A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF THE EXPERIENCE OF YOGA IN RELATION TO THE MANAGEMENT OF STRESS IN ONE'S LIFE

by

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We accept this thesis as conforming to the required standard

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the subjective experience of those individuals who practiced yoga in relation to the management of stress in their lives. A qualitative phenomenological methodology was used to guide the data collection and analysis. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with a volunteer sample of six participants. Participants were between the ages of 22 and 53 and their involvement with yoga ranged from 2 to 11 years of practice.

Audio-taped interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed according to Colaizzi's (1978) method of phenomenological data analysis. Five common themes emerged from the data, which included the following experiences: (a) a heightened sense of bodily awareness; (b) a sense of being grounded, calm, and peaceful; (c) an enhanced awareness of self and the present moment; (d) an acceptance of self and life circumstances; and (e) a trust in the process of life. These findings led to specific recommendations for future research, and as well implications for the counselling profession.
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who has always encouraged me

to learn something new.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Problem

Our society today is barraged with significant societal changes that can cause increased pressure and stress on many individuals, as total avoidance of situations that bring about stress is generally impossible in today's modern civilization. Although the precise impact of stress on people's health needs to be further researched, it has been proposed that the reduction or elimination of excessive stress could reduce disease and improve health (Wolfe & Parker, 1994).

"Physicians have determined that more than two-thirds of all visits to doctors who are general practitioners are motivated by symptoms occurring from stress" (Sierakowski, 1995, p. 19). Whether manifested as minor complaints of illness, serious ailments such as heart disease, or social problems such as alcoholism and drug abuse, it appears that stress-related problems exact a heavy toll. It has been declared that we are in great need of strategies that deal with stress and that are successful in increasing an individual's mental and physical capacity for coping (Nucho, 1988).

Statement of the Problem

As the influence of stress on various diseases becomes increasingly apparent, stress management techniques are becoming accepted components in the treatment of mental and physical health problems. The field of stress management utilizes a variety of stress management interventions (Lehrer & Woolfolk, 1993). Recently greater emphasis has been given by many
researchers, including psychologists, on the practice of yoga as a stress management technique (Venkatesh et al., 1994).

Some believe that individuals who practice yoga are less prone to psychosomatic imbalance resulting from the stress and strain of life (Shambhu Nath, 1992). In examining the literature, it is evident that attempts have been made to evaluate the efficacy of yoga in relation to stress management using quantitative research methodology. A number of studies have demonstrated that yoga has produced beneficial results by decreasing anger, tension, anxiety, and depression, lowering heart rate and blood pressure, and increasing self-esteem and vigor (e.g., Berger & Owen, 1992; Cusumano & Robinson, 1992; Harvey, 1983; Udupa, 1985; Venkatesh et al., 1994).

There are, however, few studies in the literature that examine yoga in terms of exploring the deeper understanding of the yoga participant’s lived experience. No study to date has investigated the participant’s subjective experience of yoga in relation to stress management. This study was therefore an attempt to bridge this gap. In an effort to enhance our understanding of this phenomenon, the central aim was to describe from the participant's perspective the essence of their experience in relation to managing stress in their lives.

A comprehensive review of the literature revealed that qualitative researchers have to date focused their attention on meditation, thereby ignoring an in-depth, broad-based examination of the impact of yoga. In doing so, our knowledge base surrounding this phenomenon, particularly as it relates to stress management, is limited.
Rationale for the Study

Some researchers suggest that no issue in the field of health psychology is of greater significance than whether and how stress influences adaptational outcomes; such as well-being, social functioning, and somatic health (Baum, Herberman, & Cohen, 1995). The importance of the relationship between stress and health helps to justify continued interest in the field of stress management. We are in need of interventions that will assist us in dealing with stress in positive and productive ways.

As stated previously, studies have been conducted employing experimental or quasi-experimental research designs focused on the outcomes of yoga practice (e.g., Berger & Owen, 1992; Cusumano & Robinson, 1992; Harvey, 1983; Udupa, 1985; Venkatesh et al., 1994). Hypotheses have been made about the relationship between yoga and stress and tested through various designs. These studies have included the measurement of several physiological and psychological variables related to the concept of stress.

Quantitative studies, to some degree, presuppose the contents of the yoga experience and, in an effort to study it, break it down into specific components. As a result, the holistic aspect of the yoga experience and our understanding of the phenomenon is limited. The majority of the studies that have been completed to date point to changes within the experience but do not provide descriptions of the experience (e.g., Berger & Owen, 1992; Cusumano & Robinson, 1992; Harvey, 1983; Latha & Kaliappan, 1992; Udupa, 1985; Venkatesh et al., 1994). Therefore, in this study, I endeavored to discover the
essence by which the experience of yoga and its relationship to stress management could be identified.

Through the use of descriptive and interpretive procedures, I attempted to reach below surface appearances and elicit a full and precise description of the experience from the perspective of those who practice yoga. The study allowed for the essence of the yoga experience, as it relates to managing one's stress, to be expressed and defined by the yoga participants themselves. Thus, our understanding of the phenomenon is enhanced through the contribution of the individual's own "voice."

Definitions

Stress

There appears to be general agreement in psychology that stress may best be defined as "an integrated, multidimensional response, involving at least the physiological, cognitive, and behavioral systems, occurring when people perceive the demands of a situation to exceed their coping resources" (Hiebert, 1988, p. 226). Latha and Kaliappan (1991) define stress as a "perceptual phenomenon arising from a comparison between the demand on the person and his or her ability to cope with it" (p. 36).

Thus, stress is thought to result from the perceived inability to cope and gives rise to the experience of the stress response. The stress response represents an attempt to cope with the source of stress. Coping can be at the cognitive and/or behavioral level (Folkman & Lazarus, 1986).
**Stress Management**

The area of stress management is quickly becoming a specialization within the mental health fields (Lehrer, Carr, Sargunaraj, & Woolfolk, 1994). Stress management techniques attempt to reduce stress and its harmful effects. Many of these techniques have been defined as procedures that focus on calming people's physiological, cognitive, and/or behavioral reactions (Hiebert, 1988).

**Yoga**

Yoga is "conceptualized as a broad strategy which combines meditation and exercises, which are known to promote physical and mental relaxation" (Sethi, 1987b, p. 272). Patanjali described eight stages that form the basis on which the whole system of yoga works (cited in Udupa, 1985). In short, these stages could be grouped into three, namely: (a) postural exercises; (b) breathing exercises; and (c) meditation. Patanjali’s system is a practical one designed to work with and through the body in order to expand conscious awareness of both mind and body. The purpose is to lead one systematically from physical exercises, to breathing exercises, to mental exercises—and to achieve a higher level of awareness (Rama, Ballentine, & Ajaya, 1976).

**Research Question**

The research question guiding this study was as follows: “What is the lived experience of participants who practice yoga in relation to the management of stress in their lives?” The phenomenon that I was interested in studying was the
lived experience of the yoga practitioner as it relates to managing his or her level of stress.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The central issue of this study is the individual’s subjective experience of yoga as it relates to the management of stress in their lives. In setting a context for this investigation, I begin by exploring the topic of stress and how it relates to illness. The issues and literature in this area are vast and therefore I limit my discussion to pointing out some basic positions concerning stress and one’s physiological and psychological functioning. The issue of stress management is briefly explored and background information on yoga and its various components (i.e., postural exercises, breathing exercises, and meditation) is presented.

In the remainder of this chapter, I critically review contemporary research that involves yoga, and variables that relate to the stress management process. Research studies involving yoga have been conducted that focus on particular components of the intervention. For example, several hundred papers and books have been written describing the physiological and psychological effects of meditation, as well as the physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of the practice (Patel, 1993). I have chosen to focus mainly on those studies that examine yoga from an integrative perspective; however, certain studies included in the review do focus on different components of yoga. I conclude this review with a summary and critique of the existing literature.

Stress and Its Relationship to Illness

Implicit in our contemporary approach to understanding the manifestations of stress are the assumptions that stress is a subjective experience and that the
outcomes or symptoms of distress may be at the physiological, psychological, and/or behavioral level. Holroyd and Lazarus (1982) postulate that there are basically three primary ways in which stress might lead to somatic illness.

The first of these three ways involves a disturbance of the tissue systems due to neural and hormonal influences when an individual is under stress (Holroyd & Lazarus, 1982). This is to say that when a person is under stress there are significant outpourings of powerful hormones that create dramatic changes in one's bodily processes. Many of these changes include such things as a pounding heart, sweating, trembling, fatigue, etc. When of limited duration, these changes can assist us in adapting to the challenges we face. However, excessive activation of the stress response can lead to "direct effects on physiological systems that mediate host defense or disease progression" (Baum et al., 1995, p. 327). Herron, Hillis, Mandarino, Orme-Johnson, and Walton (1996) claim that these physiological changes can damage the performance of a variety of systems, including the cardiovascular and immune systems. According to Herron et al. (1996), such damages "can directly cause, or increase the vulnerability to, chronic and immune-related diseases" (p. 209).

Holroyd and Lazarus (1982) posit that a second way in which stress might lead to somatic illness is by engaging in coping activities that are detrimental to one's health. For example, one may try to advance occupationally or socially by means of a pressured lifestyle (e.g., Type A behavior), one may attempt to reduce feelings of anxiety and stress by using tobacco, alcohol, or other forms of drugs, etc. These harmful styles of living can increase the likelihood of disease
by damaging the tissues of the body. Involuntary reactions may be equally
damaging in the long-term; for example, "disturbed sleep patterns or poor
appetite ultimately evolve into habits or life styles that are risk-factors for certain

A third way stress and coping might lead to disease is by psychological
and/or sociological factors that continually influence the person to minimize the
significance of various symptoms or influences him or her not to 'follow doctor's
orders' (Holroyd & Lazarus, 1982). An example of this would be if a person
frequently interprets pain or illness symptoms in such a way as to disregard
medical attention when, in fact, the attention is crucial. Avoidance of doctors or
failure to comply with health care regimens can come about as a defense
mechanism, for example, denial, or as a result of influence from one's
interpersonal relationships.

**Physiological Response to Stress**

According to Chrousos and Gold (1992), the increased attention to the
negative effects of stress is a result of recent progress in explicating the
biochemistry of the stress response and its relation to disease. The physical
response to stress involves three systems: (a) the nervous system; (b) the
endocrine system; and (c) the muscular system (Appley & Trumbull, 1986).

When an individual experiences a situation that threatens his or her ability
to cope, a whole chain of biochemical events unfolds without deliberate attention.
These biochemical events activate a number of organ systems. Muscular and
metabolic processes are activated to prepare the body for a response (Nucho,
Nucho declares that the following process takes place when an individual is under stress:

Vital brain impulses stimulate the pituitary gland which in turn sends messages to the pineal gland and the entire endocrine system. The heart rate speeds up, and the blood pressure rises. Breathing becomes rapid and more shallow. Adrenaline and other hormones pour into the blood stream. Blood sugar production increases to speed up metabolism to release energy. The muscle tone of internal organs and limbs changes. The nervous system becomes more excitable. The production of antibodies is delayed by the immune system (p. 12-13).

When of limited duration, the stress response can assist us in our adaptation to challenges. However, we can not remain in this 'fight or flight' stage indefinitely (Selye, 1978). If we remain in this state for too long our sense of well-being will be negatively affected, and this will be followed by gradual erosion of our physical health.

**Psychological Factors Relating to Stress**

It is generally accepted that physical health and mental health are intricately interwoven, and so health is dependent, in part, on how people think, feel, and act (Thorensen & Eagleston, 1984). With the close interrelationship between the mind and body, it is essential that we understand how they relate and how they influence one another.
Psychosomatic disorders are characterized by psychophysical responses to emotional problems (Saraswati, 1995). These emotional difficulties can include such issues as insecurity, rejection, anger, frustration, family problems, etc. Our emotional reactions are usually expressed through bodily organs and according to Taylor (1995), a negative emotional state may produce pathogenic physiological changes. Nuernberger (1981) asserts that in our bodies, our state of mind is reflected in various aches and pains as well as in a number of stress-related diseases such as hypertension and ulcers. Saraswati (1995) maintains that "psychosomatic disorders can be in the somatic, autonomic, endocrinal and immune systems" (p. 294).

Heilbronn (1992) explains how negative emotional states such as anger and frustration can cause a continuing secretion of adrenaline into the bloodstream. This may result in a chronic state of high blood pressure and/or other signs of acute distress. Such a negative emotional state may also lead people to practice faulty health behaviors, or it may produce illness behavior (e.g., such as visiting a physician) but no underlying pathology (Matthews, 1988). Our emotional states may also be associated with illness via other factors in some as-yet-undetermined manner.

**Stress Management**

It has become clear that stress can affect our immune system and is related to vulnerability to some illnesses (Cohen, Tyrrell, & Smith, 1993; Lazarus, 1990). Stress management interventions and techniques attempt to reduce stress and its harmful effects. Monat and Lazarus (1991) claim that there are
three generally defined categories of stress management techniques: (a) alterations of the environment and/or lifestyle; (b) alterations of personality and/or perception; and (c) alterations of biological responses to stress. Hiebert (1988) categorizes stress management interventions as behavioral approaches, cognitive approaches, and physiological approaches.

There are a wide variety of techniques and interventions designed to assist individuals in coping with stress. The more prominent techniques include cognitive behavioral methods, progressive relaxation, biofeedback, hypnosis, aerobic exercise, imagery, autogenic training, meditation, and yoga (Baum et al., 1995; Lehrer & Woolfolk, 1993). These various methods aim to assist the individual in reducing or avoiding the negative impact that stress can have on one's life.

**Summary of Stress and Illness**

Stress is the result of how our mind and body function and interact. It is psychosomatic in the true sense of the word - psyche meaning "mind" and soma meaning "body" (Cayne & Lechner, 1988, p. 806, p. 945, respectively). It is the consequence of how we regulate, or to put it more appropriately, how we do not regulate, the mental and physical functioning of our being. Patel (1993) advises that we need to adopt a model of stress that recognizes the reciprocal and dynamic influences of both the mind and the body. In attempting to decrease the physiological and psychological impact of stress, the choice of methods used may be crucial for optimal effectiveness.
Yoga, which is concerned with the awareness and control of somatic and autonomic processes of the mind-body complex (Jhansi Rani & Krishna Rao, 1994), provides an avenue for research with regards to stress management and its implications. Latha and Kaliappan (1992) claim that yoga incorporates behavioral, physical, and cognitive changes in its approach.

**Introduction to Yoga**

Yoga, based on ancient Indian wisdom and culture, is more than 5,000 years old and has been practiced in India for a number of centuries. "The entire consideration of health and disease in Indian Medicine is based on a comprehensive psychosomatic approach" (Singh, 1986, p. 67). The focus is more on promoting health care than curative remedies and more on mental health than physical well-being alone. Yoga ideology professes that individuals do not live compartmentally, but at various levels—physical, mental, moral, and spiritual simultaneously (Patel, 1984). Basically, the ideology holds that ill-health means some disharmony in the living organism leading to a functional imbalance. This is to say that the homeostatic nature of the organism is disturbed.

Yoga is a vast field of knowledge, and there are a number of approaches and techniques. These various approaches and techniques originate from different schools of thought. However, whether it is Raja yoga, Hatha yoga, Gnyana yoga, Dhyana yoga, Bhakti yoga, Kundalini yoga, or any other form of yoga, the emphasis is on "the control of mind, the steadying of the mind, subordinating it to the superintellect, the highest consciousness" (Shambhu Nath, 1992, p. xviii).
Amongst the various kinds of yoga, the one propounded by Patanjali seems to be the most popular and the universally accepted. Yoga, as defined by Patanjali (cited in Bahm, 1967) many centuries ago, is an "art of mental modification" and is concerned with freedom from mental disturbances. It is a system of coping with stress through developing awareness and control of the physical body, emotions, mind, and interpersonal relations (Udupa, 1985).

All schools of yoga accept the 'eight limbs' or steps of yoga, as outlined by Patanjali, as basic methodology (Goyeche, 1979). Patanjali's steps include following an ethical code similar to that espoused by all of the great religions, the practice of various postures (asanas), the voluntary regulation of breathing (pranayama), and concentration/meditation practices (Goyeche, Abo, & Ikemi, 1982). The ethical code consists of five abstentions (i.e., from violence, lying, stealing, sensuality, and greed) and five observations (i.e., purification, contentment, self-discipline, studiousness, and surrender to God or the Higher Self). Individuals are expected to observe some restraint and moderation in all their bodily and behavioral activities during the practice of yoga. Because various schools emphasize one or more of the above aspects, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to provide a clear-cut definition of yoga in terms of its precise methodology. Goyeche (1979) states that most of the systems of yoga can be described as 'integral' yoga as they follow all of the eight steps espoused by Patanjali.

According to Udupa (1985), the practice of postural exercises, breathing exercises, and meditation practices are considered the most important among
the eight limbs of yogic discipline in the management of stress related disorders. The postures, breathing exercises, and mediation are created to bring about normalcy in one's psychophysiological functions. In all yoga exercises and processes, the main focus is on the growth, development, and purification of the nervous system (Shambhu Nath, 1992). Nuernberger (1981) claims that these exercises and processes effects not only the various internal organs purposefully but also tends towards mental health.

In performing the variety of postural exercises, known as asanas, specific groups of muscles, tendons, and ligaments are powerfully stretched. This provides increased musculoskeletal flexibility and tone and is said to stimulate visceral organs and the autonomic nervous system directly (Dostalek, 1994). According to Heilbronn (1992), several factors contribute to the deep tonic effect of the postures. He declared that

- the holding of a specific posture puts pressure on the related organ, thus controlling the blood flow. In the relaxation that follows immediately afterwards, the blood flow is enhanced, flushing the organs and removing toxins. In the case of the endocrine glands, this has a powerful normalizing effect, encouraging their efficient and balanced operation (p. 134).

It is stated by Udupa (1985) that physiologically, the pulse rate, respiratory rate, and blood pressure decrease after these postural exercises and that the free flow of energy is encouraged around the body.
Yoga techniques make use of the connection between breath and mind to gain control over the mind that results in calmness and tranquillity (Broota & Sanghvi, 1994). All schools of yoga have long seen regulation of the breath as a fundamental part of physical and mental self-control. According to Harvey (1983), breathing is correlated to one's mental thought conditions and emotional life. For example, when an individual is angry, his or her breathing will be fast, jerky, uneven, and short. When an individual is calm and tranquil, his or her breath will tend to be smooth, even, and rhythmic. Breathing may indicate emotional instability or mental agitation or disturbance, especially through rhythms (Harvey, 1983). The reverse is also true. It has been said that by controlling our breath and by harmonious and rhythmic breathing we can bring about mental equilibrium and quiet our mind (Berger & Owen, 1992; Schell, Allolio, & Schonecke, 1994). Thus, our anxieties and tensions can be dissolved away.

