

Research Paper

## Yoga as a Study Partner: Enhance Physical and Mental Health of Competitive Examination Aspirants

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### ABSTRACT

Aspirants preparing for competitive exams in India often experience chronic stress, anxiety, fatigue, and poor physical health due to extended study hours, social isolation, and academic pressure. Their aspirations towards lucrative profession compel them to compromise with their wellbeing and create physical, mental and emotional threats. They just forget about 'Yoga'- the blessing of Indian knowledge system and a holistic and preventive intervention that has the capacity to normalize the situation. So, the study aims to explore the significance of yoga in improving physical and mental health of aspirants and suggest effective yoga practices that will keep aspirants stable and balanced to achieve their aspirations. A narrative review-based report was synthesized with the evidences collected from several empirical studies, national education policy reports, and published literatures from 2010 to 2025 and presented through thematic analysis guided by the objectives of the study. It is resulted that yoga reduces stress, enhances focus and emotional regulation, improves sleep quality, posture, and energy balance. Practices such as pranayama (Anulom Vilom, Bhramari), asanas (Balasana, Tadasana), and short meditations were found to be highly effective and easy to integrate into aspirants' daily routines. Yoga emerges as a low-cost, accessible, and impactful strategy for managing exam-related stress and promoting sustainable academic preparation. Its integration into aspirants' lifestyles supports both immediate performance and long-term well-being, in line with the National Education Policy 2020's emphasis on holistic education.

**Keywords:** *Yoga, Exam Aspirants, Physical and Mental Health, Well-being*

Aspirants preparing for high-stakes competitive examinations in India—such as the UPSC Civil Services, SSC, banking exams, NEET, and JEE—are subjected to extraordinary levels of psychological, academic, and social pressure. These examinations are not merely academic challenges; they are deeply embedded in the sociocultural fabric of India, often seen as gateways to status, security, and respectability (Palshikar et al., 2024; Shandilya, 2023; Subramanian, 2022). The preparation process involves long hours of study, often extending beyond 10–12 hours daily, and requires aspirants to dedicate multiple years of their youth with limited social interaction, leisure, or emotional outlets (Kumar & Bansal, 2021).

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The rapid growth of the private coaching industry, especially in educational hubs such as Kota, Hyderabad, and Delhi's Mukherjee Nagar, has contributed to a hyper-competitive environment that fosters burnout, peer pressure, and performance anxiety (Kar et al., 2020). In Kota alone, survey data suggest that over 85% of students demand at least one day of relief per week, and more than 80% report symptoms of loneliness, anger, fatigue, and sadness (Indian Express, 2023; SATHEE, 2024). A study by Shandilya, (2023) found that over 50% of UPSC aspirants rated their mental health as “poor” or “somewhat poor” during preparation, while 70% expressed persistent stress and fear of underperformance.

These competitive environments are not only academically taxing but also emotionally and psychologically draining, especially when accompanied by high parental expectations and societal stigma around failure (Deshpande, 2022; Palshikar et al., 2024). For many students, failure in these exams does not just signify academic loss but a blow to personal identity and familial pride, leading to diminished self-esteem and social withdrawal (Kar et al., 2020). This intense and prolonged psychological strain has led to a worrying rise in mental health concerns, including depression, anxiety, and even suicidal ideation among aspirants (Kar et al., 2020; NCRB, 2022; SATHEE, 2024).

The rigorous and extended nature of exam preparation exposes aspirants to a variety of physical, emotional, and behavioral challenges. Long study hours, often exceeding 10–12 hours daily, result in both mental fatigue and physical strain, frequently causing issues like eye strain, back pain, and poor posture due to prolonged sedentary habits (Bansal & Mehta, 2021; Prusty & Sinha, 2022). These lifestyle patterns are further disrupted by irregular sleeping hours, reduced physical activity, and lack of social engagement, which cumulatively impair cognitive performance and overall well-being (Kar et al., 2020; Shandilya, 2023).

