

## **Incorporating Yoga Therapy into comprehensive wellness programs for underserved populations**

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**Objective:** Yoga has become a popular method of complementary therapy, but it is still utilized predominantly by white, educated, and middle- and upper-class people. However, its benefits extend to all people. Part of the dharma of yoga should be to share yoga's transformative potential to all— via access at centers where the underserved are present, and by individualizing it to their needs with regards to language, culture, social environment and stressors, medical history, goals and values.

**Methods:** Weekly wellness classes encouraging physical activity and healthy eating take place at a Federally-Qualified Community Health Center for uninsured patients in Washington, DC. Participants are predominantly Spanish-speaking immigrant families who have never practiced yoga (or even heard of it before), have relatively low literacy (especially health literacy) and educational attainment, work multiple jobs to support their families, and have high rates of disease (including diabetes, hypertension, hypercholesterolemia, osteoarthritis and chronic pain, depression and anxiety) in part related to obesity, lifestyle, and life stressors. They participate in basic *pranayama* and *asana* taught in their native language, with an emphasis on empowerment and coping skills. Evaluation of the class occurs in terms of health knowledge, behavioral modifications, and satisfaction.

**Results:** Classes are well-attended. The majority of participants complete the program and express satisfaction. They frequently state that the yoga therapy is their favorite part of the program, and qualitative, open-ended responses provide much more insight – they practice *pranayama* to help them fall asleep at night, they notice improved muscle flexibility and decreased spasm and pain after class time and home sessions, and they are able to describe and initiate basic yoga teaching to friends and family.

**Conclusion:** This study demonstrates not only the feasibility of implementing a comprehensive yoga therapy and wellness program in communities that are not traditionally yoga participants, but also provides evidence to support the tremendous benefit of yoga to these populations, especially given the unique life struggles they face. As the yoga therapy profession continues to expand and evolve, we should actively seek out ways to share with different groups, as a means for creating both individual transformation and also to help facilitate broad social change.