

- Exercise

## The power and relevance of yoga during a pandemic

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The relevance of yoga — amid the Covid-19 pandemic, which has upended the lives and livelihoods of millions of people around the world — has increased substantially. As we celebrate the seventh International Yoga Day on June 21, this year especially, we need to understand how its healing touch can improve our physical well-being.

Yoga, which originated in India and has been part of the Indian civilisation for millennia, has been a practice that aligns our mind, body and spirit, and enhances mental clarity. It is an effective tool to reduce stress and improve motor functions, which, in turn, helps keep various health problems at bay.

The pandemic has led to a substantial loss of human lives and has created unprecedented challenges for the public health system, not just in India, but across the world. The fear of this ever-mutating virus has kept many of us indoors. This forced confinement has increased the stress on our bodies and minds.

This public health crisis has brought to the fore the importance of strengthening our immune systems. For this, we need to adopt a healthy lifestyle. Studies suggest that yoga contributes to improving the immune system since it is a combination of physical exercise, controlled breathing and mental concentration — all of which are known to have health benefits. Among the many yoga asanas, shavasana and sasakasana reduce stress which, many practitioners believe, increases the efficiency of the immune system. Breathing techniques like pranayam improve the functioning of the respiratory system. Trikonasana improves blood circulation which benefits all our organs.

Several medical practitioners and experts have suggested that those suffering from mild symptoms of Covid-19 and who have been advised to isolate at home, could benefit from practising yoga asanas and breathing exercises, albeit with caution.

As the virus directly affects the lungs, it is imperative to strengthen the respiratory system. Practising yoga is also advised to those who have recovered from the virus. Yogic breathing, beginner-level yoga asanas and meditation bring mental peace, a vital factor in the recovery process for those who have had the traumatic experience of contracting Covid-19. Apart from these, modified breathing techniques and yoga poses recommended by experts can help reduce fatigue and slowly restore energy levels among Covid-19 patients who are on the mend.

Children can also benefit from yoga. As many are facing mental stress due to isolation and anxiety in an unpredictable school year, yoga can be a useful coping method. Hence, I appeal to all the parents and teachers to motivate young children to practice yoga in their daily lives. Being a country with the largest population of young people, we must make significant efforts to help them navigate through the adverse effects of the pandemic-induced disruption.

Parents and teachers can and should motivate children to practise yoga. This will help improve physical flexibility and enhance concentration in these challenging times.

Our way of life has changed, most likely, forever. Across the world, yoga has come to be recognised as an effective tool in improving health, which, in turn, helps maintain an all-important work-life balance. Today, yoga has gained an enormous following globally and could well be considered one of the pillars of India's soft power.

In the absence of Covid-19, we could have been out in parks and public places celebrating this ancient practice. But we will have to maintain safety protocols and stay indoors.

The virus has been debilitating for so many of us. But on this Yoga Day, let us grab our mats and lift our spirits with yoga. We need the peace and calm that yoga brings into our lives. And let us hope that by next Yoga Day, the virus will be well and truly behind us.