



EDITORIAL

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Reaching Out by Looking Within: The #WellnessWednesdays Initiative at Texas Tech University

De-stressing through yoga

Why yoga, why now?

Student mental health and wellness is a critical issue facing most academic institutions, especially since the COVID19 pandemic began in January 2020. At Texas Tech, students were sent home at the beginning of March 2020, and staff and faculty followed shortly thereafter. The campus reopened for the fall semester in August 2020, but students, staff, and faculty were required to wear masks at all times when on certain areas on campus and within buildings. Some in-person classes had reduced class sizes, and other courses were moved to either hybrid or online. Meetings of more than six people were moved online to Zoom, Skype for Business, or Microsoft's Teams.

This type of disruption, while mitigated through the above-mentioned

efforts, still affected the mental and physical health of the students at the university, and the faculty and staff who work for it. Wang et al. (2020) indicated that about 71 percent of students who participated in their survey at Texas A&M had increased levels of stress and anxiety since the pandemic began, and that 48 percent of those students showed moderate-to-severe depression. Thirty-eight percent showed moderate-to-severe anxiety symptoms, and approximately 18 percent experienced suicidal thoughts (Wang et al. 2020).

Research has also shown that the body holds on

to tension and trauma, and that exercise and other forms of gentle, mindful, movement can help to release and relieve the symptoms of tension and trauma (van der Kolk 2015).

Academic libraries have been providing movement-based programs and initiatives focused on reducing students' stress and anxiety since at least the early 2000s (Lenstra 2020). More recently, wellness rooms, quiet spaces, and movement-based programs are presented for use in academic libraries throughout the academic year (Rose, Godfrey, and Rose 2015; Kohut-Tailor and Klar 2020). Many of the movement-based programs also target students during high stress periods, such as midterms and finals (Lenstra 2020).

To frame these programming options, Hinchliffe and Wong's (2010) description of the "wellness wheel" framework provides a useful tool for

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Figure 1: Texas Tech University's wellness wheel, RISE

situating academic libraries within other outreach initiatives. While primarily used in student affairs or other university departments, the wellness wheel shows facets of a well-balanced life. Texas Tech University's Risk Intervention and Safety Education (RISE) wellness wheel (Figure 1) displays the following facets of student wellness: emotional, occupational, social, spiritual, intellectual, environmental, financial and physical. The word "wellness" in academic student services spaces centers on the development of the whole person, so that wellness encompasses not only physical health, but also the importance of managing stress and emotions effectively and engaging positive relationships with others (Parker and Dickson 2020).

Yoga is one of the many wellness programs on the rise on college campuses and in academic libraries. The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society created a "Tree of Contemplative Practices" (Figure 2) and situated yoga among other movement-based practices, such as mindful walking, qigong, Aikido, T'ai chi and dance. Yoga helps people with resilience and emotional regulation (Sullivan et al. 2018), and reduces the physical symptoms of stress and anxiety (Pascoe, Thompson and Ski 2017).

Academic libraries reduce stress and anxiety and promote healthy physical and mental activity in their communities by providing unique spaces and initiatives which correspond with wellness wheel and the Tree of Contemplative Practices. Some patrons may also see academic library spaces as safer and less threatening than a traditional gym or studio space (Lenstra 2020). Through partnering with other campus entities, such as student affairs offices or student counseling centers, librarians create programs on how to live balanced lives, including regular physical activities as part of that balance (Lenstra 2020). Additionally, actively engaging with potential partners on campus, discussing physical wellness and activity, and communicating with students about the availability of such programs, delivers a greater impact in our students lives (Lenstra 2020).

