

Older Persons and Mindfulness Practice: An Alternative Perspective to Common Paradigms about Aging and Decline in Everyday Life

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Background and objectives

Yoga is a mindfulness based practice - incorporating relaxation, breathing, mental imagery and mind-body awareness. Unlike numerous other occupations many yoga teachers continue to practice and teach well into advanced ages. However, few studies explore the connections between their mindfulness based practice and perceptions of aging, motivations for continuing to teach and practice, and the implications for processes of aging.

Methods

The research involved in-depth interviews with twenty yoga teachers ranging in age from 61 to 95 years. Along with participant observation by the researcher of their classes, and mindfulness based approaches to teaching, to gain understanding of the specific practices.

Results

While much research on aging focuses on physical and emotional decline the perspectives of the yoga teachers in this study challenge those views. They describe the mindfulness practices they engage in as providing a way to reimagine aging. Despite facing adversity and natural changes that come with aging they remain positive and accepting. They described the practices as enabling them to make conscious decisions about how to live well, age positively and feel as if they are maintaining some control over the processes of biological aging. These yogis are growing older but not getting old, retaining enthusiasm for life, still learning and engaged with and contributing to their communities into advanced ages. All the participants expressed the view that they saw no reason why they or their students at any age would not continue with their practices as adjustments were easily made where needed.

Discussion and conclusion

The key implication is that the benefits of a mindfulness based practice through yoga are possible for any one at any age. The central aspect identified was integration of mind and body through the practices. They provide a way into places of rest and stillness, for finding meaning in life and coping with the processes of aging and everyday life. Most importantly the findings suggest that mindfulness offers a pathway to connect with an alternative self-paradigm of positive aging as a contrast to a dominant societal focus on a negative biological paradigm of decline.