

A qualitative study on the feasibility of a yoga-based PPI for promoting well-being at a South African HEI



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Orientation: An increase in workplace stressors in higher education institutions (HEIs) negatively impacts employees' mental health and well-being. Workplace wellness promotion programmes that emphasise employee flourishing provide an optimal long-term strategy to improve mental health.

Research purpose: The aim of the study was to explore and describe the value and feasibility of a 36-week yoga-based workplace positive psychology intervention targeted at holistic wellness promotion.

Motivation for the study: A proactive approach to employee well-being was proposed to counter the stigma commonly associated with reactive wellness programmes, especially initiatives targeted at mental health.

Research approach/design and method: The research was conducted at a South African HEI using a qualitative descriptive research design. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 participants after concluding the intervention.

Main findings: The programme was perceived as a timely initiative suitable to nurture participants' wellness needs. The different programme components bolstered a range of physical, emotional, psychological and social well-being dimensions. The design and structure of the intervention furthermore encouraged and supported processes of transformation and participants' reflections informed recommendations for the future implementation of the programme.

Practical/managerial implications: The findings provide support for this yoga-based positive psychology intervention as a viable approach for holistic workplace wellness promotion. A strategy is provided for implementing a programme that targets different dimensions of well-being implying relevance to the work context and employees' personal lives. Long-term feasibility depends on employee interest and commitment, institutional needs and strong organisational support.

Contribution/value-add: The findings show that yoga as a workplace intervention provides a holistic and proactive wellness promotion programme that could counter the stigma often linked to reactive mental-health initiatives.

Keywords: employee well-being; workplace wellness promotion; mental health; positive psychology intervention; yoga; higher education.

Introduction

Numerous life and work-related stressors pose a threat to employees' mental health and overall well-being (Vos et al., 2020). Global rates of employee burnout have risen to an all-time high post-coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), signalling a need for greater investments in employee mental health and well-being initiatives (Brassey et al., 2022). With reference to the higher education context, it has been recognised that academic institutions no longer offer the low-stress environments of past decades (Niemczyk & Rónay, 2023). An increase in workplace stressors in higher education institutions (HEIs) negatively impacts employees' mental health and well-being. Within the South African context, the governmental drive to increase the number of doctoral graduates (Naidoo, 2023) places tremendous pressure on already over-burdened academic staff who need to balance fund-raising, research activities, student supervision, teaching, community outreach and responsibilities in their personal lives. The psychological and physical well-being of

university employees is consequently compromised (Hartfiel et al., 2011; Motala & Menon, 2020; Niemczyk & Rónay, 2023) with reported evidence of rampant burnout among this population (Gewin, 2021). As opposed to burnout, there is increasing emphasis on the need to promote flourishing in the workplace by focussing on employees' strengths and inner resources.

Employee flourishing has been proposed as a long-term strategy for organisational performance (Stelzner & Schutte, 2016) if employers wish to remain sustainable and thrive in modern times (Kumar et al., 2020). Growing evidence shows that workplace wellness promotion programmes can reduce job stress and nurture a positive social climate comprising an engaged and committed workforce that performs better (Donaldson et al., 2019; Geue, 2018). Workplace wellness initiatives within the South African context are predominantly reactive in nature, mainly catering for employees who are sick or distressed (Durham, 2021). This is because there is minimal evidence on the lasting benefits of well-being interventions in the workplace especially in the African HEI context. Contrasting this, the positive mental health movement advocates the deliberate promotion of flourishing as it does not automatically arise from the absence of mental dysfunction (Keyes, 2002). Positive psychology interventions (PPIs) target wellness promotion through the development and nurturing of practices, attitudes and behaviours conducive to flourishing among non-clinical populations (Lomas et al., 2015).

Yoga is gaining popularity because of its various mental and physical health benefits in today's fast-paced society showing a growing interest in inner peace, balance and happiness (Mishra et al., 2020). This ancient mind-body-spirit system has been proven to promote well-being and resilience to stress among modern-day employees (Hartfiel et al., 2012; Puerto Valencia et al., 2019), and can be utilised as a holistic tool for offering a workplace PPI combining mental, physical and behavioural components in one approach (Meiring, 2023). Although there is support for the use of workplace PPIs for employee well-being promotion in various settings (Van Zyl & Rothmann, 2019), there is little research on workplace PPIs in the South African context, specifically in HEIs (Guse, 2022).

Research purpose

This study qualitatively explored the value and feasibility of using yoga as a tool for offering a holistic workplace PPI that targets the promotion of individual well-being to employees at a South African HEI.

