



“The only man on the mat”: yoga as a therapeutic pathway for men’s mental health

Shane Mclver, Melissa O’Shea, Bo Nixon, Zac Seidler & Subhadra Evans

To cite this article: Shane Mclver, Melissa O’Shea, Bo Nixon, Zac Seidler & Subhadra Evans (2022): “The only man on the mat”: yoga as a therapeutic pathway for men’s mental health, Australian Psychologist, DOI: [10.1080/00050067.2022.2093624](https://doi.org/10.1080/00050067.2022.2093624)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00050067.2022.2093624>



Published online: 30 Jun 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 8



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

“The only man on the mat”: yoga as a therapeutic pathway for men’s mental health

Shane Mclver ^{a*}, Melissa O’Shea ^{a*}, Bo Nixon^a, Zac Seidler ^b and Subhadra Evans ^a

^aFaculty of Health, Deakin University, Burwood, Australia; ^bCentre for Youth Mental Health, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

ABSTRACT

Objective: Men’s engagement in mental health treatment significantly lags behind that of women, despite prevalence rates highlighting that poor mental health is a public health issue shared equally between them. As such, examination of complementary and alternative mental health approaches that might support men’s mental health is crucial. The aim of this study was to explore the benefits and barriers associated with ongoing yoga practice among men currently attending community-based yoga classes, with an emphasis on identifying mental health outcomes.

Method: Qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with 14 men practicing yoga and analysed using thematic analysis.

Results: Themes related to six main aspects, including: a) being the only man in a yoga class, b) perceiving deeper elements of the practice and c) yoga and healthy ageing.

Conclusions: Findings from this study extend upon existing research supporting lifestyle interventions as an efficacious mental health treatment approach and provide support for initiatives enabling greater access to yoga among men. Factors influencing adoption and ongoing engagement are discussed accordingly.

KEY POINTS

What is already known about this topic:

- (1) Men experience substantial rates of mental illness, yet significant barriers remain for accessing and engaging with treatment options.
- (2) As a lifestyle intervention with established benefits, yoga is a promising approach for supporting men’s mental health.
- (3) The barriers and enablers to men adopting and maintaining a yoga practice are not well understood.

What this topic adds:

- (1) Benefits of combining improved flexibility and increasing mindfulness improved mental health in specific ways.
- (2) Ongoing outcomes also led to self-discovery, serving as further motivation for maintaining regular practice.
- (3) Participants noted yoga’s capacity to improve mental and physical health across the lifespan.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 23 December 2021
Accepted 17 June 2022

KEYWORDS

Men; yoga; anxiety; depression; mental health

Introduction

One in three Australian men will experience a mental illness in their lifetime (Williams et al., 2016). A recent longitudinal Australian study recruiting almost 16,000 men and boys ranging in age from 10 to 55 years identified up to 25% had experienced a diagnosed mental health disorder in their lifetime (Bandara et al., 2021), highlighting mental illness among this population as a significant public health issue. Despite these figures, men remain significantly less likely than women to seek

support by accessing mental health services (Affleck et al., 2018). A rigid conformity to traditional ideals of masculinity including self-reliance, stoicism, and emotional restrictiveness, are often cited for explaining some men’s resistance to mental health help-seeking (Bilsker et al., 2018; Seidler et al., 2016; Wong et al., 2017).

Many men also maintain negative attitudes towards psychotherapeutic treatment (Levant et al., 2011), which they commonly regard as anti-masculine, foreign, uncomfortable, and unappealing (Berger et al.,

2013; Englar-carlson & Kiselica, 2013; Seidler, Rice, Ogrodniczuk et al., 2018). Men's drop-out rates from mental health services can be as high as 44%, often due to frustrations associated with a perceived lack of progress (Seidler et al., 2021), or dissatisfaction with previous therapy experiences (Seidler et al., 2020).

Given men's low rates of engagement in current mental health treatments, it is of interest to examine what elements, if any, of current interventions are deemed more acceptable or suitable to them. For example, it has been suggested interventions employing action-oriented models of treatment with a focus on tangible and individualised goals that build men's sense of empowerment are recommended over those that focus on pure enquiry and talk-based approaches, even within cognitive traditions such as Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) (Seidler, Rice, Oliffe et al., 2018). As such, therapies with a behavioural focus tend to be particularly useful for men (Brooks, 2010), including behavioural activation and physical exercise (Mahalik & Rochlen, 2006).

Focusing on physical health might also serve to destigmatise mental health approaches and provide a gateway for men to engage in a broader array of mental health treatments (Drew et al., 2020). In addition to the known benefits of physical exercise for various mental health conditions, including anxiety (Jayakody et al., 2014; Stonerock et al., 2015) and depression (Balchin et al., 2016; Josefsson et al., 2014; Schuch et al., 2016), an expansion of our understanding of how men engage with physical exercise options for mental health is timely.

