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Authors

Oatis-Ballew, Robin

Hotz, Allison

Chaney-Taylor, Tiyana

et al.

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“You Are Your Best Thing”: The Barriers and Benefits of Yoga for Black Women

Robin Oatis-Ballew
Tennessee State University

Allison Hotz
Tennessee State University

Tiyana Chaney-Taylor
Tennessee State University

Sarah Rose Elizabetta-Ragan
Tennessee State University

Abstract

African American women face emotional stress and chronic health issues such as heart disease, diabetes, and obesity. This has become even more salient during the COVID-19 pandemic. There are a multitude of factors that contribute to this psychosocial stress and negative health outcomes including systemic oppression and barriers to physical activity. Exercise has been identified as an adaptive coping strategy for Black women to reduce psychological distress and negative health outcomes. This article will explore yoga as an adaptive intervention. Issues that impact Black women, Black women and physical activity, the benefits and barriers of yoga, and access for Black women will also be addressed. This article is aimed at two primary groups: 1) Black women who experience emotional stress and/or who have been diagnosed with or are at risk of conditions such as obesity, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes that negatively impact their overall health and, 2) healthcare providers and supporters of these women.

Keywords: African American; Black; Wellness; Women; Yoga

This essay examines the barriers and benefits of yoga for Black women as a means to support their physical and emotional health. The title “You Are Your Best Thing” is inspired by an excerpt from Toni Morrison’s novel, *Beloved*. The main character is Sethe, an enslaved Black woman who is seizing an opportunity to flee to freedom. Sethe is in danger of being found and returned to enslavement. Rather than face that future again, she makes the decision to end her children’s lives and her own life as well. Seeing the death of one daughter, the pursuers

determine Sethe is no longer mentally fit for enslavement, and she and the remaining children continue towards freedom. Years later, the spirit of the daughter seems to return in physical form and Sethe feels as if she has been given a second chance. Sethe makes sacrifices that others view as detrimental to maintain this spirit *child's* happiness. When confronted by an old acquaintance about these choices, Sethe refers to the spirit and says, 'She was my best thing.' In return, her acquaintance states, 'You your best thing, Sethe, You are.' Sethe responds, 'Me? Me?' (Morrison 1987, 134). At times, Black women are in circumstances where surviving rather than thriving is seen as the primary option, and they routinely make sacrifices for others. These sacrifices can conflict with Black women's overall well-being. The words 'you are your best thing' resonate with the research team because the goal of this article is to support Black women and their well-being.

Oppression that Black women faced in the past extends into the present. There are a multitude of factors that contribute to this psychosocial stress and negative health outcomes including systemic oppression (Chin, Martin, and Redmond 2021) and barriers to physical activity (Rimmer, Hsieh, and Graham 2010). Vanessa Bland and Manoj Sharma (2017) highlight physical inactivity as a public health concern as it can lead to chronic health issues such as heart disease, obesity, and diabetes. African American women are at an increased risk for developing these specific conditions. Additionally, African American women face emotional stress and this has become even more salient during the pandemic (Kalinowski et al. 2022).

Exercise has been identified as an adaptive coping strategy for Black women to reduce psychological distress and negative health outcomes (Joseph et al. 2015). This article will explore yoga as an adaptive intervention. We discuss yoga as an important intervention through looking at the issues that impact Black women, and their access and perspectives on this particular physical activity. We also talk about the benefits and barriers of yoga as well. The terms African American and Black are used interchangeably. This article is aimed at two primary groups: 1) Black women who experience emotional stress and/or who have been diagnosed with or are at risk of conditions such as cardiovascular disease, obesity, and diabetes that negatively impact their overall health; and, 2) healthcare providers and supporters of these women.

Our research team has been meeting through the Psychology Department at Tennessee State University for three years and we are personally and professionally invested in these issues. We are a counseling psychology graduate student, alumni, and early and mid-career psychologists who approach Black women's health through the lens of Health Services Psychology. We are three Black women and a white woman who seek to fill in healthcare disparity gaps and address the impact of bias and oppression. Three of us regularly practice yoga and one of us is considering practicing. As a collective, our group strives to identify practices that promote emotional and mental health, and healing. We believe that there are current disparities in the mainstream yoga practice that limit some Black women from accessing this community. We also believe that for Black women who feel limited, sharing information about yoga, its benefits, and how to manage the barriers may increase readiness to engage. It may also increase actual engagement and lead to improved physical and emotional health.