Literature review

Theoretical models on positive psychology interventions

It is commonly agreed that a well-rounded investigation of well-being entails a multidimensional construct including hedonic (feeling good) and eudemonic (functioning well) dimensions, and both positive and negative indicators

(Donaldson et al., 2019; Lambert et al., 2015). Keyes' mental health continuum combined hedonic and eudemonic aspects in one model and expanded the eudemonic component to incorporate both psychological and social well-being dimensions. Emotional well-being comprises a subjective evaluation of life satisfaction and affect, relating to a person's judgement of how they feel about their life (Keyes, 2002). While psychological well-being predominantly entails intrapersonal aspects (self-acceptance, personal growth, purpose in life, autonomy, environmental mastery and positive relations with others), social well-being relates more to the interpersonal sphere (social coherence, social actualisation, social integration, social acceptance and social contribution).

Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) proposed that relevant, intentional activities promise the greatest potential for sustained well-being. Their model suggests that individuals have unique personalities and dispositions towards optimism and happiness, and pleasure and joy derived from circumstances are not enduring. As people eventually adapt to circumstances, they return to their baseline level of happiness (Sheldon et al., 2013). The will to change and dedication to engage in wellness activities hold the greatest potential for becoming happier (Lyubomirsky et al., 2011). Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) also identified essential factors for achieving enduring well-being by employing relevant intentional activity including person-activity fit, sustained effort, optimal timing, positive habits and a variety of activities.

The broaden-and-built theory (Fredrickson, 2003) helps to explain why intentional wellness promotion fuels flourishing. The theory posits that positive emotions broaden a person's outlook and encourage expansive behaviours such as creativity, exploration and social connection, which promote personal resources conducive to long-term well-being such as supportive and nurturing relationships (Fredrickson, 2004). The theory also suggests that positive emotions can buffer the negative effects of stress by undoing the lingering residue of negative emotions (Fredrickson, 2003). The yoga-based PPI was designed on the assumption that sustained well-being is best cultivated intentionally over time through dedicated activities and practices conducive to self-improvement and flourishing that are personally meaningful to individuals.

Workplace positive psychology interventions

Employee well-being can serve as a protective resource against stress (Cohen et al., 2022) and promote work engagement (Kumar et al., 2020). However, findings from empirical studies on the effectiveness of workplace wellness interventions are varied, illuminating that specific aspects are essential for successful outcomes. While an eight-week online PPI failed to produce significant increases in work engagement (Ouweneel et al., 2013), a six-week on-site multicomponent intervention offered during working hours yielded a decrease in negative and an increase in positive wellness indicators (De Bruin et al., 2020). Although workplace PPIs have demonstrated a desirable impact on positive and negative

well-being indicators, a meta-analysis by Donaldson et al. (2019) revealed that PPI in workplace settings might hold greater potential for reducing negative well-being markers. Further insights from Strijk et al. (2013) highlighted the importance of on-site access to employee wellness initiatives to ensure programme uptake and commitment, critical factors for a positive impact. Current evidence (Carr et al., 2024; De Bruin et al., 2020; Hoosain et al., 2023; Talati et al., 2021) suggests that long-term, in-person, on-site and multifaceted wellness approaches are required for successful impact. Furthermore, Salanova et al. (2013) illuminated the value of utilising individual-based positive workplace interventions to promote employee well-being. These strategies entail individuals' core values, interests and preferences.

The mixed results on the impact of positive workplace well-being initiatives call for exploration into the potential pathways informing favourable impact and programme success (Hoosain et al., 2023; Lyubomirsky et al., 2011). This study aimed to address this need by exploring participants' experiences of participating in a 36-week workplace PPI involving the use of a variety of yoga-based tools to promote their sense of well-being.

Yoga as positive psychology intervention

The yogic system comprises a vast body of knowledge with multiple paths to obtain inner peace and freedom from suffering (Akdeniz & Kaştan, 2023). Raja yoga – emphasising meditation and mastering mental faculties – and Hatha yoga – the science of physical health and well-being – are two branches that are intricately connected. The intervention programme in this study was based on Hatha yoga, the most commonly practised path in Western society (Capon et al., 2019). The following core elements are found in most styles of Hatha yoga: physical postures, breathing practices, relaxation, meditation and a life of right action (Belling, 2001). The practice of physical postures, conscious breathing and physical and mental relaxation, all work on nervous system regulation (Ciezar-Andersen et al., 2021) and target aspects associated with enhanced physical health and mental well-being (Capon et al., 2019; Della Valle et al., 2020; Puerto Valencia et al., 2019). Moreover, the yoga philosophy emphasises interconnectedness and that well-being rests on how we conduct ourselves in daily life (Ross et al., 2014). Yama and niyama focus on how we relate to others and ourselves. These life principles target social and psychological aspects of well-being (Ivtzan & Papantoniou, 2014; Ross et al., 2014). Yama and niyama correspond with other empirically valid methods for promoting well-being, such as committing acts of kindness, practising gratitude and being mindful of the good things in one's life, validating them as relevant activities for sustained wellness promotion (Salanova et al., 2013; Sheldon et al., 2013). It is therefore argued that practising these principles could contribute to the cultivation of workplace well-being from a strength-based perspective.