Chronic anxiety is another prevalent issue, particularly around exam performance, future uncertainty, and familial expectations. Aspirants often internalize a fear of failure, leading to persistent stress and a decrease in self-confidence, which are strongly associated with symptoms of anxiety and depression (Goel & Rathore, 2021; Palshikar et al., 2024). Studies have identified high rates of burnout and emotional exhaustion among students enrolled in competitive coaching programs, where the pressure to outperform peers is constant and institutional support is minimal (Jha & Thakur, 2021; SATHEE, 2024). Burnout manifests as a loss of motivation, irritability, sleep disorders, and even detachment from academic goals—compromising not only success in examinations but also long-term mental health (Singh & Gupta, 2020). Additionally, institutions offering +2 education with coaching facilities have been preparing students of that age group, who generally take ill career decisions (Subhrajyoti, 2023) and 65.50% learners with just acceptable mental health (Subhrajyoti & Acharya, 2025). Despite growing awareness of these challenges, mental health resources for aspirants remain limited or stigmatized, especially in non-metropolitan areas. Counseling services are often absent from coaching centers, and students are rarely encouraged to seek psychological support, further aggravating the silent crisis among this demographic (Jain & Tiwari, 2021; Menon, 2023). Consequently, these issues demand focused academic inquiry and policy attention towards aspirants' wellbeing navigating this high-pressure academic landscape.

### ***Understanding Well-being for Aspirants***

Wellbeing refers to the integrated functioning of the body, mind, and emotions, promoting a state of overall balance and vitality. In the high-pressure environment of competitive exam preparation, the concept of holistic well-being has gained increasing relevance. For aspirants

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preparing for demanding exams such as UPSC, NEET, JEE, SSC, and banking services, holistic well-being encompasses not only academic focus but also sustained mental clarity, emotional resilience, and physical vitality (Desai & Rao, 2020; Gupta & Bhatt, 2021). It is not sufficient to merely absorb and reproduce information; students must cultivate the psychological and physical stability required to endure the often prolonged and stressful preparatory phase (Sen & Bhardwaj, 2021). Aspirants frequently experience the fragmentation of wellbeing; wherein cognitive goals are pursued at the cost of physical health and emotional stability. Long hours of sitting, inadequate sleep, erratic eating patterns, and high anxiety levels are commonly reported among this demographic (Prusty & Sinha, 2022; Rathi & Mehra, 2022; Shandilya, 2023). Over time, this imbalance leads to burnout, low motivation, and even psychosomatic symptoms such as headaches, insomnia, and digestive issues (Nagendra, 2020; Srivastava & Sharma, 2021). Emotional disturbances—ranging from irritability and low self-worth to social withdrawal and depression—further compromise academic performance and personal growth (Goel & Ranjan, 2022; Jain & Tiwari, 2021). In this context, a holistic approach to well-being is essential not only for short-term exam readiness but also for the long-term personal development of aspirants.

Maintaining holistic well-being during exam preparation involves actively nurturing three interdependent domains. Mental focus enables aspirants to absorb, retain, and apply knowledge effectively. Emotional resilience helps them manage failure, peer pressure, and family expectations without succumbing to anxiety or hopelessness. Physical energy, sustained through adequate nutrition, movement, and rest, supports the stamina required for long hours of study (Singh & Gupta, 2020; Verma et al., 2022). Together, these elements form a triad of sustainable academic functioning. Furthermore, research indicates that students who maintain balance across these domains are more likely to demonstrate consistent academic performance, healthier interpersonal relationships, and lower levels of test-related anxiety (Basu & Kulkarni, 2023; Sahni & Sharma, 2021). By shifting the focus from mere academic achievement to whole-person well-being, educators, parents, and policymakers can cultivate more humane and effective support systems for aspirants. In this light, practices such as yoga, mindfulness, and time management are not peripheral aids but central tools for academic success and psychological resilience.

### ***Significance of the study***

In response to the rising mental and physical strain among competitive exam aspirants, there is growing interest in the application of yoga as a holistic and preventive intervention. Rooted in India's traditional knowledge systems, yoga integrates physical postures (asanas), breath regulation (pranayama), and meditative techniques (dhyana) to promote balance across physical, emotional, and cognitive domains (Nagendra, 2020; Rao & Sharma, 2023). Evidence suggests that regular practice of yoga can effectively reduce symptoms of anxiety, stress, fatigue, and poor sleep quality among students preparing for competitive examinations (Gupta & Bhatt, 2021; Sharma & Kumar, 2023).

