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Opinion

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Incorporation of Yoga into Counselor Education Programming

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Abstract

An experienced counselor educator and certified yoga instructor wondered if yoga when infused into the training of master's level counseling students would have positive benefits to students and if this type of intervention had been attempted before. A review of the professional counseling literature supported positive outcomes from infusing yoga into counselor education programming. In addition, three yoga interventions had been developed and implemented to infuse yoga into the training of future counselors. Information on the benefits of yoga for counselors-in-training and specific yoga programs designed and implemented for counselors-in-training will be shared.

Keywords: Yoga; Counseling; Counselor-in-Training; Counselor Education Programming

Abbreviation: PTSD-Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

Introduction

As a counselor educator (i.e., teaching masters level counseling students) for over twelve years and a relatively newly minted certified yoga instructor; I wondered if there was a way to marry the two in order to provide more effective self-care instruction for the counselors-in-training in my courses. In thinking about this prospect, I had two questions; (1) Would the addition of yoga practice/breathing increase the self-care practices of counselors-in-training? [1-4] and (2) What (if anything) had been done previously to infuse yoga into counselor training programs? [5-10]. In order to answer these questions, I headed to the professional literature and was pleasantly surprised to research findings supported positive outcomes from infusing yoga into higher education and even found several programs developed and implemented to meet this need.

Discussion

The professional counseling literature yielded four articles that supported the positive impact on self-care practices with the

addition of yoga for counselors-in-training, practicing counselors, and more generally for students in higher education [1-4]. Three specific yoga programs were outlined in the professional counseling literature which offer a number of suggestions for the infusion of yoga into counselor training programs. The information presented below while specific to the counseling profession could most likely be incorporated into the training of other helping professionals (e.g., physical therapists, nurses, social workers etc.)

Using Yoga to Increase Self-Care Practices

A mindfulness practice that included yoga and yogic breathing was provided to counselors and counselors-in-training in a study by [1]. The program was found to decrease burnout and compassion fatigue among practicing counselors. For counselors-in-training, the program was found to improve retention in graduate studies and more effective client care. Yoga was found to increase the self-care practices of both counselors and counselors-in-training. The



authors suggested that the mindfulness program including aspects of yoga could be offered to practicing counselors as continuing education necessary for licensure renewal and infused into counselor training programs. In another study, a yoga program offered to undergraduate students was met with positive feedback. The program was shown to help students effectively decrease their self-perceived and self-reported stress levels and increase self-care practices [2].

Moving past the classroom, a trauma-informed yoga intervention was developed and implemented to help support counselors and community members in California as a reaction to the devastating wildfires of 2017 and 2019. The mind-body yoga program and a psychological recovery skills workshop were well received by counselors and the community as a whole. One participant commented, "Yoga has been so healing to my recovery, issues of grief, loss, and PTSD" [3]. Another group of researchers took the infusion of yogic breathing past the exclusive use with counselors and counselors-in-training to encourage counselors to use and teach yogic breathing techniques to clients to treat anxiety, depression, and PTSD [4].

Programs that Infuse Yoga into Counselor Training

An optional yoga program was developed for counselors-in-training in a master's level counseling program [5]. Qualitative data were collected and were categorized into three themes: structure/support, present-centered, and personal/professional benefits. The results of the study support that counseling students find the optional inclusion of yoga in their counseling training program to be beneficial [5]. In addition, the author provided the yoga instruction to students demonstrating that it is possible for professors to offer students optional yoga infusion in their counseling training if properly trained and competent in yoga instruction.

Luna Yoga is a yoga program specifically designed for female counselors and counselors-in-training to increase self-care behaviors [6]. As noted by the researchers, self-care is an ethical mandate set forth by the American Counseling Association (ACA) to prevent professional impairment [6]. In addition, yoga can increase self and other awareness as well as boost well-being in practicing counselors. For counselors-in-training yoga has been shown to reduce stress and increase the counselor's therapeutic presence in counseling sessions. The Luna Yoga program was created to design and measure five wellness factors including the creative, coping, social, essential, and physical self. The authors describe how each of these aspects of self is addressed and measured in the study. While the quantitative data did not show an improvement in four of the wellness factors, a statically significant result was found for the social self. Anecdotal information from yoga instructors and participants supported the increase in the social self as well as overall well-being. One noted limitation of the study was the self-selected participation in the Luna Yoga program which may have

drawn counselors and counselors-in-training who already had an interest in yoga as a means of increasing well-being [6].

Finally, a professor interested in the teaching of self-care to counselors-in-training, designed a 3-credit elective course titled "Mind/Body Medicine and the Art of Self-Care" [7]. Self-care is defined as self-initiated behaviors to promote health and overall well-being. The course was based on the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn. Students participated in a course twice a week and committed to practicing for a minimum of 45 minutes at least four days per week. Data were collected via focus groups [7]. Overall, students found the course helpful in their personal and professional growth.

Other researchers continued to study the course by conducting additional offerings of the course and collecting data from participant focus groups [8]. The findings were similar to the initial findings with the addition of students expressing that they had intentions of incorporating mindfulness practices into their future work as a counselor. Several years later, others continued to explore the impact of the "Mind/Body Medicine and the Art of Self-Care" elective course offered at a university in Montana for over ten years [9]. They found that the students in the courses reported increased awareness and acceptance of self and others. In addition, improvements were noted in therapeutic presence and the person-centered characteristics of acceptance, genuineness, and empathy. The continued challenge was to find a suitable space and professors trained and competent in yoga instruction [9].

Finally, a student provided a perspective as a participant in the course. She shared her personal reaction to some of the exercises including an experiment utilizing a raisin. Overall, the student found the course helped her to be more fully present in her counseling sessions and to better tolerate her internal stress and that of clients. The "Mind/Body Medicine and the Art of Self-Care" elective course provided the most research from a number of different researchers and perspectives [5-10].

Conclusion

According to the professional counseling literature, the infusion of yoga into counselor training programs has a number of immediate benefits for counseling students and eventually for practicing counselors. Specifically, yoga has been demonstrated to improve self-care practices and reduce stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue. Fortunately, several yoga interventions have been developed and implemented to incorporate yoga into master's level counselor education programs. The feedback for all programs was overall positive and no negative implications were reported. These findings have renewed my interest in incorporating yoga into my courses to train future counselors. I have reached out to the creators of the yoga programs presented here to gather information about how to incorporate yoga into counselor education. I hope to hear back soon and be able to share any results of my efforts to infuse yoga practices into my courses in the near future.

Acknowledgment

None.

Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

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