Yogic practices can serve as viable means to promote well-being holistically by utilising a variety of physical, mental

and behavioural activities that have been shown to promote several aspects of hedonic and eudemonic well-being (Capon et al., 2019; Hartfiel et al., 2012; Ivtzan & Papantoniou, 2014). A review by Domingues (2018) showed that postural yoga promotes positive well-being indicators including positive affect, flourishing, resilience, self-compassion, mindfulness and positive experiences. Yoga also positively impacted negative well-being indicators such as anxiety (Hofmann et al., 2017), stress (Della Valle et al., 2020; Maddux et al., 2017), emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation (Alexander et al., 2015) among a range of populations in diverse settings. Practising postures with mindful awareness is a key aspect that distinguishes postural yoga practice from regular physical exercise commonly used to manage perceived stress (Hansen et al., 2001). It has been found that applying mindful awareness during physical activity has greater significance for lowering perceived stress compared to ordinary aerobic exercise (Magalhaes Das Neves et al., 2014). Most research exploring the benefits of yoga on health and well-being focusses on postures, breathing practices, relaxation and meditation, and seldom incorporates the yama and niyama (Domingues, 2018; Hofmann et al., 2017; Maddux et al., 2017) aspects specifically targeted at relational well-being (Ross et al., 2014). It is therefore argued that a yoga-based wellness programme including these aspects can serve as a holistic workplace wellness intervention that enhances mental, physical and social well-being dimensions.

Research design

Research approach and strategy

A qualitative approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perceptions of the intervention to promote their sense of well-being. An interpretivist epistemology informed the qualitative descriptive research design and the use of semi-structured interviews to explore the value and feasibility of using the yoga-based PPI to enhance employee well-being.

Research method

Research setting and access

The study was conducted at a selected large open-distance university situated in the Gauteng province, South Africa. Knight et al. (2017) emphasised the importance of organisational support for the successful implementation of workplace interventions, and this was a primary consideration in selecting the institution. After obtaining ethical clearance and written permission from the university to conduct the study, initial access was established through the Employee Wellness manager. Several meetings with relevant institutional partners followed to clarify the project timeline, the structure and content of the wellness programme, recruitment strategies and research requirements.

Researcher characteristics and reflexivity

The first author who is also a qualified yoga instructor acted as programme coordinator and wellness facilitator.

The relationship formed with the participants may have influenced both the responses by the interviewees and the interpretation thereof. Research activities, processes and reflections were reported in a research diary to ensure researcher reflexivity and the identification of any bias that may have influenced the interpretation of the findings.

Research participants and sampling methods

A purposive, non-random sampling strategy was used. All employees at two target campuses of the selected HEI were invited via an electronic advertisement to partake in the 36-week intervention. The study aim, eligibility criteria, research activities, participation expectations and contact details were included in the advertisement. The advertisement was re-published once weekly for three weeks followed by a face-to-face information seminar. Eligible participants had to be employed at the selected HEI, willing to commit to participation in all research activities and physically capable of engaging in yoga practices of medium intensity. In total, 46 eligible participants volunteered to take part in the intervention. A subsample of 10 participants partook on a voluntary basis in the semi-structured interviews. Adherence to the research activities, including the practical yoga sessions, was used as criterion for selection of the subsample. Ample exposure to the programme components ensured that the sample was sufficient for data saturation. Moreover, a pattern of saturation in participant responses was picked up during the analysis further justifying the current sample size. The majority of the sample were African females (90%) with graduate and post-graduate degrees (80%), ranging between the ages of 32 and 64 years who attended over 60% of the practical yoga sessions.

The Yoga-based positive psychology intervention

The intervention comprised a theoretical and a physical component. The theoretical component consisted of 12 lessons dealing with the principles for the physical practice and yama and niyama practices (refer to Table 1). Participants received the theoretical lessons via email and were encouraged to apply these principles during the physical practice sessions and in their everyday lives.

