

Yoga Infused Psychotherapy for Drug Abuse  
and other Addictive Behaviors:  
“Namaste Sober”

By:

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Despite the existence of ample information on genetic, social, and environmental predispositions to drug use and addictive behaviors, empirical evidence and recent studies demonstrate that addictive behaviors can be unlearned, and replaced with positive behaviors and thinking. Indeed, a 2015 study conducted by Gabriele Caselli and Marcantonio M. Spada entitled *Desire thinking; What is it and What Drives it*, demonstrated that behavior is a result of learned patterns that are set in the neural path, and through the repetition of movements, images and other stimuli relating to the senses, addictive behaviors can be forever unlearned and replaced with healthy ones (Spada, Caselli, 2011).<sup>1</sup>

Yoga Infused Psychotherapy provides a means to replace addictive thinking and behaviors with physical movement and positive thinking. Through the use of Yoga Infused Psychotherapy, patients learn a new neural path of wellness by repeating the Asanas (postures) of yoga, learning Pranayama (breath work), practicing meditation and philosophy, integrating socially with healthy people, and positively restructuring thought patterns. As a result, the individual can find true inner peace, and embrace a full-life approach to living well.

“AA” arguably provides only a temporary sense of belonging through the attendance of AA meetings, and it unfortunately leaves many attendees feeling different, labeled, and separate from the rest of society. This feeling of separateness, in spite of the efforts to maintain

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<sup>1</sup>Caselli, G., & Spada, M. M. (January 01, 2015). Desire thinking: what is it and what drives it?. *Addictive Behaviors*, 44, 71-9.

sobriety, can trigger the flight/fight response and lead to chronic relapse to the alcohol/drug. Yoga Infused Psychotherapy, however, provides a permanent sense of belonging to society as a whole, replaces the unhealthy behavior with the Asanas (sequences of poses), Pranayama and meditation, and restructures unhealthy thoughts with yogic philosophy and other cognitive restructuring tools. At least one recent study has concluded that “Although conventional methods for relapse prevention can be somewhat successful, complementary therapies like yoga and mindfulness meditation are increasingly recognized for their ability to enhance recovery from addiction, in part by targeting stress-related cognitions, emotions, and behavioral urges such as craving” (Khanna, Greeson, 2013)<sup>2</sup> (Dakwar, Levin, 2009).<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, the use of Yoga Infused Psychotherapy can provide a more permanent and socially acceptable instrument to transition the individual through the challenges in life in a healthy way.

Yoga Infused Psychotherapy integrates mindful breathing (Pranayama), body awareness (Asanas/poses of yoga), yogic philosophy (Yama and Niyama- principles of living well), and conscious relaxation (meditation), with well-established cognitive restructuring tools. It reduces stress at a neurological level, activates the parasympathetic nervous system, and increases motivation for change and learning, while creating a daily discipline and structured routine. Most importantly, Yoga Infused Psychotherapy replaces unhealthy behaviors and integrates new healthy perspectives and thinking into daily life as the individual integrates back into a healthy social world. It simultaneously targets the role of the brain, the body, the spirit, the social self, and the mind. This is of paramount importance because a large number of people who battle with addiction have the underlying issues of stress and anxiety, which prevent

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<sup>2</sup>Khanna, S., & Greeson, J. M. (January 01, 2013). A narrative review of yoga and mindfulness as complementary therapies for addiction. *Complementary Therapies in Medicine*, 21, 3, 244-52.