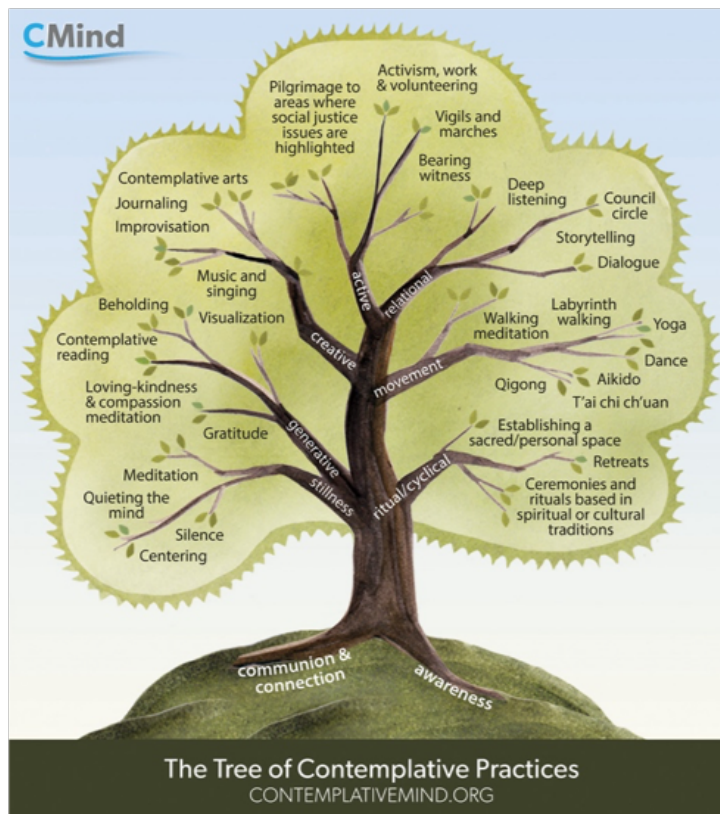


Figure 2: The Tree of Contemplative Practices, 2021

The exact number of academic libraries that engage their communities with yoga programs is currently unknown. However, Lenstra's (2017) survey on public libraries and yoga programs shows the popularity of yoga in Canadian and US public libraries. Lenstra (2020) lists at least 15 other academic institutions whose libraries offered yoga as a part of special programming as of the end of 2019, though his survey was informal. Further research demonstrates an increased awareness and use of yoga programs in de-stress activities at the end of

the semester in academic libraries (Lenstra 2020).

Specific yoga programs described in the library research and outreach literature discuss the merits of conducting such programs. To bolster wellness and connect to the health sciences community at the University of Utah, Casucci and Baluchi (2019) created a library yoga program which offered a trial of free sessions for 10 weeks during the summer of 2016 for health campus students and employees. The University of Alabama Libraries added a restorative yoga program in 2017 and allowed all members of the university to attend (students, staff and faculty), and transitioned to online sessions during the COVID19 pandemic (Jackson 2019; Jackson 2021). Other libraries have offered a yoga lecture and demonstration as part of a wellness series (Varman and Justice 2015). Cox and Brewster's (2020) survey of academic libraries in the United Kingdom showed that before the pandemic, six universities were offering yoga as a programming option. Their study also noted that these kinds of sessions halted with the shutdowns brought by the COVID19 pandemic, and that academic libraries in the UK became much more focused on easing student anxieties through making materials more available online and offering webinars on related topics, such as how to access materials remotely.

Yoga in academic libraries also serves faculty and staff. Several university libraries have developed yoga programs over the past 15–20 years specifically as a workplace initiative. Examples of libraries initiating these programs include The University of California San Diego Library's yoga program for employees in 2007 (Goodson 2013) and East Carolina University Libraries integrated yoga program for staff (Dragon, Webb, and Tatterson 2020).

#WellnessWednesdays at Texas Tech University

Before the pandemic, the Texas Tech University campus offered yoga classes through the student recreation center. While a great way to get students active,

this arrangement only serves the students who go to the rec center, those who were on campus, and those who were comfortable practicing yoga with others in an in-person setting. After the pandemic shutdown the campus in March of 2020, these sessions were cancelled and became inaccessible to students until the campus deemed it safe to resume in-person sessions spring of 2021. The recreation center and other departments have also offered yoga and other movement-based programs outside during nice weather, particularly during the several “student wellness days” the University held in March. None of these programs were offered online.