The physical component consisted of a balanced yoga sequence taught in two phases (Sequence A and Sequence B), and was presented by a team of four qualified and experienced yoga teachers (including the first author). Each phase was taught for eight weeks to ensure gradual progression and familiarity through repetition. Each sequence was repeated twice during the programme (refer to Table 2). Postures from both sequences were practised during the final four weeks. Sessions started with a period of focussed attention and mindfulness to help participants relax and become present followed by deep breathing (i.e., conscious rhythmic breathing, abdominal breathing and full yogic breath). The asana practices formed the core of

each session, which was concluded with a guided relaxation and meditation (Yoga Nidra).

Data collection and recording

The interview schedule comprised 10 questions dealing with the reasons for joining the programme and the related goals, the impact of the yoga-based intervention on participants' well-being (e.g., lessons learned and skills acquired from the theoretical and from the practical component, respectively) and the feasibility of the programme in the workplace setting. The questions were based on the objectives of the study and were critically evaluated by the authors for relevance and representation. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author after the conclusion of the intervention. The interviews were held at a time and place convenient for the participants and they gave consent for voice recordings of the interviews. These recordings were transcribed, and the transcriptions were checked for accuracy. Interviews ranged between 15 min and 50 min, and were conducted in English.

TABLE 1: Structure of the theoretical component.

Lesson	Description	Duration (weeks)
Programme introduction		
1	Introduction to the basic principles of practice (goal setting, non-judgemental acceptance of where you are, patience, tolerance, and gradual progression, non-comparison and non-competitiveness)	2
	Introductions to yama and niyama practices	2
Yama practices		
2	Ahimsa: Non-violence, kindness and friendliness	3
3	Satya: Truthfulness	3
4	Asteya: Non-stealing	3
5	Brahmacarya: Movement towards the essential. Self-control and moderation	3
6	Aparigraha: Non-attachment, non-greediness	3
Niyama practices		
7	Sauca: Inner and outer cleanliness, purity	3
8	Samtosa: Modesty, contentment	3
9	Tapas: The removal of impurities in our mental and physical systems through the maintenance of correct habits such as sleep, exercise, nutrition, work and relaxation	3
10	Svadhayaya: Self-inquiry and examination	3
11	Isvarapranidhana: Reverence to a higher power, surrender	3
Programme conclusion		
12	Reflection of lessons and practices	2
Overall duration		36

Source: Meiring, L. (2023). Workplace wellness: Yoga as a positive psychology intervention for employees in a South African higher education institution. Doctoral thesis, University of South Africa

TABLE 2: Implementation structure of the physical component.

Sequence	Technique and session structure	Duration (weeks)
Sequence A	Pawanmuktasana series + Yoga nidra	8
Sequence B	Surya namaskar + Yoga nidra	8
Sequence A	Pawanmuktasana series + Yoga nidra	8
Sequence B	Surya namaskar + Yoga nidra	8
Sequence A + B	Pawanmuktasana series + Surya namaskar + Yoga nidra	4
Overall duration		36

Source: Meiring, L. (2023). Workplace wellness: Yoga as a positive psychology intervention for employees in a South African higher education institution. Doctoral thesis, University of South Africa

Strategies employed to ensure data quality and integrity

Trustworthiness entails credibility, transferability, confirmability and dependability (Gunawan, 2015). The use of appropriate data collection and analysis techniques together with researcher reflexivity contributed to the credibility of the study. An independent thematic analysis served as a comparison, and rich descriptions further enhanced credibility, with verbatim quotations used to illustrate the context and phenomenon being studied. A detailed description of the research process allows replication of the study, and information on the study context and sample allows comparison to other contexts and populations. To demonstrate dependability, an audit trail of the research design was provided. Reflexive analysis of a range of participant experiences and perceptions ensured confirmability (Gunawan, 2015).

Data analysis

Participants' experiences and perceptions were analysed to provide insight into the value and feasibility of using the yoga-based PPI to enhance employee well-being. The six phases of the reflexive thematic analysis process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2020) were applied. These include familiarisation with the data, and writing notes, systematic coding, generating initial themes from the coded and collated data, developing and reviewing themes, refining, defining and naming themes, and reporting the findings. Refer to Meiring (2023) for more detail. The text was coded using computer-based qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti 9 (2020). Lumivero/ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH. Kreuzberg district, Berlin, Germany.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval to conduct this study was obtained from the University of South Africa College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Review Committee (No. 2018-CHS-0221).

Results

Four main themes were constructed from the analysis process highlighting the value and feasibility of the yoga-based PPI (see Table 3).

