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Medknow

## Yoga in 42 African American women’s memoirs reveal hidden tradition of health

Dear Sir,

Researchers who document yoga’s popularity in the United States likely underestimate the fullness of its impact if they do not include data from communities of color. In a search of over 200 published black women’s memoirs, the term “yoga” appeared in 42 narratives.<sup>[1]</sup> Sadie and Bessie Delany are sisters who both lived over 100 years; they credited four decades of daily yoga as a main variable in their longevity.<sup>[2]</sup> Personal writing by Ann Petry (1965), Maya Angelou (1976), and Jan Willis (1969, 1981) also shows historic awareness of several physical and spiritual traditions, including tantric yoga. African American women’s accounts of yoga’s perceived benefits can inform doctors, therapists, and researchers interested in addressing health issues particular to this demographic.

Several black women have turned to yoga to improve health: Ann Petry adopted yoga to heal a back injury and Queen Latifah employed yoga in her effort to quit smoking. Robbin Alston, author of “The Art of Feeling Good: The Power of Àse Yoga”, is a noteworthy case. Alston, a psychologist, discovered yoga after being diagnosed with breast cancer and became a yogini and instructor as a result of life-sustaining healing she experienced from her practice. She now teaches classes nationwide to reduce illness from cancer, high blood pressure, heart disease, and stroke that plague African American women.<sup>[3]</sup>

Anxiety is the leading psychological challenge for black women in the United States.<sup>[4]</sup> Narrative data support clinical findings regarding the pervasiveness of this particular mental health issue: In the Africana database survey, “anxiety” appeared in 174 memoirs.<sup>[1]</sup> A spring 2016 search showed International Journal of Yoga has published 87 articles referencing anxiety and PubMed journals routinely conclude that yoga’s health benefits include decrease in several types of anxiety and depressive conditions. Given the documented positive effects of yoga on anxiety, a greater research focus on yoga as a

preventative and corrective intervention for African American women is warranted.

Historical research and narrative data contribute to a more robust assessment of yoga’s global impact on public health.<sup>[5]</sup> African American women have consistently engaged yoga as a little-known but effective pathway to wellness. Including diverse demographics as sources of knowledge in research can simultaneously uncover hidden traditions of positive practices and offer strategies to increase yoga’s psychological and physical impact on marginalized populations.

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