The National Education Policy 2020 also emphasizes the integration of Indian knowledge systems—including yoga—into mainstream education to support students' well-being and resilience (Ministry of Education, 2020). A number of empirical studies have demonstrated that yoga interventions lead to significant improvements in attention span, emotional regulation, and physical posture—common problem areas among aspirants engaged in prolonged sedentary study routines (Iyengar et al., 2019; Prusty & Sinha, 2022). Moreover, yoga's non-invasive, low-cost nature makes it highly accessible and adaptable for student populations across diverse socioeconomic backgrounds (Bhushan & Yadav, 2021; Sahni &

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Sharma, 2021). By fostering mindfulness, physical flexibility, and mental clarity, yoga presents itself not merely as a stress-relief strategy but as a transformative lifestyle approach. Its implementation among competitive exam aspirants can serve both preventive and remedial functions—promoting self-awareness, self-regulation, and long-term psychological well-being. Therefore, investigating ‘yoga as a structured intervention’ within aspirant communities through a comprehensive review-based approach is not only timely but also essential for shaping sustainable academic environments.

### ***Objectives of the study***

1. To study the mental benefits of yoga for aspirants.
2. To study the physical health benefits of yoga for aspirants.
3. To explore the Simple Yoga practices for aspirants.

### ***Research Questions***

1. What are the mental health benefits of yoga for aspirants preparing for competitive examinations?
2. How does the practice of yoga contribute to the physical well-being of aspirants during their preparation phase?
3. Which simple and structured yoga practices are most effective and feasible for aspirants aiming to improve their well-being?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Research Design***

This study adopted a narrative review to explore the role of yoga as a holistic intervention in enhancing the mental and physical well-being of aspirants preparing for high-stakes competitive examinations in India. Given the rising concerns around burnout, anxiety, and physical health issues among this population, the review focused on synthesizing findings from existing literature, reports, and empirical studies that examine both the challenges faced by aspirants and the potential benefits of yoga-based practices.

### ***Data Sources and Search Strategy***

Relevant literature was identified through a systematic search of scholarly databases such as Google Scholar, PubMed, Scopus, and ResearchGate, along with government reports (e.g., NCRB, SATHEE), academic publications, and online educational platforms (e.g., Indian Express, Ministry of Education). The search included articles published between 2010 and 2025, using a combination of keywords such as:

- “Yoga and mental health in students”
- “Competitive exam stress”
- “Well-being of UPSC/NEET aspirants”
- “Pranayama and stress reduction”
- “Yoga for cognitive performance”

Only studies written in English, relevant to Indian aspirants preparing for competitive exams, and focused on mental, emotional, or physical health outcomes were included.

### ***Inclusion Criteria***

- Peer-reviewed articles, academic reports, and review papers related to yoga, education, and aspirant/student well-being
- Studies focusing on aspirants of Indian competitive exams (UPSC, NEET, JEE, etc.)

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- Literature discussing psychological stress, burnout, academic pressure, and the impact of yoga practices
- Published between 2010–2025

### ***Exclusion Criteria***

- Articles not related to /aspirant student well-being or yoga practices
- Studies not focusing on the Indian educational context
- Studies not written in English language.

### ***Data Analysis***

The selected literature was analyzed using thematic analysis, guided by the three core objectives of the study:

1. Mental health benefits of yoga
2. Physical health improvements
3. Simple and practical yoga practices for aspirants

Themes such as stress reduction, emotional regulation, posture correction, focus enhancement, and sleep improvement were identified and grouped under respective categories. A comparative analysis of findings across sources helped establish a conceptual framework for understanding yoga as a structured intervention.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### ***Mental Benefits of Yoga for Aspirants***

#### **1. Stress Reduction and Emotional Regulation**

The physiological and psychological pressures of competitive exam preparation often led to heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and fear of failure. Yoga has been scientifically proven to regulate stress by reducing cortisol—the primary stress hormone—while calming the autonomic nervous system (Gupta & Bhatt, 2021; Khalsa, 2015; Nagendra, 2020). Regular engagement in yogic practices such as pranayama (breath regulation), asanas (physical postures), and meditation has been shown to significantly alleviate anxiety symptoms and improve emotional control, especially under performance-related stress (Ross et al., 2019; Sahni & Sharma, 2021). Aspirants who practice yoga report lower levels of anxiety during mock tests, reduced insomnia before exams, and improved ability to cope with fear of underachievement (Iyengar et al., 2019; Singh & Gupta, 2020; Verma & Kulkarni, 2021). The grounding nature of yoga enables students to reframe their failures, regain emotional balance, and sustain motivation throughout the preparation journey.