Theme 1: Timely response to employees' needs

When participants were asked about their reasons for joining the programme, stress was identified as the main motivation. While a variety of personal and work-related stressors were mentioned, work stress was dominant. Demanding workloads, pressing deadlines, challenging and toxic work relationships, and administrative and technological frustrations were common factors that contributed to participants' stress. One of the noteworthy stressors was the implications resulting from bureaucratic decision-making:

'The external factors that's working in our working environment is sometimes just too much ... there's other

people we are dependent on, like Department of Higher Education, things coming from the Minister to say, this you *have* to implement. And we know it's not going to work. And then you have to work around that because it is the Government, it is the accreditation of the qualifications in the institution and so on.' (P1, female, age 55)

Another consequence of bureaucratic influence was disruptions caused by annual student protests. This affected employees' ability to conduct their work and the accompanying hostile climate compromised their physical, emotional and psychological well-being. On some days staff would be prevented from entering the premises or they would be forced to evacuate.

In addition to these external factors, reference was made to an organisational culture characterised by unreasonable performance expectations that affect academic and administrative staff:

'We are under pressure the whole time ... you have to perform the whole time ... Work-work-work-work-work! You know, that is the message you get. And it's nonsense!' (P4, female, age 53)

'If you don't do 500 [registrations] today, you have to do 1000 tomorrow. You can't! You're a human being.' (P1, female, age 55)

Participants mentioned a range of negative consequences that resulted from their unmanaged stress including muscular tensions, headaches and feelings of despair. Collectively, participants' experiences portrayed that the organisational climate was not conducive to flourishing. When working under stress and pressure and not allowing constructive time for restoration employees are more likely to leave work in a negative state. This has spillover effects into their personal lives. When Participant 8 realised she was transferring her work frustrations to her family members, she was inspired to make a change:

'I also realised that ... when I arrive at home, I'm still overwhelmed. I'm still angry and my kids are being affected ... they will just ask one simple thing – maybe it's homework related or something – and I will just blow it ... that is when I saw that, you know what, I really need to do something about this.' (P8, female, age 48)

Participants recognised that their stress was taking a toll on their well-being, and they identified a need for supportive

TABLE 3: Descriptive outline of themes.

Theme	Description
1. Timely response to employees' needs	Stress as motivation for joining the programme Recognising the need for the intervention Accessibility and suitability of the workplace yoga-based PPI
2. Functional tools for holistic well-being	Benefitting from the 'off the mat practice': Increased awareness, mindfulness, acceptance and inner peace Benefitting from the 'on the mat practice': Emotional regulation, physical benefits, positive social interaction and connection
3. Transformation process	Guidance and support for growth Transformation and growth
4. Looking ahead and making it work	A viable wellness approach; highly recommended Potential obstacles and suggestions for programme success

PPI, positive psychology intervention.

resources to address this and decided to enrol for the programme. They appreciated the convenience of having access to yoga sessions during the workday, especially those who are mothers and found it difficult to fit additional activities into their schedules:

'A lot of these women ... are mothers, and we don't find time for ourselves. And at lunchbreak, instead of wasting it ... you're doing something now valuable for yourself.' (P3, female, age 43)

The lunchtime yoga sessions offered an opportunity to take a constructive break, which helped to counterbalance sedentary behaviour, release muscular tensions, calm the mind, increase energy levels and boost work performance. Participant 4 described how attending the sessions supported her as someone who struggled with mental health issues. She highlighted the importance of having continuous access to wellness resources in the workplace, which actively supported her in nurturing and maintaining a positive state of being:

'I can't stress the thing of space enough ... there's a place where you feel well, your body feels well and your mind feels well, and you can go back to that space to recharge, and then you can come back to the office. And you can take those skills back with you to the office. It makes a huge difference to experience it there [in the workplace] ... Coming back to it all the time. So for someone that's really prone to depression, stress, anxiety, that is a really useful tool.' (P4, female, age 53)

Theme 2: Functional tools for holistic well-being

This theme illustrates the widespread benefits participants experienced from practising and applying the tools from the theoretical and physical programme components. Combining these components in a single programme is a noteworthy feature that distinguishes the yoga-based PPI as a unique multifaceted approach to wellness that impacts emotional, psychological, physical and social well-being dimensions with application value in work and personal life domains. In this context, Participant 9 stated:

'Those high intensity [*exercises*] ... it didn't teach me the posture, it didn't teach me the mental awareness ... More awareness of who you are, or how certain things happen around your life ... I actually learned from yoga, than from the gym [*sic*]. What I did there ... had a lot of effect [*sic*] on my life, in total.' (P9, female, age 46)

Although presented as two distinct aspects, the theoretical and practical components formed an integrated approach to wellness. While the lessons provided the theoretical underpinning for a living practice conducive to the cultivation of well-being in everyday life, the weekly yoga sessions offered an opportunity to work with the physical body and explore how the different principles relate to the physical practice. Participants valued the different perspectives the facilitators offered on the lesson content during the class sessions and they benefited from their continued guidance and support. Participant 3 indicated that she learned:

'how to accept what is ... accept it when it's happening and not to carry it forward – and let go ... when you gave us the theory we read it, we just read it, but listening to you reiterate it in the class, sometimes made you think.' (P3, female, age 43)

Mindful awareness and non-judgemental observations were core components that were constantly reinforced during the yoga sessions. Collectively, participants reported greater awareness of their 'habits, attitudes, behaviours, thinking, and just simple – breath' (P10, female, age 34). Accounts of better emotional regulation and being more patient and accepting of things outside of their control were common. Participants described how practising mindful observation and rhythmic breathing enabled a sense of slowing down, which fostered a greater sense of harmony and inner peace:

'I used to be very short-tempered. I used to be very impatient ... sometimes we tend to forget that there are things that we don't have control over ... I think I developed ... a sense of accepting what I cannot change.' (P8, female, age 48)

Participant 9 (female, age 46) felt that the practice helped her to 'deal with my life situation in a better way and be a bit more positive ... that on its own, actually makes me to be a better person around other people'. This illustrates how the yama and niyama along with mindfulness cultivated during the physical practice created heightened consideration of how the participants treated themselves and others. Many described how they reframed their internal narratives and habitual responses more positively. The yoga philosophy teaches that our intrapersonal relationship forms the basis of our interpersonal relationships. Hence, becoming kinder and more compassionate towards oneself has a direct bearing on interpersonal interaction.

In addition to psychological aspects, physical benefits derived specifically from the yoga practice sessions included the release of muscle tension, relief from back pain and constipation, fewer migraines, improved physical strength, better balance, and weight loss. Practising yoga during lunchtime also helped to rejuvenate participants, which benefited their productivity. Participant 2 explained:

'Energy! It used to wake me up ... we would go into the class, we're tired, right, we do it, we do it. And then, it is so relaxing ... you almost want to fall asleep. But when I come here [to my desk], I'm energised ...' (P2, female, age 32)

While the PPI was an individual-based initiative, the unique benefits of offering the physical component in a group setting were evident. Participants motivated each other to attend the practice sessions and attending with others enabled them to connect with colleagues from other departments. Employees from different positions, levels and departments gathered in a casual way to conduct a uniform activity together with a common goal of promoting wellness:

'It's got a positive energy in the workplace ... Maybe they don't feel the impact immediately, but on [*sic*] the long-term there's a major difference. And it's the climate of the work ... and the organisation ... I actually felt more connected.' (P5, female, age 42)

Theme 3: Transformation process

This theme reflects some of the changes participants noticed after completing the intervention that were indicative of personal growth and transformation. Particular aspects of the programme structure and implementation as well as individual attributes were identified as prerequisites for positive change.

Pertaining to the design and implementation of the PPI, sufficient information, a well-thought-out structure, good organisation and supportive facilitators were highlighted as important aspects that aided personal growth and transformation. One participant also described the significance of setting a positive tone:

'The fact that you introduced it so well in terms of positive psychology. I think that's really a strength ... and this is about feeling better and err, feeling better in terms of your body and in terms of your mind.' (P4, female, age 53)

Participant 3 highlighted the programme structure as an important pathway that facilitated change:

'I don't think we would have reached that err, physical ability if it wasn't structured like that ... I think a lot of people would have left, you know, because it would have been a bit challenging for them.' (P3, female, age 43)

The physical practice started with basic movements and progressed to more challenging asana. Repetition fostered a sense of familiarity and provided an opportunity for practice, which enabled participants to observe their progress.

Participants also highlighted the importance of proper coordination and communication. The dedication and enthusiasm of the wellness facilitators played a significant role in the success of the implementation:

'It was very well organised ... I think that is absolutely the strength that was carrying the programme through ... The instructors were very motivated ... that was motivating ... you wanted to go there because the instructors were really committed to do the best that they can. And if somebody does the best they can, then you feel, I want to be there as well.' (P1, female, age 55)

Most of the participants were new to yoga. The wellness facilitators served as good examples through their conduct and offered compassionate support and guidance. These qualities created a safe environment where participants felt at ease and inspired to face challenges. Willingness to try and persevere through difficulties are critical prerequisites for progress and growth. 'Everybody – with whatever type of body you had – everybody was accommodated and I felt um, accepted' (P8, female, age 48).