Fall 2020 #WellnessWednesday videos. Based on the research mentioned previously and the clear need for an inexpensive, online yoga program, I began to develop two different ideas based on yoga outreach programming for Texas Tech University. Still new to my position as a tenure-track STEM librarian, I decided to start slowly. Instead of holding an in-person event in the fall of 2020, I recorded 5 minute videos focused on breathing or yoga asanas (poses) that one can do in a chair. Recordings were done with a personal iPhone or university issued iPad Mini. The University Libraries Promotion and Marketing department created introductory and ending video clips, and I then added a standard warning slide (using Canva) about participating in a movement-based program. The University Libraries Marketing department strung these clips together using Adobe PremierPro or iMovie, exported them into a file format that could be used on social media, and shared them on its social media channels every other week starting in October. For our purposes, iMovie was much simpler to use for these types of short videos.

We decided on using the hashtag #WellnessWednesdays because of its alliterative nature. We also knew that I would be the one teaching full yoga sessions online, and we needed consistency and continuity in usage of the hashtag. These videos were recorded in the library at first featuring only the instructor (me!)—though by the end of October and into December, the city of Lubbock had a massive spike in COVID19 cases, so the remainder of the videos were recorded by me at my home. These videos were then shared via YouTube to the University Libraries’ social media channels with the hashtag and brief text about the benefits of study breaks. This text served as a reminder to students and others to take five-minute breathing or movement breaks during their peak study or work hours. By having these videos recorded, people could participate whenever they liked. Distributing the recordings via YouTube also allowed us to use the transcription AI in YouTube for captioning and accessibility purposes.

#WellnessWednesday Online Zoom sessions. During the spring of 2021, I offered and taught online yin and restorative yoga sessions via Zoom on Wednesday evenings. This type of yoga focuses on asanas which allow the body to relax using props such as pillows, blankets, blocks, etc. Yin yoga also focuses on stretching deeply, into areas and groups of muscles that may get ignored during a faster practice focused on strength. Both types of yoga develop appreciation for deep relaxation of mind and body, and can help participants cultivate skills of conscious relaxation, discover where one is holding tension in the body, and create the conditions necessary for the body to relax (Pranskey 2017; Lasater 2016; Lasater 2017).

The library marketed these Zoom sessions on TechAnnounce, the daily announcements email sent to the University community. The program was also placed on the library calendar, shared via social media posts, and announcements were made at library research instruction sessions and library workshops. Reminder emails were sent the day of, which contained the link to the session as well as the list of asanas. This allowed for participants to prepare

for the session with blankets, rolled towels, etc., if they so chose. We did not practice the same session twice, though many of the asanas were in multiple sessions. The general structure of the sessions is as follows:

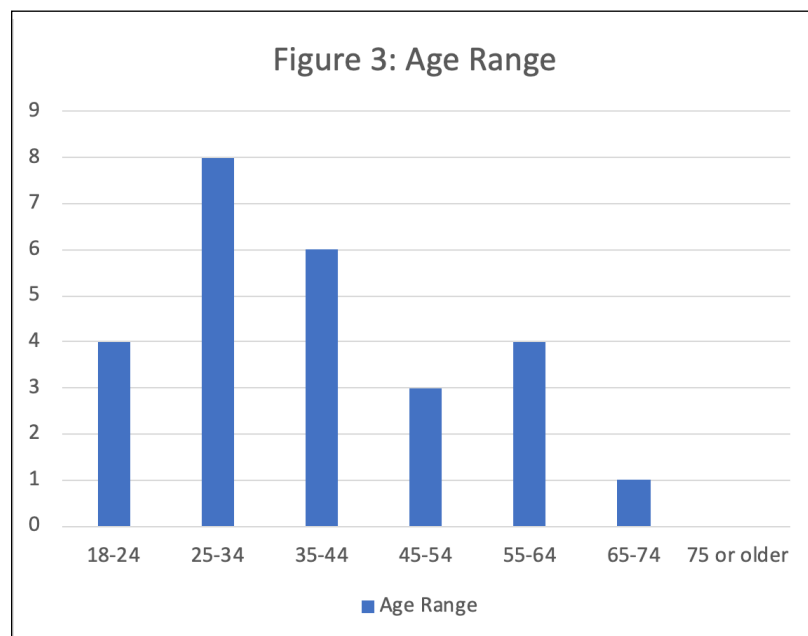
- Open the Zoom room about 10 minutes before the session was scheduled to start.
- Remind participants about the use of pillows, blankets, and rolled towels before starting the session.
- Remind participants that they do not have to have their camera on, and also to mute themselves during the session.
- Start the session with gentle moving aspects, focusing on the breath.
- Settle into the deeper stretches or relaxing asanas, and always end with a savasana (corpse) posture.
- During savasana, either read a poem or have the participants focus on their breath or a brief metta (loving-kindness) meditation, which is a type of meditation focused on compassion for oneself and others.