In yoga, a variety of specific breathing techniques known as pranayamas are used to control, improve, and refine the breathing processes, thereby energizing the body and calming the mind (Shambhu Nath, 1992). The yogic method of harmonious and deep breathing brings about a calming effect on the nervous system. Breathing may be a calming preface to or the actual object of meditation.

Meditation is a personal technique for increasing internal awareness. It can be defined as "a continuous stream of effortless concentration, on a single point, over an extended period of time" (Nuernberger, 1981, p. 213). Miller, Fletcher, and Kabat-Zinn (1995) defined it as "the effort to intentionally pay
attention, nonjudgmentally, to present-moment experience and sustain this attention over time" (p. 193). It is a state of observation, meaning only to observe—there is no judgment or action.

Different people have practiced meditation in different manners. There are no universally accepted techniques. Although meditation is often used in spiritual development, its practice requires no particular belief system. Buddhists adopt Vipassana type of meditation that consists of concentrating on one's own breath after sitting in a comfortable position in a secluded place and shutting off the sense organs as best you can (Shambhu Nath, 1992). According to Sethi (1987a), in transcendental meditation, chanting of some mantras or sacred words while sitting in a relaxed position for 15 to 20 minutes is prescribed. Whatever may be the techniques, the individual needs to sit in a comfortable position and close his or her eyes and other senses as best he or she can and then give a complete freedom to the mind to empty all the stress of the day.

Meditation is said to cause efficient relaxation of the mind and gives a freshness to the entire psychosomatic system. Evidence exists suggesting that meditation is effective in reducing both autonomic arousal and various self-reported symptoms (Lehrer et al., 1994).

**Research on Stress Management and Yoga**

**Quantitative Studies**

Studies examining the relationship between yoga and variables related to the stress management process have been conducted using various quantitative research designs. Psychophysiological and biochemical measurements of the
cardiovascular, neuroendocrine, and other bodily system responses, self-report measures, and performance measures that assess the effects of stress on psychomotor or cognitive skills (e.g., reaction time or problem solving) have been used in the research designs.

Schell et al. (1994) conducted a study that examined the influence of yoga on stress hormone release, heart rate, and blood pressure as well as the psychological changes induced by yoga practice. The research design used for the study consisted of a quasi-experimental design. A nonequivalent control-group design was used for assessing the measures of hormones (cortisol, prolactin, and growth), heart rate, and blood pressure, and a static-group comparison design was used to measure the psychological variables.

Of the 25 females who volunteered for the study, 12 of the volunteers (average age 32.5, range 27-55 years) were experienced in practicing yoga and 13 volunteers (average age 29.5, range 22-54 years) were without any experience in relaxation exercises and served as controls. During the experimental period, the control group read in a comfortable position.

The findings of the study indicated that there were no substantial differences between the yoga and the control group concerning endocrine parameters and blood pressure. However, the course of heart rate was significantly different; heart rate for the yoga group decreased during the yoga practice. Significant differences between the groups were also found in psychological parameters. The yoga group showed markedly higher scores in life satisfaction and lower scores in excitability, aggressiveness, openness,
emotionality, and somatic complaints on the Freiburger Personality Inventory (Fahrenberg, Hampel, & Selg, 1984). Significant differences were observed concerning coping with stress with the controls having a higher tendency to react with aggression and self-pity, whereas the yogis tended to reduce stress by downplaying their situation. Finally, the yoga group had significant higher scores in high spirits and extravertedness, compared with the individuals in the control group.

As the participants for this study were volunteers, there is a possibility of sampling bias. One must question whether certain results concerning differences in mood were due to the intervention or if they existed previously and supported the decision to choose this technique of stress management. The researchers acknowledged that all psychological results could be the effect of the selection of groups. Thus, because of the non-random assignment to groups these results cannot be generalized. Because the individuals for the study were all female, the findings can not be generalized to include males.

Cusumano and Robinson (1992) explored the effects of Hatha yoga and progressive relaxation on heart rate, blood pressure, physical self-efficacy, and self-esteem of 95 female Japanese undergraduates residing in Japan. The research design used in the study was a 2 x 2 (treatment by time) factorial design. Each of the researchers led two groups of students (one yoga group and one progressive relaxation group) for three 80-minutes classes over a 3-week period. The Physical Self-efficacy Scale (Ryckman, Robbins, Thornton, &
Cantrell, 1982) and the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1979; Silber & Tippett, 1965) were used as dependent measures.

The results of the study indicated that both yoga and progressive relaxation were effective in lowering heart rate and blood pressure and increasing self-esteem. However, perceptions of physical self-efficacy declined over time for both the yoga and progressive relaxation groups. With a probability level set at $p<.05$, no significant differences were found between the treatment groups.

Although the participants completed a survey to assess perceived efficacy of the treatments at the end of the experiment, the authors provided no psychometric information on this survey. An interaction effect found for the demand characteristics survey indicated that the participants evaluated the treatments more highly when administered by the male group leader. The difference in age (20 years), gender, status (teacher/graduate), and nationality (American/Japanese) of the two group leaders could have accounted for these results as these factors were not controlled for. In order to cancel the confounding effect, it would have been more appropriate for the group leaders to be matched on demographic characteristics.

An interaction effect for treatment by group leader was found for the measure of average heart rate. The Hatha yoga group led by the male (biased in favor of the Hatha yoga treatment) did significantly better in lowering heart rate than did his progressive relaxation group, and the Hatha yoga group of the female leader. On the contrary, the progressive relaxation group of the female
leader (biased in favor of the progressive relaxation treatment) did significantly better in lowering heart rate than did her Hatha yoga group, or the progressive relaxation group of the male leader. It was acknowledged that the leaders may have induced differing emotional reactions in the participants that influenced their heart rates.

The researchers had predicted higher scores on physical self-efficacy and self-esteem for the Hatha yoga treatment than the progressive relaxation, which was not supported by the results. The experiment, however, lasted only 3 weeks and there is the possibility that change in the perception of one's body and the consequent influence on self-esteem brought about through Hatha yoga may require a longer period. Therefore, the measures of physical self-efficacy and self-esteem may not have been appropriate for the time span of this experiment.

The relative mood benefits of Hatha yoga and swimming were compared in Berger and Owen's (1992) study. Eighty-seven college students in two swimming classes (n=37), a yoga class (n=22), and a lecture-control class (n=28) completed the Profile of Mood States (McNair, Lorr, & Droppleman, 1971) and the State-Trait Inventory (Spielberger, Gorsuch, & Lushene, 1970).

A multivariate analysis of variance indicated that both yoga participants and swimmers reported greater decreases in scores on Anger, Confusion, Tension, and Depression than did the control group. The mood benefits of yoga supported Berger and Owen's (1988) earlier observation that exercise need not be aerobic to be associated with mood enhancement.
The interpretation of the study’s data is limited due to the fact that intact classes were used. The internal validity of the experiment rests on the equivalence of the treatment groups. In comparing age, gender, and initial preclass mood and anxiety scores of the controls and exercisers to determine possible differences in students selecting physical activity classes, two differences did emerge. Exercisers were higher on Vigor than members of the lecture class and yoga participants were higher on Anger than the lecture class. Only random assignment can provide us with a high degree of confidence that the differences between the groups on the posttest can be attributed to the treatment rather than to extraneous factors.

Venkatesh et al. (1994) examined personality differences between 40 adult practitioners of yoga (20 males and 20 females) and 40 adult controls (20 males and 20 females) who had no interest in yoga practice. Most of the individuals were in the age range of 20-29 years, the control group being somewhat younger than the yoga practitioners, particularly among the males.

The study was carried out to evaluate: (a) the effect of yogic practices on neuroticism and state-trait anxiety; (b) the correlates of such yogic practices in terms of type ‘A’ personality and stressful like events; and (c) the differences between yoga practitioners and controls on attitude towards yoga. The authors failed to provide any descriptive information on the frequency, intensity, and duration of the yoga program, which makes replication of the study very difficult.

The results of the study revealed that yoga practitioners had significantly lower mean scores on neuroticism, state and trait anxiety, and stressful life
events during the past year than non-yoga practitioners. However, the yoga practitioners also had more positive attitude towards yoga and showed significantly higher scores on social desirability than control males and females. No significant difference was found on type ‘A’ behavioral pattern.

Variables such as education, occupation, and age were uncontrolled in this experiment and thus these or other intervening variables could give rise to spurious or misleading results. The influence of these uncontrolled variables upon the dependent variables can not be assessed. Another concern with this study was the fact that the yoga practitioners had more positive attitude towards yoga than the control group. One must ask to what extent attitude contributed to the greater effect.

Wood (1993) examined the effects of three different procedures, relaxation, visualization, and yogic breathing and stretch on perceptions of physical and mental energy and on positive and negative mood states. The participants consisted of 71 volunteers ranging in age from 21 to 76. Volunteers were allocated to one of the three sub-groups, A, B, and C. Each sub-group underwent two sessions of each of the treatment procedures. Prior to and after the intervention, the participants completed visual analogue scales (Bond & Lader, 1974) to assess their feelings. The results indicated that a 30-minute session of yogic breathing and stretch exercises produced a significantly greater increase in perceptions of physical and mental energy and feelings of alertness and enthusiasm than the other two procedures (p<.05).
The fact that no control group was used in this study limits the interpretation of the results. The author claimed that no credible procedure, which did not contain substantial elements of at least some of the active interventions, could be devised. Another concern was the fact that group allocation made on a consecutive basis led to sub-group A containing a significantly ($p < .05$) higher proportion of men (68%) than sub-groups B (32%) or C (33%). The treatment groups obviously differed on gender. The author also stated that drop-outs were not replaced after the first session but does not indicate how many drop-outs there were or from which sub-group they left.

Latha and Kaliappan (1991) investigated the effectiveness of yoga and thermal biofeedback techniques in the management of stress and high blood pressure. Fourteen individuals with essential hypertension, ranging in age from 45 to 70 years, served as the sample for this study. All were on anti-hypertensive drugs but were free from any other abnormalities or pathological conditions. Initially 22 individuals were selected, however over a period of 9 months, 9 individuals dropped out due to various reasons.

Seven of the individuals underwent training in yoga and thermal biofeedback techniques and seven served as comparison group. Results showed a significant reduction in the systolic blood pressure during treatment phases. Moderate reduction in the diastolic pressure was noticed, only when the thermal feedback was introduced. This also corresponded to significant reduction in the intake of anti-hypertensive drugs.
This study could be expected to have a sampling bias with an attrition rate near 41%. The individuals who remain with a study until its completion are generally different from those who leave the study early. If the two groups were closely comparable at the outset, they may differ considerably at the end of the study because of this attrition. The small sample may have seriously limited the authors' power to detect significant effects.

The assessment measures employed in the study consisted of case history, blood pressure, temperature monitoring, schedule of daily events, symptoms, medication intake, and the Coping Behaviour Measure (Jalowiec, 1981). Two other measures employed were constructed by the investigators for the purpose of the study (i.e., Stress Questionnaire and Somatic Symptom Scale).

The Stress Questionnaire was piloted on a sample of 80 "normal" participants. Test-retest reliability on a sample of 30 individuals was .96. The authors failed to state the time interval between retests. This is an important factor as the test-retest method is subject to a number of biases accruing from the potential effects of recall, practice, and repetition. The questionnaire had a high content validity rating given by three judges.

The Somatic Symptom Scale received a test-retest reliability of .70. Once again, the time interval between retests was not stated. The authors claimed that the content validity was empirically supported as items for the instrument were based on extensive review of earlier somatic symptom scales. However, the absence of extensive reliability and validity data for the two measures
constructed by the investigators limits the interpretations that can be made from the study.

Latha and Kaliappan (1992) were involved in another study where the effect of yoga in the treatment of migraine and tension headaches was evaluated. The sample consisted of 20 headache patients (who were described as “mainly housewives”), attending private clinics. These individuals were diagnosed as either suffering from tension or migraine headaches. The age of the group ranged from 16 to 55 years. The individuals selected had not previously practiced any form of physical exercise, yoga, or meditation.

The study's aim was to investigate “the effect of yoga training on perception of stresses, coping pattern, symptom reporting, headache activity, and medication intake of migraine and tension headache patients” (p. 42). The participants were divided into two groups of 10 and were randomly assigned to yoga therapy group and a control group. The yoga therapy was administered for 4 months.

The assessment measures used in the study included rating scales for (a) headache intensity, duration, and frequency; (b) presence of accompanying symptoms; and (c) medication intake. No further information was provided on the scales. The second assessment tool used was a stress questionnaire developed by the researchers. Its purpose was to identify different sources of stresses as perceived by the participants, their coping responses under stressful situations, and also the somatization level. A pilot study on a random sample of 30 normal individuals yielded a co-efficient of stability of .82. With more information
provided on the assessment measures, one would be in a better position to evaluate their measurement validity and reliability.

The results of the study showed a significant reduction in the headache activity, medication intake, symptoms, and stress perception for individuals in the therapy group. These individuals also showed significant improvement in coping behaviour compared to those individuals in the control group.

Of concern is the fact that participant expectancy was not controlled for in this experiment. Therefore, the possibility that the observed benefits to the participants could have been due to their expectation rather than to any intrinsic effects of yoga can not be ruled out.

**Summary of the Quantitative Studies**

Research on yoga has included the study of several physiological and psychological variables related to the concept of stress and is suggestive of the favorable effects of yoga. Physiological changes such as lower heart rate and blood pressure and psychological changes such as decreased anxiety, tension, depression, and aggressiveness, and increased self-esteem and perception of vigor were all reported to be associated with the practice of yoga. Yoga participants also reported greater decreases in scores on anger and confusion and lower scores in excitability, emotionality, openness, and somatic complaints.

However, interpretation of the research results depends on the internal and external validity of the experiments. The most serious threats to the internal validity of the studies were biases resulting from lack of random assignment and lack of control groups. Also noted were concerns regarding attrition, effects of
researcher bias and researcher characteristics, weak operational definitions of the treatment procedures, and lack of information on assessment methods. In such situations, alternative explanations for change must be considered.

The quantitative studies do indicate an interest in evaluating the efficacy of yoga as a stress management technique and encourage further work and better research designs. However, the methodologies used in these studies, to some degree, necessarily presuppose the contents of the yoga participant's experience. In trying to answer the question of why something is, these methodologies presuppose an idea of what it is they are studying. These presuppositions limit our understanding of the phenomena.

Qualitative studies, on the other hand, are more concerned with studying phenomena from a holistic point of view that includes personal perspectives upon experience. These studies seek “to comprehend phenomena not on the basis of the researcher's perspective and categories, but from those of the participants in the situations studied” (Maxwell, 1992, p. 289). The meaning and quality of the individual's subjective experience is at the forefront when conducting such research.

**Qualitative Studies**

Several studies have examined the effects of yoga through qualitative research methods and include examining personal perspectives of the yoga participant's experience. The studies that follow make use of a qualitative framework and focus on various interrelated aspects of yoga. However, certain studies focused solely on the component of meditation.
Wilson (1985) examined the lifestyle and social structure of a yoga ashram (a residential retreat) in eastern Pennsylvania for a period of 5 years. The participants consisted of 70 men and women residing in the ashram. Interviews and participant observation were used as methods for data collection. The study described how the ashram facilitated processes whereby residents learned to release and prevent stress in their lives.

It was reported that various aspects of the ashram lifestyle (e.g., the formal practices, which included yoga postures, breathing techniques, and meditation, the diet, the guru-disciple relationship) all helped to gradually eliminate stress and tension from the lives of the residents. All residents interviewed listed stress-related symptoms (e.g., headaches, indigestion, muscular tension, anxiety, smoking, irritability, fatigue, etc.) that had vanished from their lives since moving to the ashram.

In assessing the value and trustworthiness of qualitative studies, it is imperative that the methodology of the study be explicated in detail so that the reader can judge whether it was adequate and made sense (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Wilson's (1985) description, however, of the procedures for data-collection and analysis was extremely limited and thus makes interpretation of the results difficult. Without this information, one cannot completely assess the credibility of the findings.

Through the use of participant observation, Wilson (1985) would have been in a position to gain insights and develop interpersonal relationships that would have been virtually impossible to achieve through any other method.
However, his participation could have also threatened the trustworthiness of the study. If the researcher allowed preconceived ideas and expectations to influence his observations, then, of course, the data collected becomes of suspicious value. As the use of other methods of data collection contributes greatly to our confidence in the findings, the researcher could have considered the use of audio or videotape recordings.

It has been stated that as the amount of direct observation and intensity increases, the chances improve of obtaining a valid and credible picture of the phenomena being studied (Borg & Gall, 1989). As Wilson (1985) was involved in this study for 5 years, the chances of the participants masking what was really going on was probably low due to the length of his involvement. Maturation, however, could be a concern here due to the study's length. Because the participants were adults, the chance of interference is less than if they were children.

Brownstein and Dembert (1989) conducted a case study with a 46-year-old Caucasian male U.S. Air Force aviator. This individual had a 6-year history of mild essential hypertension. The participant was instructed on how to practice yoga techniques (i.e., postures, breathing, and relaxation) at home and how to incorporate these into daily life activities. Other components of his management included use of personal daily blood pressure monitoring, continuation of his routine diet and exercise program, and gradual reduction of the hydrochlorothiazide medication over 3 weeks.
The participant was seen once a week for 6 weeks to observe that he was practicing his techniques correctly, to discuss his feelings over this revised regimen, to identify and use new coping mechanisms to reduce job and family-related stresses, and to evaluate his overall health and blood pressure. After 6 weeks, medication had been discontinued, and his diastolic blood pressure remained within normal levels. The individual was subsequently returned to full flight status without recurrence of diastolic hypertension at follow-up 6 months later.

There is, of course, no way of knowing how typical this selected case really is, and it is therefore rather unsafe to draw any general conclusion from the case study. The fact that this individual was chosen by the researchers could have affected the results. Studies have also found that intervention based on a combination of techniques is probably more likely to be effective in reducing symptoms of stress than intervention based on a single technique (Lehrer & Woolfolk, 1993). In addition to this, weight loss and exercise have been shown to reduce high blood pressure, even to the point where medication can be discontinued (Kaplan, 1986). Therefore, under these circumstances, it is difficult to attribute these changes to yoga.

