

## Impact of Yogic Practices on Brain Function, Memory, and Neuroplasticity

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### ABSTRACT

We investigate the effects of yoga on the structure, function, memory, and neuroplasticity of the brain, with a focus on asanas (physical postures), pranayama (breath regulation), and dhyana (meditation). Recent research in neuroimaging, physiology, and behavior indicates that yoga has a beneficial effect on brain and cognitive functions. Increased grey-matter volume in the prefrontal cortex and hippocampus, regions essential for memory, attention, and executive function, has been associated with regular practice. Additionally, yoga seems to improve neurotransmitter control, especially by increasing levels of gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA), which support mental clarity and serenity. Increased heart-rate variability, a sign of improved autonomic balance, promotes brain flexibility and resilience even more. Through increased focus, emotional control, and less stress reactivity, yoga may mechanistically improve memory. Despite promising findings, the majority of the available data is derived from cross-sectional or quasi-experimental designs, which restricts the ability to infer causal relationships. There aren't many long-term randomized trials that look at the long-term neurological or cognitive changes brought on by yoga practice. To elucidate dose-response connections and individual differences, future research should prioritize longitudinal and mechanistic studies. All things considered, including yoga into programs for cognitive health and rehabilitation has a great chance of fostering neuroplasticity, emotional stability, and cognitive lifespan.

**Keywords:** *Yoga, Asana, Pranayama, Neuroplasticity, Brain structure, Memory, Cognition, Hippocampus, Prefrontal cortex*

### Yoga and Brain Structure

Regular yoga practice has been found to influence specific brain regions, especially the **hippocampus** and **prefrontal cortex**.

- **Hippocampus:** This area is essential for learning and memory. Studies show that people who practice yoga regularly have greater grey-matter volume here (Froeliger, Garland, & McClernon, 2012; Villemure et al., 2015), which may help protect against age-related memory decline.

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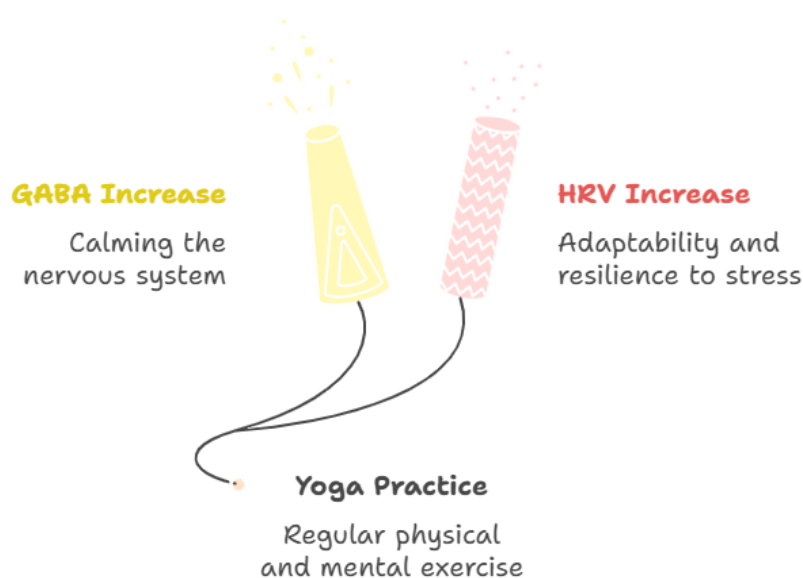
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- **Prefrontal Cortex:** This part of the brain is responsible for decision-making, attention, and self-control. Increased thickness in this region suggests improved concentration and better emotional regulation in yoga practitioners.

These structural changes indicate that yoga may help maintain brain health and delay cognitive aging.

Chemicals called neurotransmitters are responsible for communicating between brain cells. Their equilibrium seems to be affected by yoga, particularly with regard to gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA), a neurotransmitter that aids in nervous system relaxation. Better focus, emotional stability, and decreased anxiety are all associated with higher GABA levels (Streeter et al., 2012). By lowering stress hormones like cortisol, yoga's breathing and meditation techniques probably promote this balance and provide a more stable and tranquil state of mind. The autonomic nerve system regulates involuntary bodily processes such as breathing and heart rate. By raising heart-rate variability (HRV), a measure of improved flexibility and stress resilience, regular yoga practice aids in the regulation of this system. The brain and body can swiftly recover from stress and preserve general homeostasis because of the balance between the parasympathetic (rest-and-digest) and sympathetic (fight-or-flight) systems.