#### **2. Mindfulness, Focus, and Cognitive Enhancement**

Another key benefit of yoga for aspirants is its ability to enhance mindfulness and mental clarity, both of which are critical for academic success. Meditation and breathwork have been linked to improved attention span, memory consolidation, and task-related cognitive flexibility (Sharma & Kumar, 2023; Telles et al., 2018; Zeidan et al., 2010). Yoga encourages aspirants to remain present in the moment, which reduces mental fatigue caused by overthinking and multitasking. By cultivating non-reactive awareness and emotional self-regulation, yoga helps students stay focused during study sessions and avoid digital distractions or self-sabotaging behaviors (Jain & Tiwari, 2021; Ramesh & Kumar, 2022). This mental discipline not only supports knowledge retention but also boosts decision-making abilities in high-stakes exam settings.

### **3. Emotional Balance and Positive Mindset**

Competitive exam aspirants often face volatile emotional states triggered by peer comparison, parental pressure, and prolonged uncertainty. Yoga stabilizes these mood swings by activating the parasympathetic nervous system and enhancing the production of neurotransmitters like serotonin and dopamine, which are associated with positive mood and emotional well-being (Nagendra, 2020; Sahni & Sharma, 2021; Streeter et al., 2012). Through consistent practice, students develop inner calm, resilience, and a more optimistic outlook—enabling them to approach their academic journey with steadiness and self-compassion. This emotional anchoring is essential for aspirants to maintain healthy study routines without succumbing to burnout or despair.

#### ***Physical Health Benefits of Yoga for Aspirants***

##### **1. Improved Flexibility, Posture, and Musculoskeletal Health**

The sedentary lifestyle of exam aspirants—marked by prolonged sitting, minimal physical activity, and poor posture—can result in musculoskeletal discomfort, back pain, and eye strain. Yoga directly addresses these issues through stretches and postures that realign the spine, improve flexibility, and release physical tension accumulated from long study sessions (Iyengar et al., 2019; Prusty & Sinha, 2022; Woodyard, 2011). Even a short daily practice can reduce fatigue, increase mobility, and prevent the physical ailments often reported by students confined to desks for hours (Mishra & Deshmukh, 2020).

##### **2. Strength, Stamina, and Energy Balance**

Light to moderate yoga sequences are designed to energize the body without exhausting it, making them ideal for students who require sustained physical vitality throughout their study period. Practices such as Surya Namaskar (sun salutations) and Vrikshasana (tree pose) build muscular endurance and improve circulation, contributing to a sense of lightness and alertness (Gupta & Bhatt, 2021; Sinha & Reddy, 2021). Unlike strenuous workouts, yoga maintains energy equilibrium—reducing daytime lethargy and helping aspirants stay physically prepared for mentally demanding tasks.

##### **3. Better Sleep, Immunity, and Internal Regulation**

Holistic health includes optimal functioning of internal systems like digestion, respiration, and immunity. Yoga enhances parasympathetic activity, which promotes restorative sleep and regulates metabolic functions vital for mental clarity and sustained effort (Chandran et al., 2021; Sharma & Kumar, 2023). Aspirants who practice yoga report fewer sick days, more consistent sleep patterns, and improved digestion—all of which contribute to better cognitive performance and study consistency. Furthermore, improved respiratory function through pranayama reduces fatigue and enhances oxygen flow to the brain, increasing overall alertness and academic efficiency (Telles et al., 2018; Udupa et al., 2003).