The theoretical lessons presented various topics for contemplation and participants admitted that the process was sometimes challenging:

'The yama, niyamas, I really did not like them from the beginning. I used to say, I hate it! ... 'Caused it forced me to grow! Working on yourself is not nice.' (P2, female, age 32)

While recognising personal weaknesses can be uncomfortable, practising self-compassion and acceptance are important pathways to positive change, which can lead to a rewarding outcome. A participant explained that:

'[A]fter I'm nicer to another person and had a moment to just not jump at that person, it would feel good. It will be like ... wow, okay, I'm growing.' (P2, female, age 32)

Interviewees described numerous changes they noticed in their behaviours, habits, perspectives and outlooks that were indicative of positive shifts that occurred within them. Personal commitment and perseverance were identified as prerequisites for positive change:

'When I got better, it made me always realise that all I need is time. If something is difficult, just give it time and then I would get better at it. If – as long as I want to.' (P2, female, age 32)

Participants furthermore shared how overcoming limitations on the yoga mat increased confidence in performing their work duties. There were also accounts of changes around self-care and personal boundaries. Collectively participants indicated an increase in self-awareness and taking on more positive behaviours. For some, this translated into healthier habits and making better dietary choices. Participant 8 noticed stronger personal boundaries:

'I'm grounded when I'm taking decisions. I don't just take a decision just because I must take it to satisfy people ... I've learned to be – to put my foot down when I'm taking decisions.' (P8, female, age 48)

Interviewees also noticed that they became more optimistic. The following extract is a testament to the collective recognition of the various changes in perspectives and increased resilience:

'The other colleague also said to me – we were laughing about something that was happening and she said, "You know what, a year ago, we were – we will [sic] not be able to laugh about this". I said, "that's true!" ... We see things in a different light.' (P1, female, age 55)

Theme 4: Looking ahead and making it work

The final theme deals with the feasibility of using this yoga-based PPI to promote employee well-being and whether there is merit in recommending it as a viable workplace wellness initiative. It presents key aspects that contributed to the success of the programme and highlights factors that could compromise success.

The intervention group was small in comparison to the overall staff complement and attrition towards the end was significant. Because of the nature of the research, new intakes were not permitted after the recruitment phase. However, participants mentioned that other colleagues expressed interest in joining the yoga sessions over the course of the 36 weeks, offering evidence for long-term sustainability:

'People, yes, they wanted to come ... they saw us going there. But the problem was, it was already full, you see ... because of the

research. I think people would still be interested, even men would still be interested. There were some men who wanted to join – who were talking about it.’ (P9, female, age 46)

Despite the high attrition, interviewees felt that the programme is a feasible approach for promoting employees’ well-being and has the potential to add value to the institution’s performance outcomes. Participant 8 said that she:

‘... would really recommend it to all the employees at any time ... it’s needed, to be honest. Especially in a setup like this one where we see ... a lot of students.’ (P8, female, age 48)

When asked about the long-term feasibility of the programme, interviewees indicated that there was a small group who demonstrated their commitment over the 36 weeks, but acknowledged that there is a need to create greater awareness and interest among employees:

‘I think it is feasible, but you will have to get the people that are really interested involved in the classes ... and then, I’m sure the commitment will be there.’ (P6, male, age 56)

While organisational support was highlighted as a critical element for programme uptake and success, individual traits were also identified as necessary pathways required for successful employee wellness promotion. The general attendance of interviewees was relatively good compared to the overall sample and their reflections confirmed that willingness to change and commitment to the process are necessary prerequisites for successful impact. In addition to these fundamental character traits, the first-hand benefits participants experienced from attending the physical practice sessions offered additional motivation to remain committed. Participant 8 (female, age 48) explained that ‘the motivation was – what I saw happening to me, that’s what motivated me – I had to push myself, based on the benefits that I was getting’.

A number of aspects could compromise programme success and should be managed to enhance successful outcomes. Interviewees referred to misconceptions about yoga, which further supports the need and value of proper advertising and information sharing to raise interest and enhance the overall success of advertising campaigns. Participant 7 expressed her amazement at the initial interest:

‘I was surprised that [*sic*] how many people showed up ... [*laughs*] because any time you tell people something about yoga, they go like, “ooh, I don’t follow that religion”. I tell them; no, it’s not a religion [*laughs*].’ (P7, female, age 64)

Employees furthermore need to be assured that anyone can be accommodated, especially those who have physical limitations or health conditions:

‘People will need more understanding of it ... of the benefits ... especially ... people who have ailments.’ (P2, female, age 32)

Apart from a lack of drive, personal and work-related reasons also affected attendance.

