

*A Study of Professional Helpers' Experience in Self-Care Through Mindfulness
Yoga*

Yu-Fang Hsu, National Kaohsiung Normal University, Taiwan

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Abstract

Over the years, the cultivation of professional helpers has focused on theory instruction and practical training. Few counseling programs directly address the importance of self-care in reducing stress and burnout in their curricula (Newsome, Christopher, Dahlen, & Christopher, 2006). In the process of helping people, however, the helper's personal factors and well-being are interwoven with perplexity and condition of the persons involved, thus making professional help a highly complex and challenging task. Therefore, attention to professional helpers' self-care can't be overemphasized.

The purpose of the study was to explore the professional helpers' experience in self-care through mindfulness yoga. Three professional helpers were interviewed to understand their personal experience. Qualitative analysis was applied to collected data. The results of the analysis are as follow:

1. Mindfulness yoga helped professional helpers experience deep meditation, repairs energy burnout and physical fatigue, and promotes self-awareness and nourishment.
2. The bodily thinking enables helpers to stay in the moment see into their inner selves, and be better at responding to internal and external stress.
3. Yoga practice is less affected by time and space. It enhances an individual's ability to relax, increases the awareness of the helping process, and timely protects the clients and helpers.
4. Mindfulness yoga keeps helping professionals achieve a much more tranquil condition, promotes love and kindness and positive energy, prevents professional burnout, and allows helping work to be longer-lasting.

Keyword: professional helpers, self-care, mindfulness yoga

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Introduction

1. Background and rationale

In the field of professional helping, the developing process and practical training has been highly emphasized for a long time. However, counseling curricula that directly emphasize the importance of self-care to reduce stress and professional burnout remains scanty (Newsome, Christopher, Dahlen, & Christopher, 2006). Years of intensive learning and training guides helpers with professional certificates to enter the job market, however, real challenges might be just about to surface. In the process of professional helping, a helper's personality, experience, attitude, and mental as well as physical well-being interweave with the perplexity and condition of the client, making the given task highly complicated and challenging. Therefore, a helper's mental/physical care and state of being cannot be disregarded.

The scope of helping professionals is very wide. It includes clinical psychologists, counseling psychologists, elderly consultants, school psychologists, social workers, rehabilitation consultants, and psychiatric medical personnel (He, 2007). Challenges that helping professionals might face include professional stress, professional burnout, and vicarious traumatization. For example, the client's suicide, resistance, and hostility, the helper's anxiety, perfectionism, and personal problems, stress such as excessive cases assigned by an organization, low salary, and insufficient professionalism suffocate helping professionals. Inappropriate expression of continuous and repeated emotional stress accumulates for a long time and a continuing search for satisfactory methods to dealing with clients easily leads to professional burnout (He, 2007). Empathy into the client's traumatic issues, on the other hand, leads to vicarious traumatization.

Yoga takes on meanings such as "connection" or "combined" (Boccio, 2003). In the learning process of the helping profession, researchers gradually sense that the helper's mental/physical condition is very important while dealing with the person involved. Because of my friend's introduction, I had the opportunity to come in contact with mindfulness yoga. Mindfulness yoga allows an individual to observe changes that it brings about to the self via posture (asana), breathing, deep relaxation, and meditation. Without judgment or rejection, an individual perceives the process and totally accepts the changes (Douglass, 2011). In other words, mindfulness yoga combines the mindfulness of Buddha yoga with asanas and the breathing of Indian yoga and integrates absorbed perception to perceive the inner feelings and psychical habits of an individual. This facilitates the development of self-understanding and transformation, enhances personal perception, and enables an individual to perceive a revitalized mindset, tranquil, joy, and happiness (Boccio, 2003).

2. Purposes of the study

Based on the afore-mentioned research background and rationale, the current study aims to investigate helping professionals' self-care experience with mindfulness yoga and their experiences with changes in response to helping with stress. It is hoped that professional helpers can better take care of themselves during the help process. So they can improve the quality and lengthen the task of professional help.

Methods

A semi-structured interview in qualitative research was utilized in the current study for data collection, where direct interview with helping professionals was utilized to understand their self-care experience with mindfulness yoga.