Assessment of the Program

Two types of assessment were employed in evaluating this program. The first was informal and based on my own experiences, reflecting on my own teaching and classroom dynamics. These classroom dynamics included participant feedback about asanas they enjoyed or how they felt after the session. This type of participant feedback allowed for smooth and flexible planning.

The first session had 17 participants from across the university. Over the next 14 weeks, the sessions averaged seven participants. Email reminders were sent to more than 70 participants by the end of the semester, as once a person signed up, they would stay on the email list unless they asked to be removed. As the semester went on, participation varied: during one session only two participants attended, because of a technical failure on my end, and there was a cancellation of a session because of the 2021 winter storm with widespread power outages.

I also developed a survey for a more formal assessment of the program. This survey allowed for participants to comment about the program and their encounters with yoga, and was based on Brems' (2017) scientific study of a



university yoga workplace wellness initiative. Owing to the nature of the research, an IRB for the survey was submitted and approved. I then distributed the survey after the spring 2021 sessions had been completed, at the end of the semester in May.

Figure 2. Age Range of Participants.

Participants were not required to take the survey and were allowed to skip any question.

Twenty-nine of the final 73 participants filled out the post-semester survey. Of the 29 respondents, four were faculty, four were staff, 15 were graduate students, and three were undergraduate students. The age range was 18–74 (the breakdown of ages is shown in Figure 3). Thirteen of the participants identified as white, five Hispanic/Latino, four Asian or South Asian, three Middle Eastern or North African, and three described themselves as multiracial or multiethnic. Twenty mentioned speaking English at home, but others also listed the following languages: Spanish, Bengali, French, Turkish, Armenian, Telugu, Portuguese, Farsi, and Swahili. Twenty-two of the respondents were female, two were male, two were nonbinary, though several other options for gender were included, and several skipped this question.

Twenty-two of the respondents heard about the program from TechAnnounce. Other responses indicated a friend or colleague had told them about it, they received graduate school emails, and an instructor announced it during a library instruction session. Most respondents (16) mentioned that they had come to 1–3 sessions, and nine said that they had come to 4–8. Only one person who took the survey said they came to 8–15 of the sessions.

When asked how important it was to have a regular yoga practice, 15 respondents said “extremely important” or very “important” (Figure 4). Twenty also mentioned that they have participated in yoga at studios or online before coming to the #WellnessWednesdays sessions, and five had not participated in any yoga before this program.

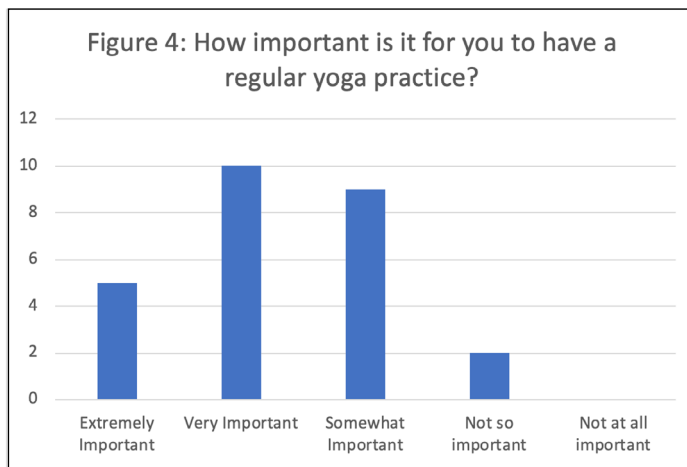


Figure 4. Importance of Yoga Practice.