Stress and Systemic Issues that Impact Black Women's Health

There are notable structural issues that negatively impact Black women's emotional and physical health. Due to the intersections of structural racism and sexism, Black women are

marginalized on the basis of race and gender (Crenshaw 1991). Sometimes, women have leaned into stereotypes such as the Strong Black Woman as a coping strategy for racialized oppression. In this stereotype, women are strong, independent, self-sacrificing, and less vulnerable. Yet, this may come at a cost to overall mental and emotional health (Donovan and West 2015). Additionally, stress in general has been shown to accelerate cellular aging, which can wear down the body's system and produce a variety of different ailments (Williams and Mohammed 2009). One meta-analysis found that perceived racism and discrimination are positively associated with increased psychological distress and poor physical health (Pieterse et al. 2012).

Regarding physical health, some literature examines perceived racism as a stressor that has the potential to influence a physiological stress response that can lead to negative outcomes. For instance, Lewis et al. (2017) found that the stress of racism can impact the immune system and cardiovascular functioning. Further, a laboratory and ambulatory monitoring study documented the relationship between racism and psychophysiological reactivity, including cortisol, blood pressure, and heart rate responses (Brondolo, Gallo, and Myers 2009). This study showed that an increase in stress-related disorders such as hypertension and cardiovascular diseases are prevalent in populations that withstand racism (Brondolo, Gallo, and Myers 2009).

Additionally, the Black woman's physique has been subjected to scrutiny, invalidation, and denigration since the transatlantic slave trade (Strings 2019). These actions have perpetuated a societal distaste for Black physical attributes and disregard an appreciation for diverse body compositions. For instance, the healthcare system utilizes the Body Mass Index (BMI) tool to diagnose obesity. The utility of this index compares a patient's height and weight to national averages that are outdated when considering the United States of America's population (Stern 2021). Black women face systemic racism and stereotyping when medical providers utilize the BMI index due to its ability to elicit misdiagnoses, increase stigma, and act as a barrier to treatment intervention and recommendations (Stern 2021). Given these realities, Black women could benefit from psychological and physical interventions that promote overall health and well-being.

Physical and Psychological Benefits of Yoga

While it is known that physical activity is necessary for the human body to function optimally, the pervasiveness of chronic health diseases has been increasing. With available technological advances such as online entertainment streaming services and, more recently, the restrictions associated with COVID-19, people are becoming more sedentary. Physical inactivity is a major risk factor for a multitude of health problems (Yang 2007). Recent research shows that globally, COVID-19 mortality rates increased for people who were overweight and had low levels of physical activity (Wang, Sato, and Sakuraba 2021). Other literature encourages people to make cognitive shifts in their thoughts about exercise as a way of improving overall mental health functioning during the pandemic (Diamond and Waite 2020).

When one thinks of yoga, overall health and improvements in strength and balance come to mind (Hawks, Elsmore, and Hawks 2021). Yoga has additional positive implications for some of the primary health conditions that Black women face: cardiovascular disease, obesity, and diabetes, as well as mental health concerns related to emotional stress. In one study that reviewed yoga programs and their relationship to four leading risk factors for chronic diseases, Kyeongra Yang (2007) found that there were significant impacts on these physical health conditions. The systematic review found that yoga interventions are generally effective in reducing body weight,

blood pressure, glucose level, and high cholesterol (Yang 2007). There is also more recent evidence that yoga can be helpful with weight loss and mental health (Unick et al. 2022). In a study of 60 women in a weight loss program, yoga was an effective contributor to long-term weight loss. Additionally, women who participated in yoga reported more self-compassion and less negative affect than women in the study who did not participate in yoga (Unick et al. 2022).