Gifford-May and Thompson (1994) conducted a study that attempted to discover, through the detailed explications of meditators’ descriptions, the phenomenology of deep meditation experiences. The participants themselves decided what a “deep” experience was for them. The study also aimed to
discover whether a "general structure" of deep states of meditation could be found irrespective of meditation practices and traditions.

Ten participants were chosen for the study, four females and six males. The individuals varied in their length of meditation practice from 3 to 25 years. The authors stated that all participants were around middle-age and were from a variety of professional backgrounds. They came from the meditation traditions of Siddha yoga, Transcendental Meditation, Buddhism, and Kundalini yoga.

In the interview, participants were asked to describe their meditation experience, particularly the deep states that they had experienced. The interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was recorded. Data analysis was completed using “micro-explication” (Denne & Thompson, 1991) to get at the core of the meditation experiences. The analysis process consisted of the researchers reading all the transcribed interviews, breaking the text up into content units relevant to the research question, and further coding each thought or descriptive phrase. These central thoughts or descriptive phrases are known as elements (Denne & Thompson). Following this, the researchers wrote summary statements next to the relevant text that were typically close or even identical to the original language of the participants, or whenever possible, the statements were paraphrased and abstracted from the description. The summary statements were used to extract the individual constituents that were then compared and matched to each meditator’s description.

The phenomenological approach revealed three major constituents of deep states of meditation and it also revealed a complex range of experiences of
meditation. The three constituents of deep meditation experience were: (a) transcendence beyond the normal physical and mental boundaries of the self; (b) a different sense of reality; and (c) positive emotion. Only the first constituent was experienced by all 10 meditators, and thus can be considered invariant. It was found that common experiences might arise irrespective of expectations or beliefs.

This study did not follow the experiences of meditators longitudinally; therefore, it is not possible to conclude that the descriptions of transcendence reflect an experience over time. However, all the participants did practice meditation for a number of years. It is possible that the described transcendence is a cumulative outcome of long-term practice.

Pollio, Henley, and Thompson (1997) posit that for a phenomenological study to be judged valid, the researcher’s procedures must be rigorous, and they must be appropriate for yielding the type of understanding claimed by the study. In addition to this, the interpretation of the data must provide insight to the reader. Insight can be assessed in terms of plausibility (whether the reader is able to see the relation between the interpretation and the data) and illumination (any interpretation should allow the reader to see the phenomena in a different light and to allow for a new understanding).

In examining Gifford-May and Thompson’s (1994) study in light of the above concepts, a concern that arises is the fact that the authors stated that their presuppositions and biases were bracketed; however, they gave no indication as to what these may have been. Without this information, it is difficult to assess
whether or not the researchers imposed their biases on the participants either during the interview or in subsequent interpretation. Because the orientation a researcher brings to the data shapes its interpretation, it is necessary that this orientation to the phenomenon be made explicit. In doing so, the researcher provides the reader with the opportunity to understand his or her interpretations of the data. Gifford-May and Thompson did present evidence from participants’ quotes to demonstrate the connection between themes and the participant’s perspective on his or her lived experience. The text appears to support the interpretations made by the researchers.

Although Gifford-May and Thompson’s (1994) study represents a methodical and systematic look into the phenomenon of deep meditation, it does not examine yoga from an integrative perspective encompassing all its components (i.e., postural exercises, breathing exercises, and meditation). The study’s focus is not on the full description of yoga, nor on examining this issue in relation to stress management. As a result, the question remains as to what the lived experiences of those who practice yoga are in relation to stress management.

In another study conducted by Barnes (1980/1981), the basic structure of meditation was examined once again. This study involved a phenomenological investigation of meditation as it was understood and performed by serious followers of Transcendental Meditation, Yoga (Integral) Meditation, and Ignatian Meditation. The method used for the study was empirical phenomenological
reflection (Colaizzi, 1978), which aims at a descriptive understanding of the phenomenon by reflectively disclosing its meaning.

There were six participants involved in the study, one male and one female for each of the three forms of meditation considered. Each person had been practicing meditation from 1 to 2 years and was interviewed four times over a 6-month period, covering all participants in 18 months.

In analysing the data, a process of reflective analysis bearing upon the personal descriptions of the individuals was utilized. This lead to one particularized and one general structure for each of the meditations that were considered. The results of the investigation were expressed in three parts: (a) the historical portrait as a typical setting for each type of meditation; (b) three concrete structures grounded in the particularity of the individual's accounts; and (c) three general structures of the phenomenon apart from the individuating limitations of any one experience. The study concluded that "meditation represents the progressive interiorization of a specialized world view by which everyday experience is spontaneously perceived and evaluated according to its 'salvific' significance" (Barnes, 1980/1981, p. 4243).

In comparing the studies by Barnes (1980/1981) and Gifford-May and Thompson (1994), it is evident that the time period for practicing meditation varied substantially between the different studies. Barnes' participants had practiced meditation from 1 to 2 years, whereas those individuals in Gifford-May and Thompson's study had practiced from 3 to 25 years. Despite these
differences the resulting thematic descriptions do appear harmonious with one another.

Barnes' (1980/1981) study, once again, focused solely on the psychological experience of meditation as did Gifford-May and Thompson's (1994). Although these studies may contribute to our knowledge base regarding meditation, they contribute little to the exploration of the issue of yoga from an integrative perspective. We are still left without a rich and full description of yoga encompassing all its components.

Edwards (1987) described the process of change and the long-term effects and changes ascribed to the practice of Siddha yoga that involves meditation, chanting, and mantra repetition. The descriptions of change were based on 13 yoga participants' perspectives. Edwards employed Spradley's (1979) ethnographic method to minimize the bias introduced by his theoretical perspective.

The sample consisted of 13 participants who had been practicing Siddha yoga for 10 or more years. The participants were from three different subgroups, householders (n=4), ashramites (n=4), and swamis (n=5). Each individual participated in a series of three in-depth interviews and completed a written validation procedure where they were asked to add, delete, or otherwise correct the researcher's conclusions regarding their experiences of Siddha yoga.

The results of the study indicated that the participants ascribed 169 types of long-term change to the practice of Siddha Yoga, and included seven categories: physical, mental, emotional, conceptual, relational, attitudinal, and
values and priorities. The participants emphasized mind-related changes rather than physical or relational changes. The process of change was described in 11 themes concerning the purification process and 33 themes on the guru/disciple relationship. The individuals indicated that the change process is governed by the awakened Kundalini (life energy) and that the development of the guru/disciple relationship is central to the change process.

The investigator in this study considered himself a “yogi-scientist.” As he was the main instrument for collecting data in the study, factors such as biases, changes in perception, and subjectivity can all bring about changes in the instrument. A change in what is observed and how it is interpreted can be a very serious threat to the internal validity of the study. Unless such changes are carefully recorded, which requires a great deal of insight, the data collected earlier in the study will not be comparable to the data collected later on.

Both Edwards (1987) and Wilson's (1985) study points to the importance of the guru-disciple relationship in the participants' experiences. Even though Wilson focused more on the integrative aspects of yoga (e.g., postures, breathing techniques, meditation, diet), and Edwards focused more on meditation, the guru-disciple relationship was acknowledged as a critical factor in the change process.

In using Spradley's (1979) ethnographic method, Edwards (1987) had the participants validate his conclusions as a way of checking to make sure that he was not distorting the descriptions of the culture or environment. This process of validation is recommended by some qualitative researchers (e.g., Miles &
Huberman, 1994; Spradley, 1979). Giorgi (1989), on the other hand, questions this process and states that we should not be placing the participant in such a situation where he or she is expected to make psychological sense of the data. Giorgi states that there is no problem in going back to the participants to clarify ambiguous points in the original description, but the problem arises when the individuals are asked to evaluate a psychological interpretation of their own description, either implicitly or explicitly. This task is, after all, part of the researcher's role as an expert in his or her field.

**Summary of the Qualitative Studies**

The qualitative studies reviewed highlighted a number of different aspects with regards to the practice of yoga. For example, the social structure of an ashram was implicated in eliminating residents' stress, and long-term changes, primarily mind-related, were attributed to the practice of Siddha Yoga. Phenomenological investigations into the practice of meditation revealed general structures of the practice (Barnes, 1980/1981; Gifford-May & Thompson, 1994). In addition, the blood pressure of an individual with essential hypertension returned to normal levels following his participation in yoga techniques, blood pressure monitoring, and a diet and exercise program. These studies tend to suggest that the experience of yoga, and meditation in particular, is related to a sense of well-being.

Qualitative research has its own procedures for addressing the scientific adequacy of investigations. These procedures are different from those of the quantitative approaches. The concepts of generalizability, reliability, and validity
so commonly used in quantitative research are replaced with such concepts as trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, and confirmability. In the reviewed studies, concerns regarding the trustworthiness of the findings were noted. Issues such as lack of information on methodology, failure to make presuppositions explicit, and possible biases resulting from the use of participant observation and interviews were addressed.

**Summary and Critique**

Despite the inherent difficulties in the quantitative studies, most tentatively point to similar conclusions. The research is suggestive of beneficial effects of yoga practice on stress-related symptoms (e.g., lowering heart rate and blood pressure, state and trait anxiety, stressful life events, headaches), compared with control groups.

Although the quantitative studies indicated changes resulting from the practice of yoga, the studies were limited in a number of ways. Due to the nature of these studies, only certain concepts and variables have been explored, artificial time frames have been used for yoga practice, and studies have relied solely on college students as samples. The use of quantitative methods in investigations of yoga for stress management raises the question of how fully the description of the experience reflects the reality of the lived experience. The research has made basic assumptions without drawing on individual experience. Our understanding of yoga may have been as much restricted as developed by these endeavors.
Qualitative studies, with their focus on the individual's subjective experience, can address the issue of yoga and stress management from a different perspective. The studies reviewed, however, had a different gaze on the phenomenology of yoga than the one proposed in the present study. The majority of the studies focused on meditation, thereby ignoring the broader aspect of the yoga experience. The studies did not explore the breadth of the impact of yoga, particularly as it relates to stress management.

No studies were found to date that investigated the participants' subjective impressions of the experience of yoga as it relates to the management of stress in their lives. It is clear that previous research has not conceptualized the problem in terms of this process. This leads to the conclusion that this particular area of focus has not yet been adequately explored. Yoga theorists (e.g., Nuernberger, 1981; Sethi, 1987b; Udupa, 1985) claim that the practice is of great value to the management of stress in one's life and popular belief supports this; however, the question remains as to what the individual experiences of this phenomenon are.

Studies of experience must begin with a phenomenological framework because other kinds of research methodologies assume a prior definition of the experience being investigated (Rahilly, 1993). Further examination of the subjective experiences of yoga in relation to stress management will enhance our understanding of this phenomenon. The knowledge gained through the present study is relevant for clinical applications of yoga and stress management.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter is intended to provide an understanding of both the underlying concepts and the procedures that guided the design and implementation of this research project. In the following pages, I discuss the specific research method used for this study and describe the procedures employed for data collection and analysis. The chapter concludes with an examination of the issue of trustworthiness as it relates to this study.

Research Design

The research question guiding this study was “What is the lived experience of participants who practice yoga in relation to the management of stress in their lives?” As the primary focus of this study was to explore the participant’s subjective experience of yoga in relation to stress management, a phenomenological research method was used to guide the data collection and analysis. According to Giorgi (1970) and Knaack (1984), the phenomenological model allows the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the participant’s experience than would other models. As this approach allows the participant’s own frame of reference and view of social reality to be shared, it is the most appropriate means of obtaining a description and a deeper understanding of the meaning of an experience (MacMillan & Schumancher, 1989). This method is particularly valuable when one is studying a phenomenon that little is known about (Colaizzi, 1978; Yin, 1984).
The phenomenological research method has its origins in phenomenology as a philosophy and in the study of perception and consciousness (Giorgi, 1985; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Misiak & Sexton, 1973). As methodology rests upon philosophy (Colaizzi, 1978), conceptual clarity demands an understanding of the subsequent reasoning.

**Philosophical Foundations of Phenomenology**

Edmund Husserl is generally recognized as the founder of phenomenology. The discipline of phenomenology was intended to be a science of consciousness (Husserl, 1913/1931) and involved “inquiring back into the ultimate source of all the formations of knowledge” (Husserl, 1936/1970, p. 97). Husserl “reasoned that if consciousness is our primordial window on the world, then an understanding of human knowledge would be best based upon an understanding of consciousness” (cited in Osborne, 1990, p. 80). For Husserl, consciousness was “the source of all ontology and the basis of any true epistemology” (cited in Hanna, 1993, p. 183).

According to Husserl (1913/1982), pure consciousness and its resulting intuitions could bring about a verifiable certainty of knowledge that had always eluded philosophy. Husserl believed that knowledge of the structures of consciousness was the result of a kind of pure “seeing” unconnected with the activity of thinking. Knowledge, for Husserl, was not theoretical or intellectual, but intuitive.

Husserl (1971) devised a method, generally known as “phenomenological reduction,” as a way to see the world as it is in itself—and then to accurately
describe what was seen. The ultimate aim of the approach was to reach and grasp the essences of things appearing in the consciousness. In the exploration of consciousness, all biases, theories, beliefs, and habitual modes of thinking must be suspended or "bracketed." Husserl was convinced that through his method one could attain a level of inquiry that was free of presuppositions.

A second branch of phenomenology, known as the existential or hermeneutic phenomenology was developed by Martin Heidegger (1963/1972). Heidegger was an assistant to and student of Edmund Husserl's for many years (Hanna, 1993). "While Husserl considered consciousness to be primordial, Heidegger assigned primordial status to Being" (Hanna, 1993, p. 187). "Husserlian ontology sees Being as object to transcendental consciousness.... [and] moves away from the existential to the ideal and an anonymous consciousness" (Osborne, 1994, p. 173). Heidegger, on the other hand, chose Being as the fundamental principle of phenomenology and demonstrated an interest in understanding the whole person's existence, and not just consciousness.

A major point of division appears to exist between the two primary branches of phenomenology. Husserlian phenomenology asserts that we can actually see "things as they are" through intuitive seeing (Osborne, 1994). This is achieved through the process of bracketing and reduction. Existential or hermeneutic phenomenology does not believe in this attempt to achieve presuppositionless knowing and asserts that the presence of interpretation is unavoidable (Osborne).
What seems to prevail in contemporary phenomenological research in psychology is a compromise between the views of Husserl and Heidegger. The use of bracketing is common procedure in the phenomenological method to attempt to identify some, if not all, of the researcher's presuppositions.

**Contemporary Phenomenological Methodology**

The phenomenological research method emphasizes descriptive and interpretive procedures that will allow a phenomenon to reveal its essence (Valle, King, & Halling, 1989). The method articulates the embedded role of the researcher and the dialogical relationship with the participants involved in the study (Van Manen, 1984). According to Giorgi (1985), the researcher's attitude is defined as open and atheoretical yet reflective and questioning.

As the primary task of the researcher is to reveal the meaning of the participant's experience, the researcher must attempt to articulate his or her own personal biases or predictions and temporarily suspend or “bracket” them (Denne & Thompson, 1991; Giorgi, 1975). Osborne (1994) states that this process of rigorous self-reflection “involves a gradual shift from one's natural attitude (conditioned way of experiencing the world) to a more conscious awareness of one's presuppositions and development of transcendental attitude” (p. 170).

The purpose of suspending or “bracketing” one's biases is to reduce the potential for contamination by the researcher's assumptions, of the understanding of the participant's experience. By making one's assumptions explicit, this will enable those who read reports of the research to consider the
researcher's perspective through which the participant's descriptions and meanings are understood (Giorgi, 1975; Osborne, 1990).

**Bracketing My Own Presuppositions**

Osborne (1990) states that bracketing one's orientation to the phenomenon is one way in which the validity of the phenomenological researcher's interpretations can be assessed. In attempting to make explicit my assumptions and expectations regarding the present study, I must question myself as to why I am asking this particular research question and what biases and presuppositions I hold.

My own experience with yoga prompted my interest in this study, having been involved in the practice, irregularly, for the past 10 years. Also through my work in the helping profession and other personal experiences, over the years I have developed an interest in the ability of individuals to cope with stress in their lives in such a manner that their physical and mental health are not negatively affected. Based on my life experiences and my readings of the literature on stress management and yoga, I have identified the following preexisting thoughts and feelings that are relevant to this study:

(a) Managing one's stress levels in a positive manner is essential to one's mental and physical health.

(b) The phenomenological approach will provide a means to understand the experience of yoga in relation to the management of stress in one's life and will enable me to enter into the lived experience of the participant in a caring manner.
(c) Practicing yoga allows me to feel a sense of attunement with my physical body and a sense of inner peace. The physical postures provide me with a strong physical workout, whereas the breathing techniques help center me and move energy through my body. Meditation allows for the integration of all that is and grounds me in a sense of calmness. In doing yoga, my ability to cope with stress increases as I nourish my body, mind, and spirit.

(d) I assume that the reality that I perceive as indicated in the above paragraph is similar to that perceived by other people who practice yoga and that this practice enables these individuals to manage stress in a positive manner.

**Data Collection and Procedures**

**Recruitment and Selection of Participants**

In circumscribing a context within which to study this experience and in selecting appropriate participants, care was taken to ensure that both the context and participants would be the most revealing of the phenomenon (Barrell, Aanstoos, Richards, & Arons, 1987). According to Patton (1990), qualitative research typically focuses on moderately small samples that are selected purposefully to create richly varied descriptions of the phenomenon being investigated. Patton claims that there are no set rules for sample size in qualitative investigations, and that in-depth information from a small number of individuals can be very worthwhile, particularly if the cases are information-rich.

It is stated in the literature that the following two criteria are sufficient when selecting participants for a study: (a) the participant needs to have had the
experience with the topic under investigation; and (b) the participant needs to have the willingness and ability to communicate this experience (Colaizzi, 1978; Polkinghorne, 1989; Osborne, 1990).

As the purpose of this study was to explore in-depth the lived experiences of those who practice yoga and how they perceive this in relation to their management of stress, sampling was purposive rather than random. I selected six participants who met the following requirements: (a) the participant had had the experience investigated by this research question; (b) the participant's yoga practice involved the three components of postural exercises, breathing exercises, and meditation; (c) the participant had the capacity to articulate a full and sensitive description of the experience; (d) the individual was willing and able to communicate their experience in English; and (e) both female and/or male individuals were welcome to participate. A sample size of six was appropriate for the purpose of this study and proved adequate in providing enough data to extract common themes from the participants' descriptions and to learn about the phenomenon being investigated.