### Yoga Improves Brain Health



### Mechanisms Supporting Memory and Neuroplasticity

Through a number of processes, yoga encourages neuroplasticity, or the brain's capacity to create new neural pathways:

1. **Less Stress Reactivity:** Yoga reduces cortisol levels by promoting mental calmness (Thirhalli et al., 2013), which shields brain cells from the damaging effects of stress.
2. **Better Attention and Focus:** Consistent meditation and mindful breathing enhance focus, which facilitates better memory formation and information processing.
3. **Improved Emotional Regulation:** Yoga's ability to manage emotions promotes better decision-making and lessens cognitive exhaustion.

## METHODS AND MATERIALS

This review summarizes and interprets the body of research on the effects of yoga on memory, neuroplasticity, and brain function using a narrative style. Finding recurring patterns, mechanisms, and insights presented in various studies is the main goal rather than performing a statistical meta-analysis. This method enables a more comprehensive comprehension of the ways in which different yogic techniques—such as postures, breathing, and meditation—affect neurological and cognitive effects.

### *Data Sources and Search Strategy*

A number of significant scientific databases, including PubMed, Google Scholar, and PubMed Central (PMC), were searched in order to gather pertinent literature. These databases were selected due to their extensive collection of trustworthy, peer-reviewed research articles in the fields of psychology and biomedicine.

Specific search terms were used to capture the diversity of research in this area, such as:

- “Yoga AND neuro-plasticity”
- “Yoga AND memory”
- “Pranayama AND brain imaging”
- “Asana AND cognition”
- “Yoga AND hippocampus”

These combinations were designed to ensure that studies covering both physiological and psychological effects of yoga were included.

### **Inclusion Criteria**

To maintain consistency and scientific relevance, only studies that met the following conditions were included:

1. **Participants:** Human participants who practiced yoga, either adults or adolescents, had to be included in the study.
2. **Type of Intervention:** Asanas (postures), pranayama (breath control), or dhyana (meditation) were required components of the yoga practice. Additionally taken into consideration were studies that concentrated on integrated yoga programs that combined all three.
3. **Outcome Measures:** The study had to evaluate cognitive or brain results, including: Cognitive or memory performance tests; structural or functional brain imaging (MRI, fMRI, SPECT); Neurophysiological indicators such as heart-rate variability (HRV) or GABA levels.
4. **Quality of Publication:** To guarantee the validity and dependability of the results, only research that was published in peer-reviewed scientific publications in English was examined.

### **Exclusion Criteria**

Certain studies were deliberately excluded to maintain focus and clarity.

1. Studies that focused solely on meditation and excluded yoga poses or breathing exercises were disregarded since they are more closely related to mindfulness or pure meditation research.
2. Since the focus of this review is on direct evidence from human participants, animal researches were not included.

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3. These omissions made it possible to guarantee that the evaluation accurately depicted the benefits of yoga as a comprehensive human activity rather than discrete components or research findings.

### Data Extraction and Analysis

From each selected study, specific information was gathered to allow comparison and interpretation. The key details extracted included:

- **Sample size:** The number of participants and their demographic details.
- **Intervention duration:** How long and how frequently yoga was practiced in the study (e.g., 8 weeks, 6 months, or years of experience).
- **Outcome measures:** Results related to changes in brain structure, memory, attention, or other cognitive functions.
- **Proposed mechanisms:** How researchers explained the observed changes—such as stress reduction, improved neurotransmitter balance, or enhanced brain connectivity

### Study Area

Numerous individuals and study designs are covered in the corpus of scientific research on yoga's effects on the brain and cognition. It is now possible to comprehend how yoga improves not just overall well-being but also mental health and cognitive function in individuals with particular issues because researchers have examined both healthy individuals and clinical groups.

### Population Studies

Yoga's effects on the human brain, cognitive processes, and emotional well-being have been thoroughly investigated in a variety of demographic groups. In order to determine how yoga benefits different facets of society, researchers have concentrated on particular age groups and medical issues.

**Young adults:** One of the most often researched demographics is young adults. This age group frequently struggles with stress, academic pressure, and technological diversions. Regular yoga practice has been found to improve focus, memory recall, and learning capacity in young adult studies. Additionally, it promotes mental clarity and emotional equilibrium by lowering stress and anxiety levels. Yoga enhances focus and stress resilience through physical postures, breathing exercises, and mindfulness.