1. Participants

The participants in the current study included a medical worker, a community psychologist, and a college counselor. Demographic information of the three participants is listed in Table 1.

Table 1
Demographic information of the participants

No.	Gender	Background	work experience	yoga experience
A	Female	Registered nurse	26 years	11 years
B	Female	Psychologist	20 years	25 years
C	Male	College counselor	10 years	10 years

2. Instruments

(1). Interviewer

The researcher of the current study acted as the interviewer, with the purpose of ensuring the mastery of interviewing techniques and the familiarity with the research structure. The researcher, a Ph.D. student majoring in counseling psychology, has been engaged in counseling for almost ten years. During her working period, the researcher also cared for herself with yoga and followed different yoga instructors. For the past five years, the researcher has fixed on a yoga instructor specializing in both Buddha yoga and Hatha yoga.

(2). Interview protocol

The interview protocol provided the interviewer basic structure and direction for the interview, making sure that the interview process fit the research topics. The researcher first drafted an interview protocol and revised it after the pilot study. The outline of the final interview protocol is as follows:

1. What are the most stressful and challenging aspects in the field of helping? How do you cope with them?
2. How does your contact with yoga influence the experience and changes responding to helping stress?
3. What are the effects of asanas, breathing, and meditation on the perception of inner/outer condition and emotional control of the moment?
4. What's your opinion on the notion that practicing mindfulness yoga enhances the spirit of love and kindness? Provide some previous experiences.

2. Research procedure

(1). The pilot study

After the researcher drafted the outline of the interview, a pilot study was carried out, where a helping professional who also has yoga experience was interviewed. Unsuitable sections observed in the interview process were later revised and became the final interview protocol.

(2). The formal interview

Based on the recommendation from the researcher's yoga instructor and the introduction from the researcher's friends, the research called the candidates and determined the final interviewees. The semi-structured interview was recorded and it lasted 1.5~2 hours for every interviewee.

(3). Data processing

The researcher first transcribed the audio recordings of the interview and then repeatedly read the texts to have a comprehensive understanding. Later, the texts of each transcript were underlined, segmented, and summarized, with which relevant analysis and categorization was conducted to disclose specific themes. To make sure that the researcher did not misunderstand the interviewees' opinions, the descriptive text was then mailed to the interviewees for them to double check the content. The researcher further compared, generalized, re-structured, and grouped relevant specific themes from the descriptive texts, with the aim of generating common themes and a synthesized finding.

Results and discussion

The synthesis of the three interviewees' experience revealed that stress and challenges helping professionals frequently faced were divided into the following three major categories: 1) system instability in the working environment and personnel stress, 2) vicarious traumatization and energy burnout from the clients, and 3) factors related to the helper and their family.

Among the aforementioned challenges, energy burnout resulting from negative energy while working, led the three interviewees to sense the importance of taking good care of themselves. For example, only when Interviewee A was aching all over did she suddenly realize that she should take good care of herself" (A1-03) and start practicing yoga on a weekly basis. Interviewee B self-reported that, "Whenever I am tired, I will go into nature,... be alone, stretch out and meditate... That's the way to revive my energy" (B1-10). Interviewee C stated that, "I usually practice asanas outdoors during holidays. When I am really tired, I will practice body awareness to relax I won't take the job home.... I could easily switch roles with the client if I did" (C2-14).

Yoga practitioners usually regard yoga practice as a good means to stress management and self-care(Kelly & Colquhoun, 2005). The interviewees in the current study stated that the learning of yoga significantly improved their responses to stress, attitude, and mood while helping others. Major changes were as follows:

1. Enhancing personal attentiveness and awareness, and improving emotional control

Through various techniques such as asanas, breathing, deep relaxation, and attentiveness, mindfulness yoga enhances our awareness, make us better understand our inner selves and body experience, helps us perceive the inner/outer condition of the moment, and improves emotional control (Douglass,2011) . Interviewee A expressed that after learning yoga, she has been aware that her body and mind has become softer and she is more able to accept the patients' emotions, saying that, "During work, I will perceive the induced emotion via deep breath, minimize the frustration and stress, and adjust myself to look at bright side of things" (A2-05).