Yoga as a potential treatment pathway

One holistic health practice that appears to improve physical and mental health outcomes, but which remains largely under-researched with men, is yoga. Yoga is an ancient and spiritual practice, including (but not limited to) breathing exercises, physical postures, and meditation (Iyengar, 1966). Positive outcomes for yoga interventions have been identified for mental health conditions such as depression (Cramer, Anheyer et al., 2017; Cramer, Sibbritt et al., 2017) and anxiety (Cramer et al., 2018).

Australian men are generally under-represented in yoga classes and are estimated to represent less than 20% of total participants (Morgan, 2016). In a recent study of men who do not practice yoga, researchers identified that a mix of gender related perceptions and pressures represented potential barriers to increased yoga participation among men, with many men identifying yoga as a feminine practice out of step with traditional ideals of Australian masculinity (Cagas et al.,

2021). In contrast to these perceptions, as an accessible and low impact form of exercise that builds strength and flexibility, along with greater levels of awareness and self-empowerment (Büssing et al., 2012; Morgan, 2016; Zhang, 2014), yoga appears to harness many of the factors that enhance men's engagement with mental health interventions while also affording a range of mental health benefits.

Notably, there is limited evidence related to how men experience yoga related to mental health, or the ways yoga might ameliorate men's mental health symptoms. Despite generally positive findings, most of this work has been limited by examining discrete sub-groups such as military veterans (Justice & Brems, 2019) and incarcerated men (Bartels et al., 2019), as well as gathering the perspectives of these men on relatively short yoga interventions rather than longer-term engagement with the practice. In a review of qualitative findings arising from 11 studies that have explored the experience of yoga as a mental health treatment approach, most included few or no men as participants and the relative absence of men was noted (Capon et al., 2019). A single study included mainly men, specifically veterans suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Cushing et al., 2018). Findings from this qualitative enquiry identified that men found yoga provided considerable mental health benefits including an increased awareness of their bodies, better social connection, and an experience of mental stillness.

Therefore, in light of previous and current research, a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of men engaged in yoga for mental health is useful. Accordingly, this qualitative study aimed to describe the experiences of men participating in yoga, explore how yoga influences their mental health, and to identify the enablers and barriers experienced by men in commencing and maintaining a yoga practice. As such, the study sought to further our understanding of yoga alongside other lifestyle interventions as a possible complementary or adjunct mental health treatment for men and what practical considerations exist to support improved uptake of yoga among men.

Method

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants from three hatha yoga schools providing yoga classes for men within regional Victoria once ethics was obtained from the university's ethics committee

(HEAG-H 162). Eligibility was open to all men practicing yoga at these schools, regardless of experience level, aged 18 years and above. Advertisements, plain language statement and consent forms explaining the study were provided to each studio for men practicing yoga to review, and all participants provided informed consent prior to participation. Recruitment information noted that the study was aimed at developing a more detailed understanding of the perspectives and experiences of yoga for men with a focus on how yoga influences mental health. No incentives were offered for participation, other than knowing participant reflections could potentially contribute to designing and implementing future yoga-based interventions that benefit other men. A total of 14 participants were subsequently included in the study, with ages ranging from 26 to 77 ($M = 58.71$, $SD = 15.33$). Yoga practice experience among participants ranged from one to 25 years ($M = 11.28$, $SD = 7.53$).

Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were conducted up to one hour. Examples of questions included: "Were there any mental health reasons, such as previous symptoms of stress, anxiety or depression, that influenced your decision to take up yoga?", "What have been the most significant changes experienced over time regarding mental health that you would directly attribute to your yoga practice?", and "What made those changes significant to you?".

Interviews were conducted, audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and de-identified by a mature-age male psychology graduate who was guided and mentored by the research team. Before analysis commenced, participants were invited to review their transcript as a form of respondent validation to ensure an accurate reflection of their perspectives had been gathered and, if necessary, to provide any clarification. Once consulted, all agreed on correct representation.

Data analysis

This study drew on a qualitative description design (Sandelowski, 2000) using interviews to provide the raw data. Interviews were conducted solely by one of the researchers (BN). Interview responses were transcribed and subsequently analysed using a systematic methodology, as outlined through guidelines for reflexive thematic analysis of qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). As a form of inter-rater reliability, discussions were undertaken between authors throughout data collection and analysis. Six phases of coding

were undertaken, including data familiarisation and forming initial codes, followed by searching for, reviewing, defining and naming themes. The coding process was undertaken by author BN with the assistance of author MO, who double coded all transcripts. Any coding inconsistencies were discussed and agreed upon between these two authors. Codes were then categorised into broad themes in consultation between the two authors.