**Middle-aged participants:** Another significant group of participants in yoga research are middle-aged individuals. At this point in their lives, people frequently struggle with stress from their jobs, family obligations, and health problems related to their lifestyle. According to research, yoga can support cognitive health during these taxing years. Frequent practice helps maintain memory functions that may otherwise deteriorate as a result of prolonged stress or sleep deprivation, enhances attention span, and promotes better management of stress hormones. Additionally, some research indicates that yoga benefits middle-aged persons' emotional stability, general mental health, and quality of sleep.

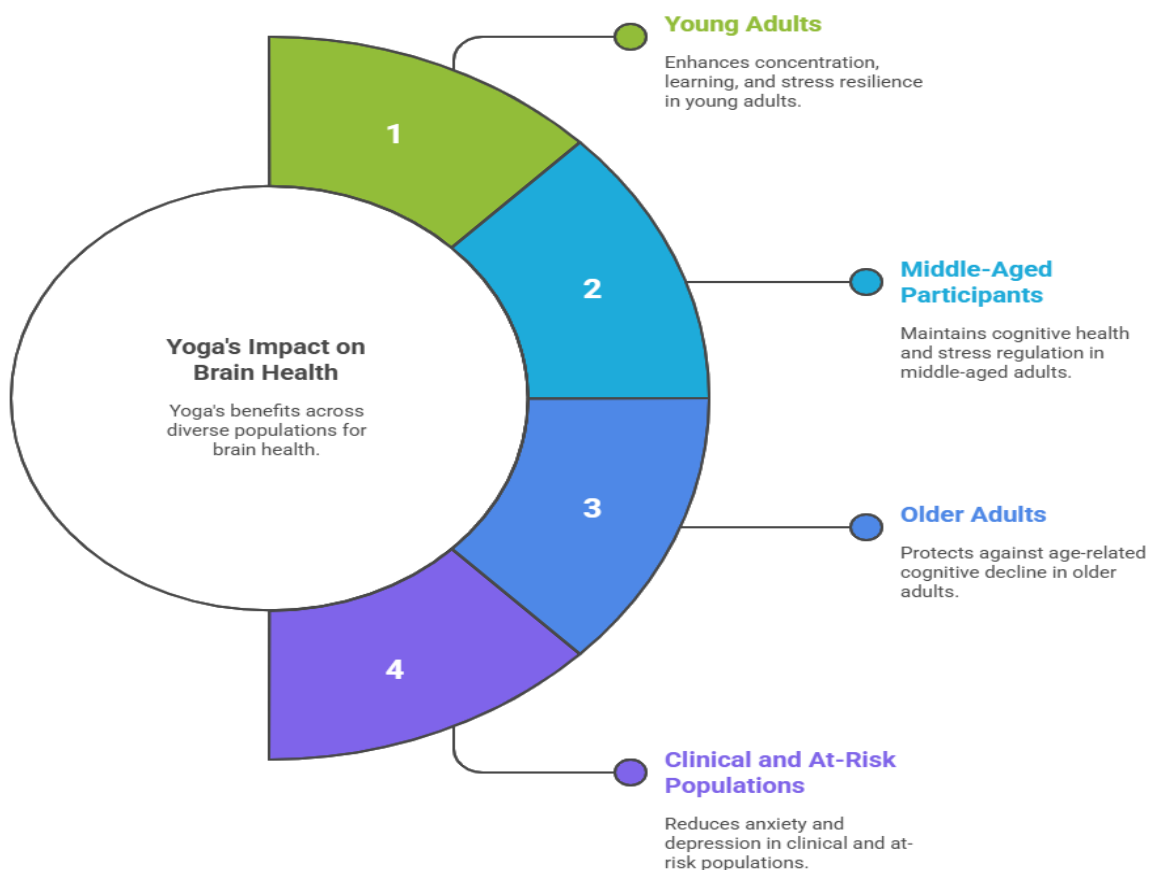
**Old Aged Participants:** Yoga's ability to prevent age-related cognitive deterioration in older persons has been the primary focus of research. Memory, judgment, and emotional regulation may all be impacted by the anatomical and functional changes that the aging brain naturally experiences. Yoga has demonstrated potential in reversing these impacts. Research has shown that older practitioners' mood, memory, and focus all increase. Combining meditation, controlled breathing, and mild physical activity improves blood flow to the

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brain, lowers anxiety, and promotes neuroplasticity, which is the brain's capacity to rearrange itself and create new neural connections.