The participants for this study were recruited by the following process. The letter of initial contact (refer to Appendix A) was posted at community-based centres around the Greater Vancouver Area, British Columbia. This letter, explaining the purpose of the study, was also sent to the instructors who taught at these centres. A total of seven individuals telephoned to inquire about the study. Six of these individuals were screened over the telephone to determine if they met the inclusion criteria for the study. I informed each of them of the nature
of the research and explained that I was interested in their experience with yoga and how they perceived this in relation to their management of stress. As the first six individuals who inquired met the criteria and were interested in participating in the study, I thanked the seventh person for his interest and informed him that I had obtained the necessary participants for the study.

An appointment was booked with the individuals for the first in-depth data collection interview and the options for the location of the interview were discussed. Two of the participants chose to have the first interview at the community centre where they taught, three chose their home, and one chose to have the interview at The University of British Columbia.

**The Data Collection Interview**

According to Osborne (1994), the interview is the most commonly used means of gathering data for a phenomenological research study. The aim of phenomenological interviewing is to get as close to the prereflective experience of the person as possible. By making the interview process minimally intrusive and allowing the individual’s experience to present itself as spontaneously as possible, the researcher is able to elicit descriptions of how the individual perceives things (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975). As the purpose of this study was to uncover and describe the participants' perspectives on events, the subjective view was what mattered. I was not looking for specific answers but attempting to gain a deeper understanding of the experience of yoga as it related to the management of stress in one’s life.
Although the length of each interview with the participants varied, the average length was approximately 1½ hours. The interviews took place during the 3 months following the recruitment effort and were recorded on audio-tapes to assist with data collection and analysis. At the beginning of the first interview, I introduced myself and endeavored to establish trust and rapport with the participants. Trust is a crucial factor in the relationship between the researcher and the participant as it encourages authentic descriptions of the individual's experience (Osborne, 1990). I verbally explained the informed consent form (refer to Appendix B) that outlined the purpose and logistics of the study, and answered any questions about what was involved or expected by the participants. The participants were reminded that their involvement in the study was completely voluntary and that they were free to withdraw at any time. Participants were also advised that they could refrain from answering questions that they felt uncomfortable with, and could also ask to have the audio-tape turned off at any time.

During this introduction, issues surrounding confidentiality were discussed and participants were invited to choose a pseudonym for use in all oral and written reports of the study. When both parties agreed to proceed, the participants were asked to read and sign two copies of the informed consent form and to retain one for their own personal records. Background information was collected from each participant at this time, which included brief demographic questions related to age, education, and employment status (refer to Appendix C).
The purpose of the first interview was to obtain a detailed, in-depth description of the yoga participant's perspective of his or her practice as it related to managing stress in his or her life. The goal was to understand the meaning that the participant makes of his or her experience. In setting up the interview, I explained to the participant that I was interested in understanding how they personally experienced yoga in relation to managing their stress levels. I began each interview by reading the interview script (refer to Appendix D) to each participant to ensure the context of the study was presented in a consistent manner. The script involved asking the participants to think back to a recent time when they were involved in doing yoga and they perceived it as having an effect on their level of stress. I asked that they describe this experience in a full and detailed manner.

During the interview, I used non-leading questions and attempted to make the interview process as minimally intrusive as possible. As I wanted to allow the individual's experience to reveal itself as spontaneously as possible, prompts were used only when deemed necessary to help further articulate, elaborate, or clarify unclear phrases or concepts. Open-ended questions, paraphrasing, and reflection were used at times throughout the interview to assist in gaining an in-depth understanding of the experience. I sought to help participants use their own words, thought patterns, and values when responding to the questions. I occasionally referred to a list of prepared questions (refer to Appendix E) that were used to help orient, organize, and create a clearing for the phenomenon to appear and to deepen participants' self-exploration of their experience. The
interview came to an end when the participant had described his or her experience of yoga to his or her satisfaction.

Prior to ending the interview, I asked each participant if he or she had any other information that they wanted to add. The participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions or discuss their experience of the interview. I briefly explained the forthcoming process of transcription and data analysis. I informed each participant that I would be giving them a copy of the results section and contacting them for a follow-up (i.e., validation) interview.

Detailed field notes were recorded immediately following each interview in order to document the participant’s demeanor and behaviour (verbal and non-verbal), the emotional climate of the interview, and any notable distractions or disruptions that took place. As well, I recorded my subjective impressions of how I felt the interview proceeded, including my role as researcher, any impressions that I had about the interview content, and finally any personal reactions or biases that arose. This information was helpful in establishing a context for interpreting and making sense of the interviews.

Upon completing my first audio-taped interview, the faculty supervisor of this study reviewed the audio-tape prior to any further interviews taking place. The supervisor provided me with feedback regarding the manner in which I conducted the interview and whether or not there was any indication of my personal bias influencing the interview process. Minor suggestions were made regarding the timing of my use of paraphrasing and reflection. This feedback was taken into consideration and implemented during subsequent interviews.
Data Analysis

Given my research question and design, the data obtained through this study were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. Following each interview, the audio-tapes were reviewed in order to get an initial sense of the participant's experience and to become more familiar with the content of the interview. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim using a Dictaphone machine and computer word-processing software. ViaVoice (1998) software was also used at times throughout this process. The pages of each transcript were line numbered thus allowing me to easily return to the specific text when necessary.

In using Colaizzi's (1978) approach to data analysis, the transcriptions were subjected to the following analysis:

(a) the transcribed interviews were read thoroughly to get a full sense of the participant's experience.

(b) the interviews were read through several more times with the specific aim of extracting significant phrases or sentences that directly pertain to the investigated phenomenon.

(c) assuming a psychological perspective towards the phrases or sentences and with a focus on the phenomenon being described, the meaning of each significant statement was expressed. These are known as formulated meanings and were derived through the use of creative insight (i.e., a leap from what the participants say to what
they mean). Each formulated meaning was recorded along with its corresponding text and its location (i.e., line number).

(d) these formulated meanings were then organized into preliminary themes according to similarities within the participant’s protocol.

(e) the above steps were repeated for each protocol until all the transcripts were analysed. The extracted themes were then organized into clusters of themes that were common to all the participants’ protocols. These clusters of themes were referred back to the original protocols in order to validate them.

(f) an ongoing process of comparison and revision of these preliminary themes led to the identification of five common themes that were universal to all the participants’ protocols. These themes were then presented in an exhaustive description of the investigated topic.

Throughout the process of recording, clustering, and synthesizing categories to discover themes, I remained aware of the need to bracket any presuppositions that arose as I reflected on the meaning of the descriptions. Through engaging in a continuous process of comparison and revision, I felt confident that the language used to describe the participants’ experiences was accurate and consistent. The analysis resulted in the identification of five common themes that were evident in each participant’s protocol. Although each theme was present in all the participants’ descriptions, some of the themes appeared more significant to some individuals than others. Furthermore, there
was considerable variability in how these themes were manifested in the participants' lived experiences.

**The Validation Interview**

Having the participants validate the researcher's conclusions as a way of checking to make sure that the researcher is not distorting the descriptions of the culture or environment is one process of validation. As mentioned earlier, this process is suggested by some qualitative researchers (e.g., Miles & Huberman, 1994; Spradley, 1979). Giorgi (1989), however, questions this process and states that we should not be placing the participant in such a situation where he or she is expected to make psychological sense of the data. Giorgi believes that the responsibility for psychological interpretations of the data lies within the role of the researcher, not that of the research participant.

Keeping the above statements in mind, a copy of the results section was mailed to each participant and a validation interview was conducted via telephone. The purpose of this interview was to share with the participants the themes that had evolved from the interviews and to provide them with an opportunity to express any opinions or views that they may have had regarding the themes. Each participant was asked if they could relate to these themes and if they felt that I had portrayed their experience in an accurate manner. The participants were also asked for any feedback regarding their biographical information. Any reactions or responses that the participants had were documented during our telephone conversation. This concluding interview
allowed for the voice of the participants to be further heard and assisted in increasing the trustworthiness of this study.

As a result of the validation interview, participants reported feeling as though I had accurately captured the essence of their yoga experience as it related to stress management. In addition, none of the participants felt the need to provide any further information or clarification. Most of the individuals voiced their appreciation for the follow-up telephone contact.

Trustworthiness of the Study

In examining the issue of validity in the context of qualitative research, one comes across such concepts as trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Polkinghorne (1989) suggests that validity involves the question of whether the findings can be trusted and whether they can be used as the basis for actions. Pollio et al. (1997) presents a conception of validity that includes methodological concerns of rigor and appropriateness and experiential concerns of plausibility and illumination. According to Barrell et al. (1987) "the test of a structure's validity is the extent to which it explicates the sense of the subject's original description without imposing any sense that cannot be grounded in that original description" (p. 452).

In order to enhance the credibility of this study, a number of steps were implemented throughout the project. Prior to conducting the first interview, my own framework and assumptions were explored and documented thus ensuring that I was more aware of these as I proceeded with the research. In selecting participants for the study, care was taken to ensure that information was
collected from a diverse range of individuals and settings. No two participants in this study came from the same community centre. This reduced the risk of chance associations and allowed for a better assessment of the generality of the themes that emerged. The participants also ranged in age (i.e., 22 to 53) and varied in the length of time (i.e., 2 to 11 years) that they had been practicing yoga.

In carrying out the interview with the participants, I attempted not to ask leading questions or closed or short-answer questions as these do not give participants the opportunity to reveal their own perspective. As mentioned previously, detailed field notes were recorded immediately following the interviews that included any observations about the participants or myself in relation to the interview process or setting. As the aim in qualitative research is not to eliminate researcher influence but to understand it and to use it productively, I tried to ensure that biases, changes in perception, and subjectivity were noted throughout data collection and analysis. By being aware of such processes and trying to remain objective with the data, I believe the risk for potential contamination by my presuppositions of the participant's experience was reduced.

According to Maxwell (1996), the main threat to valid interpretation is imposing one's own framework or meaning, rather than understanding the participant's perspective and the meaning that they attach to their own words and actions. In analysing the data, I systematically attempted to learn how the participants made sense of what had gone on for them in their lived experiences.
I endeavored to listen for each participant's meaning and retain the meaning of the participant's language by using his or her own words. In doing an analysis, it is also important that the researcher consider alternative interpretations and explanations of the data (Polkinghorne, 1989). I intentionally attempted to identify and analyse any competing explanations and discrepant data. As part of doing this, I would often take a break from analysing the material and return to it when my mind was refreshed. I also requested that a colleague review the themes with the corresponding text to provide feedback regarding any biases or assumptions that might be evident or any flaws in my logic. The validation interview was an opportunity for me to receive feedback from the participants regarding any misinterpretation of the meaning of their experiences. The challenge, after all, in analysing the data is to capture the understandings and perspectives of the participants' experiences and to try to minimize the effect of translating their views incorrectly (Owen, 1994).

**Summary**

A qualitative methodology was used as a framework for obtaining a prereflective description of the lived experiences of individuals involved in the practice of yoga. Participants for the study were selected on the basis of their ability and willingness to describe their yoga experience as it related to the management of stress in their lives. Six volunteers were interviewed for the study, ranging in age and the length of time they had been practicing. The interviews were recorded on audio-tapes and then transcribed, thus providing the data for the analysis. Field notes were also taken following the interviews with the
participants. Data analysis was conducted according to the phenomenological method as outlined by Colaizzi (1978). Completion of data analysis resulted in the identification of five common themes.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Introduction

In this chapter, the common themes or similarities of experiences as reported by the six participants who were interviewed for this study are presented. Prior to a detailed description of these themes, a brief biographical sketch of each participant is presented. The biographical information is provided in order to gain a better understanding of the participants who volunteered for this study, as well as to provide the basis and context for further analysis. Each participant's yoga practice did involve the three components of postural exercises, breathing exercises, and meditation. Pseudonyms have been employed for each of the participants to assure their anonymity.

Background of Participants

Carmen

Carmen is a 34-year-old Caucasian woman who is married and is the step-mother of two teenage boys. She was originally born in Ontario and moved to British Columbia 11 years ago. Carmen is currently self-employed, owning and operating an inspirational bookstore in the Greater Vancouver Area. She also teaches yoga on a regular basis and has been practicing yoga herself for the past 10 years. At the age of 18, Carmen was in a car accident that resulted in her back being broken. As part of her medical treatment, she had steel rods placed in her back. She suffered with chronic back pain for 6 years and first began yoga in an attempt to manage this pain. Carmen also suffered from anorexia nervosa and described herself as "very sick" when she first began practicing yoga. During
our interview, Carmen spoke about a skiing accident that had happened 2 months prior to our meeting. She described this incident as both physically and emotionally stressful for her as she had injured her knee and was concerned about her ability to teach yoga.

**Joe**

Joe is a 45-year-old Pakistani male who is married and is the father of three children. He has spent most of his life in Pakistan, coming to Canada only 4 years ago. Joe is self-employed and teaches yoga once a week at a community centre. He also offers private yoga lessons as well. Joe has been practicing yoga for 11 years and initially began the practice in Karachi on the recommendation of his wife. As part of his study of yoga, Joe travelled to India where he attended a weeklong yoga course at the Classical Institute of Yoga in Bombay. He found this experience to be “fascinating” and if possible, he would like to return to the Institute for a longer period of time. Joe's religious background is that of Zoroastrian and he believes that this religion is closely related to yoga philosophy. During our interview, Joe spoke about an incident that had taken place 3 months prior to our meeting where he was driving in Vancouver traffic in the rain and feelings of frustration arose for him.

**Marg**

Marg is a 53-year-old Caucasian woman who is married and is the mother of three boys, ages 18, 19, and 21 years old. She has an undergraduate degree in nursing and works part-time as a registered nurse at a hospital in the Greater Vancouver Area. Marg described herself as being a very active person, juggling
many different tasks over the years in her various roles as mother, wife, employee, and volunteer. She is actively involved as a volunteer in her community and has sat on a number of committees organizing a variety of events. Marg presently teaches yoga at the local community centre three times a week and has been practicing herself for 6 years. During our interview, Marg shared how she had been involved in a difficult surgery 2 months prior where an 18-year-old boy lost his eye. This incident was very upsetting to her as the medical team had worked very hard to save the boy’s eye but was not successful in doing so.

**Amanda**

Amanda is a 22-year-old Caucasian woman who has just recently been married. She currently spends her time studying at The University of British Columbia in the Department of Education. She will be completing her studies in the upcoming year and is planning to pursue a career as a teacher. Amanda is also employed on a part-time basis at a local community centre as a yoga teacher. She has been practicing yoga herself since the age of 16 and was originally encouraged by her sister to take her first course. She has continued taking classes from this same teacher ever since. Amanda places a high value on her relationships with her family of origin and lives in close proximity to both her family members as well as her husband’s family. During our interview, Amanda shared an incident that had taken place that week where she was feeling “stressed out” and “worried”. She had spent 2 hours travelling on the bus between The University of British Columbia and her home, she was behind in her
reading material for her classes, and she was worried about finding a substitute teacher to cover her yoga class.

**Chantal**

Chantal is a 52-year-old Caucasian woman who has never been married. She is currently employed on a contract basis doing editorial work in the lower mainland and enjoys her work tremendously. She is quite academically inclined and has taken various courses at The University of British Columbia. Chantal has been practicing yoga for 6 years and teaches classes twice a week. She originally began yoga at a time in her life when she was “in search of some kind of spiritual mentor” and was attempting to work through her personal issues. Chantal experienced sexual abuse as a child, perpetrated by her parents, and described herself as being very dissociated when she first began yoga due to the pain and the trauma of this experience. During our interview, Chantal spoke about an incident that had happened 6 years prior that she believes led her into starting yoga. She had been renting a home that was destroyed in a house fire and she lost all her personal belongings. At that time, she was left with no place to live, no income, and no belongings, as she had no rental insurance to replace her personal effects.

**Sasha**

Sasha is a 28-year-old Caucasian woman who has been married for 4 years. She is the mother of a 4-year-old girl and at the time of the interview was 6 months pregnant with her second child. She was planning a home birth with the assistance of a mid-wife and the support of her family members. Sasha is
originally from Edmonton and moved to British Columbia to study at the University of Victoria. She received her Child and Youth Care Degree from this university and presently works on a full-time basis in the social services field with youth. Sasha has been practicing yoga for 2 years at a local community centre and is planning to continue her classes throughout her pregnancy. Her other interests include playing the piano, reading, rock climbing, and spending time with her family and friends. During our interview, Sasha shared a work-related incident where she was attempting to assist a teenage mother who was experiencing a very difficult time. Sasha was "feeling a lot of stress around" trying to help and support this young person and her baby.

**Description of Common Themes**

The process of data analysis revealed five common themes that reflected the experience of all of the participants in this study. Although each of the individuals’ experiences differed in many aspects, significant similarities in how they experienced yoga in relation to their management of stress did emerge from the in-depth interviews. Due to the constraints of language, the identified themes are presented in a style that may suggest that the participants experienced them in a discrete, discontinuous, or possibly sequential manner. However, the participants in this study did not experience these themes in isolation to one another. The identified themes frequently overlapped and interacted with each other in a way that reflects the complex nature of the participants’ experiences with yoga. Instances of this overlap are evident in the descriptions that follow.
The five themes that emerged from the participants' accounts are discussed below. Specific excerpts, quoted verbatim, from the interviews have been chosen with the intent to best capture and reveal the essence and meaning of the participants' experiences with yoga. The order in which these themes are presented is random and does not reflect the relative importance or frequency of the participant's experience. The themes are as follows:

1. A heightened sense of bodily awareness.
2. A sense of being grounded, calm, and peaceful.
3. An enhanced awareness of self and the present moment.
5. A trust in the process of life.

**A Heightened Sense of Bodily Awareness**

All of the participants in this study reported that their connection to and awareness of their physical body was a very important aspect of their experience with yoga in relation to the management of their stress. The participants spoke at length about how yoga assisted them in becoming "more in tune" with what was happening in their physical bodies. The process of becoming "more aware" of what was going on in their physical body involved learning to be "more present" in their body and more conscious of their bodily felt sensations and feelings. By learning "to listen" to their bodies more acutely, the participants were better able to receive subtle messages emerging from their bodies. The participants experienced these somatic processes as being interrelated to what was going on both emotionally and psychologically for them.
For four of the six participants, the experience of “going back into their body” figured significantly in their stories. These individuals spoke of how yoga assisted them in bringing their attention from an external focus to more of an internal focus. “Instead of somewhere out here worrying about something that’s out there…. It brought me back into my body. So it made me focus on what was happening in my body.”