"After my limbs become soft,... I also get a softer attitude,... I am more empathetic and feel the mental/physical discomfort patients suffer, and more able to accept patients' emotions" (A2-07). Interviewee B also mentioned that, "I am more aware of the condition that the patient is in and clearer about mine. I know I need to repair or heal myself when I am exhausted or moody, or show countertransference towards the cases. I need to be self-aware so I know whether or not any negative energy accumulates in me. I pay more attention to the moment (here and now)" (B1-15). Interviewee C pointed out the effects of asanas on himself, including, "the enhancement of attention, and the decrease of getting interfered with" (C1-02), saying that, "I am aware of the feeling that each inhalation and exhalation brings to me.... I am aware of my physical condition, muscular condition.... Gradually, I don't just practice asanas once a day in my daily life.... I practice asanas at any time in my daily life, and such practice enhances my sensibility" (C2-02).

2. Mindfulness yoga enhances an individual's ability to relax, increases the awareness of the helping process, and timely protects the cliets and helpers

In the field of professional helping, different people involved often come with different problems and situations. Therefore, helpers' timely relaxation enhances the awareness of the conditions in the helping process, which benefits both the cases and the helpers. Interviewee A mentioned that, "Higher integration of the body and mind leads to greater physical relaxation and subsequent psychological relaxation." (A2-07). Interviewee B noted that, "The recent case I had was anxious, nervous, had insomnia and had shallow breath. So I started deep breathing, hoping to reach a balanced aura. Helpers are tools. A good aura benefits the cases and promotes self-protection." (B1-19). Interviewee C also mentioned that, "When I am in a state of anxiety or nervousness, my breath is shorter, shallower, and rapider. My muscles become stiffer and my emotion is tenser. The breathing practice enables me to be more aware of what happens to me and my current of well-beings. This is a kind of self-care." (C1-14). Besides, "I am more aware of the relationship and the atmosphere in the interview. I'll know what happens" (C1-08).

3. The practice of mindfulness yoga guards the energy, keeps helping professionals achieve a much more tranquil condition, promotes love and kindness and positive energy.

All of the three interviewees mentioned that the practice of mindfulness yoga kept them in a more relaxed and tranquil condition and enabled them to be more positive about events, thus making their energy to spring up. Interviewee A noted that, "Since I practiced yoga,... I have received mental and physical comfort as well as relaxation. I have experienced pleasurable feelings and gained the energy of positive thinking." (A1-08). "When my meridians and body are stretched out further, it seems to be easier for me to get into meditation." (B1-22). "I feel gratitude, pleasure, and peace. What surfaces when I meditate in yoga is to thank my parents." (B1-24).

Interviewee C mentioned that since he practiced yoga, he has obviously felt that his inner emotions are much more stable, saying that, "It feels like a protection shield. Although I am doing things, everything around me is crystal clear. My feelings are more tranquil. Excited or angry emotion will return to calmness." (C1-03). "I stay in a much tranquil condition, where energy can be kept and negative thoughts will not prevail." (C1-16). "I think I am in a much more tranquil condition. Love springs up and never ends." (C1-18).

Conclusions

Through the interview and comprehension process, the researcher not only better realizes how mindfulness yoga broadens the substance and vision of self-care experience that helping professionals have, but also finds vagueness and confusion existed in previous yoga learning. Such dialogue leads to deeper comprehension. The reflection on personal yoga learning experience enables the researcher to have a better understanding and awareness of the effects of mindfulness yoga on helping professionals' self-care and mental/physical condition. Based on the results of the current study, the conclusions of the study are as follows:

1. All of the three interviewees agree that mindfulness yoga repairs energy burnout and physical fatigue, helps individuals experience deep meditation, and promotes self-awareness and nourishment.
2. The bodily thinking enables helpers to stay in the moment see into their inner selves, and be better at responding to internal and external stress.
3. Yoga practice is less affected by time and space. It enhances an individual's ability to relax, increases the awareness of the helping process, and timely protects the clients and helpers.
4. Mindfulness yoga keeps helping professionals achieve a much more tranquil condition, promotes love and kindness and positive energy, prevents professional burnout, and allows helping work to be longer-lasting.

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Contact email: yu890101@gmail.com