#### ***Simple Yoga Practices for Aspirants***

Yoga functions as a mind-body discipline that promotes routine, accountability, and inner alignment. These qualities are critical during exam preparation, where time management, emotional stability, and personal discipline determine long-term success (Brown & Gerbarg, 2005; Nagendra, 2020). By harmonizing the body's physical rhythms with the mind's cognitive demands, yoga creates a space of self-regulated discipline. This synchronization allows aspirants to manage their study schedules efficiently while maintaining emotional poise and mental clarity. Moreover, yoga inculcates introspective habits that foster self-awareness, enabling students to identify and address emotional or behavioral patterns that

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hinder their progress (Joshi & Kapoor, 2022; Sahni & Sharma, 2021). Yoga is not merely a complementary health activity but a strategic lifestyle intervention for exam aspirants. When integrated into daily life, it cultivates the resilience, clarity, and calm required for both academic achievement and personal well-being. For aspirants preparing for competitive examinations, adopting simple and structured yoga practices can significantly enhance physical well-being and psychological stability. Amid long study hours and performance anxiety, short but effective routines involving breath regulation, basic postures, and meditation can be both therapeutic and preventive. Among breathing techniques, Anulom Vilom (alternate nostril breathing) and Bhramari Pranayama (humming bee breath) are especially effective in calming the nervous system and reducing stress-induced physiological responses. These techniques activate the parasympathetic system, regulate oxygen flow, and have been shown to reduce cortisol levels, promote emotional regulation, and enhance mindfulness (Gupta & Bhatt, 2021; Nagendra, 2020; Rajesh et al., 2022; Telles et al., 2018).

In addition to pranayama, incorporating foundational yogic postures (asanas) can counter the physical strain induced by prolonged sedentary behavior during exam preparation. Poses like Sukhasana (easy seated pose) create a stable base for concentration and breathwork. Balasana (child's pose) offers muscular relaxation and emotional grounding, especially helpful during mental fatigue. Tadasana (mountain pose) promotes spinal alignment and postural awareness, while Bhujangasana (cobra pose) opens the chest and relieves back tension—areas commonly affected by extended sitting (Iyengar et al., 2019; Prusty & Sinha, 2022). These gentle postures are safe for beginners and can be performed in confined spaces without requiring any special equipment.

Equally important are short guided meditation sessions, which help sharpen cognitive focus and reduce distraction. Even 5–10 minutes of breath-based meditation or mantra repetition has been shown to enhance memory retention, improve attention span, and reduce pre-exam anxiety (Bhattacharya et al., 2021; Sahni & Sharma, 2021; Sharma & Kumar, 2023). These practices not only enhance academic focus but also support long-term emotional resilience.

A suggested daily yoga routine of 15 to 30 minutes—involving pranayama, a short series of postures, and a concluding meditation—can be easily integrated into the lifestyle of aspirants. Practicing in the morning helps build mental readiness for the day, while evening sessions aid in stress relief and better sleep. Over time, these simple yet structured practices promote physical vitality, emotional balance, and mental clarity, offering aspirants a holistic support system to sustain consistent academic effort and personal well-being (Gupta & Bhatt, 2021; S. Kumar & Bose, 2022; Nagendra, 2020).

### CONCLUSION

In light of the multifaceted challenges faced by aspirants preparing for competitive examinations, yoga emerges as a holistic intervention that nurtures both mental and physical well-being. Throughout this paper, it has been demonstrated that yoga not only helps reduce stress and anxiety but also improves focus, posture, stamina, and emotional resilience—key components for effective and sustainable academic preparation. By integrating breathing techniques, simple postures, and guided meditations into their daily routine, aspirants can build a support system that enhances performance while protecting long-term health. Yoga should not be perceived merely as a short-term remedy for exam stress, but rather as a long-term lifestyle strategy. Its benefit accumulates with consistent practice, fostering self-discipline, clarity, and inner balance that extend far beyond examination halls. The ability to manage one's body and mind becomes crucial during the intensified competitive situation.

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Therefore, the path to success in high-stakes examinations is no longer defined solely by the number of hours studied or effort exerted. It also depends on how intelligently aspirants manage their energy, focus, and emotional health. In this context, yoga represents not just hard work, but smart, healthy preparation—an invaluable companion in the pursuit of academic and personal excellence.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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