**Clinical and at Risk Participants:** In addition to healthy individuals, clinical and at-risk populations have also been researched. These include those who suffer from anxiety, depression, moderate cognitive impairment, or other mental illnesses. The purpose of the research in these groups is to determine whether yoga may be used in addition to medical treatment as a complimentary therapy. Research indicates that yoga can enhance mood, encourage greater emotional regulation, and lessen the symptoms of anxiety and sadness. It is a useful non-pharmacological method of improving mental and emotional well-being because of its effects on the chemistry and structure of the brain, including decreased cortisol levels and increased grey matter in emotional control regions.

### Exploring Yoga's Multifaceted Impact on Brain Health



### Cross-Sectional Comparisons

Cross-sectional studies, which contrast long-time yoga practitioners with non-practitioners, are a major component of yoga research. Despite their inability to precisely demonstrate cause and effect, these studies aid in identifying the variations that might result over years of continuous practice.

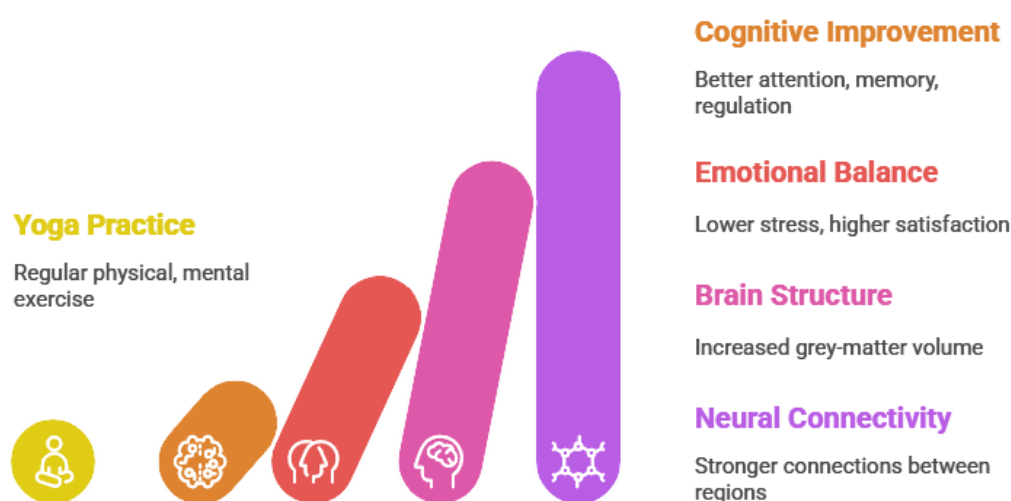
Long-term yoga practitioners routinely do better on tests assessing attention, working memory, and emotional regulation, according to numerous research of this kind. They

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frequently express greater levels of overall life pleasure and less perceived stress. These results imply that yoga affects well-being on both an emotional and cognitive level.

Studies using neuroimaging have shed more light on these variations. Experienced yoga practitioners' brain scans show increased grey-matter volume in areas including the hippocampus, prefrontal cortex, and insula that are related to learning, memory, and emotional regulation. This implies that consistent practice of physical exercise, breath control, and meditation may help maintain or perhaps improve brain structure. Additionally, yoga practitioners have better neuronal connectivity across the parts of the brain that control attention and emotional equilibrium, according to functional MRI research. Yoga practitioners may be more adept at focusing, handling stress, and preserving emotional stability in day-to-day living due to this improved connectivity.

### Yoga Enhances Brain Structure and Function



### Short- and Mid-Term Intervention Studies

The effects of yoga have been the subject of more and more intervention-based research, in which participants—often novices—participate in structured yoga programs for a predetermined amount of time, typically eight to twelve weeks. The speed at which yoga can affect the brain and behavior is demonstrated by these short- and mid-term interventions. Under the guidance of a guru, participants in these courses usually combine meditation, pranayama (breathing methods), and asanas (postures). Measurable gains are seen in a number of cognitive and emotional functioning domains even after a few weeks.

For example, participants frequently exhibit improved working memory and attention span, two essential elements of executive functioning. These enhancements are most apparent when performing jobs that call for prolonged concentration or multitasking. Regular yoga practice has also been shown to improve emotional regulation by lowering anxiety, stabilizing mood, and reducing perceived stress.

