

## **Yoga and Public Speaking Anxiety: Bringing the Mind-Body Connection to the Center**

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Public speaking anxiety (PSA) is a persistent communication issue in American culture. Though public speaking is known to be essential for success (Gallo, 2015), it is one of the most feared activities among American adults, including college and university students (Chapman University, 2017). To manage this fear, university communication centers use evidence-based practices to help clients manage anxiety when giving a speech. These techniques include, but are not limited to, deep breathing exercises, muscle flexion and relaxation, as well as positive visualization techniques (Hines & Brown, 2017; Lucas, 2017). Though these approaches are effective in both theory and practice, PSA persists (Chapman University, 2017).

This study examined other, non-conventional, techniques to combat PSA in undergraduate students. Specifically, the effects of yoga-inspired poses, pranayama, and guided meditation were compared to those of more traditional approaches.

### **Theory & Hypothesis**

This study is rooted in the mind-body connection theory (MBCT). In which, the mind is seen as a tool for regulating emotions through self-awareness and bodily self-care (Alvord, Alvord, & Zucker, 2013; Stellitano, 2014). The term “yoga” is derived from the Sanskrit word “yuj,” which means to yoke or to unite (Iyengar, 1976). As a holistic mind-body practice, yoga can

be used to combat mental and physical stressors (Khalsa, Butzer, Shorter, Reinhardt, & Cope 2013). Many studies have found therapeutic benefits of yoga and meditation techniques, which include mood improvements, increased stress resilience, and improved performance of cognitive, psychomotor and physical tasks (Khalsa et al., 2013).

This study examined the effects of a Kripalu meditation technique called Breathe, Relax, Feel, Watch, and Allow (BRFWA), where the practitioner first only breathes, then they relax their body and mind, then they feel the bodily sensations, emotions, and feelings, then they simply observe or witness all happenings, and finally they allow or let everything be the way it is (Cope, 2017). It also examined the effects of *Dirga pranayama* or the three-part breath, which invites practitioners to breathe fully into their lungs to calm the mind, create more introversion and relax the chest and belly (Kripalu Schools of Yoga and Ayurveda, 2015). Additionally, the effects of poses, or *asana*, in a series of spinal movements, seated poses, and standing poses, to further tap into the mind-body connection were examined.

It was hypothesized that by using yogic movement, breathing and meditation techniques, speakers would feel less anxious and more empowered than those exposed to traditional speaking preparation techniques and/or no techniques at all.

### Methods & Procedures

This study compared the public speaking anxiety and empowerment scores among three groups of undergraduate speakers at a large Midwestern university – those that were introduced to yogic techniques (Experimental 2 or E2 group), those that were introduced to the noted traditional techniques (Experimental 1 or E1 group), and those who were introduced to no techniques (control) – who then gave speeches.

The traditional speaking techniques intervention consisted of deep breathing (four-square breathing), muscle contraction and relaxation as well as positive visualization. The intervention lasted approximately 10 minutes. The control group received no intervention. The yogic intervention consisted of the techniques detailed above.

For data collection, surveys were composed of The Public Speaking Empowerment Scale (Brown & Leek, 2016), and the public speaking portion of the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension-24 (PRCA-24) (McCroskey, Beatty, Kearney, & Plax, 1985). The combined tests measured influence, agency, confidence, empowerment, and anxiety. The groups were comparable in size with 12 to 18 participants in each group (n=44).

### Results

Participants who were exposed to traditional techniques in the E1 group had significantly higher levels of influence, confidence, agency, and empowerment than those in the control or E2 groups. Regarding anxiety, participants in the E1 group also felt significantly different (M=15.14) than those in the control group (M=19.11), but not significantly less anxious than those in the Experimental 2 group (M=16.42). Based on the study's findings, the alternative

hypothesis is rejected and the null hypothesis is accepted: Speakers exposed to the yogic techniques did not experience lower speaking anxiety levels than those exposed to traditional speaking preparation techniques and/or no techniques at all.

### Discussion

Though the alternative hypothesis was rejected, these initial results are interesting because the *tried-and-true* techniques did significantly reduce anxiety when compared to the control group. The results also indicate that anxiety levels were, in fact, reduced by the E2 group's intervention. This study supports existing research that validates the use of the traditional techniques. This study has also shown that we might rely too much on traditional tools and could produce new tools to prepare students for public speaking engagements, because though the traditional techniques are effective, there public speaking anxiety continues to persist.

### Limitations & Future Work

Research dealing with yoga's effects on performance-related anxiety is a small, yet growing field of study. The major limitation of this study was the sample size. Findings are not generalizable and should be further explored. Also, future work that considers the psychology of change resistance, holding sessions for longer periods of time (i.e., six weeks uses more diverse and larger samples, and/or examine other yogic practices such as *Nadi Shodhana Pranayama*) could help researchers further understand the effects yogic techniques could have on speaking anxiety and empowerment. This future research could also consider yoga as “the skillful participation and engagement with the movement of life’: an opportunity to find a deeper and more intimate connection with

everything we experience, and exploring these connections in an honest and responsible way” (Kozlowski, 2020). With these inquires and invitations in mind, communication centers could invite students to learn, embrace and embody their most authentic selves to then create boundaries with speaking anxiety or fear in order to become more comfortable in the uncomfortable experience of PSA.

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