Two additional authors (SE and SM) then each reviewed a set of randomly allocated interview transcripts. Themes and sub-themes were further refined based on consultation. Although Braun and Clarke (2022) suggest consensus is not essential, group consensus was achieved among the authors, nonetheless.

Results

Six key themes were identified which tended to charter the course of the participant's experience of yoga over time, from beginning their yoga journey and feeling a sense of isolation as the only man on the mat, perceiving deeper elements of self-discovery and finally, experiencing yoga as a positive pathway for healthy ageing. Links to the mental health factors associated with each theme and sub-theme emerged as analysis progressed.

Isolation versus inclusion: when you're the only man on the mat

Participants' introduction to yoga typically involved initial encouragement from others, including partners and family members with an existing practice, or the recommendation of a health professional. One participant described persistence from his daughters, saying "... oh Dad, you would really enjoy it [yoga] and it would keep you mobile" (P05, age 72). Another referred to the psychologist treating his anxiety at the time saying, "yoga would be a very good thing for you ... it would settle you down ... give it a go" (P08, age 64). Male-identifying athletes who were known to practice yoga also inspired participation, such as professional surfers, motocross riders, cricketers, and football players.

Participants commonly described commencing formal yoga classes as "the only man on the mat" (P15, age 26) and initial feelings of intimidation and awkwardness in studios that consisted of "nearly 100% women" (P04, age 70). Perceptions of yoga studios as women's cultural spaces reflected a deterrent for several participants in pursuing a regular practice, with one participant reporting initially feeling "extremely aware ... of being the only bloke" (P05, age 72) in class and another

identifying the gender disparity as a *“barrier to get other men into”* (P09, age 70) practicing yoga. So too was a perception that yoga was naturally more suitable for women’s bodies and thus less accessible to them: *“It was a little intimidating the fact that there were a lot of people there, like young girls, super flexible and they all seemed to know what they were doing”* (P15, age 26).

However, the limiting perceptions of yoga spaces as women’s spaces were less prominent for younger participants, who described greater openness to yoga and the view that the benefits of yoga for men and women were more established and understood amongst their peers: *“All the guys I’ve done it with, and that includes some young guys that are just in year 12, um, they all seem to recognise the benefit of it, it helps you physically, but also stress wise”*. (P11, age 52).

Several factors supported participants to overcome both practical and perceptual barriers in commencing yoga, including accessible class scheduling options and studio spaces that felt open and welcoming to new men taking up the practice. One participant described his local studio as feeling *“like a safe space for men”* (P15, age 26). For several older participants, the availability of a weekly men’s only class at their local studio was regarded as being pivotal to their initial adoption of yoga. These classes were described as *“laid back”* (P05, age 72) and allowing for *“a bit of a joke and ... enjoyment between us”* (P10, age 61). A sense of comradeship was referred to in these all-men classes where a participant described how he and his classmates felt *“motivated by each other’s presence”* (P10, age 61). For these practitioners, seeing other *“men like me”* was reported as a de-stigmatising experience, allowing for earlier preconceptions of yoga as a women’s practice to shift.

Finding a suitable teacher was also considered important. Several participants believed teachers focussing predominantly on physical over spiritual aspects of yoga helped to create an environment where new practitioners felt comfortable and met these men at their starting point. In this sense, yoga teachers who were knowledgeable about the physicality of yoga, *“down to earth”* (P14, age 31), and who *“laid off the spiritual bit”* (P05, age 72) were favoured by men new to the practice.

Feeling accepted as a man practicing yoga

Many participants described increased confidence they developed in their yoga practice with time, enabling them to feel less intimidated and more accepted within their studio. One participant believed confidence and acceptance by his fellow practitioners,

regardless of his gender, developed as he started to feel more self-assured with his own practice, noting now he could *“walk into a yoga practice, even if it was a new one”* and not *“feel out of place”* (P01, age 77). Similarly, another participant reflected that with time his experience as part of an underrepresented demographic in yoga classes became less of an issue: *“I’ve been to heaps of classes ... and I’m the only bloke in the room ... I got over that hump ... I’m there for my benefit, so it doesn’t fuss me”* (P13, age 65).

Many participants referred to increased social connection through yoga classes as being a great benefit of their practice. Participants attributed group classes as enabling them to have a *“better social outlook on life”* (P10, age 61), develop *“more personal”* connections (P09, age 70) and as a *“major motivator”* for continued practice (P12, age 55). One older participant noted the opportunities for building new connections his studio had provided, commenting *“as you get older it’s sometimes harder to make friends, so I think that yoga is a great help there for men”* (P01, age 77).

Physical reset

Several participants reported approaching yoga in search of physical benefits that included a restorative and sustainable practice that promoted physical durability with low physical impact. Men were also drawn to yoga to increase flexibility. One participant remarked, *“I couldn’t touch my toes ... I was pretty embarrassed really”* (P06, age 58). As participants progressed in their practice, they identified the manifestation of physical benefits, referring to improved energy, physical durability (particularly injury prevention and management of pre-existing conditions), flexibility, posture, and breathing.