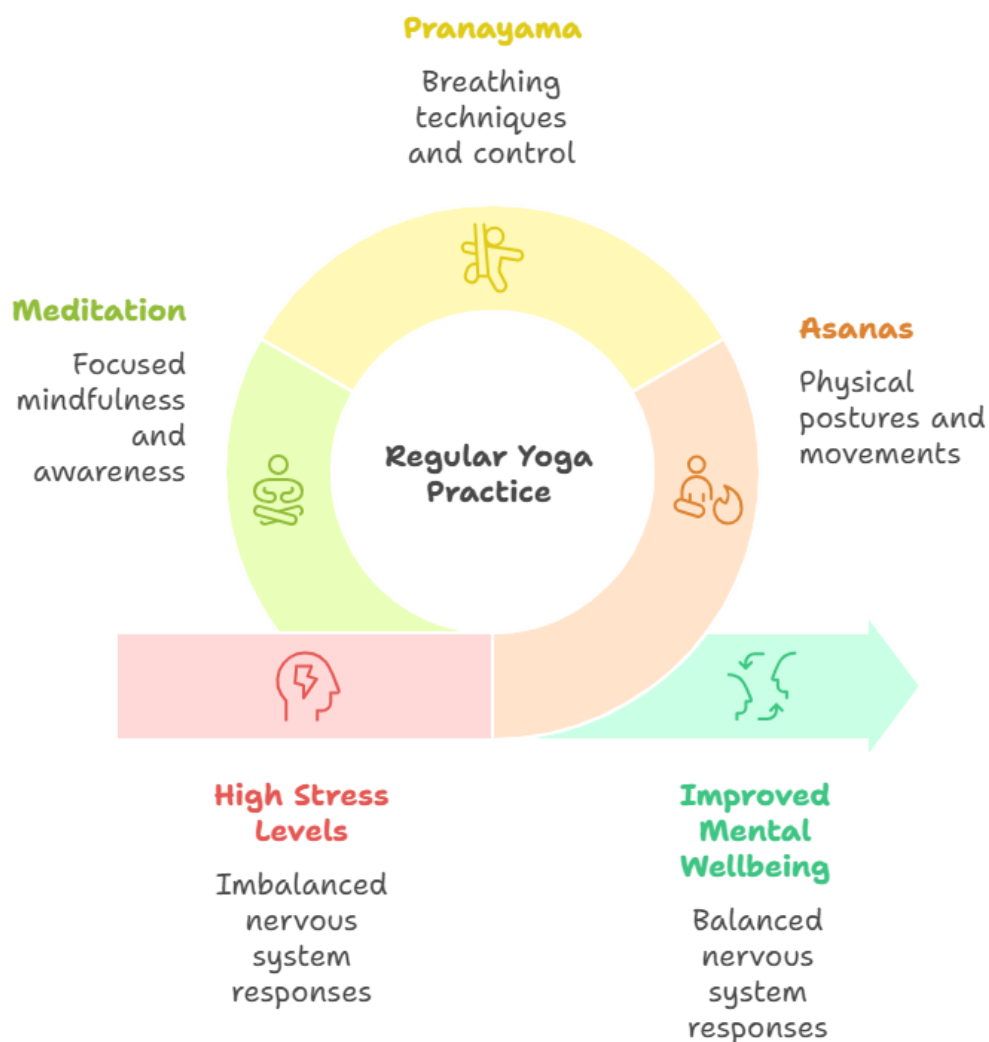
These physiological advantages are associated with yoga's capacity to regulate the autonomic nerve system, thereby balancing the parasympathetic (rest-and-digest) and

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sympathetic (fight-or-flight) responses. This equilibrium helps people feel more at ease, have better heart rate variability, and have lower cortisol levels.

Additionally, some research indicates that regular yoga practice increases prefrontal cortex activation, which is linked to improved focus, self-control, and decision-making. This implies that yoga can start to "train" the brain to react to stress more effectively and calmly in as little as a few months, laying the groundwork for long-term emotional and cognitive resilience.

### Yoga for Cognitive and Emotional Resilience



### Neuro-imaging Studies

The research of yoga's effects on the brain has undergone a radical change with the advent of contemporary brain imaging techniques like Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI), Functional MRI (fMRI), and Single Photon Emission Computed Tomography (SPECT). By using these methods, researchers may see firsthand the structural and functional changes brought about by consistent yoga practice.

#### 1. Grey Matter Volume (GMV)

Numerous neuro-imaging studies have revealed (Gard, Hölzel, & Lazar, 2014) that yoga practitioners had larger grey matter volumes, particularly in regions such as the insula,

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prefrontal cortex, and hippocampal regions. Since the hippocampus is essential for memory and learning, yoga may safeguard or even improve memory functions. The prefrontal cortex is linked to planning, emotional regulation, and attention—skills that mindfulness breathing and meditation frequently enhance. There is increased volume and activity in the insula, which is in charge of self-consciousness and interception (awareness of internal body states), suggesting a higher level of emotional and physical awareness.