Yoga has been known to promote relaxation as well as enhance focus and concentration (Hawks, Elsmore, and Hawks 2021). Some of these more noticeable mental health benefits are related to emotional regulation, decreasing anxiety, and reducing depression severity (Gerber, Kilmer, and Callahan 2018). Also, the breathing, relaxation, and meditation components of yoga can lead to decreased sympathetic nervous system activation, which can help to improve a host of mental health concerns (Hawks, Elsmore, and Hawks 2021). Moreover, Büssing et al. (2012) reviewed 38 research articles, meta-analyses, and randomized clinical trials to report a summary of the effects of yoga on mental and physical health. Their report demonstrated that yogic practices are effective in alleviating several depressive symptoms and fatigue. Further, yoga interventions such as yogic breathing were found to be more beneficial in treating anxiety and anxiety disorders in comparison to standard anxiolytic drugs or active controls including relaxation responses (Saeed, Antonacci, and Bloch 2010). Additionally, another systematic review revealed that yoga is beneficial in stress reduction and helps to better manage stress-related symptoms (Chong et al. 2011). Lastly, a review of more than seven articles studying Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) due to natural disasters and combat demonstrated that the practice of yoga significantly reduced PTSD symptoms including sadness, fear, stress, anxiety, sleeplessness, and the rate of respiration (Büssing et al. 2012; Telles, Singh, and Balkrishna 2012).

Black Women, Physical Activity, and Restorative Yoga as an Option

According to the American Heart Association (2023), 59% of Black women ages 20 and older have cardiovascular disease while 58% have high blood pressure. Physical inactivity is a risk factor for these conditions. Reportedly, up to 80% of Black women are overweight (Office of Minority Health Resource Center 2020). Yoga is an option for addressing these issues as the practice targets emotional and physical health. Additionally, yoga is a longstanding practice. One researcher notes that meditation and yoga have been present during eras of enslavement, segregation, and migration to the Civil Rights, Black Power, and New Age movements (Evans 2021). Research has also noted that some African American women feel as if yoga has added to the quality and the duration of their lives (Evans 2016). Gail Parker (2020) also highlights how yoga practices can contribute to emotional healing from racialized trauma and oppression. When Black women engage in the practice of yoga, it has been associated with many benefits; notably, longevity, improving physical injuries, reduced substance cravings, and mood improvement (Evans 2016). Interestingly, because otherness and accessibility related to cost and physical location is a predominant issue, Black women have begun to open their own yoga studios which have provided ample opportunities for the community to bolster cultural support.

Restorative yoga may be helpful to Black women coping with stress and/or who have or are at risk of being diagnosed with serious health conditions. This form of yoga refers to the practice of releasing mind-body tension and promoting health within the nervous system. Props can also be used to help maintain poses longer and thus increase the opportunities for natural

healing to take over. Restorative yoga may be a good tool for Black women as it increases the overall functioning of the central nervous system. When the nervous system is working well, this reduces the release of the stress hormone cortisol. Moreover, in the book *Restorative Yoga for Ethnic and Race-Based Stress and Trauma* (2020), Parker notes that racialized trauma impacts the body and that restorative yoga practices can increase healing. This is because this practice has a positive impact on the nervous system and this in turn helps the body rest and heal. Additionally, the mindfulness and emotional aspects of yoga can aid in processing stressful experiences. Other books also promote the benefits of restorative yoga. In *Pause, Rest Be*, Octavia Raheem (2022) discusses restorative yoga and addresses how to lean into yoga that is indeed restorative and non-depleting. In her book on *yoga nidrā*, Tracee Stanley (2021) emphasizes the importance of rest. As Evans (2021) indicates, Black women have struggled for wellness as they seek to heal from personal, cultural, and structural violence and oppression (Evans 2021). Thus, the idea of yoga practices that promote health along with rest and restoration may be appealing. Despite the positive outcomes associated with yoga practice, many Black women do not participate in yoga practice and an exploration of barriers to this is warranted.

Barriers to Yoga Practice Among African American Women

Even with all the known benefits that yoga can bring to physical and mental health, African American women are still one of the lowest represented groups in the practice (Berger 2018). There are several suggestions as to why African American women may not engage in yoga despite the benefits. These suggestions are related to the location and cost of yoga classes, an acute sense of otherness or not belonging, and religious beliefs that confound yoga with practices outside of one's own faith.