One woman, who was anorexic when she first began yoga, described her initial sense of disconnection from her body: “My teacher said like I had breath like in my throat. I just did not want to be in my body…. I had spent a lot of years trying to get out of [my body].” Through practicing yoga, she was able to “go back in her body” and get in touch with what was happening internally for her. She began noticing feelings and began to open up to this experience rather than trying to restrict it as she had done in the past. Another woman who had experienced childhood sexual abuse, had a strong sense of disconnection from her body prior to experiencing yoga. “I was completely dissociated until about 3 years ago…. like my mind and my body were just not connected at all because of the pain and the trauma.” She used the analogy of a “walking, talking head” to describe herself: “It’s just like you're a head on a stick. You know, you don't know your body. Anything from the neck down, or even from the forehead down, you don't know what's going on with your self.”

These individuals experienced yoga as taking them “back into their bodies” where they were able to pay attention to their bodily sensations and connect with the physical aspect of their being. The process of becoming more
"connected to" and "present" in their bodies enabled them to be more aware of their feelings as manifested through their bodies. In the words of one participant: "when you come back into your body, and say well how am I feeling now?... You can actually identify things [be]cause you're connecting yourself."

Breathing was a central part of becoming more aware of the physical body. The individuals in the study spoke about the importance of being more conscious of their breathing and of noticing what happens to their breathing when they were "feeling uptight" or "stressed." "If you notice when you are excited or if you are mad, or if you are nervous, you breathe in fast and shallow," stated one participant. A significant benefit of being aware of their breathing was that it enabled the participants to be more conscious of what was going on for them physically, emotionally, and psychologically. This awareness helped them to regulate their emotional and physical responses in situations by changing their breathing pattern. One woman described her process: "[I] just breathed and calmed my body down so that I wasn’t in that fight or flight and that the rest of my body wasn’t tensing around it." Another participant stated: "Like a d-e-e-p breath and I would do that three times...because that would calm my senses right away and that will enable me to think in the clear and right direction." Another participant commented on how breathing in, retaining the breath, and then exhaling through her nose would immediately calm down her blood pressure and her heart rate. "Just even after four or five of these techniques, I notice a difference."
An additional component that figured significantly in the stories of the participants was a heightened awareness of energy in their physical bodies. As one woman illustrated:

You feel movement. You're not moving but you feel little little tiny movements of your cells. It's like the movement of your cells say reproducing or uh, exchanging fluids or doing all those things that cells do. It's almost as if you feel that movement as energy and you feel it flowing.... So if you've ever had the feeling of having adrenaline rushing through your body, it's the same thing except for when it's the energy, you're very calm. Your body is very quiet.... So when I'm going through the postures and I'm feeling my energy move, it's like 'oh thank God.' It's great.

This participant recalled the first time that she had “a really definite feel of energy running through” her body. “I remember my energy flowing and I remember feeling it and thinking oh my gosh, this is amazing.” According to her, this flow of energy was “too much” for her at the time. It was “almost like a jolt, like a shock.” In reflecting on it, she felt that the energy was not leaving her body. “Like I think it was getting stuck.”

Another individual talked about how yoga had taught her to “open up to” stressful experiences and allow the “volatile energy that is there in a stressful situation” to flow through her, instead of constricting it. She described her response to such a situation: “And I just opened my body and my body just
shook. I felt at that time that I let the energy pass through me instead of holding it.... I just allowed that energy to run through me."

Another consistent thread running through the participants' experiences was the sense of being particularly sensitive to bodily distress symptoms such as "tension," "tightness," "shaking," "trembling." One person talked about her response to getting a telephone call in the middle of the night saying that her father had had a heart attack. Part of her response at that time was: "Oh wow, look at how that affected my body. I just like I tied up into a knot with two words, you know, heart attack.... My whole body went into tension." Another participant, noticing that her body was feeling "tight" or "tense," described it as follows:

It's almost like when I'm moving around I feel a little more awkward...a little bit disjointed. That things aren't flowing through my body as well as they will, as I know they will after I am finished the hour-and-a-half of yoga.

According to this individual, after engaging in yoga she often became aware of other areas in her body where she had "been storing some tension or some stress." One woman described the benefit of first becoming aware of this tension, and then of learning how to get "rid of it by working certain areas" of her body. "Like I feel tension as conflict almost in my body and so when I release that, there is no more conflict. And you can just be, flow, and everything moves properly."

The participants also commented on the sense of relaxation that their bodies felt following their experience with yoga. One individual declared that after
her yoga session: "My body was totally, totally relaxed. I was just in a state of calmness." Another person affirmed that she felt "much more relaxed.... just better in my body.... a lot more grounded, looser, that my whole body just functions better as a unit afterwards." The individuals spoke about how the breathing techniques could "virtually relax your body."

For two participants in the study, this heightened sense of connection to and awareness of their physical body was intimately related to emotions being revealed and released through bodily expression. One woman shared her experience of when she first began yoga. During the initial stage of her practice, this participant began noticing her bodily feelings and really opening up to this experience rather than resisting it as she had done prior to yoga. She spoke of this new experience comparing it to the past.

So opening the breath around and through and into those places that are dark and tight and ugly, instead of what I think my body was doing was resisting [this opening] and then using fitness as a way to resist it even more by tightening instead of surrendering, you know, kind of softening into it.

According to her, softening into her body instead of creating a more rigid body was allowing changes to take place both physically and emotionally for her. As she allowed her abdomen to soften, her back started to release, and in working with the sacral area this started to release the pain in her back. She believed that her back pain had to do, in part, with a lot of tightness in her sacral area. In sharing her experience of "softening into my body", she expressed the following:
I'd cry sometimes all the way home from class because I think I was so uptight and tense that even just that little bit of opening and softening was releasing emotions from my body. I didn’t understand it at the time. I mean I’d get home and my husband would say, do you think this is good for you? I’d be all red in the eyes. I’d say, you know I don’t know, I cry all the way home but I feel really good…. I don’t think I’d cried for probably 3 or 4 years up to that period in my life, up until that time. So it was like I’d had a lot of pent-up emotions that needed to get out and it was releasing that.

Another participant, in describing her first experience with yoga, shared how her class had been involved in doing some preliminary yoga to prepare themselves for a special guest teacher. After completing the yoga, their teacher had told them that the guest teacher was on his way and that:

we’re just gonna sit and be quiet in anticipation. At which point, tears streamed down from my eyes, and I was feeling a little self-conscious, I gotta tell you…. oh my goodness, just like, just dripping right down the front of me…. I just remember that I cried through the whole set…. I wept, and I wept, and I wept, and I thought oh my, this is so strange. Next night, part two. Again I arrived, I sat down, they did some preliminary yoga, I wept, he gave a talk, he answered questions, I wept through the whole thing…. and I couldn’t get over the feeling that I had that something was shifting. So I thought I’d better try this yoga.

In becoming more aware of their physical bodies and their feelings as manifested through their bodies, both participants experienced emotions being unleashed
from their bodies unexpectedly. By learning to be more attentive to and more present in their body, they were better able to get in touch with these bodily feelings and to experience these feelings.

Two participants in the study spoke about becoming more aware of their bodily felt sensations and impulses in relation to their dietary intake after beginning yoga. For example, one individual described how he used to be:

A big fan of meat, a meat lover.... Once I started doing yoga I don't know what happened, my metabolism eventually changed, which I didn't realize and I started h-a-t-i-n-g meat. I couldn't stand the smell and the taste of the meat.

Eventually he gave up eating meat and also gave up drinking alcohol. Another participant, who described herself as "wildly overweight" and having had "very bad food addictions" shared how she became more in tune to her bodily cues. "Gradually my diet got modified just because I didn't feel the need to eat a lot of red meat. I didn't feel the need to eat a lot of crappy food. I didn't feel the need to eat in quantity." In becoming more aware of their basic bodily cues, these participants were guided to make changes in their dietary habits.

Through the process of yoga, the participants in this study experienced an increased awareness of their bodily feelings and sensations; increased physical relaxation; in some cases an emotional and physical catharsis; and changes in dietary intake. By bringing their awareness into their bodies, they were able to receive sensory information and thus felt they were able to determine the state of
their physical being. With this knowledge, the participants made adaptive changes in particular situations in their life.

**A Sense of Being Grounded, Calm, and Peaceful**

The second major theme emerging from the participants' accounts of their experience with yoga was a sense of being grounded, calm, and peaceful. These words appeared repeatedly in the individuals' stories as they shared various aspects of their experience. In this context, the sense of being grounded, calm, and peaceful denoted a sense of serenity and peace of mind that the participants felt as a result of their yoga practice. They spoke about a sense of self-composure and stillness that was present in varying degrees and was especially prevalent following their yoga practice.

The word "grounded" appeared in four of the six participants' descriptions of their yoga experience. One woman, in describing how she felt after practicing yoga, expressed the following:

I feel that I reap all kinds of benefits out of going in feeling sort of tight and like my body's not quite, it's almost like it's not quite aligned correctly. And then going into yoga and...coming out feeling grounded and peaceful and much more in tune with myself and the space around me."

When asked what "feeling grounded" meant to her, she replied that it was a "natural sensation" of walking out of the community center and noticing that her feet were on the ground, noticing how her body moved as she was walking, and being in tune and aware of her body. She compared this to other times in her life when she was walking places and thinking about where she was going to next,
what she had to do when she got there, and thinking about whether or not she had prepared properly for the upcoming situation. For her "feeling grounded" meant being "more in tune" with herself and "not cluttered with all the other thoughts" about her life. This particular individual was 6 months pregnant at the time of the interview and commented that she kept thinking that "the best space" to be in for labour would be the feeling that she has after doing an hour-and-a-half of yoga. "I mean that's the feeling I want.... I want to feel calm. I want to feel grounded and at peace."

Another participant stated that as a result of her daily practice of yoga she felt "grounded" and "capable of handling anything that will come up." In describing her experience of flying back to Ontario after she got word that her father had had a heart attack, she stated that she "just sat and meditated for 6 hours on the plane all the way home. And when I got there to see my dad I was like, I was just so grounded and so there for my mom." Another woman described herself as "completely off balance," "so troubled," and "very high-strung" prior to practicing yoga. Once she became involved in doing yoga she "seemed to be more grounded" and "seemed to be able to feel that there was light at the end of the tunnel." According to her, yoga gave her "a bridge...a sense of balance" that enabled her to deal with issues that were happening in her life in a much more constructive manner. She stated that without yoga, she may have "literally gone off the deep end." For her, yoga kept her "steady.... totally grounded and also non-reactive." In her words:
Mentally I'm so much more stable than I was before. I would say, uh, my ability to cope has increased one thousand fold.... and coping with life on all levels.... You know, physically I'm solid. I'm balanced or more balanced than I ever was you know and I, just everything has just shifted so wonderfully.... [Yoga] basically had just saved my life and continues to be there for me.

Another participant spoke about her family members knowing that even though she might be uptight on her way out to yoga class, they always knew that when she returns from class she would be “far more centered, far more balanced.” She stated that yoga has had “a powerful effect” on her to teach her to balance herself. “It’s something that works for me to balance, it really does. It’s really important.... It’s given me balance and when I think of yoga, I feel like smiling.” She claimed that in practicing yoga “you have a better understanding of who you are and what you’re all about and you feel more grounded.”

The words “calm and relaxed” appeared in five of the six participants’ accounts of their experience with yoga. One individual, in describing herself prior to being involved with yoga, stated: “I was so hyper. My first yoga class, it was, get on with it already, you know. Like do something. Let’s do something, I’m not even breathing heavy here.” Now, as a result of her daily yoga practice, she believes that she is a much more relaxed person and that her daily practice allows her to begin her day “feeling calm and ready and open to receive instead of on the defensive.” Another participant declared that his daily yoga practice “just calms me down and relaxes me. The most strongest word that I could ever
think of is the word called tranquility.... So I will really feel that, especially when I do meditation." Another individual described how she felt after being involved in a yoga class one evening: "It was fabulous and I ended up coming out totally blissed out, totally blissed out. It was great." When asked what she meant by "blissed out," she declared: "Just calm and my body was totally at rest, like there's no more conflict in my body.... And you can just be, flow and everything moves properly."

The word "peaceful" was also intertwined among the participants' descriptions of their experience with yoga. When asked for one word that would describe yoga in relation to her stress management, one participant asserted: "That would be the name of my mother's cottage, tranquility. It makes you tranquil. And tranquil doesn't mean that you're not alert. Tranquil means that you're just at peace. And that you're aware." Another individual, in responding to the same question, avowed the following: "Peace, yeah. Anti-conflict. I don't know if that is a word but I'm coining it. Just a complete absence of conflict or tension." One of the participants in the study shared her experience of increasing her daily meditation time.

So I bumped it up and it was the most beautiful feeling because it was like I'm just going to sit peacefully for 2½ hours with nothing but the birds outside chirping and this peacefulness and I'm going to do this for me to heal myself. And it was the easiest thing to do.

Another participant, in looking for a way to deal with the stress that was associated with her husband's depression, stated that she recognized that what
she needed was "something very soothing, something calming, something relaxing" for herself. She affirmed that she was not looking for "an opportunity to go boxersize and get over my stress." She really wanted to have time that was just hers and that was "very peaceful." In describing how she felt following her yoga classes, she stated: "I'm in a different space entirely. I feel much more, much more at peace with myself therefore much more willing to be with others and feel good about my family and the rest of my life." She described her yoga practice as a "healing kind of exercise." When asked what "healing" meant to her, she expressed the following:

Just the sense of being able to walk out of there feeling at peace with myself, at peace with the people in my life, much less aggravated, much less frustrated, much less prone to, uh, prone to stress. Things don't seem as stressful or as big of a deal as before doing the yoga. And it's a very common experience for me. I really have that feeling almost every time that I go to yoga.

Three of the participants in the study used the metaphor of their "cup being full." One woman asserted that after practicing yoga she felt capable of giving to people, being there for them, and listening to them. She noted that when she did not practice on a regular basis, she would become "cranky and that things do stress me out because I haven't given to myself. So it's like filling my own cup before I head out into the world." Another woman described how she felt after coming home from yoga one evening: "I came home and I felt that the draining that I had felt at 5:00 in the afternoon was gone. I felt that my cup was
definitely filled.” Another participant described how she first felt when she initially began yoga.

Like the cup was empty, almost empty, so there was nothing, nothing to give. So the yoga gives you energy so that you can bring yourself up, and you can work with yourself, you can work with other people, you can do whatever, whatever you need to do.

In summary, all of the participants in the study identified this sense of being grounded, calm, and peaceful as being an essential aspect of their experience with yoga. This sense of “tranquility” appeared to represent a state of internal balance for the participants.

**An Enhanced Awareness of Self and the Present Moment**

Common amongst the participants’ accounts of their experience with yoga was the idea of an enhanced awareness of self and the present moment. The word "aware" appeared repeatedly in the descriptions suggesting that this was a key aspect of the experience. For the participants, this enhanced awareness signified a sense of being "more in tune" with the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual aspects of their being and more cognizant of their present surroundings. Through yoga they had learned to become more attentive to what was happening in the “present moment” versus focusing on the past or the future. The participants’ attention had become directed towards what was going on internally for them as well as what was going on in their interpersonal relationships and their environment at that moment. As a result of this enhanced awareness, the participants were living more in the present.
Although all of the participants in this study reported this sense of enhanced awareness, it was expressed in different ways. In each of their accounts, the notion of being more aware of one’s self and the present moment emanated from their descriptions. One participant described how a yoga class had enabled her to bring her attention back to herself at that particular moment in time instead of being worried about future issues. In her words:

It brought me back into my self and when I’m in that state the answers just come. I don't have to worry about it. I just know. And I can tell what I need to think about, or what I need to be concerned about, or what I need to find a solution to. Because not everything that I worry about needs to be worried about. And so when I’m in that state of just being in my self then I can tell.... you automatically know what's right.

This participant claimed that she “turns everything into yoga.” When asked what she meant by this statement she asserted that yoga was “an attitude.” According to her, yoga was an “attitude of acceptance, of learning” and she attempted to look at everything with that attitude.

Personally one of my shadows is self-pity. Like just getting really upset and going ugh, and stomping my foot down on the ground. And I know sometimes that I just have to do that. Like it’s the right thing for me to do at the time. And if I’m aware of the fact that it’s the right thing to do then that’s yoga. If I just do it without thinking about if it’s right or it’s what I need to do then it’s not; it’s just being self-pitying.... That is the attitude of yoga. Being aware of what’s going on.
She claimed that quite often she was not aware of why she was doing something and that her growth process involved expanding her awareness to as many of her behaviours as she could and to as much of what was happening in the present moment as she could.

For another participant, the idea of taking "a pause" was an essential aspect in his experience. Prior to starting yoga, he described himself as being more "brash and aggressive" than he is today. He declared that in the past he would often "react instantly" to situations, whereas today he is not as quick to respond. "Now I would just pause myself, give a second thought on whether I am acting in the right way or not. So that gives me a little time to think instead of reacting right away." He maintained that even if he initially began to react to a situation in a harsh way, he would instantly calm himself down and realize that that was not the way to react and adjust his behaviour accordingly. When asked for one word to described yoga in relation to his stress management, this participant stated:

If I had to use just one word, awareness.... You see it has made me more aware of many things in life. As I was talking to you earlier, we sweat the small stuff. We get annoyed, we get cheesed off, we get worried about small little things.... It just made me more aware that things will happen."

A key component of another participant’s experience with yoga was the notion of “presence.” For her, this meant being more aware of and more focussed on “the details of each moment.” Commenting on this sense of “presence” in relation to her meditation, she expressed the following: “The
experience of that absolute presence of the unfolding moment. Just what is in this moment and the next, and the next, and the next. And just being able to sit and listen and be there.” This participant believed that practicing yoga on a daily basis had trained her to be as “present” as she possibly could be in everything that she was doing. As a result of being “present,” she was “more able to deal with everything that happens during the day.” She declared that it was a “whole practice” for her to do everything, as much as possible, “being in the moment.” If there was an aspect of her self that did not want to be somewhere and she was worried about something else that she had to do, then this resulted in feeling “stress.” She was aware of the times when she was “out of that present focus.”