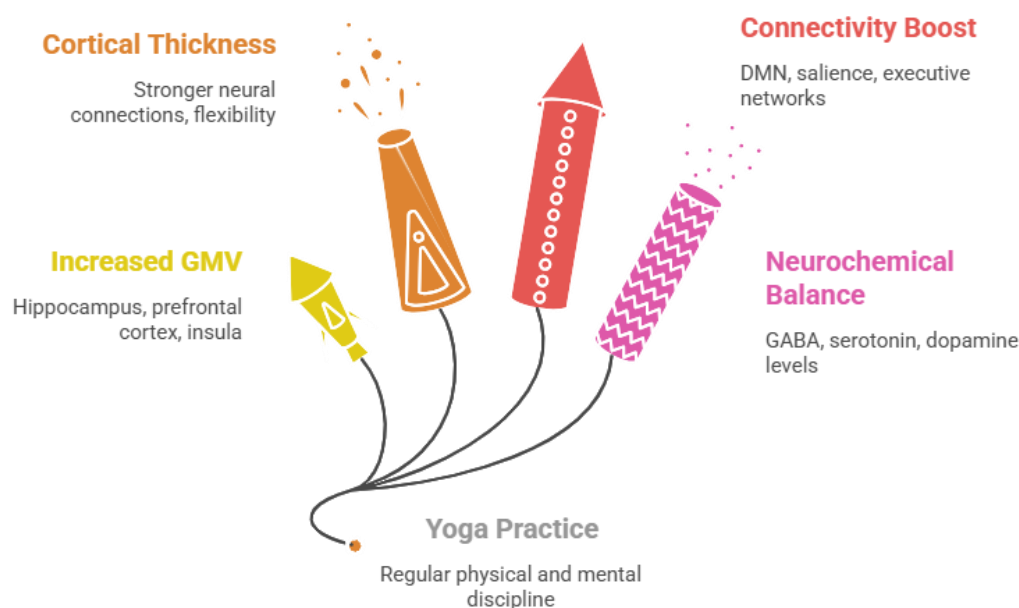
**Cortical Thickness:** Regular yoga practitioners have also been shown to have thicker cortical tissue in MRI studies. Greater cognitive flexibility and better neural connections are associated with thicker cortical regions, which mean the brain can adjust to new knowledge or difficulties more effectively.

### 2.Functional Connectivity

Yoga improves the functional connectivity between different brain networks, according to functional MRI research. Better connection between brain areas is suggested by improved coordination between the executive control network, salience network, and default mode network (DMN). This results in less mind wandering and more effective mental processing.

**Neurochemical Changes:** Yoga affects neurochemistry in addition to structure and connection. Gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA), a neurotransmitter that promotes serenity and relaxation, has been found to be elevated in imaging investigations. Better cognitive clarity and less anxiety are associated with higher GABA levels. Yoga may also aid in the regulation of dopamine and serotonin, which would further support emotional balance and mood stability.

### Yoga Enhances Brain Structure and Function



### Cognitive Performance Studies

Numerous standardized psychological and cognitive tests have been employed by researchers to quantify improvements in various cognitive areas when examining the effects of yoga on mental performance. These domains—which each reflect an essential component

