious considerations or concerns with utilizing yoga as a therapeutic intervention.” Participants could not advance further than the first page of the survey without either giving or denying consent. Participation in this study was voluntary and all information was kept confidential and anonymous.

One of the limitations of this study is the small sample size. Only 105 students participated in the survey. Since there wasn't a large number of participants, the results may not generalize to large populations. Another limitation is the fact that it is unknown how perceptions

towards yoga differ in individuals of different race/culture. Data was analyzed through descriptive statistics and grounded theory methods were used to record themes in the responses that participants submitted.

Results

The survey data provided an in-depth view of opinions toward using yoga in general and opinions towards using yoga as a therapeutic intervention. The results of the survey showed that 13 participants are currently involved in yoga practice, 21 participants have engaged in yoga practice in the past, 26 participants have never practiced yoga, and 2 never have but want to in the future. When participants were asked to write about what they associate with yoga 6 different themes emerged: There were 42 participants whose response revealed an association between yoga and relaxation and/or mindfulness, 32 participants associated yoga with both relaxation and physical fitness/health, 13 participants associated yoga with physical activities, and a small amount of participants associated yoga with either culture (2), an activity of daily living (2), spirituality (2), or stereotypes (4). The majority of participants responded saying they associated yoga with calmness, stretching, mindfulness, and strength. One participant described yoga as a way to “improve physical, mental, and emotional strength, practice meditation and mindfulness, practice spiritual connectedness, and meet members of the community.” Results of the survey showed that social work students have a solid understanding of yoga and a general awareness of TSY.

Only 7 respondents had no prior knowledge of yoga being used as a therapeutic intervention for clients. There were 26 participants who said they don't think there are any cultural or religious concerns associated with using it as an intervention, 32 said there are concerns, and 28 said they were unsure. One of the participants who expressed cultural/religious concerns with the use of TSY said “some conservative Christians that I know do not feel comfortable with yoga,” which is similar to what another student said - “I think the Christian community may have some reservations, but I think there is more openness to this practice.”

Another trend appeared when students were asked to share their opinion on using yoga as an intervention; the majority of all participants either fully supported the use of TSY with clients or supported its use with specific clients. Surprisingly, just 2 respondents stated that they did not support the use of yoga as an intervention. When asked about using TSY with clients, one student's response was "I think it's great - I wish it was used more often and had better accessibility." There were 60 responses claiming support for TSY and 24 stating that it could benefit specific clients. Many of these responses were similar to what one participant said: "I think it is fantastic for healing the entire person and not just the mind."

Discussion

After searching the literature related to social work students' attitudes and knowledge on yoga, it appears as though the current study is the first to conduct a survey to determine attitude and knowledge towards yoga specifically with social work students. Regardless of the setting or population that social workers work with, it is crucial to use evidence based practices and remain aware of current possible treatment modalities. The research previously discussed highlights the fact that TSY has proven to be an effective treatment - one that can even be used with clients who don't respond well to medication or other common forms of treatment. This current study reveals that the majority of current social work students do have positive feelings towards the use of yoga, and especially towards the use of yoga as a therapeutic intervention.

From the results of the survey, it is evident that the majority of social work students support the use of TSY. Although, the results also show that some individuals may associate yoga with religious practice. TSY has been shown to be effective with a wide range of clients, and professionals are even acknowledging the fact that it is becoming more common for professionals, such as social workers and counselors, to utilize TSY as a treatment for their clients (Mensinga, 2011). Many of the students who responded to the survey saying they support the use of yoga as an intervention said they wanted to learn how to do so, but didn't know how to access that information. It is important that social work students are educated on TSY during school so that they are efficient and effective professionals once they begin their careers.

Conclusion

The findings of the current study imply that the majority of social work students have a desire and willingness to either use or learn about using yoga as a therapeutic intervention. The research shows that TSY can be a very effective treatment for clients. These facts together imply that it would be beneficial to include lessons on TSY in the Master of Social Work curriculum. There seems to be an association between yoga and religious practice for some participants. Providing education on TSY could also help in reducing/eliminating this association. It is clear that not all social work students support this approach, but most do, so there should be optional courses available to those who do want to increase their knowledge on this topic. Additionally, TSY could even be a special pathway or concentration area for students to specialize in. It is important that students are at least aware of TSY as a treatment since it is being used more often and there are more clients now who experience trauma.