Yoga space, costs, and studio culture can be exclusionary. In the United States, yoga has become geared toward white fitness culture. Amara Miller (2018) writes about yoga's progression in the United States. During the 1960s, Miller discusses how yoga was part of a counter culture that was in opposition to the Vietnam war and racial injustice, and in search of a more authentic self. Miller notes, "Yoga became tied to this hip counterculture identity and lifestyle" (Miller 2018, 76). This contrasts with the transformation of yoga that later took place and is present in many studio spaces now. Miller adds, "Counterculture values and an emphasis on authenticity were subsequently adopted (or as many argue, co-opted) by marketing and advertising firms during the 1960s and '70s, which began utilizing these discourses to sell products by framing consumption as a means of expressing one's individuality" (79). The product consumption that Miller highlights may create a financial barrier to accessibility. Furthermore, the cost of yoga classes can be an obstacle as well. Many classes cost \$20-25 per session. Also, many yoga studios and classes are in neighborhoods and areas that are predominantly white (Berger 2018). Michele Tracy Berger (2018) notes that not only are many yoga studios typically outside of a convenient geographical location for African American women, but yoga in the United States is often seen as a white space where Black women are othered, feel stereotyped, and/or are viewed with hypervisibility or invisibility.

This acute sense of otherness may also be a barrier between yoga and Black women. Bhalla and Moscovitz's (2020) study on yoga and female objectification revealed five media frames in which yoga is portrayed, in visual images, in three popular women's magazines. These images may be seen as exclusionary by Black women. One frame is the objectification of

women's bodies. The images often featured women in tight clothing showing off their athletic body types and were accompanied by articles or statements drawing a connection between yoga and body shaping and weight loss. Two more frames centered on health benefits that stress physical over mental or spiritual wellness, and yoga as a practice for white women (Bhalla and Moscowitz 2020). Emphasizing the physical over the mental and spiritual refers to positioning how a woman looks over how she feels. Also in these leading magazines, over 80% of the yoga related images featured women who were thin and white. The remaining frames are commodified brand promotion and consumption, and yoga as a commercialized personal vocation. Oftentimes, yoga articles were accompanied by advertisements attempting to use yoga to support purchasing other products. The final frame highlights the product branding and consumerism that accompanies yoga and the pressure that may be on teachers to promote products. This depiction of yogis as thin white women, surrounded by products both related and unrelated to yoga, could be very distancing for Black women.

In addition to these non-inclusive media images, there are other indicators that studio spaces may not value Black bodies. While white women's bodies have been promoted as the health and beauty ideal, historically Black women's bodies have dehumanized through enslavement and also marginalized through a racialized phobia about obesity (Strings 2019). Given the negative and historical lens through which Black women's bodies have been viewed (Hotz 2022; Strings 2019), the body objectification associated with yoga may be off-putting for some African American women. Despite this, it is important to note that many Black women feel body positivity despite the realities of racism and its regard Black bodies. Also, many Black women are comfortable participating in yoga spaces that are reflected and advertised in common media images. However, for other African American women, feeling as though one does not belong is deeply embedded in the psyche due to hundreds of years of oppression (Berger 2018). While some yoga teachers and studio websites assert an all-inclusive motto for participation, the reality is most of the people who participate in yoga classes in the United States are thin, white, women (Berger 2018). That sense of otherness can be a major deterrent to participating in yoga and experiencing the benefits it can afford. When they do not see others that look like them, Black women may not choose to engage in yoga practices. Some Black women have chosen instead to create spaces for themselves and others. For instance, in a conversation between Rebecca Kinney and Kerrie Trahan, Trahan discusses her journey to discovering yoga and founding Yoganic Flow and Yoga House in inner city Detroit. When asked about the obstacles Trahan faces in getting people to try a yoga class, she stated, "A lot of people would say, 'That's for white girls.' When we first started in the community, a lot of people thought yoga was not for them. People would also say, 'I'm too big for yoga.'" Trahan later added, "I think when you don't see anybody looking like you doing that thing, you don't think it's for you or it's available to you. That's a barrier" (2019, 44).