This participant shared how she had responded to getting word in the middle of the night that her father had had a heart attack. She made the decision right away that she would fly back to Ontario but she needed to address a number of issues regarding her business before she left. In doing so, she described her experience that night as “amazing” as she felt that she had accessed “the energy that would have went into just catatonia” and “channelled it into awareness” and into what needed to be done.

And I did it with such, I can’t tell you, that night was just like uh, it was an amazing experience because I just was in the store and put on beautiful music for myself. Everything to nurture myself.... And I left everything in place for me to be away.... Because I’m a self-disciplined person, I could have done all those things without the awareness. And I could have got everything done in my store that I needed to get done, you know, but I
would have been frazzled. You know, would’ve been frazzled. But I can’t
tell you, I wish somebody could have been a fly on the wall that night
because I was in such peace.

Another participant shared how she had felt “much more in tune” with
herself and with “the space around” her following her yoga class one evening.
Prior to going to the class, she had been very bothered by a work-related issue.
On her return home however, she felt “much more at peace” with the issue and
“definitely more in the moment, just in tune with the moment.” For another
participant, she experienced yoga as giving “you an openness of your mind. It’s a
clarity that you can try this and that, and you can stop the ‘monkey chat,’ you
know the brain chatter.” Her regular yoga practice had been a means to calm
herself down so that she could listen to her inner voice and access her internal
wisdom. She believed that through yoga she had learned to be more “present”
and “get involved more” in what she was doing at any particular moment in time.
As a result of this, “you have a better understanding of who you are and what
you’re all about.”

A final participant shared that her recent experience with meditation had
led to the development of her “psychic abilities.” She described herself as being
“intensely sensitive” and stated that she could “feel what another person feels
without having to say words, you can just get inside their skin.... Telepathically
speaking, I can really connect with people.” This individual believed that her
increased sensitivity had developed following her intense work with yoga to
process her personal issues, one being childhood sexual abuse.
All of the participants in the study reported this sense of enhanced awareness that came about through their experience with yoga. Although it was expressed in different ways, the participants shared how they had become more mindful of what was going on with their internal selves and their surroundings in the present moment.

**An Acceptance of Self and Life Circumstances**

The participants in this study identified a sense of acceptance as being an essential element of their experience with yoga. The idea of accepting themselves and their life circumstances emanated throughout the various descriptions. In this context, the notion of acceptance signified a sense of unconditional self-approval and an open-mindedness and tolerance towards both themselves and the events that had happened in their lives. The participants displayed a sense of patience towards themselves and the events in their lives and appeared to approach life with a deep sense of optimism.

A significant aspect of this theme was a sense of self-acceptance that appeared to have arisen through their practice of yoga. Two of the participants described how yoga had affected their self-esteem. One woman commented on her process with yoga and stated that “it gives you a tremendous amount of self-esteem, self-confidence.” According to her, “accepting self, it's so important to be self-accepting at this moment. You finally accept yourself, like the warts and all, and your own uniquenesses and your strengths.” Another participant, describing herself as “anorexic and unhealthy” prior to starting yoga, stated that she had “very low self-esteem” at that point in her life. In looking at herself now, she
asserted: "I'm a completely different being. You know I look at that person 10 years ago and go wow, who was that person." She believed that practicing yoga had "empowered" her.

When you practice yoga it's like fully taking responsibility for yourself and you feel empowered by that, cause you feel that, you know, even with my knee I felt empowered before [the doctor] came in even. I thought I can do this. If I need surgery, you know, it will be done and I will heal. I know how to heal myself and I'll take responsibility for it. And I'll do what it takes. And I'll be fine with whatever happens, you know.

This individual spoke about an "incredible peace" coming over her as soon as she realized that she had all the "tools" from 10 years of yoga to work with her knee injury. She also believed that yoga had assisted her in working through marital issues with her husband by helping her "stay connected" to her "worth" and to her "path."

Just really staying true to what was calling me and where my work was taking me instead of falling to the control and jealously and things that were happening in my relationship.... Yoga really helped me to do that because it gave me that courage to keep staying committed to myself and to my journey, and to my path and to loving myself enough to not give my power away.... I think that [yoga has] really allowed me to embrace who I am, to accept who I am, to be who I am.

Another participant, who was 6 months pregnant at the time of the interview and still practicing yoga, shared her experience of feeling “frustrated” in
her practice. As her pregnancy progressed, she was unable to do the postures in the same way that she had been doing them in the past. Thus, it was necessary for her to give herself "more leeway" to work with the postures. She remembered saying to herself: "okay, it's all right. I'm not going to be able to be quite on the same level that I was. I'm going to have to get something different out of this." Her sense of frustration dissipated as she allowed herself to work with what was happening in her present situation.

Another principal component of this theme was the aspect of accepting one's life circumstances. The participant who had injured her knee during a skiing accident believed that one of the main things that yoga had given her was an "absolute acceptance of what is happening in this moment." She recalled her self-talk following her ski accident.

So as much as possible pulling myself out of what if, why didn't, you know, I should've stayed home, I shouldn't have gone skiing. I knew I wasn't feeling comfortable enough to ski. You know all those things. Instead of going there, pulling myself into the moment and going you know you did, and you're here and you've pulled something and you got to deal with it.

For three of the participants, the concept of "not being a victim anymore" figured prominently in their stories. One participant claimed that prior to practicing yoga, she was "one walking victim. You know like please do something to me so I can complain about it, you know like do something." For her, yoga had been "very empowering."
And now it's like, well if it happens why am I doing it and what's the point. And I'm no longer a victim. And man is that ever a nice thing to come to. Say, yeah I don't have to do this any more. And any little challenge or any large challenge, I'm up for it. But it's just, I'm not cowering in the corner and just, you know, crying and weeping uncontrollably, going, you know, how bad can it get...the complete shift has happened.

In a similar vein, another participant who had claimed that yoga was “an attitude of acceptance, of learning” stated that she attempted to look at all situations with that attitude. For her, this meant “just an acceptance of what happens. Just not worrying about the reasons or I guess not creating a victim out of myself...you make yourself into a victim. Nobody makes you into a victim.” She spoke about taking whatever life gives you and dealing with it in the way that you deal with it. For her, there were “no negative experiences, there’s just negative ways to deal with it.” So when something arose in her life that caused her concern, she would consciously attempt to ask herself “what’s going on here, what do I need to learn or what do I need to get out of this before I can more on?” According to her, “if you’ve got that attitude then it’s a flow. And in a flow there isn’t any stress or barriers or anything like that.”

Another participant who had broken her back in a car accident at the age of 18 expressed: “I felt like a victim a lot of the time because I was vibrant and healthy and then I had this car accident. And you know, it was like something was done to me.” She suffered chronic back pain for 6 years and eventually began practicing yoga as a way to manage her pain. In her experience, yoga had
taught her to take responsibility for her self and her well-being, "my mental, emotional, physical, and everything well-being."

Participants in the study spoke about certain events and circumstances being beyond their control. One individual, who worked as a nurse, discussed a "troubling" and "upsetting" surgery that she had been involved in shortly before our interview. Following the surgery, she had been feeling very sad and shared this with her yoga students that evening. In doing so, she also explained that "in all our lives we have troubling and upsetting days and we can't avoid crisis or chaos or sadness coming in from an external force." According to her, "there are external circumstances and things that are beyond you." Another participant declared that yoga had made him "more aware that things will happen. There are certain things, which are not under your control." He believed that many of our problems and feelings of anguish resulted from the fact that we do not accept events in our lives.

When you start accepting that, okay, I'm going to accept the weather as it comes. I'm going to accept the traffic as it is. I'm going to accept the life that it is.... the things that are not under your control, you cannot do anything about. So when you cannot do anything about it, just accept it.

All the participants in this study identified a sense of acceptance as being a crucial aspect of their yoga experience. The idea of accepting themselves and their life circumstances appeared to have a major influence on the way they lived their life. The participants seemed very much aware of the things they could change in their life and the things that they could not change.
A Trust in the Process of Life

The fifth major theme emerging from the participants’ experiences with yoga was the idea of trusting in the process of life. Evident in the participants’ descriptions was a trust and a belief in something larger than themselves and a faith in a universal plan. The participants exhibited a quiet assurance that the events that happened in their life “happened for a reason” and that life was unfolding “the way it was supposed to.” This stance included a belief that they had “lessons to learn” in their life and that life was generally kind.

A significant aspect of this theme involved the sense that one is “at the right place at the right time.” One participant spoke about her husband beginning his day almost “ready to do battle” instead of in a more receptive mode in which she starts her day. She described this receptive mode as “trusting that you are in the right place at the right time, that things are unfolding as they need to, that you do have the wisdom to handle what is going to occur today, and that kind of feeling.” Another participant, in sharing how she became involved in a yoga teacher’s course, stated that in the beginning she was not aware of the time commitment required by the course. She thought it was “just 12 weeks” as opposed to the 2 to 3 years required for the course. “I think it was interesting that I got involved in it without knowing how much of a commitment it was. But it must have been right cause I’m still there.” She had a strong feeling that she was on “the right path” and doing what she needed to be doing right now. Another participant who was a nurse and was involved in upsetting surgery, questioned herself as to why she had chosen to participate in the surgery to the degree that
she had: “Why, why, you know, why didn’t someone else scrub in. I could have circulated or whatever. But maybe, maybe I was suppose to.”

Common amongst the participants’ accounts was a sense that there was a purpose behind “negative” life events and such events were often seen as “gifts” and “teachers.” For example, the participant who had injured her knee through a skiing accident claimed: “It was an incredible gift. Thank-you. It was an incredible gift. Really, when I look at it now.” According to her, it had been a “really great teacher” because it had allowed her to “integrate yoga on a whole other subtler level.” She had to do the postures more slowly and with more awareness. Also she was able to deeply process her anxiety about not being in “perfect” shape to teach yoga.

And then again the teachings of yoga are to accept what is happening in this moment, at this time, and trusting that who ever comes, who ever shows up is meant to see you in that way, and for you to teach in the way that you’re teaching and in some way that it’s going to assist them in their lives too. Instead of going to the ego place where you go, you know I’m not perfect, I don’t look perfect, I can’t do the postures perfectly. All that stuff.

Another participant declared that the “most life changing” event that had happened to her was when her home burnt down. At that point in time, she had been doing real estate out of a rented home and the fire destroyed her office and all her belongings. She had no insurance on her belongings and was therefore “left with nothing.” For 11 months she was “like a gypsy” staying a few days, a
few weeks, or a few months at various homes in her neighbourhood. In reflecting on it now she acknowledged: “It was so great. I had nothing and yet I had everything because I had this new growth experience.” She believed at that point in time she “was being told by the universe” that she “better clean up or clear out.”

The participants frequently reframed the “negative” events that had happened in their lives in an attempt to find meaning for themselves. For example, the nurse who was involved in a surgery where an 18-year-old boy lost his eye shared how sad and helpless she had felt following the surgery. Because it was necessary for her to go home and then to teach yoga the same day, she felt she needed to get herself “out of that funk.” In her thoughts, she kept thinking that the boy “is so blessed because he has the other eye, right. He has the other eye. And then he has his inward eye, the spirit, the third eye. And that sort of helped me quite a bit.” According to her, “it was g-o-o-d to have to teach” as she felt nurtured by the experience and more serene following the class. Another participant in talking about the eviction notices that she had received expressed the following:

But if you reframe all these experiences, and say, why am I attracting this? What do I have to change in my self? Why is this happening? What is the bigger picture here? And to, and to not let the emotions run rampant, which is what I had done my whole life. Then, you find that, uh, oh, well, it's just another eviction notice.
Such external events were seen as “lessons to overcome” by this participant and she believed that if you saw every “so called horrendous experience as horrible and not as a lesson to be overcome and to be learning it, then you’re going to be a nervous Nelly.” This individual believed that as a result of her childhood sexual abuse she had developed a photographic memory. “So [the abuse] can be a good thing and a bad thing but I just choose to look at it now that it is a good thing that it happened and how great to have a memory.” She referred to this photographic memory as “one of the gifts of the garbage.”

Another significant component of this theme was a sense of “going with the flow.” On the day that one of the participants was being interviewed she had had plans to go downtown to do business errands following the interview. She had learned just prior to our meeting that this would not be possible for her, as one of her staff members needed to go home and she would have to remain at her store. She responded by saying:

Well you know, I must be meant to be in the store this afternoon. So whether I need to be there for me or whether someone else is gonna come in I need to be there for, or what, then I go, hey, I’m suppose to be there today. So I just surrender to it. And there’s no stress. You know, if I was in there wishing I was somewhere else and catastrophizing over the fact that I am not getting my errands done downtown or maybe it’s the simple fact that I’m not suppose to be downtown and this is the hook up that kept me here instead of going, you know.
According to her, one of the greatest things that yoga had given her was a “deep level of trust.” She expressed that her core belief was now that life really supported her and that it was not out to get her. She felt that she had a much more optimistic outlook on life then she had had prior to practicing yoga. For another participant, there was a sense that things were now flowing in her life in a much more positive manner than they had in the past. “I realized that things were improving when I committed to myself, and that the universe seemed to commit to me. Everything seemed to switch.”

Three of the participants in the study spoke about having a sense of “just knowing” things in their life. For example, one participant shared how she was reading through the yoga sutras and “it was stuff that I just knew, that I felt was right.” When she was reading the yoga philosophy “it was like telling me things that I already knew.” Another participant spoke about her first experience with yoga and that she “just knew” that she wanted to explore it more fully. As a result of her daily yoga practice, she believed that she had “received the most incredible inspiration to do what I'm doing now in my life. To teach the way that I teach, and also to run my business and to be with my family.” For another participant, she began noticing changes in her physical, mental, and emotional state once she began yoga and “so I took it to mean that [yoga] was a go.”

For all of the participants in the study, the idea of trusting in the process of life emanated from their descriptions of their yoga experience. There was a sense that everything in their life happened for a reason and that what they were doing at this point in time was what they were supposed to be doing. This sense
of trust led to the participants feeling as though they were supported through their journey of life and that there was meaning to this journey.

Summary

Five common themes emerged from participants’ accounts of their experience with yoga in relation to the management of stress in their lives. As was evident from the descriptions, the themes were intertwined with one another and certain themes appeared more significant to some participants than others. Despite this variability and the variability in how the themes were expressed, all five themes were reflected in each participant’s experience and captured the essence of the experience for the individuals in this study.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter begins with a review of the purpose of this research project. Following this, the findings that ensued from the study are placed in context of the current available literature. An overview of the implications of this study for the counselling profession is presented as well as recommendations for future research. The chapter ends with a critical examination of the limitations of the study and a brief conclusion.

Review of the Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate and document the subjective experience of yoga as it related to the management of stress in the participants’ lives. A phenomenological perspective (i.e., Colaizzi, 1978) was used as a framework for obtaining a retrospective view of the lived experiences of the yoga participants. The research question guiding this study was “What is the lived experience of participants who practice yoga in relation to the management of stress in their lives?” This study attempted to elucidate the meaning of the yoga experience through an analysis of the participants’ descriptions.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with six participants, ranging between the ages of 22 and 53. Phenomenological data analysis of the transcribed interviews led to the identification of five common themes. These five themes included the following experiences: (a) a heightened sense of bodily awareness; (b) a sense of being grounded, calm, and peaceful; (c) an enhanced awareness of self and the present moment; (d) an acceptance of self and life
circumstances; and (e) a trust in the process of life. Despite the uniqueness and variability that characterized participants' experiences of yoga, all five themes were evident in all descriptions. Although each theme had its own discernable features, several of the themes interacted with each other, thereby reflecting the complex nature of the yoga experience.

**Research Findings in the Context of Professional Literature**

In the present study, a qualitative methodology was employed to investigate the phenomenon of yoga as it related to stress management. Most of the research studies conducted on this phenomenon are based on quantitative analysis of specific variables and indices relating to yoga and stress management. Due to the nature of these quantitative studies, only certain concepts and variables have been explored and researchers have neglected to describe the specific dimensions of the yoga experience they are investigating. Definitional and methodological problems in this body of research therefore make comparisons and generalizations with this particular study difficult. However, a comparison of this study's findings to the existing literature follows.

All of the participants in this study reported that a heightened sense of bodily awareness was a very important aspect of their experience of yoga in relation to stress management. The participants spoke about becoming more aware of what was happening in their physical bodies, and thus they were more able to determine what was going on emotionally and psychologically for them. The nature of the link between somatic processes, emotion, and cognition is an important issue that psychological theorists have labored with over time.
According to Gendlin (1979), the body carries an implicit felt sense of meaning and is therefore intimately associated with both emotion and cognition.

In turning to the yoga literature, this finding is consistent with a number of authors who claim that through practicing yoga individuals enhance their sensitivity to bodily processes (Broota & Dhir, 1990; Jhansi Rani & Krishna Rao, 1994; Krishna Rao, 1995). According to Krishna Rao (1995), this heightened awareness may be due to the fact that individuals who practice yoga are advised to pay attention to the sensations associated with the postural and breathing exercises and thus this may increase their sensitivity to bodily felt sensations and feelings. This particular finding also concurs with the stress management literature on the more physically-oriented techniques of relaxation therapy. Authors in this field have made similar observations about the importance of attending to and being aware of one’s bodily sensations (Benson, 1975; Jacobson, 1977; McGuigan, 1993). For example, the basic premise behind Jacobson’s (1977) Progressive Relaxation method is that once individuals learn to cultivate the ability to make extremely sensitive observations of their internal self, they are then able to learn to identify tension sensation and learn to relax it away. Similarly, the biofeedback method is used to inform individuals of the somatic activity taking place in their physical body through the use of a measurement-information tool (Stoyva & Carlson, 1993). The goal is, once again, to use this information to assist the individual in becoming more aware of his or her internal state and in learning how to lower his or her arousal level.
The results of this present study suggest that breathing was an essential aspect for the participants in becoming more aware of their physical body. The individuals spoke about the importance of being more conscious of their breathing and of noticing changes in their breathing pattern when experiencing different situations. With this breath awareness, the participants were better able to ascertain their physical, emotional, and psychological state of being and regulate these to some degree by changing their breathing patterns. In looking at the available literature in this field, it is evident that studies have been conducted by medical researchers that indicate that respiration is very closely linked with the activation of the autonomic nervous system (Ballentine, 1976; Brena, 1972; Hirai, 1975). These studies suggest that deep slow breathing is associated with parasympathetic activation and an emotional state described as calm and composed.