One participant emphasised the importance he perceived in backbends for flexibility and posture, *“getting your spine to do the opposite of what gravity and our work habits have us do for a big part of our day when we sit behind a computer or drive a car”* (P08, age 64). With these changes, participants noted the emergence of mental health benefits and an acknowledgement that physical health was intimately connected to their mental health and vice versa: *“If my body is good and I feel good that is just a reflection of my outlook on life”* (P10, age 61).

Mental reset

Participants reported experiencing initial physical health benefits often extended to mental health benefits. For instance, participants were better able to

effectively manage rumination, gain insight into negative core beliefs, and develop a more optimistic outlook on life. Participants resoundingly referred to stress reduction as a major benefit they had experienced after commencing practice.

Many participants described the practice inducing greater calmness and balance, and lower emotional reactivity. One participant described feeling *"calmer in all situations ... a lot calmer"* (P01, age 77), while others commonly noted how friends and family had recognised shifts in their general demeanour, stating, *"according to my wife it has calmed me down tremendously"* (P04, age 70). Another participant reported commencing their practice on medical advice for an anxiety disorder, reflecting *"I can quite clearly look back and remember what it was like to be anxious and now, I'm not and I'm very thankful for it (yoga) because living with anxiety is terrible"* (P08, age 64). Other participants credited their more developed sense of bodily awareness as allowing them to identify and self-regulate during periods of hyperarousal, with observations including *"if I am getting stressed or anxious or uptight you can sort of feel it; you tighten up and you know what you need to do"* (P06, age 58) and *"being aware of my emotions and at times when I'm under stress ... now I'm a lot more relaxed"* (P10, age 61).

Men also described yoga as inducing feelings of happiness and contentment that lasted beyond the end of a class. One participant remarked: *"I sort of had a euphoric sort of a feeling after I had finished class, I'd walk back to my car ... and I have a big grin on my face just because I felt so nice in my body"* (P15, age 26). For many participants, these changes were as unexpected as they were welcome: *"Yoga surprised me, yeah. I just feel good, yeah"* (P02, age 73).

While participants commonly referred to their experiences of commencing yoga in pursuit of physical benefits, most acknowledged that it was the effects that yoga had on their minds that typically kept them coming to the mat. This was conveyed by one participant with comments including *"over time, I started to enjoy the other side, the mental side of things", "I get as much from the mental side of it as I do from the physical side of it"* and *"20 years ago it was physical, now it's probably 50/50 physical ... and the mental aspect of it"* (P10, age 61).

Participants reported the influence of mindfulness, cultivated through their practice, as being significant and life changing. Several participants referred to the concept of *"forced mindfulness"* in describing their earlier experiences of yoga, noticing yoga effectively anchored their concentration and awareness to their bodies and breath. Participants reported immediate

benefits, stating these experiences of anchored awareness *"still your mind"* (P13, age 55), *"put you back into your body and you're not racing off with thoughts"* (P15, age 26). In turn, participants could simultaneously observe and disengage from negative thoughts.

Yoga as a long-term practice

Several participants referred to a sense of pride and achievement they felt through their continued yoga practice, reflecting increasing self-efficacy. This trend was reflected in one participant's statement: *"Yes, I certainly walk straighter ... I think pride comes in to that a bit ... it gives you confidence, yeah"* (P01, age 77). Others referred to daily benefits of yoga they experienced as self-motivating: *"the thing that kept me going, kept me practicing and kept me going back to yoga all the time was the need for it ... I felt a need"* (P04, age 70). As such, several participants described yoga as a tool for empowerment, leading to increased resilience and productivity but also encouraging the incorporation of other holistic practices and healthy lifestyle choices such as maintaining a balanced diet, regular meditation, and other forms of physical activity.

Other participants reported experiencing forms of spiritual growth as their practice evolved. For some this represented a greater capacity for *"contemplation"* and exploration of deeper questions, such as *"what does life mean to everyone?"* (P07, 48 years) which translated into a kind of *"yearning for wisdom"* (P04, age 70) that was viewed as a positive shift in their attention. For others, it was experienced as a deeper connection with themselves, a freedom *"to be more authentic"* (P08, age 64) rather than *"working against my own nature"* (P04, age 70). In this, participants described feeling *"a lot clearer with what matters"* (P11, age 52).

Positive ageing

Eleven of the 14 participants reported coming to yoga after the age of 40. One participant reported *"it really bothered me that I was getting old"*, stating he increasingly felt *"stiff and decrepit"* (P12, age 55). Another middle-aged participant reported *"the body was starting to show wear and tear"* and *"part of the conversation was starting to be about 'oh this is hurting, that's hurting'"* (P11, age 52).