<sup>3</sup> E. Dakwar, & F.R. Levin (2009) The emerging role of meditation in addressing psychiatric illness, with a focus on substance use disorders *Harvard Review of Psychiatry*, 17(4), 254–267.

the healing of addictive behaviors. Numerous existing studies have examined the relationship between anxiety, stress, PTSD, and substance abuse, and have concluded that people with addictions have higher incidences of these disorders when compared with the general population (Courtois, 1988; Herman, 1992;<sup>4</sup> Pekala, Kumar, Maurer, Elliott-Carter, & Moon, 2009;<sup>5</sup> Ross, 1989).<sup>6</sup> In their longitudinal study, Gil-Rivas, Prause, and Grella (2009) found that “lifetime trauma exposure, along with symptoms of depression and anxiety, was associated with an increased likelihood of substance use 6 to 12 months following residential substance abuse treatment.” In addition, “[O]ne of the reasons meditation is considered to be an effective component of addiction treatment is because it has been shown to decrease these common symptoms of depression and anxiety” (S. L. Shapiro, Schwartz, & Bonner, 1998;<sup>7</sup> Toneatto & Nguyen, 2007).<sup>8</sup> If the underlying causes of addiction, such as depression and stress, which are vastly present in most subjects who battle with addiction, are not addressed, then the likelihood of relapse is more than doubled.

Studies have already demonstrated the scientifically significant effects of yoga on the brain. In a study conducted by Harvard neuroscientist Sara Lazar at Massachusetts General

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<sup>4</sup> Herman, J. (1992). *Trauma and recovery*. New York, N.Y.: BasicBooks.

<sup>5</sup> Pekala, R., Kumar, V., Maurer, R., Elliott-Carter, N., & Moon, E. (2009). Self-esteem and its relationship to serenity and anger/impulsivity in an alcohol and other drug-dependent population: Implications for treatment. *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly*, 27, 94–112.

<sup>6</sup> Ross, A., Friedmann, E., Thomas, S., & Bevens, M. (September 18, 2012). Frequency of yoga practice predicts health: Results of a national survey of yoga practitioners. *Evidence-based Complementary and Alternative Medicine*, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Shapiro, S. L., Schwartz, G., & Bonner, G. (1998). The effects of mindfulness-based stress reduction on medical and pre-medical students. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 21, 581–599.

<sup>8</sup> Toneatto, T., & Nguyen, L. (2007). Does mindfulness meditation improve anxiety and mood symptoms? A review of the controlled research. *La Revue Canadienne de Psychiatrie*, 52, 260–266.

Hospital and Harvard Medical School, important changes were found to take place in the brain after completing a 30-day experiment on yoga and meditation. Lazar found that each subject showed a significant change in five parts of the brain. The changes occurred in (i) the posterior cingulate, the part of the brain involved in mind wandering, and self-relevance; (ii) the left hippocampus, a part designated for learning assistance and memory and cognition; (iii) the temporo parietal junction (TPJ), associated with empathy and compassion; and (iv) the Pons, which are found in the brain stem and produce a lot of regulatory neurotransmitters. The fifth part of the brain which showed differences from people who never meditated or practiced yoga, was the amygdale, which is a part of the brain that controls the “fight or flight” response and is responsible for fear and stress in general. The amygdale shrunk in size in subjects after receiving yoga treatment, which shows that the stress levels of people who do yoga are much lower than those of people who do not (Lazar, 2015).<sup>9</sup>

Yoga treatment has already been used in other disciplines to cure and lessen symptoms of other problems/sicknesses. For example, Pierre Philippot, François Nef, Lucy Clauw, Marie de Romrée and Zindel Segal, conducted a study in 2012 entitled “*A Randomized Controlled Trial of Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Treating Tinnitus,*” published in *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy*, where they used meditation and yoga practices to determine if yoga can cure Tinnitus, a psychological disorder where people hear imaginary sounds. In the experiment, a group of thirty patients with Tinnitus were treated with yoga and mindfulness based practices. At the end of the study, the results showed a significant improvement in not only the symptoms of Tinnitus, but also in the acceptance and stress level of the patients when compared to the levels before they started the training.<sup>10</sup> Another study conducted by the

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<sup>9</sup> Schulte, B. (2015, May 26). Harvard neuroscientist: Meditation not only reduces stress, here’s how it changes your brain. Retrieved June 29, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Philippot, P., Nef, F., Clauw, L., Romrée, M., & Segal, Z. (September 01, 2012). A Randomized Controlled Trial of Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Treating Tinnitus. *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy*, 19, 5, 411-419.