Another perceived barrier may be related to religion. There has been controversy over yoga in Christian communities, and in some groups, it has been labeled as an anti-Christian practice (Wong 2018). This may be because yoga has roots in South Asian religious practices. The church has been a stabilizing force and source of support for Christian African Americans. Some Christian African Americans may feel the yoga postures represent a form of worship to other gods or religious images. Conversely, other Christian yoga participants argue that the practice has brought them closer to their higher power. Nonetheless, Andrea Jain (2017) has asserted that yoga is not a religion as it is not based on dogma and is about the individual

participants' unique practice and their relationship with God (Jain 2017). These discussions within Christian communities may impact whether Black women choose to participate in yoga.

As noted earlier, in the face of these concerns, some Black women are comfortable with practicing yoga as it is presented in the mainstream. Also, many Black women are not low-income, physically inactive, or at risk of developing major health conditions such as obesity, cardiac disease, or diabetes. Still those who are uncomfortable, experiencing stress, and/or facing serious health concerns, but are curious about the practice, could benefit from yoga. It is important to understand there are options that promote health in culturally-safe spaces.

Benefits to Yoga Practice Among African American Women

Despite the barriers, there are many potential benefits to yoga practice for African American women. Women who are facing emotional stress and/or diagnosed with or at risk of developing serious medical conditions should consider yoga as an intervention. There is evidence that yoga contributes to a healthier and longer life. Stephanie Evans (2016) completed a review of memoirs from African American women to examine the possible perceived benefits of yoga within a Black population. Evans found that yoga was mentioned in 42 memoirs where the practice contributed to increased longevity, healed physical injuries, decreased substance use, and enhanced breast cancer treatment. These narratives shed light on the importance of holistically understanding Black women's experiences. They also promote the benefits of engaging in regular yoga practice. This regular engagement could positively impact physical well-being (Evans 2016). In her book, Evans (2021) discusses how Black women have navigated racial trauma, stress, anxiety, and depression. In their yoga memoirs, Black women discuss practices of reflection, exercise, movement, stretching, visualization, and chanting for self-care (Evans 2021). Yoga provided an opportunity for African American women to continue their journey of healing and growth. Furthermore, Amini Richardson (2018) describes yoga as a peace practice that can be enhanced if Black women were more able to access Black-owned yoga studios. When Black women engage in yoga practice, they increase fellowship and find a shared community because they are surrounded by similar life experiences. Yoga practices can transcend the challenges discussed earlier and offer a meaningful source of support (Kinney and Trahan 2019).

Daheia Barr-Anderson's (2016) study adds to what is known about the potential benefits of yoga among African American women. According to Barr-Anderson (2016), African American women participants in a quantitative pilot study reported improvements in their mental and physical health after practicing yoga. In this study, the researcher recruited 59 women. Approximately 30 women were in the intervention group and participated in multiple yoga classes each week. In contrast, the remaining 29 women were in the control group and received baseline testing to establish their health status. Based upon exit interviews with the intervention group, Barr-Anderson (2016) reported that some of the women shared marked changes in their health. Notably, a participant shared that she was able to discontinue her prescribed blood pressure medication after engaging in the three-month yoga practice. Another participant expressed concerns related to stress eating and chronic stress due to career demands. This participant engaged in yoga practice or breathing exercises when feeling triggered to stress eat. After the study, the participant indicated losing a significant amount of weight and reduced stress levels.

In addition to the research mentioned above, online platforms are increasingly developing spaces for Black women and yoga. These spaces include Black Girl Yoga and Sisters of Yoga on Instagram. In a recent article, Shanice Cameron (2019) focuses on how Black Girl Yoga creates opportunities for Black women to participate. *Elle's* online magazine, elle.com, along with *Glamour's* online option have also featured articles on Black women and yoga (Penrose 2018; Rasool 2022; Rudulfo 2015). These platforms highlight Black women's efforts to create their own safe spaces within the yoga community. Digital counter spaces have made yoga more accessible for these groups. These spaces also offer opportunities for Black women to see themselves reflected and to feel connected.

Future Directions

There is evidence that Black women respond well to yoga to promote health and healing. Also, there are growing opportunities for Black women to engage in yoga practice to improve their emotional and physical health. By engaging in yoga practices, Black women can prioritize their well-being and embody the concept "you are your best thing" (Morrison 1987). Black women, their healthcare providers, and those who support them are encouraged to help identify opportunities to move toward health and healing through yoga.