As such, participants saw yoga as a form of physical activity they could maintain as they aged, often comparing this with other physical exercise they used to do and now found to be less physically sustainable. Participants reported that the low impact nature of yoga was a key factor in their ability to maintain

a yoga practice as their physical health declined in older age and to experience ongoing mental health benefits.

Discussion

This study sought to identify the experiences of men participating in yoga, explore how yoga influences mental health among male practitioners, and to identify the enablers and barriers experienced by men in commencing and maintaining a yoga practice. Results supported the emerging notion that yoga affords benefits to men through its unique combination of physical exercise, relaxation, and mindfulness (Rocha et al., 2012). Although participants had a growing awareness of poor posture, a lack of flexibility and general anxiety, most did not actively seek out classes as a proactive approach to improve health and wellbeing but were encouraged to join a yoga class by family or friends or by health professionals. This behavioural pattern is consistent across the men's health research spectrum, where yoga can here be framed as informal help-seeking that is often thought to actively contradict and challenge social practices of masculinity, upheld by rigid tenets of stoicism and self-reliance (Courtenay, 2000a, 2000b; Seidler, Rice, Ogrodniczuk et al., 2018; Seidler, Rice, River et al., 2018).

Over time, participants reported lower stress and emotional reactivity, increased relaxation and becoming calm as key benefits, and that these improvements served to motivate ongoing engagement. These trends are consistent with a previous review of qualitative research into mental health benefits attributed to yoga (Capon et al., 2019), and extends our understanding of yoga participation among men. Although yoga-focussed qualitative research with men is limited, comparable findings have been identified regarding reduced stress levels and increased positive emotion being motivators for establishing an ongoing practice (Bartels et al., 2019; Cushing et al., 2018; Justice & Brems, 2019).

Despite these obvious and immediate benefits, attendance in yoga classes among men is often low. For participants in this study, many struggled with perceptions that yoga (as it is typically taught) as a core practice focused on the inner self and contemplative insight, physical and mental presence, and flexibility, and did not appear to conform to traditional masculinity, often aligned with largely opposing ideals of power, invulnerability, risk-taking and pursuit of status. Notions of yoga as a women-only practice were emphasised when they commenced classes as the "only man on the mat". Similar preconceptions of yoga among men can be found in other qualitative

research (Cushing et al., 2018) where participants spoke of yoga as being "socially unacceptable" (p. 66) and viewing the practice as a "feminine movement" (p. 68). These perceptions often arose from situations where men felt excluded to varying degrees, even when participating in classes, due to teaching styles and what was seemingly expected. Similar perceptions have also been noted by other researchers as barriers by non-practicing men (Cagas et al., 2021). However, findings from the present study suggested such views diminish over time among men who persevere with the practice.

This highlights challenges for men around becoming aware and managing their own gendered preconceptions and prejudices and processing any initial feelings of discomfort or self-consciousness. Participants mentioned the influence of other men as athletic role models, as well as modified classes that included an emphasis on yoga's physicality, as key factors for initial and ongoing engagement with a yoga practice. This aligns with the broader literature on male-oriented healthcare, where useful aspects of masculine ideals can be contextually leveraged to the clinician's advantage to effectively engage men in treatment (Seidler, Rice, Ogrodniczuk et al., 2018; Seidler, Rice, River et al., 2018). Participants also remarked about the positive impact of finding a yoga teacher who could articulate the physical aspects of the yoga practice in an engaging way and emphasised challenging postures. This further mirrors qualitative work on men in therapy, where orientation and education to the setting and what is expected of them can lead to greater initial buy-in and long term outcomes (Seidler, Rice, Oliffe et al., 2018; Seidler, Rice, River et al., 2018). Participants in the current study considered this as a more effective means of initially enticing men to yoga rather than an early focus on spiritual elements, for example, whereby the individuals' strengths and interests are sought and included in the process.

Among the positive changes, participants validated that physical activity helps improve mental health, consistent with research demonstrating links between structured physical activity and mental health benefits (Cooney et al., 2014). It was also reported yoga practice cultivated a type of forced mindfulness, whereby attention became anchored in awareness to bodily sensations, promoting a sense of mental balance and calm through settling and stilling the mind. Rather than a diversion from negative thinking (Lepore, 1997), yoga also supported men to feel less attached to their thoughts and to experience them with less judgement. Many reported a reduction in their overall emotional reactivity over time, noting that initial feelings of calm during yoga practice increasingly

translated to positive changes “off the mat” as well. This is consistent with other research which proposes the mental health benefits of yoga are likely to permeate individuals’ lives more broadly (Gard et al., 2014).