When asked why they signed up for the sessions in an open-ended text box, 11 responses centered on some form of relaxation” or stress relief. Other respondents mentioned for their health, the importance of mental and physical balance, and the ability to practice at home. One mentioned that since they were an online student, it is “really nice to have a program offered that I could do remotely in the evening.”

Answers to an open-ended question about helpful aspects about the series varied as well, and included themes of mindfulness and relaxation, increased flexibility, online availability, and one “great to get my mind off school.” One participant mentioned that there was “no pressure to do everything perfectly or completely” while another went further and enjoyed “that the focus is on our own strengths, wellness, flexibility, etc. I like that you explain how to get into each pose as well as demonstrating it. I like that it was online and free because it made it easy to participate.”

One of the biggest barriers to coming to a session like yoga is creating the space within one’s own busy life. Many respondents mentioned that they were unable to attend more sessions because of class, dinner, work, or study time. Respondents were also asked about their barriers to trying a yoga session practice before the #WellnessWednesdays sessions. Although participants

mentioned time as a barrier (which included scheduling), they also mentioned the expense of online studio sessions. Others mentioned that while there were plenty of “athletic” versions of yoga, yoga sessions that focused on relaxation or breathing were not being offered often enough. Participants also wrote about being self-conscious about limited abilities, the inability to slow down, and a lack of motivation.

Reflection

Yoga programs can be a low-cost yet high-impact program with regards to its popularity and benefits. Those who attended regularly want the program at Texas Tech University Libraries to continue. Students who were unable to attend all the sessions because of their class or work schedule concurred and wanted the program and sessions to be offered. Students or faculty who were already distance learners or teachers before the pandemic were happy that a program was freely available to them. Many of the participants appreciated the online aspect of the sessions because it allowed them to participate however they might wish without feeling the pressures to be “perfect.” Currently, the Texas Tech University Library has started the yoga sessions for summer over the next 13 weeks. Zoom now offers closed captioning for all their sessions, which was not consistently available for all sessions during the spring of 2021. Participants can also add gender pronouns to their names upon sign-in for trans and nonbinary inclusivity.

Time is still a significant barrier to participating in a program like yoga. Students, staff and faculty have varying schedules. During certain times of day or busier times during the semester, it can be difficult to come to a session. Additionally, one needs to have a stable internet connection, and this might not always be available. While participating online can cut down on things like travel time, setup time, etc., it could also be easier to not participate when busy with other obligations. This finding reflects the Brems (2017) study that also mentioned time as a significant barrier to participation in yoga sessions, even if sessions are freely available.

The #WellnessWednesdays program and its effects adds to the growing evidence that these types of movement-based programs are valuable. These programs can be an effective means of outreach to student, staff, and faculty communities who might not have the chance to go to a yoga class from a regular studio, and they also have beneficial impacts on mental health and wellness in these populations. Campus departments like the student counseling center, student recreation center, or student affairs maybe willing to help with these programs as well. Offering a cross-campus yoga outreach initiative would be a nice way to make new connections at the institution, especially if the campus departments use the wellness wheel framework. By offering yoga as an outreach program at our academic libraries, we can begin to offer programs which can also have a larger impact on the lives of those who participate by reducing their stress and anxiety.

Yoga as an outreach program helps our academic communities by creating and allowing for spaces that can relax and restore the body and mind. We make yoga more inclusive and accessible by offering these programs for free, online, or both, to our communities during high stress periods, such as midterms or through our finals week de-stress events. These therapeutic wellness initiatives should be embraced as another way to support our academic communities.

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