

Yoga Therapy - Physical Therapy | A Difference in Perspective

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Yoga therapy and physical therapy are, among some health professionals, synonymous. Others maintain that physical therapy and yoga as a therapeutic intervention differ diametrically. The lack of consensus is attributable to the fact that each therapy is grounded in an intrinsic difference in perspective.

Part vs. Person

Let us look at physical therapy and yoga therapy from a perspective of addressing pain.

Pain is defined as *physical suffering associated with a bodily disorder (such as a disease or injury) and accompanied by mental or emotional distress. Pain, in its simplest form, is a warning mechanism that helps protect an organism by influencing it to withdraw from harmful stimuli. In its more complex form, such as in the case of a chronic condition accompanied by depression or anxiety, it can be difficult to isolate and treat.*

Isolate and treat... Physical therapy can be defined within these words in that the therapeutic intervention is purely physical, and finite in scope. It is effective in targeting localized, physical injury or imbalance. Primary emphasis is placed on physical strengthening and exercise, often with the addition of specialized equipment.

If we add the words *complex, chronic, depression* and *anxiety* from the definition of pain, we have the end-result of it [pain] *can be difficult to isolate and treat* — What then?

Yoga does, indeed, have a physical aspect, more often seen in larger class settings where emphasis is placed on the active or “doing” aspect of yoga. This is sometimes taken to excess, and is an unfortunate product of the mentality “more is better.” In contrast, **one-to-one yoga therapy sessions** and specialized small-group yoga therapy classes emphasize “less is more,” drawing client/patient awareness to how the body and mind respond to changes in their actions, breathing, or mental state. In essence, a deamplification of the ‘do’ aspect occurs during yoga therapy, providing the opportunity for the client or patient to be calm, aware, at ease and—if possible—pain free during yoga therapy. Underlying all forms of yoga is the understanding that a human being is considerably more than the physical body. There is an overall soft-focus on the entire person rather than a single, localized focal point such as a joint, a muscle, a syndrome.

Putting Things in Perspective

Modern medical science uses empirical evidence—a source of knowledge acquired by means of observation or experimentation—upon which to base a hypothesis, and ultimately to prove its validity or lack thereof. Yoga, which is a component of traditional Indian medicine (Ayurveda, meaning the science/study of life) could be said to be one of the oldest and most rigorously tested sources of knowledge as it is over 2,500 years old. Physical therapy as a therapeutic intervention is a newcomer to the field of therapy having come into existence in 1917 following WW1, and the APTA (American Physical Therapy Association) was formed in 1921—a century ago.

Yoga as a therapy is a broad, dynamic field of therapy. **C-IAYT Yoga Therapists** are often certified or licensed in other health professions or hold degrees in yoga therapy or medicine. Current or former physical therapists, physicians, heart surgeons, psychologists, occupational therapists, nurses and osteopaths are but some of the health professionals who comprise a significant portion of the membership of IAYT, the International Association of Yoga Therapists. It is rather noteworthy that the brunt of these individuals have either moved to the profession of yoga therapy, or have integrated it within their health or medical practice: many of them turned to yoga because they found it to be the sole form of therapy which helped them during a life crisis, in recovering after injury, or managing chronic pain.

In any therapeutic modality the effects and benefits are dependent on appropriate and qualitative treatment, a knowledgeable and compassionate practitioner, and a certain level of willingness and initiative on the part of the patient / client. Why then the tendency to subvert yoga therapy in favor of more allopathic modalities, or to create an amalgam between yoga therapy and physical therapy? Quite simply, a lack of awareness and knowledge of the scope of yoga and yoga therapy.