The most significant changes for participants involved a shift in mindset, where an emerging awareness of the mind-body connection developed over time. Participants could maintain concentration easier, recognise maladaptive thinking quicker, and described these new insights and experiences as empowering. For many, deepened understanding and discovery led to deeper questions about life, meaning and purpose. Therefore, one unexpected outcome of the study was that the spiritual aspects participants were initially averse to eventually became the inevitable and satiating consequences of ongoing practice.

Further, healthy ageing was a key incentive for yoga practice among older men and reflective of a growing popularity for yoga practice among this age group. A survey of holistic movement participation trends of over 195,000 Australians over ten years found increasing participation rates for yoga among men and women aged 55 years and over (Vergeer et al., 2017). Participants in this study affirmed the need for exercise modalities that support healthy ageing. For older men, in addition to maintaining physical health, the mental health benefits of social connection provided by yoga practice was of particular significance. Most participants attributed many improved mental health outcomes to the increased social connection to the male yoga group classes they attended; a phenomenon found in other male-focused community programs as well, such as Men’s Sheds (Morgan et al., 2007).

The mean age and years of yoga practice among the cohort was 58 and 11 years respectively, suggesting the group was experienced and committed to attendance over time. After examining what makes men’s health community programs successful, researchers identified several factors, including the need to incorporate a combination of activity-based “doing”, talking to peers and silences (Oliffe et al., 2020); all of which align with yoga’s pedagogy. Although some attrition can be expected in community-based men’s health programs (Seidler et al., 2021), the average number of years participants attended yoga classes emphasised the capacity for yoga to promote health and consistently meet men’s needs in later years particularly.

Implications

The current findings extend upon existing literature supporting lifestyle interventions as a beneficial mental health treatment tool for men. Although barriers for

men practicing yoga clearly exist (Cagas et al., 2021), they are not insurmountable. Initiatives should challenge misinformed notions of yoga being a feminine practice.

The promotion of yoga through masculine environments, including sporting groups, and offering men-only classes with an emphasis on physical challenges, were identified by several men in our study among approaches to help increase their participation. Results also emphasise the importance of yoga teacher training that promotes an inclusive pedagogical model and encourages yoga teachers to offer a supportive, safe space for new men particularly. Findings also support multiple strategies aimed at improving men’s mental health more broadly, such as encouraging GPs and psychologists to promote the practice as an adjunct treatment modality to help improve wellbeing in addition to traditional treatment.

Limitations and strengths

There are a number of study limitations. For example, participants’ perceived barriers to initiating or maintaining a regular practice were perhaps less significant than for other men who had either discontinued or never practiced yoga. Further, self-selection to participate might reflect a generally positive attitude towards yoga unique to this cohort. It could also be argued the number of participants was limited. Indeed, these limitations point to further potential research directions, such as large surveys, longitudinal studies and randomised trials, comparing practitioners and non-practitioners alike.

Despite these limitations, this study represents one of the first to qualitatively examine the perspectives of men practicing yoga (with a specific interest in mental health outcomes) and includes a group of men with diverse ages and levels of practice. Participants’ ongoing yoga experience was a strength of this study, compared with a majority of existing yoga-based qualitative research with participants claiming limited yoga experience.

Conclusion

Qualitative findings offered practical insights into incentives for men to commence and participate in yoga, as well as identifying barriers to their regular yoga practice. In doing so, findings provide further support for yoga as a mental health self-management or adjunct treatment tool for men seeking an expanded set of mental health treatment options alongside recommendations to support men’s

participation in yoga. Accordingly, these findings have important treatment implications when considering existing research reflecting men's reluctance to engage with conventional mental health treatment options, and the potential efficacy of yoga as an effective mental health treatment pathway for men. Future research studies canvassing the perspectives of men who have disengaged with yoga are encouraged, as well as studies deconstructing further holistic, therapeutic benefits yoga potentially offers alongside other treatments.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Shane McIver  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1837-8661>

Melissa O'Shea  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0230-3729>

Zac Seidler  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6854-1554>

Subhadra Evans  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1898-0030>

Data availability statement

Data not available due to ethical reasons. Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data are not available.