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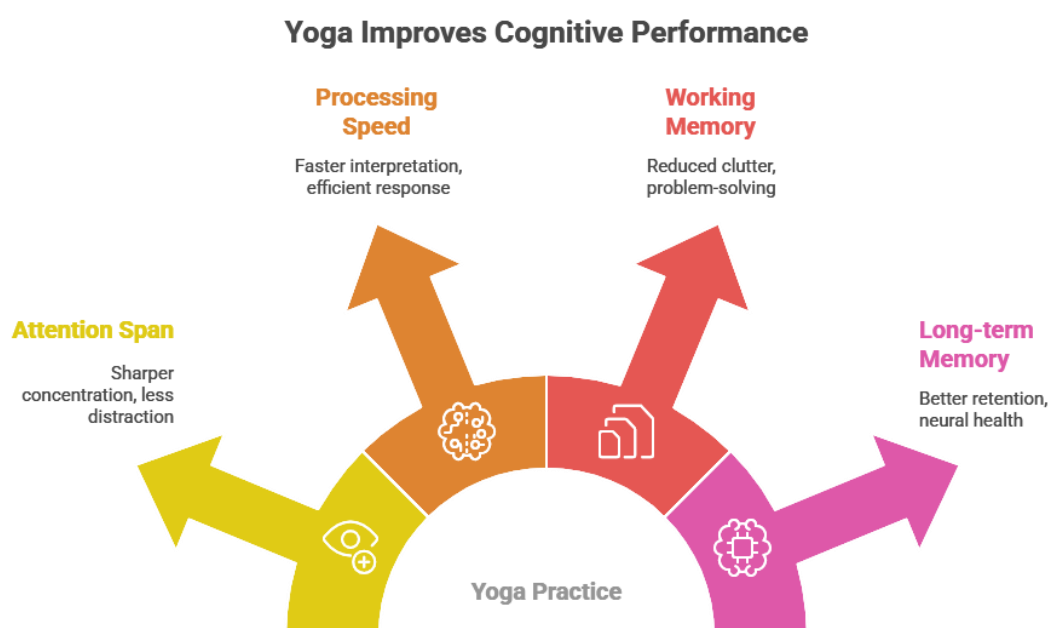
of the brain's information processing and mental efficiency—including working memory, long-term memory, processing speed, and attention.

Among the most often studied areas are focus and attention. It has been demonstrated that regular yoga practice, which frequently incorporates physical postures, mindfulness, and controlled breathing, improves focus and lessens distraction sensitivity. This is due to yoga's promotion of present-moment mindfulness, which enables people to concentrate on one idea or work for extended periods of time.

Consistent yoga practice also seems to improve processing speed, or how quickly an individual interprets and reacts to information. Yoga's contemplative and rhythmic qualities help practitioners better synchronize their mental and physical reactions, which enables them to respond to stimuli more effectively in both everyday settings and cognitive examinations. Another area that needs improvement is working memory, which deals with the short-term manipulation and storage of information. According to studies, yoga improves working memory by clearing stress and mental clutter, which frees up cognitive resources required for reasoning and problem-solving.

Similarly, yoga practice is positively correlated with long-term memory, which is the capacity to store and retrieve information over longer periods of time. Enhancing oxygenation and circulation to the brain through deep breathing and mindfulness practices promotes neuronal health and memory consolidation.

Overall, research consistently shows that people who regularly practice yoga do better than non-practitioners on tasks requiring working memory and sustained attention. These gains are frequently ascribed to enhanced mental clarity, improved mind-body coordination, and decreased chronic stress, all of which support more effective cognitive performance.



### Mechanistic Studies

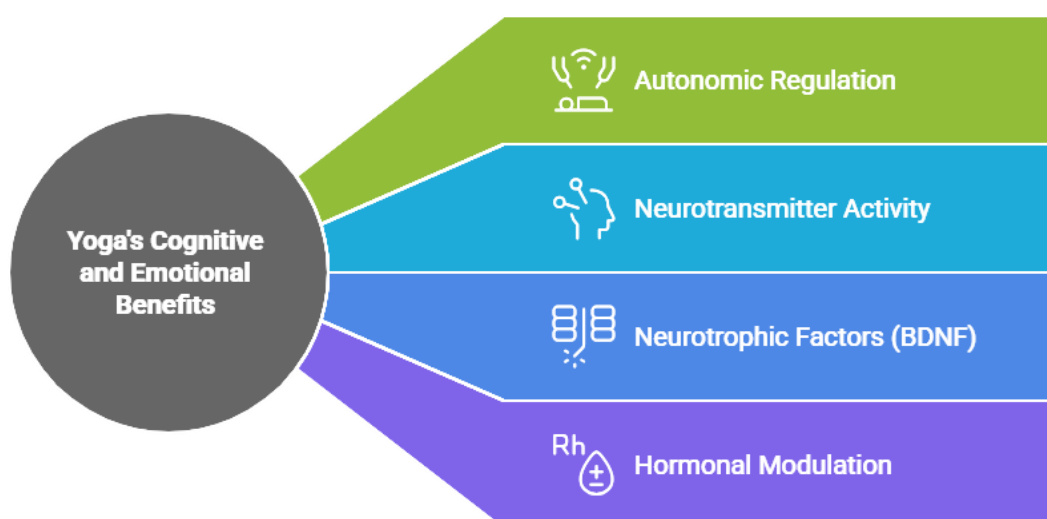
To understand *how* yoga produces these cognitive and emotional benefits, researchers have explored the biological and physiological mechanisms underlying its effects. These

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mechanistic studies reveal that yoga influences the brain and body through several interconnected systems.