A number of authors in the yoga literature are in accordance with this study's finding (Harvey, 1983; Harrigan, 1981; Krishna Rao, 1995; Patel, 1993; Saraswati, 1995). They assert that our physical, mental, and emotional states of being are reflected in our breathing patterns and that through breathing we can influence our physical, psychological, and emotional well-being. According to Saraswati, control of the emotions is one of the most significant attainments from practicing the yogic breathing exercises. This author asserts that slower, deeper more regular breathing decreases the breath rate, which lowers the heart rate, resulting in a reduced level of arousal and anxiety and a sense of relaxation. As a result of this process, an individual is in a position to control his or her affective
state. In doing yoga, an individual remains consciously aware of his or her breathing process throughout the practice, and this awareness remains in the background as a habitual aftereffect of the yoga practice (Goyeche et al., 1982). This coincides with the experiences of the participants in this study when they spoke about regulating their breathing patterns under certain situations and thus avoiding or at least greatly minimizing their stress reactions. Several psychodynamically-oriented therapists would also agree with this process and maintain that there is a crucial link between the breathing pattern and emotional functioning (e.g., Ajaya, 1983; Dychtwald, 1977; Nuernberger, 1986).

Participants in this study reported that through their experience with yoga they had encountered a heightened awareness of energy in their physical bodies. Such an effect would be supported by findings in the literature that maintain that yoga postures and breathing exercises have a profound energizing and relaxing effect (Harrigan, 1981; Harvey, 1983; Wood, 1993). Heilbronn (1992) explains this effect by suggesting that muscles and organs share at some point a common vessel, for example, a lymphatic drainage channel or an acupuncture meridian. According to this author, “the benefit of the postures is that their creative tension clears the meridians of restrictions and imbalances, thus permitting the free flow of energy around the body” (p.134). Some of the experiences described by the participants in this study suggest that they may have experienced this unleashing of energy, which was previously restricted in tense muscles.

One participant described her experience of feeling her energy move by stating that “you feel little little tiny movements of your cells. It’s like the
movement of your cells say reproducing or uh, exchanging fluids or doing all those things that cells do." This description could be looked at in light of what has been written about Kundalini energy. According to Ramaswami (1989), Kundalini is a type of bioenergy that lies dormant in the human body at the base of the spine. The sensory accompaniments when this Kundalini energy is aroused has been described as: "The skin or the inside of the body may tingle, tickle, itch, or vibrate. Apt descriptions are a deep ecstatic tingle and orgasmic feelings" (Sannella, 1987, p. 95).

The participants spoke about being particularly sensitive to bodily distress symptoms such as "tension," "tightness," "shaking" and "trembling." In being aware of such feelings and sensations, the participants were able to access information about their own state of being. Once again, this aspect of the participant's experience is similar to the internal sensory observation found in the Progressive Relaxation method (Jacobson, 1977). An individual first needs to become aware of such internal sensations before he or she is in a position to do something about it. In becoming more sensitive to rising tension levels in one's body, the individual is better equipped to deal with this before the tension gets so great that it results in pain.

The participants in the study remarked on the sense of relaxation that their bodies felt following their experience with yoga. One participant declared that after doing yoga, "My body was totally, totally relaxed. I was just in a state of calmness." This finding is in accordance with the yoga literature that claims that the practice of yoga does reduce autonomic arousal and thus leads to a feeling
of relaxation (Cusumano & Robinson, 1992; Joseph et al., 1981; Patel, 1993; Wallace, Benson, & Wilson, 1971). A review of various self-regulation techniques (meditation being one) indicated that all the methods do tend to produce a generalized relaxation response (Lehrer et al., 1994). Thus, as one becomes more aware of what relaxed muscles feel like, the more sensitivity one would have towards the muscles as they start to become tense.

For two participants in this study, a heightened sense of connection to and awareness of their physical body was intimately related to emotions being released through bodily expression. Goyeche et al. (1982) assert that although yoga practice does not claim to have special techniques “designed” for this purpose, there are a number of procedures that have this effect. According to these authors, the practice of yoga as a whole eventually does release emotions in most people and this release appears to coincide particularly with the breathing techniques. Goyeche (1979) believes that “psychological conflicts and defenses are chronically structured in the body as muscle tension, [and] during the process of...yoga, as this tension is relaxed, a somatopsychic discharge is usually observed (p. 377). This somatic discharge often consists of muscle spasms, tremour, as well as occasional vocal discharges like laughing, crying or unintelligible sounds. Wilson (1985) referred to a similar process of “letting go” that individuals at the Pennsylvania ashram experienced. He described this experience as “an altered state of consciousness, one which is a radical departure from the ordinary waking state experienced by most people most of the time” (p. 255). During the “letting go” process, the individuals often experienced
spontaneous crying, laughing, yelling, shaking and moving, which Wilson claims are natural manifestations of the body’s healing process. Following this experience, the individuals were typically left with a sense of calm and peacefulness. Although this feeling lasted only temporarily, they reported that it was unlike any earlier experience in their lives.

Body therapists have asserted that feelings are expressed and controlled somatically and repressed emotion can be released by heightening awareness of the body through various techniques (Brown & Cooper, 1995; Hover-Kramer & Shames, 1997; Reich, 1949). Reich believed that words often act as a defense against emotion and that silence is often necessary for emotions to be revealed through bodily expression. One participant shared her experience of sitting in silence following some postural and breathing exercises and how “tears streamed down” from her eyes. This finding is also consistent with literature on autogenic training that discusses the phenomenon known as “autogenic discharges” (Schultz & Luthe, 1969). These are depicted as emotional or physical discharges, often consisting of crying, palpitations, muscle twitches, and sometimes unpleasant features such as pain and anxiety. It is thought that these discharges reflect the body’s process of achieving equilibrium. It appears that in both yogic and psychological terms, this discharge or “letting go” process is viewed as a release of psychophysical tensions that have accumulated over time and interfere with an individual’s optimum functioning.

Two participants in this study commented on their experience of a heightened sense of bodily felt impulses in relation to their dietary intake. One
participant spoke about how he "started hating meat" and "couldn't stand the smell and the taste of the meat". Another participant shared how she "didn't feel the need to" eat a lot of red meat, to eat a lot of crappy food, or to eat in quantity. As a result of these basic bodily cues, the participants were guided to make changes in their dietary habits. In examining the literature, it appears that this particular finding is unique to this study and was not found in any of the reviewed literature on yoga. It has been stated that yoga philosophy promotes a vegetarian diet; however, there is no mention of changes such as those experienced by the participants in this study (Patel, 1993). This finding suggests that an investigation such as this has the ability to discover new information regarding this phenomenon. Dostalek (1994) states that yoga stimulates visceral organs and thus we might postulate that this stimulation could be in some way related to the participants' experiences. Most of the residents living in the Pennsylvania ashram reported that eating moderately assisted them in remaining calm and "centered" throughout the day (Wilson, 1985).

The participants in the present study reported that they had experienced a sense of being grounded, calm, and peaceful as a result of their yoga practice. This sense of "tranquillity" appeared to represent a state of internal balance for the participants and was especially prevalent following their practice. This finding is in line with statements in the traditional yoga literature and is documented in the research field. There are a number of studies that suggest that yoga can have a calming and peaceful effect on its practitioners (e.g., Berger & Owen, 1992; Goyeche et al., 1982; Harvey, 1983; Venkatesh et al., 1994). The
psychological effects of the breathing exercises are said to be in the direction of calm, passive concentration, and peacefulness (Goyeche et al.). Turning to the literature specifically on meditation, Goleman and Schwartz (1976) concluded that meditation produces a psychophysiological response opposite to that found in stress-related conditions. Positive emotion was revealed as being one of the constituents of deep states of meditation in Gifford-May and Thompson's (1994) phenomenological study. In their investigation, two main kinds of positive emotion were described. They consisted of "a deep sense of calm sometimes associated with stillness and a more energetic joy" (p. 128). The findings from their study suggest that this sense of calmness did not simply relate to changes in autonomic arousal levels but appeared to be inextricably linked to shifts in cognitive and perceptual experiences as well. Two of the meditators in Gifford-May and Thompson's study used the term "bliss" in describing their experience, which appeared to represent "a more diffuse feeling than joy but more energetic than calmness" (p. 135). This term was also used by two of the participants in the present study in describing their feelings following their yoga practice. There is further literature in the meditation field that explores the emotions of calmness, bliss, and tranquillity (e.g., Brown, 1977; Goleman, 1988; Kornfield, 1979; Walsh, 1978).

All of the participants in this study reported a sense of enhanced awareness of self and the present moment as a result of their experience with yoga. The participants spoke about being more aware of their internal selves and their surroundings; their focus more oriented towards the "present moment" than
the past or the future. This finding can be looked at in light of what has been written about the process known as "meditation in action," or "mindfulness meditation" (Miller et al., 1995; Patel, 1993). According to the authors, this process refers to when an individual is completely absorbed in the here and now and in what he or she is presently doing. The individual is neither dwelling on the past nor preoccupied with the future. The goal is to pay attention to the present moment experience with a nonjudgmentally and nonreactive stance. It has been said that this way of being often creates a sense of calmness, clarity, and stability of mind for the individual and thus he or she is able to think, emote, and act for self-fulfillment and social harmony (Krishna Rao, 1995). This way of being appears to capture the essence of what the participants in this study were referring to when they described their deepening sensitivity to the moment-to-moment flow of experiences in their life. In recalling the description of one participant, he shared how he used to "reacting instantly" to many situations in the past, whereas today he "takes a pause" and gives a second thought on whether or not he is acting in the right manner. Another participant spoke about the notion of "presence," which, for her, meant being more aware of and more focussed on "the details of each moment." As a result of this, she felt better equipped to deal with the day to day issues that arose in her life. Another participant avowed that as a result of being "present [and] getting involved more.... you have a better understanding of who you are and what you're all about."
In reflecting on this process known as “meditation in action” or “mindfulness meditation,” we can see some similarities between this approach and cognitive therapy as they relate to the issue of stress management. The premise behind both approaches is that one’s perception and thoughts largely determine one’s emotional and behavioural responses. These two approaches appear however to differ in their aims. Cognitive therapy attempts to explore the dysfunctional aspects of certain thoughts and tries to modify these by generating contradictory evidence that supports more adaptive beliefs (Beck & Weishaar, 1989). The “meditation” approach, on the other hand, does not try to substitute one thought pattern for another. Its goal is for the individual to directly perceive the inaccuracy, limited nature, and intrinsic impermanence of one’s thoughts in general, and specifically one’s anxiety-related thoughts (Miller et al., 1995). In addition, the “meditation” approach focuses as much on somatic awareness as it does on cognitive sensitivity. One is encouraged to be aware of his or her somatic activity during situations as well as to routinely practice the yoga postures. The “meditation” approach emphasizes meditation as an alternative way of relating to the present moment, and thus is more “a way of being” rather than a “technique” in the narrow and usual therapeutic sense for coping with a specific problem (Miller et al., 1995). It appears from the participants’ experiences in the present study that with this increased awareness and volitional control they were able to respond to potentially stressful situations with greater effectiveness rather than reacting with emotions such as anger, fear, or anxiety.
One participant in the present study shared how her experience with yoga led to the development of her "psychic abilities." It is interesting to look at this experience in light of what has been written on the notion of *Kundalini* energy. As mentioned earlier, this is said to be a type of bioenergy that lies dormant in the human body at the base of the spine (Ramaswami, 1989). The actual awakening of the *Kundalini* and its journey through the chakras (i.e., energy points) is said to be accomplished through special spiritual disciplines including the arresting of respiration and special postures. Although a detailed examination of this phenomenon would take us far afield, Ramaswami has reported that those individuals who have experienced the ascending of the *Kundalini* energy from the spinal column to the crown of the head show evidence of paranormal abilities (e.g., clairvoyance, telepathy, precognition, etc.) This could possibly explain the experience of the participant in this study who claimed to have extrasensory perception as a result of her yoga practice. This particular individual was involved in intense meditation, at one point meditating for 2½ hours a day. In turning to the psychological domain, we see that Jung (1976) showed an interest in Kundalini yoga and found that there were important insights to be obtained from the similarities that Kundalini yoga offered for his own theory of individuation. Jung was interested in yoga's ability to produce a spiritual development of the personality.

The participants in the present study identified a sense of acceptance as being an essential aspect of their experience with yoga. The idea of accepting themselves and their life circumstances emanated from their descriptions and
appeared to have a major influence on the way they lived their lives. In reviewing the yoga literature, the theme of acceptance appears throughout some of the writings. In a study conducted by Goyeche (1979), psychosomatic patients practicing yoga developed “a state of calm or indifference to the same stimuli which used to aggravate them” (p. 377). For these patients, issues that used to be troublesome to them prior to practicing yoga no longer bothered them. This is consistent with other studies that have found that yogis tended to reduce stress by downplaying their situation and by changing their outlook in perceiving day-to-day problems (Latha & Kaliappan, 1992; Schell et al., 1994). It has been stated that by engaging in yoga, one shifts from a “primary pre-occupation with the environment to an unattached objective assessment and acceptance of the situation” (Sahasi, Mohan, & Kacker, 1989, p. 54).

Wilson (1985), in examining the lifestyle and social structure of a Pennsylvania ashram, stated that the theme most emphasized in the teachings was the importance of developing self-acceptance. The participants were encouraged to understand that one’s idealized image regarding how he or she should be in order to feel contented with oneself will inevitably be inconsistent with how he or she really thinks or feels. According to the teachings, the need to act differently than how one truly thinks or feels is a constant source of tension. As stated earlier, yoga philosophy and cognitive therapy share the basic premise that an individual’s problems arise primarily from faulty thinking processes and belief systems. This is consistent with Lazarus’s (1990) theory that suggests that an individual’s appraisal and views of reality are largely responsible for his or her
source of stress. The participants in the present study appeared to deeply understand that focusing on how things *should be* interfered in some way with their functioning. Consequently, it appears that these individuals may live by the old adage originally pronounced by Reinhold Niebuhr and modified over the years to include: Grant me the serenity to accept the things that I cannot change, the courage to change the things that I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

Participants in this study spoke about how yoga had influenced their self-esteem and how it had "empowered" them. In looking at the yoga literature, there are studies that indicate that yoga is related to positive changes in self-esteem (e.g., Jung, 1987; Pazhayattil, 1985/1986; Venkatesh, Joseph, Murthy, & Desiraju, 1989). According to Broota and Sanghvi (1994), after successfully achieving the yoga postures, the individual feels a sense of accomplishment and begins to develop confidence in one's self. As a result, a new self-concept and self-confidence is developed that generalizes to other aspects of the individual's life. An extensive review of studies documenting the physiological and psychological effects of Hatha yoga was carried out by Arpita (1983). She concluded that Hatha yoga contributed to increases in body image, self-esteem, and self-concept, and to decreases in anxiety and depression.

Three of the participants in this study shared how their experience with yoga had led them to view events in their life differently and to "reframe" many of the situations that happened in their life. These individuals were no longer viewing themselves as "victims" as they had done in the past, and were able to
look at life in a more optimistic manner. Authors in the stress management field have explored people's general orientation to life as a variable effecting one's ability to manage stress (Antonovsky, 1979; Kobasa, 1979; Lazarus, 1990). They have affirmed that an individual's world view is a major source of emotional distress, and that effective treatment of stress disorders requires that the individual develop a world view that serves to promote an effective style of coping with life's challenges and difficulties. Woolfolk and Lehrer (1984) assert that a world view most favorable to mental and physical well-being would include the following:

(a) a recognition and acceptance of the inevitable misfortunes and limitations of life; (b) a tolerance for the imperfections of one-self and others; (c) an involvement in the process of one's life rather than its outcomes; (d) a commitment to something outside oneself; and (e) a balance between effortful striving and passive, detached observation (p. 356).

The authors also add to this that an individual requires some system of belief, whether it be of religious or secular humanistic variety, that makes the world intelligible and meaningful.

Similarities are evident between the above statements and Antonovsky's (1987) research on personal coping resources and stress management. His research led to the identification of three personal coping resources that are said to affect one's ability to deal with stress. These resources are as follows: (a) self-efficacy, (b) optimism, and (c) sense of coherence. According to Antonovsky,
sense of coherence refers to an individual’s belief in a world that is coherent, structured, and reasonably predictable as opposed to one that is chaotic, unstructured, and unpredictable. The author maintains that sense of coherence directly affects one’s adaptation to stress and is a critical factor in good health.

The above notions are consistent with those put forth in narrative psychology. The basic tenet underlying narrative psychology is that individuals do not merely respond to events in and of themselves, but they respond to their interpretation of these events and the perceived implications (Meichenbaum & Fitzpatrick, 1993). Studies have found that individuals who adapted more effectively to stressful experiences were able to find and focus upon positive aspects or beneficial side effects of the experience (Taylor, Wood, & Lichtman, 1983; Thompson, 1991). Baum, O'Keefe, and Davidson (1990) found that “those individuals who assume some personal responsibility and avoided blaming others for their misfortune exhibited better adjustments than those who do not assume responsibility or who focus blame on others” (p. 1645). This sense of personal responsibility and focusing on positive aspects is evident in the participants’ descriptions in the present study. It is apparent that the participants, to varying degrees and in varying ways, were moved to make meaning for themselves out of the negative experiences and to execute self-responsibility when appropriate. The negative experiences were reframed in an attempt to find meaning for themselves and “to learn” from the events.

The fifth and final theme that evolved from the participants’ experiences with yoga was the idea of trusting in the process of life. Throughout the
participants' descriptions, there was a sense that everything in their life happened for a reason. The participants displayed a belief and trust in something larger than themselves and a faith in a universal plan. In turning to the psychological literature, we see that Jung (1973) was first to use the concept of “synchronicity.” Jung theorized that collaboration exists between people and events that somehow seem to involve fate. He spoke about coincidences that were acausal, meaning that certain events did not seem to be connected by normal causal means. The general belief in “synchronicity” is that every single life has a purpose and a deeper meaning than we are generally aware of and that everything happens for a reason. It was Jung's belief that this phenomenon of “synchronicity” is always operating in the universe and as of yet, there is no principle of science currently available to us that can explain such happenings.

In looking at Jung's (1973) concept of “synchronicity” in relation to the participants' experiences in the present study, we can see some parallels. Participants spoke of a sense of being “at the right place at the right time” and that “things are unfolding as they need to.” In some strange way, the right person or the right series of events often happened just in time to assist the individuals in their life. The participants shared how “negative” life events were often reframed and seen as “gifts” and “teachers.” There was a belief in the value of these events and that there were important “lessons” to be learned. These “negative” experiences were often seen as necessary for the participant's personal growth and development. Although some of the individuals may not have cognitively understood why the distress was occurring right at that time, they did have an
underlying knowingness and belief in the value of it. The participants seemed to
know and trust that whatever happened was meant to be.