Department of Physiology & Medicine, University of Medical Sciences & Guru Teg Bahadur Hospital Delhi, India, was performed on patients with diabetes, to determine the results of using Pranayamas and yoga-Asanas on the brain and cognitive functions on patients with Type II Diabetes. All subjects had a specific kind of diabetes which tended to slow down cognitive responses, and the yoga therapy experiment was a project to determine if reversal of brain function degeneration was possible. The variable group was taught Pranayama and yoga-Asana by a certified yoga instructor daily for 45 days. The findings demonstrated that “Type II diabetes with yoga asanas and pranayamas had significant reduction in hyperglycemia with decrease in oral hypoglycémie drugs for maintenance of normoglycemia in response to yoga therapy. Various yoga-asanas may be directly rejuvenating/regenerating cells of pancreas as a result of which there may be increase in utilization and metabolism of glucose in the peripheral tissues, liver and adipose tissues through enzymatic process” (Kyizom, Singh, Tandon, Kumar, 2008).<sup>11</sup>

When paired along with traditional western treatment, yoga has vast potential to cure addictions entirely. In 2013, the authors of a book entitled *Complementary Therapies in Medicine*, Surbhi Khanna and Jeffrey M. Greeson noted, “A systematic review conducted in 2009 concluded that although there was promising preliminary evidence for the safety and clinical efficacy of mindfulness meditation training for substance use disorders, conclusive data were lacking due to poor trial quality and other methodological concerns like small sample sizes” (Khanna, Greeson, 2013).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Kyizom, T., Singh, S., Singh, K. P., Tandon, O. P., & Kumar, R. (2010). Effect of pranayama & yoga-asana on cognitive brain functions in type 2 diabetes-P3 event related evoked potential (ERP). *Indian Journal Of Medical Research*, 131(5), 636-640.

<sup>12</sup> Khanna, S., & Greeson, J. M. (January 01, 2013). A narrative review of yoga and mindfulness as complementary therapies for addiction. *Complementary Therapies in Medicine*, 21, 3, 244-52.

The current barriers of addiction research include, but are not limited to, the pharmaceutical industry's reluctance to develop new medications, and physicians' failures to address addiction disorders in their practices. These obstacles support the argument in favor of researching yoga psychotherapy for addiction. Yoga Infused Psychotherapy provides an inexpensive and benign alternative to the use of pharmaceuticals. In addition, the idea of yoga psychotherapy treatment is attractive to patients who do not fully believe they have an addiction problem, and it also appeals to those patients who do not have the financial means for traditional treatment. Consistent with the necessary goals of preventing relapse and efficient use of limited time and money, Yoga Infused Psychotherapy can begin inside of a treatment center and then allow patients to continue its practices and its principles alike, in the vicinity of their own homes.

In Sanskrit, the word Yoga means union. Yoga Infused Psychotherapy will also allow people to reconnect with friends, with family and with society. We live in a culture that drives success through fast results and hard work, which has led to extraordinary inventions and advancements in science and technology. But these advances have not come without consequence. The unconscious drive to "have more," and "to outperform," has resulted in people feeling "not good enough, fast enough, big enough, or rich enough" thus driving addictive behavior in order to feel good, or not feel bad. The rise in addiction behaviors has destroyed relationships, increased legal problems, diminished health, and caused financial ruin and spiritual demise in our loved ones. AA and current addiction therapy efforts leave the individual feeling separate like an outcast (with labels like "alcoholic" and "in recovery") and in a Western "power driven" society, these unconscious embedded negative labels result in chronic relapse. Yoga Infused Psychotherapy heals the mind, the body, the social self, and the spirit by undoing old negative neural paths forever. It creates a sense of wholeness and belonging, while teaching balanced living skills and the skills to cope with the pressures of Western culture, breaking the cycle that leads to relapse and igniting the way to living well. Yoga Infused

Psychotherapy will give tomorrow's generation the will to thrive in life and fully integrate in society with a sound mind and strong body. Namaste.