- 1. Autonomic Regulation:** The sympathetic nerve system, which controls the "fight or flight" response, and the parasympathetic nervous system, which controls the "rest and digest" response, are both rebalanced by yoga. Techniques like meditation, deep breathing, and leisurely postures encourage parasympathetic activity, which reduces blood pressure and heart rate and encourages relaxation. The brain's capacity to remain composed and focused under pressure is strengthened by this better autonomic regulation, which also promotes emotional stability.
- 2. Neurotransmitter Activity:** Changes in neurotransmitter levels, specifically those of cortisol and gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA), have been linked to yoga. While lower cortisol levels indicate less stress, elevated GABA levels are associated with less anxiety and improved mood control. When combined, these modifications aid in establishing a mental atmosphere that promotes steady emotional reactions and clear thinking.
- 3. Neurotrophic Factors (BDNF):** The rise in Brain-Derived Neurotrophic Factor (BDNF) among yoga practitioners (Ellegaard, Pedersen, & Høgh, 2020) is another significant discovery. A protein called BDNF aids in the development, upkeep, and repair of neurons. Increased BDNF levels are linked to better memory retention, learning ability, and general brain plasticity. This implies that yoga may encourage long-term anatomical and functional changes in the brain in addition to influencing mental state.
- 4. Hormonal Modulation:** Hormonal activity is also impacted by regular yoga practice, especially hormones linked to stress and mood management. Better mental and emotional health is fostered by a stable internal environment, which is maintained by reduced secretion of stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline. The brain can more effectively restructure itself and create new neural connections because to these hormonal changes those promote neuroplasticity.

### Unveiling Yoga's Cognitive and Emotional Benefits



## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Structural and Functional Brain Changes (Gothe et al., 2019; Villemure et al., 2015)

Yoga practitioners had higher grey-matter volume or density in areas linked to memory and executive control, according to several studies. Anatomical alterations in the frontal cortex, hippocampus, anterior cingulate cortex, and insula, for instance, seem to be associated with yoga practice, according to a systematic review.

Another research found that practitioners with about three years of experience had higher GMV in the hippocampus, indicating improved memory-related structure.

Increased connection within the default-mode network (DMN) and other attention and self-referential processing-related networks is shown by functional connectivity findings.

### Memory and Cognitive Function

Studies on cognitive outcomes show that yoga therapies increase memory, executive function, processing speed, and attention. According to a meta-analysis, yoga had a modest ( $g = 0.33$ ) impact on cognition in RCTs, with the biggest effects being seen in attention and processing speed and a somewhat smaller effect on memory. Participants in a 12-week integrated yoga training research who were middle-aged (35–55 years) shown notable gains in short-term memory and attention-alertness.

When comparing a yoga-based educational system to a traditional one, another study involving schoolchildren revealed improved verbal and visual memory scores.

### Neuro-plasticity Mechanisms

Proposed mechanisms by which yoga may promote neuroplasticity include:

- **Stress reduction and autonomic regulation:** Yoga seems to improve heart-rate variability and parasympathetic tone, as well as lower stress hormone levels, which fosters flexibility.
- **Neurotransmitter modulation:** Research indicates that yoga practitioners have higher levels of GABA (gamma-aminobutyric acid), which may help with cortical inhibition and neural network effectiveness.
- **Up-regulation of neurotrophic factor:** Research suggests that yoga and meditation practitioners have higher levels of brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), which promotes synaptic growth and plasticity.
- **Increased neural efficiency:** Despite comparable performance, a study of yoga practitioners revealed decreased activation in the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (dlPFC) during working-memory tasks, indicating increased neural efficiency.
- **Structural adaptation:** Years of consistent practice have been linked to less age-related grey matter loss in specific brain regions.

## CONCLUSION

According to the available data, yoga can improve memory and cognitive function, encourage neuroplasticity, and have a good impact on brain structure and function. Improvements in neurotrophic support, neurotransmitter balance, autonomic modulation, and brain efficiency are probably among the processes. Integrating yoga with brain-fitness and cognitive health programs is a viable approach for practitioners and educators. Stronger empirical data is still required, particularly large-scale, long-term randomized research, standardized techniques, and investigations over a wide range of clinical and age groups. When designing future research (or curricular programmes), attention should be paid to

intervention standardization, measurable neuro-imaging/biomarker outcomes, and tracking cognitive effects over time.

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### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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