Appendix: Survey

Western Michigan University and University of Michigan

Schools of Social Work

Principal Investigator: Jessica Gladden

Student Investigator: Alexis Freed

University of Michigan

School of Social Work

Principle Investigator: Yatesha Robinson

You are invited to participate in this research project titled "*Social Work Students' Attitudes Towards Yoga.*"

STUDY SUMMARY: This consent form is part of an informed consent process for a research study and it will provide information that will help you decide whether you want to take part in this study. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose to not answer any question. The purpose of the research is to learn about social work students' attitudes towards yoga as exercise and as a therapeutic approach, and will serve as Alexis Freed's senior thesis project for the requirements of her bachelor's degree in social work. If you take part in the research, you will be asked to take a survey. Your replies will be completely anonymous, so do not put your name anywhere on the survey. Your time in the study will take approximately 10 minutes. Possible risks and costs to you for taking part in the study may be the time that it will

take for you to participate, and potential benefits of taking part may be a greater awareness of differing uses of yoga. Your alternative to taking part in the research study is not to take part in it.

The de-identified (anonymous) information collected for this research may be used by or distributed to investigators for other research without obtaining informed consent from you.

Should you have any questions prior to or during the study, you can contact the primary investigator, Jessica Gladden, LMSW, Ph.D. at (269) 387-3191 or jessica.gladden@wmich.edu. You may also contact the Chair, Institutional Review Board at 269-387-8293 or the Vice President for Research at 269-387-8298 if questions arise during the course of the study.

This consent has been approved by the Western Michigan University Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) on 11/7/19.

Should U of M students have any questions prior to or during the study, you can contact the primary investigator Yatesha Robinson, LMSW at (734) 764-6996 or yatesha@umich.edu. The University of Michigan Institutional Review Board Health Sciences and Behavioral Sciences has determined that this study is exempt from IRB oversight.

Participating in this survey online indicates your consent for use of the answers you supply.

Social Work Students Attitudes Towards Yoga

The purpose of this survey is to help us understand how social work students at Western Michigan University feel about yoga. Your responses will help us in developing activities that students can participate in. Your responses and decision to participate or not has no effect on your standing in the school of social work.

Please start by telling us about yourself:

What is your gender?

How old are you?

_____ 18-20

_____ 20-25

_____ 25-30

_____ 30+

Select your status as a student at Western Michigan University.

_____ Undergraduate pre-social work student

_____ Undergraduate social work student

_____ Graduate social work student

_____ Other

If you are a graduate social work student select your concentration.

_____ Policy, planning, and administration

_____ Clinical

_____ Clinical with Trauma Specialization or TF-CBT

What type of community did you grow up in?

How do you define your race or ethnicity?

Do you exercise? If yes, how do you exercise and how often?

Please write out your answers in this next set of questions to help us understand your opinion and what you know about yoga:

1. What do you associate with yoga?

2. Describe the benefits of yoga.

3. Describe the reasons that an individual might practice yoga.

4. Are you currently taking any yoga classes or have you in the past? If yes, how often do/did you attend?

5. If you have experience with yoga, please write what type/types of classes you have attended.

6. If you do practice yoga or have in the past, what are the reasons why you have chosen to practice yoga?

7. Are there any reasons why you might not engage in yoga practice?

8. Do you believe there are any cultural or religious considerations or concerns with practicing yoga?

Please answer this set of questions to help us understand what you know about using yoga as a therapeutic intervention:

1. Have you ever heard of yoga being used as a therapeutic intervention?

_____ yes

_____ no

2. Why do you think yoga might be used as a therapeutic intervention?

3. What is your opinion on using yoga as a therapeutic intervention?

4. Do you believe there are any cultural or religious considerations or concerns with utilizing yoga as a therapeutic intervention?

Lastly, please answer this final set of questions to help us understand your opinion on yoga classes being available at the College of Health and Human Services:

1. If yoga classes became available at the College of Health and Human Services would you attend?

_____ yes

_____ no

_____ maybe

2. If you selected yes for the previous question, please write out the benefits you would hope to gain through attending a yoga class at CHHS.

3. If you selected no for the previous question, please write the reasons why you would not be interested in attending.

4. If there is any other information you would like to share, please add it here.

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