References

- Affleck, W., Carmichael, V., & Whitley, R. (2018). Men's mental health: Social determinants and implications for services. *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 63(9), 581–589. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0706743718762388>
- Balchin, R., Linde, J., Blackhurst, D., Rauch, H. L., & Schönbacher, G. (2016). Sweating away depression? The impact of intensive exercise on depression. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 200, 218–221. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2016.04.030>
- Bandara, D., Howell, L., Silbert, M., & Daraganova, G. (2021). *Ten to men: The Australian longitudinal study on male health – data user guide* (Version 4.0). Australian Institute of Family Studies.
- Bartels, L., Oxman, L. N., & Hopkins, A. (2019). "I would just feel really relaxed and at peace": Findings from a pilot prison yoga program in Australia. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 63(15–16), 2531–2549. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306624X19854869>
- Berger, J. L., Addis, M. E., Green, J. D., Mackowiak, C., & Goldberg, V. (2013). Men's reactions to mental health labels, forms of help-seeking, and sources of help-seeking advice. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 14(4), 433–443. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0030175>
- Bilsker, D., Fogarty, A. S., & Wakefield, M. A. (2018). Critical issues in men's mental health. *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 63(9), 590–596. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0706743718766052>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis - A practical guide*. Sage.
- Brooks, G. R. (2010). *Beyond the crisis of masculinity: A transtheoretical model for male-friendly therapy*. American Psychological Association.
- Büssing, A., Michalsen, A., Khalsa, S. B. S., Telles, S., & Sherman, K. J. (2012). Effects of yoga on mental and physical health: A short summary of reviews. *Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine*, 2012, 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2012/165410>
- Cagas, J. Y., Biddle, S. J., & Vergeer, I. (2021). Yoga not a (physical) culture for men? Understanding the barriers for yoga participation among men. *Complementary Therapies in Clinical Practice*, 42, 101262. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ctcp.2020.101262>
- Capon, H., O'Shea, M., & McIver, S. (2019). Yoga and mental health: A synthesis of qualitative findings. *Complementary Therapies in Clinical Practice*, 37, 122–132. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ctcp.2019.101063>
- Cooney, G., Dwan, K., & Mead, G. (2014). Exercise for depression. *JAMA*, 23(23), 2432–2433. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2014.4930>
- Courtenay, W. H. (2000a). Constructions of masculinity and their influence on men's well-being: A theory of gender and health. *Social Science & Medicine*, 50(10), 1385–1401. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-9536\(99\)00390-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-9536(99)00390-1)
- Courtenay, W. H. (2000b). Engendering health: A social constructionist examination of men's health beliefs and behaviors. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 1(1), 4–15. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1524-9220.1.1.4>
- Cramer, H., Sibbritt, D., Park, C. L., Adams, J., & Lauche, R. (2017). Is the practice of yoga or meditation associated with a healthy lifestyle? Results of a national cross-sectional survey of 28,695 Australian women. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 101, 104–109. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychores.2017.07.013>
- Cramer, H., Anheyer, D., Lauche, R., & Dobos, G. (2017). A systematic review of yoga for major depressive disorder. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 213, 70–77. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2017.02.006>
- Cramer, H., Lauche, R., Anheyer, D., Pilkington, K., de Manincor, M., Dobos, G., & Ward, L. (2018). Yoga for anxiety: A systematic review and meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials. *Depression and Anxiety*, 35(9), 830–843. <https://doi.org/10.1002/da.22762>
- Cushing, R. E., Braun, K. L., & Alden, S. (2018). A qualitative study exploring yoga in veterans with PTSD symptoms. *International Journal of Yoga Therapy*, 28(1), 63–70. <https://doi.org/10.17761/2018-00020>
- Drew, R. J., Morgan, P. J., Pollock, E. R., & Young, M. D. (2020). Impact of male-only lifestyle interventions on men's mental health: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Obesity Reviews*, 21(7), e13014. <https://doi.org/10.1111/obr.13014>
- Englar-carlson, M., & Kiselica, M. S. (2013). Affirming the strengths in men: A positive masculinity approach to assisting male clients. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 91(4), 399–409. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.2013.00111.x>
- Gard, T., Noggle, J. J., Park, C. L., Vago, D. R., & Wilson, A. (2014). Potential self-regulatory mechanisms of yoga for