It is evident that this theme of trusting in the process of life touches on the
issue of spirituality for the participants. Although a detailed consideration of the
spiritual aspects of yoga is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that
yoga originated as a spiritual practice and its relationship to stress management
may be of secondary nature. Nespor (1993) believes that yoga can be
recommended for people with existential neuroses, a lack of meaningfulness in
their lives. According to the author, yoga can enhance one's spiritual life and the
perspective beyond their physical life regardless of one's particular religion. He
believes that yoga can assist people in finding new purposes for their life and a
new sense of self-confidence. In Gifford-May and Thompson's (1994) study, the
meditators spoke of "a sense of something larger than themselves" and
described this dimension as "powerful" (p. 126).

For the participants in the present study, it appears that their beliefs reflect
a way of thinking and being that appears to give them the freedom to flow with
life and all its occurrences. They have a sense of just allowing life to flow,
knowing and trusting that it will all be just as it is supposed to be. There is a trust
in a universal scheme and that things will work out perfectly without any
interference on their part. For the participants, this represents a way of being in
the world.
Summary

In comparing the findings of this current investigation to the stress management and yoga literature, it appears that the experiences of the participants lend support to present day theories and research in the field. The findings of this study are in many ways consistent with the literature of several authors (e.g., Berger & Owen, 1992; Broota & Dhir, 1990; Goyeche et al., 1982; Harvey, 1983; Hover-Kramer & Shames, 1997; Krishna Rao, 1995; Nuernberger, 1986; Ramaswami, 1989; Saraswati, 1995; Wilson, 1985). As was highlighted throughout the discussion, yoga is related to other stress management techniques in a variety of ways. The results of this study also point to some unique qualities that yoga appears to have in relation to stress management.

Although there seems to be similarities between this current investigation and the stress management and yoga literature, it would be misleading to claim that these similarities are conclusive. As was previously noted, the literature available today in this field is weakened by the fact that it lacks experimental studies, consistent terminology, and coherent conceptualizations and theories. As a result, it is difficult to make clear, logical comparisons with the present study. In view of that, any comparisons that have been drawn between this research and stress management and yoga literature must be regarded as speculative.

**Contribution of Findings to the Literature**

Although the results of this study reflect some of the observations and theories found in the stress management and yoga field, some important
contributions have emerged from this research. Past investigations of the phenomenon of yoga have predominantly consisted of quantitative studies. By nature, these investigations are based on a prior definition of the experience and time and again reduce yoga to specific components in order to study it. As a result, the essence of yoga as a holistic experience was not investigated.

The qualitative studies examining yoga have primarily addressed aspects of meditation, thus, once again missing the holistic experience of this phenomenon. Previous authors in the yoga literature have not focussed on the subjective experience of yoga as it relates to the management of stress in one's life. This particular research project contributes to the existing literature in exactly this manner. In engaging in a retrospective review of the lived experiences of the yoga participants, a deeper and broader understanding was achieved. In using a phenomenological framework, the experience was explicated from the voices of the participants and not based on a prior definition of the experience. Therefore, this research represents an important contribution to the existing body of knowledge and adds to what is already known about yoga and stress management.

The phenomenological research tradition within which this investigation was situated appears to have highlighted the basically holistic, even spiritual in nature, experience of the participants in this study. From the participants' descriptions, there appears to be something about yoga that spreads into a number of interrelated realms in ways that most other stress management techniques do not. It has been claimed that yoga incorporates physical, cognitive,
and behavioural changes in its approach (Latha & Kaliappan, 1991), and this appears to be supported by the findings of the present study. In examining yoga from a subjective point of view, the participants' descriptions suggest that yoga does speak to the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural aspects of the individual. Although this study represents only one experiential account, it does encourage one to question whether yoga may provide a means of regulating physiological, emotional, and cognitive reactions to stressful events and thus increase coping effectiveness. The findings from this study also suggest that yoga may play a preventive role in protecting individuals from potentially stress-inducing situations through the values, beliefs, and attitudes that are espoused through its philosophy. As well, the sense of internal balance and the enhanced sense of self-awareness that participants described appear to act as protective measures that ward off impending stress and allows the individual to function in a more proactive versus reactive manner.

Implications for the Counselling Profession

The results of the present study point to some interesting implications for the field of counselling and stress management. In looking at the various stress management techniques available today for working with clients, it is evident that many of them focus on one particular component of the stress response. For example, some techniques, such as relaxation training and biofeedback, emphasize modification of physiological responses. Others, such as the self-statements and imagery techniques, focus on cognitive changes. In assertiveness training and social skills learning, behaviour change is
emphasized. There is evidence supporting the specificity of effects for various stress management techniques (Lehrer et al., 1994).

Studies have found, however, that interventions based on a combination of techniques are more likely to be effective in reducing symptoms of stress than interventions based on a single technique (Lehrer & Woolfolk, 1993). One could extrapolate from this that a technique that addresses only one aspect of the stress response may be too limited in its focus. Considering the fact that stress has been recognized as a multi-dimensional phenomenon involving cognitive as well as physiological and behavioural components, a holistic biopsychosocial approach for the treatment and prevention of stress-related disorders does seem in order. Stress management techniques that use multiple modalities may have a broader range of effects than more narrowly focussed methods.

In the counselling profession, therapists routinely work with clients who are dealing with numerous stress-related issues. As therapists, we must give careful consideration to the whole person with whom we are working, including such aspects as goals and aspirations, style of life, social context, and world view because these factors can generate or compound problems associated with stress. In looking at the different strategies available in the field for assisting clients, we can see that various Western oriented self-regulatory therapies tend to focus more or less on one or two dimensions of an individual. Consequently, the individual is not seen as an integrated, organized whole, with mind and body intricately connected. The findings from the present study suggest that yoga may
be a system that deals with life styles and values on the one hand, and mind-body regulation on the other.

As a counsellor, we must consider the practical aspects of any therapy that we use or suggest for our clients. In examining yoga as a stress management approach, we can see that it is a relatively inexpensive form of therapy. Yoga has remained and continues to remain an independent discipline that could be adopted by most people, irrespective of physical state, age, sex, marital status, race, or religion.

The counselling profession is a challenging career and as therapists we must take care of ourselves, thus avoiding the problems associated with stress and burnout. Therapists who practice yoga themselves may experience benefits such as those described by the participants in this study. In terms of our therapeutic effectiveness, an enhanced awareness and perceptual sensitivity may foster a deeper understanding of, and compassion for, the clients with whom we work. Participants in this study spoke of how yoga had assisted them in “tuning into” themselves and as a result one received “the most incredible inspiration,” another automatically knew what was right for her and answers just came, and a third spoke of having “an openness of your mind,... a clarity.” According to Patel (1993), a practical result of meditation is an increased ability to find a resolution to any problem. It may be that yoga assists individuals in focussing on and accessing their own internal wisdom. Thus, yoga may be as important for our own health as it is for our clients.
As was indicated by the findings in this research, yoga appears to be a holistic system dealing with the body, mind, and behaviour in a synergistic way. It may have much to offer in meeting the needs of our clients in today's modern society and could be an important self-help tool for personal health and well-being. Depending on the client’s situation, yoga could be used as a complementary measure to enhance our present day psychotherapeutic interventions.

Recommendations for Future Research

The focus of this research has been on the lived experiences of yoga participants in relation to stress management. Given the results of this study and the clinical and research observations in the literature, yoga's potential for assisting individuals in managing stress does seem substantiated enough to warrant further, extensive investigation. This is not to negate the fact that the lack of definitional clarity in the field of stress management and yoga has resulted in many inconsistencies in the research findings investigating this phenomenon. With this said, it is essential that future research be conducted in a diligent manner that specifies exactly the dimensions of yoga and stress management that are being examined. Researchers must clearly explicate the data-gathering and analytic procedures used in their studies. Our understanding of participants' experiences with yoga will only be developed further if more rigorous attention to methodology and more convergence of definitions come about.

The participants who volunteered for this study consisted of five Caucasian women and one non-Caucasian man. There were no outstanding
distinctions that emerged from this study regarding gender or cultural differences. However, with this particular sample, there is a high probability that any differences that might exist would not be revealed. Future research could be directed towards investigating gender and culture as they relate to individuals' experiences with yoga. If differences emerge related to either variable, this would be of value to practitioners working in the field. Research into the experiences of participants from other cultures would provide additional information about the lived experiences of these people.

The participants that volunteered for this research varied in the length of time that they were involved in practicing yoga. This variation ranged from 2 years to 11 years. Differences were reflected, in some small ways, in the depth to which the participants spoke of and described their experiences. Those individuals who had practiced longer shared more in-depth descriptions of their experiences and appeared slightly more introspective. It would be of interest to conduct future research that compares long-term practitioners with short-term. Information from this kind of research would be very useful to therapists working with clients in determining what might be expected in terms of changes taking place in relation to yoga practice.

Given the lack of phenomenological research into the experience of yoga and stress management, replication of this study with a larger sample size would contribute to a greater understanding of the meaning of this phenomenon. Research that examines the holistic experience of the individual is essential in studying this phenomenon because yoga is embedded in a broad therapeutic
scheme. In attempting to study the specific contributions of its individual components, we end up missing the essence of the yoga experience. An individual is an integrated, organized whole, whose body and mind can not be separated, thus our research must reflect the reality in which human beings live. Further exploration of this phenomenon and an accumulation of experiential accounts can contribute to the shaping of theory and future research (Colaizzi, 1978).

The knowledge gained through further studies will be of value in assessing the potential clinical applications of yoga as it relates to the stress management field. Given the results of this study and the clinical and research observations in the literature, yoga could be a valuable tool in establishing and maintaining the health and well-being of individuals. An application of the tools of science and scientific thinking to this phenomenon may provide secular means and ways that can be widely applicable in promoting health. Future research that examines the clinical applications of yoga seems warranted.

Study Limitations

This project was an exploratory study as I intended to examine the issue of stress management as it is experienced by those individuals involved in the practice of yoga. As with any investigation, there are always inevitable trade-offs that accompany research decisions. Due to practical considerations, my sample consisted of six volunteer yoga practitioners in the Greater Vancouver Area, British Columbia. It should be noted that those participants who agreed to enter the study may not have been representative of all those who begin the practice of
yoga. In addition, only one of the six volunteer participants was male and non-Caucasian. As a result, study findings may have differed with a more diverse group of volunteers. Due to the disproportionate gender representation and lack of multi-cultural representation, it is not possible to determine with confidence, any differences in these areas. Furthermore, five of the six participants were yoga instructors and thus this may have influenced the manner in which the individuals responded in the interviews.

The purpose of doing a phenomenological study is to attempt to capture the essence of some aspect of the lived world. This essence is expressed through an interpretative description of the phenomenon. Thus, this type of inquiry depends highly on the use of language, that used both by the participant and by the researcher. Koestenbaum (1978) notes, however, that "language is mostly metaphoric, especially when it tries to name, describe, or clarify abstractions, and in particular when the abstractions refer to transcendental or ubiquitous aspects of being" (p. 84). Valuable shades of what the participant felt or experienced and was inadequately able to express in words may have been lost. Therefore, this study was limited by the extent to which both the participants and the researcher were able to articulate the complexity and totality of the experience.

Due to the phenomenological nature of this study, an in-depth interview was used as a means to gather the data. Interviews are vulnerable to self-report bias and thus this is always a concern. In using the interview as a data-gathering method, the study is of course dependent on the extent to which participants are
willing and able to disclose their experiences. This willingness and ability can be influenced by the participant's level of self-awareness and their capability to recall their experiences. Studies involving retrospection can be affected by memory and possibilities of distorted recall. However, according to Van Manen (1990), the accuracy of the participants' reports is not a crucial issue in a phenomenological study because meaning making emerges from the salience of the experience from the perspective of the participant. It is the subjective view that matters and what the participant chooses to present and not to present, as well, the affect, is what constitutes the meaning of the experience to him or her.

The aim of phenomenological interviewing is to get as close to the prereflective experience of the person as possible and requires that the participant contribute in terms of articulating their thoughts and feelings related to their experience. Despite feeling confident that my efforts to establish rapport and trust with participants and to develop a sense of comfortableness for the participants, certainly the individual's own personality characteristics come into play in determining what he or she will share about their experience. Also the issue of social desirability and the need for social approval could have effected the manner in which the participants responded in the interviews (Borg & Gall, 1989).

The focus of this study was limited to an exploration of the participants' experiences within the limits of a 1½ hour interview, with a follow-up validation interview. A more complete exploration of the participants' experiences could be accomplished with additional interviews over a longer period of time. However,
due to limitations of time and resources this option was not available. The in-depth interview and follow-up discussion were the primary sources of data collection. In doing the validation interview, this was one more piece of information that addressed the trustworthiness of my account of the participants’ experiences.

**Conclusion**

This study provides an account of the lived experiences of participants who practice yoga in relation to their management of stress in their lives. Current literature within the area of stress management and yoga fails to fully capture the nature of participants’ experiences with yoga. Thus, the primary contribution of this study relates to the examination of an area that has not previously been researched. By examining the subjective experiences of yoga practitioners, a more in-depth understanding of how they make sense of this process emerged. This study adds an extensive description of stress management and yoga to the existing body of literature. Making explicit that which was lived implicitly adds to our knowledge base and provides the basis for future research in this field.

The stress of modern day life seems inescapable; no matter what we do, we cannot avoid it entirely. This stress may well be a crucial factor relating to the high levels of psychological distress and rise of physical diseases in our society. The findings of this study suggest that yoga could be a valuable tool in assisting individuals in establishing and maintaining health and well-being. A fuller understanding of this area and a greater comprehension of the experiences of
the yoga participants may improve our ability as counsellors to assist the clients we serve.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

LETTER OF INITIAL CONTACT

I am writing this letter to introduce myself. My name is Kelly Brown and I am doing a Master of Arts degree in Counselling Psychology at The University of British Columbia. As part of my degree, I am researching stress management and yoga. The title of my research project is "A Phenomenological Investigation of the Experience of Yoga in Relation to the Management of Stress in One's Life."

I am looking for adults who are currently practicing yoga on a regular basis and who are willing to share their experience of this practice as it relates to the management of stress in their life. Both females and/or males who are willing and able to conduct an interview in English are welcome to participate.

For the purposes of the study, I will arrange to meet with you for one in-depth interview. This interview will be approximately 1 to 1½ hours in length. You will be asked to tell me about your experience of yoga as it relates to managing stress in your life. The interview will be recorded by audio-tape and transcribed in order to assist me with data analysis. Upon completing my analysis, I will contact you for a follow-up interview and provide you with a summary of the results. This interview can be conducted in person or by telephone. Confidentiality will be maintained at all times. The audio-tapes will be number coded and kept in a locked filing cabinet.

If you are involved in practicing yoga and are interested in exploring this experience in relation to stress management, please contact me. You may leave your name and number at the Department of Counselling Psychology at 822-4919, attention Kelly Brown. I will return your call as soon as possible. My thesis supervisor at the Department of Counselling Psychology is Dr. Bonita Long. She may be reached at 822-4756. I thank-you in advance for your interest in this study.

Sincerely,

_____________________________
Kelly Brown
APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION FORM

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research study. As you know the material that you discuss in your interviews will remain confidential and the data presented in my Master's Thesis will refer to you anonymously. I do, however, need some background information and I would appreciate you taking the time to answer the questions below.

1. Name: ________________ Age: ______

2. Preferred Pseudonym: ________________

3. Tel no: ________ (work) ________ (home) Time: ________
   (Please indicate at which phone number you would prefer me to call you as well as the preferred time that I can reach you).

4. Number of years involved with yoga: ________

5. Please indicate your highest education level:
   (a) public school ______
   (b) high school ______
   (c) some college or university courses ______
   (d) college diploma ______
   (e) undergraduate university degree ______
   (f) master's degree or above ______

6. How do you currently spend your time?
   (a) employed ______
   (b) unemployed ______
   (c) homemaker ______
   (d) retired ______
   (e) volunteer ______
   (f) other (please explain) ____________
APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Time: 1 to 1½ hours

Guiding Question: What is the experience of participants who practice yoga in relation to the management of stress in their lives?

Purpose of the Interview

The purpose of the interview is to obtain a detailed, in-depth description of how the participants perceive yoga in relation to managing their stress levels.

Prior to the start of the interview, I will verbally explain the consent form and if both parties agree, the form will be signed (a copy will be given to the participant). In beginning the interview, the following script will be read to each participant:

*During this meeting, I am interested in developing an overall perspective, based on your experience, of what it is like for you to be involved in yoga. I am interested in understanding how you personally experience this event in relation to the management of stress in your life.*

*I would like you to think back to a recent time when you were involved in doing yoga and you perceived it as having an effect on your level of stress. Can you please focus on this experience and describe it in a full and detailed manner, describing it as concretely as you can. I encourage you to include as many details as possible that are related to your feelings, thoughts, and behaviours, as they occurred during your experience.*

*Please try to describe the experience in such a way that someone who has never had the experience would be able to “see” the experience in your description. Do not stop until you feel you have described it as completely as possible and you feel understood.*
Validation Interview

A follow-up interview will be conducted with the participants upon completing the preliminary analysis of the data. The purpose of this interview is to share with the participants the themes that have evolved from the data and to provide the individuals with an opportunity to express their views or opinions regarding these themes. Each participant will be asked the following questions: (a) How do these themes relate to your individual experience? and (b) Do you have any particular thoughts and/or feelings that you would like to share regarding these themes? The participants' responses will be documented during the interview.
APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

As the participants share their description of their experience, I will respond by reflecting and asking for clarification where necessary. The succeeding questions may be asked to help facilitate the description of the experience as well as to help discover any personal meanings associated with the experience. The questions are as follows:

(a) Can you tell more about what you were feeling or what went through your mind when that happened?

(b) What effect did this have on you?

(c) What did you do when that happened?

(d) What does it mean to you to practice yoga as a way of managing stress?

(e) What was the significance of the event?

(f) Can you think of another occasion when you were involved in doing yoga and you had a similar experience? What was that like for you?

(g) In reflecting on your experience of practicing yoga and stress management, can you tell me what it was like for you before you began practicing yoga as compared to now.

(h) Let’s see, if I understand you, you said that…. Can you explain this further to me?

(i) If you had to use one word to describe your experience with yoga in relation to stress management, what would that one word be?

(j) Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experience of practicing yoga in relation to managing your stress?