Recommendations for Black Women

According to Barr-Anderson (2016), there are five adaptable steps to becoming involved in yoga practice. First, anyone can begin their yoga journey in a safe and secure place such as at home. Utilizing streaming resources like YouTube allows participants to try free courses at their speed and comfort level. Next, participants can search for free community courses or trial classes offered at many yoga studios. This helps in establishing a sense of physical space while providing an opportunity to try different styles of yoga. The third step focuses on Black women resisting comparison with other participants in yoga practice. This comparison can lead to possible risk of injury if attempting to keep up with advanced yogis in class. This third step is encapsulated by a core principle of yoga – do not judge yourself against others. Fourth, Black women can meet individually with yoga instructors to address any concerns about engaging in the practice. Some instructors want to find modifications for their students so they can advance their yoga practice without injury or dropping out of the practice. Finally, due to the many simultaneous responsibilities that Black women juggle, participants must take periods of rest when needed. If Black women become overwhelmed or reach their pain threshold, it is paramount that they take a break. Barr-Anderson (2016) says that participants should take time for mindfulness, even if that means lying down for the entirety of a yoga class – to breathe and refocus.

Recommendations for Providers and Allies

The health conditions and outcomes that Black women face are related to increased stress and maladaptive coping (Woods-Giscombe 2010). Risk for cardiovascular and metabolic disorders are persistent issues that the Black community experiences (Barr-Anderson 2016). Bolstering physical activity is a non-medicinal intervention that has a positive impact on health. Helping Black women identify yoga and other exercise opportunities that are safe based on their

health conditions is a good step. This could be done by providing a list of referrals to yoga platforms that are known to be culturally inclusive. Another step providers could take is to provide information about digital counter spaces that increase accessibility for African American women. Providing information about the positive outcomes associated with yoga practice could also be beneficial.

Recommendations for Future Research

Another future direction is for researchers to empirically demonstrate that yoga can be effective in reducing stress in African American women. To date, few studies have addressed the multifaceted benefits of yoga for Black women. Studies that continue to explore the relationship between stress and yoga practice for African American women would meaningfully add to this conversation. It is especially useful to see more evidence-based research on why yoga practice is appropriate for this demographic of women.

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Robin Oatis-Ballew (She/her/hers) is a Professor and Coordinator of the PhD in Counseling Psychology at Tennessee State University in Nashville, Tennessee. Her research interests are cultural competency in Health Services Psychology and inclusive learning and healing environments. She is also a Licensed Psychologist, has maintained a private practice for 22 years, and strives to move through life with a spirit of inclusivity.

Allison Hotz (She/her/hers) is a Rehabilitation Psychology Postdoctoral Fellow at Rush University Medical Center in Chicago, Illinois. She identifies as a Biracial cisgender woman without a disability raised in an urban community in the Southern United States. Allison has research and clinical experiences investigating African American coping mechanisms when faced with systemic discrimination. Presently, she is completing a health-psychology scoping review that will examine disability identity acceptance among African Americans at risk for peri-amputation secondary to peripheral vascular disease.

Tiyana Chaney-Taylor (She/her/hers) is currently serving as a Postdoctoral Psychology Fellow specializing in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at the University of South Carolina in Columbia, South Carolina. As an African American cisgender woman without a disability, her personal experiences have deeply influenced her academic and clinical pursuits. Tiyana's research explores the unique experiences of Black Women in the context of stress and coping mechanisms. Presently, Tiyana is engaged in efforts to create supportive community spaces tailored specifically for Black women at a predominantly white institution (PWI). Her commitment to this initiative stems from a genuine desire to bolster the resilience and overall well-being of Black women navigating academic and societal challenges.

Sarah Rose Elizabetta-Ragan (She/her/hers) is a doctoral candidate currently completing her internship at Western Kentucky Psychology Internship Consortium in Hopkinsville, Kentucky. Sarah has clinical experience working within addiction and mental health treatment programs, which includes administrative experience and program development. Sarah has research experience related to addiction treatment, specifically addressing trauma and eating disorders in adults. Presently, she is in the process of completing her dissertation which focuses on trauma and disordered eating in African American women.