- psychological health. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 8, 770. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2014.00770>
- Iyengar, B. K. S. (1966). *Light on yoga*. George Allen and Unwin.
- Jayakody, K., Gunadasa, S., & Hosker, C. (2014). Exercise for anxiety disorders: Systematic review. *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 48(3), 187–196. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bjsports-2012-091287>
- Josefsson, T., Lindwall, M., & Archer, T. (2014). Physical exercise intervention in depressive disorders: Meta-analysis and systematic review. *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports*, 24(2), 259–272. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sms.12050>
- Justice, L., & Brems, C. (2019). Bridging body and mind: Case series of a 10-week trauma-informed yoga protocol for veterans. *International Journal of Yoga Therapy*, 29(1), 65–79. <https://doi.org/10.17761/D-17-2019-00029>
- Lepore, S. J. (1997). Expressive writing moderates the relation between intrusive thoughts and depressive symptoms. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73(5), 1030–1037. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.73.5.1030>
- Levant, R. F., Wimer, D. J., & Williams, C. M. (2011). An evaluation of the health behavior inventory-20 (HBI-20) and its relationships to masculinity and attitudes towards seeking psychological help among college men. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 12(1), 26–41. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0021014>
- Mahalik, J. R., & Rochlen, A. B. (2006). Men's likely responses to clinical depression: What are they and do masculinity norms predict them? *Sex Roles*, 55(9–10), 659–667. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-006-9121-0>
- Morgan, M., Hayes, R., Williamson, M., & Ford, C. (2007). Men's sheds: A community approach to promoting mental health and well-being. *The International Journal of Mental Health Promotion*, 9(3), 48–52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623730.2007.9721842>
- Morgan, R. (2016). *Strike a pose: Yoga is the fastest growing fitness activity*. <http://www.roymorgan.com/findings/7004-yoga-is-the-fastest-growing-sport-or-fitness-activity-in-australia-june-2016-201610131055>
- Oliffe, J. L., Rossnagel, E., Bottorff, J. L., Chambers, S. K., Caperchione, C., & Rice, S. M. (2020). Community-Based men's health promotion programs: Eight lessons learnt and their caveats. *Health Promotion International*, 35(5), 1230–1240. <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/daz101>
- Rocha, K. K. F., Ribeiro, A. M., Rocha, K. C. F., Sousa, M. B. C., Albuquerque, F. S., Ribeiro, S., & Silva, R. H. (2012). Improvement in physiological and psychological parameters after 6 months of yoga practice. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 21(2), 843–850. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2012.01.014>
- Sandelowski, M. (2000). Whatever happened to qualitative description? *Research in Nursing & Health*, 23(4), 334–340. [https://doi.org/10.1002/1098-240X\(200008\)23:4<334:AID-NUR9>3.0.CO;2-G](https://doi.org/10.1002/1098-240X(200008)23:4<334:AID-NUR9>3.0.CO;2-G)
- Schuch, F. B., Vancampfort, D., Richards, J., Rosenbaum, S., Ward, P. B., & Stubbs, B. (2016). Exercise as a treatment for depression: A meta-analysis adjusting for publication bias. *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, 77, 42–51. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychires.2016.02.023>
- Seidler, Z. E., Dawes, A. J., Rice, S. M., Oliffe, J. L., & Dhillon, H. M. (2016). The role of masculinity in men's help-seeking for depression: A systematic review. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 49, 106–118. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2016.09.002>
- Seidler, Z. E., Rice, S. M., Ogradniczuk, J. S., Oliffe, J. L., & Dhillon, H. M. (2018). Engaging men in psychological treatment: A scoping review. *American Journal of Men's Health*, 12(6), 1882–1900. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1557988318792157>
- Seidler, Z. E., Rice, S. M., Oliffe, J. L., Fogarty, A. S., & Dhillon, H. M. (2018). Men in and out of treatment for depression: Strategies for improved engagement. *Australian Psychologist*, 53(5), 405–415. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ap.12331>
- Seidler, Z. E., Rice, S. M., River, J., Oliffe, J. L., & Dhillon, H. M. (2018). Men's mental health services: The case for a masculinities model. *The Journal of Men's Studies*, 26(1), 92–104. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1060826517729406>
- Seidler, Z. E., Rice, S. M., Kealy, D., Oliffe, J. L., & Ogradniczuk, J. S. (2020). Once bitten, twice shy: Dissatisfaction with previous therapy and its implication for future help-seeking among men. *International Journal of Psychiatry in Medicine*, 55(4), 255–263. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0091217420905182>
- Seidler, Z. E., Wilson, M. J., Kealy, D., Oliffe, J. L., Ogradniczuk, J. S., & Rice, S. M. (2021). Men's dropout from mental health services: Results from a survey of Australian men across the life span. *American Journal of Men's Health*, 15(3), 155798832110147. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15579883211014776>
- Stonerock, G. L., Hoffman, B. M., Smith, P. J., & Blumenthal, J. A. (2015). Exercise as treatment for anxiety: Systematic review and analysis. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, 49(4), 542–556. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12160-014-9685-9>
- Vergeer, I., Bennie, J. A., Charity, M. J., Harvey, J. T., van Uffelen, J. G., Biddle, S. J., & Eime, R. M. (2017). Participation trends in holistic movement practices: A 10-year comparison of yoga/pilates and t'ai chi/qigong use among a national sample of 195,926 Australians. *BMC Complementary and Alternative Medicine*, 17(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12906-017-1800-6>
- Williams, L. J., Jacka, F. N., Pasco, J. A., Coulson, C. E., Quirk, S. E., Stuart, A. L., & Berk, M. (2016). The prevalence and age of onset of psychiatric disorders in Australian men. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 50(7), 678–684. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0004867415614105>
- Wong, Y. J., Ho, M. H. R., Wang, S. Y., & Miller, I. S. (2017). Meta-Analyses of the relationship between conformity to masculine norms and mental health-related outcomes. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 64(1), 80–93. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000176>
- Zhang, Y. (2014). American adult yoga practice: Preliminary findings from NHIS 2012 data. *The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*, 20(5), A122. <https://doi.org/10.1089/acm.2014.5298.abstract>