The role of organisational support, including support from supervisors, to ensure the long-term success of workplace wellness initiatives was emphasised. A participant was discouraged to attend because:

‘One of the supervisors ... when we used to come up from the yoga, they used to complain, make like little side comments ... I still wanted to come, but the whole – them saying, you know, “oh you guys are going”, and, you know, “what is your target? Are you meeting it?”.’ (P2, female, age 32)

Cultivating an overall organisational culture that supports employee wellness and encouraging staff to refrain from scheduling meetings over lunch breaks could further assist the development of an organisational culture supportive of well-being. Actively communicating and informing institutions of the various benefits of employee well-being for organisational success is also needed.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore and describe the value and feasibility of using yoga as a tool to offer a holistic and proactive wellness promotion programme for employees at a South African HEL. The findings revealed that the programme was suitable to address a range of wellness needs related to emotional, psychological, physical and social well-being dimensions. Participant responses show how and why the particular approach worked.

Theme 1: Timely response to employees’ needs

Similar to previous studies (Niemczyk & Rónay, 2023; Poalses & Bezuidenhout, 2018), the participants experienced various personal and work-related stressors that compromised their well-being. Prolonged unmanaged stress causes exhaustion and is a precursor to burnout (Jacobs, 2024). The broaden-and-built theory explains that the thought-action repertoires that characterise negative emotional states impede problem-solving, creativity, enthusiasm and social interaction (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002). In line with this, the findings showed how participants’ stress diminished their emotional regulation, which negatively impacted service delivery and had detrimental spill-over effects on their family and personal life. Stressors outside participants’ control such as bureaucratic, top-down decision-making, unrealistic performance expectations and disruptive protest actions threatened their sense of autonomy, causing feelings of uncertainty and hopelessness. Participants’ experiences also depicted an organisational culture that was not conducive to flourishing.

The diverse reasons participants had for joining the intervention offer evidence of the inclusivity value of the programme. These included wellness promotion, stress prevention (Della Valle et al., 2020; Puerto Valencia et al., 2019) and the management of common mental health issues such as anxiety and depression (Capon et al., 2019). This suggests that the stigma commonly associated with traditional reactive wellness approaches and mental health

issues (Dobson et al., 2019; Durham, 2021) can be remedied by this type of strength-based initiative.

In line with previous findings, the participants expressed that the yoga-based tools helped them manage their stress (Maddux et al., 2017) and nurture various aspects of their well-being (Domingues, 2018). This benefited their performance and service delivery and nurtured a positive social climate through enhanced emotional regulation (Donaldson et al., 2019; Geue, 2018). Theme one verified the role of critical aspects required for the attainment of enduring well-being through intentional activity as proposed by Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) – a will to change, person-activity fit and timing (also see Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014).

Participants recognised the detrimental effects of stress and showed a willingness to take action. This indicates self-selection and voluntary uptake of workplace wellness initiatives (Sheldon et al., 2013; Talati et al., 2021). The participants were all familiar with the mental and physical benefits associated with yoga and were eager to take part in the programme, which demonstrated person-activity fit. Offering resources and opportunities to engage in happiness-relevant activities in the workplace that are accessible (Hoosain et al., 2023) and meaningful (Cohen et al., 2022; Salanova et al., 2013) have been highlighted by organisational wellness scholars as key requirements for successful impact. The need for a regular practice as a pathway to enjoy the benefits of yoga and other wellness related practices was also apparent (Ivtzan & Papantoniou, 2014; Strijk et al., 2013). Employers are therefore urged to invest in and commit to building a wellness culture and offer ongoing activities targeted at employee well-being promotion (Salanova et al., 2013).

Theme 2: Functional tools for holistic well-being

According to the theory of sustainable well-being, commitment to intentional activity using relevant tools and practices is the most conducive pathway to long-term happiness (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). The second theme demonstrated that the yoga-based PPI served as a valid multifaceted workplace wellness programme conducive to flourishing, thus improving resilience (Trompetter et al., 2017). In line with previous qualitative reports (Akdeniz & Kaştan, 2023; Capon et al., 2019), participants experienced positive benefits related to physical, emotional, psychological and social well-being dimensions. While quantitative evidence supports that yoga can promote these well-being dimensions (Hartfiel et al., 2012; Ivtzan & Papantoniou, 2014), the qualitative accounts presented in this study describe how these benefits relate to work and personal life domains of higher education employees in the South African context.

Interviewees shared that they became more patient and accepting of things outside their control and were better able to regulate their emotions, which in turn benefited their interpersonal relationships, contributing to social well-being. The introspection that was sparked by the

theoretical lessons cultivated a greater awareness of self and everyday conduct. Participants' reflections indicated increased self-compassion, which can serve as a buffer against mental health issues (Capon et al., 2019; Trompetter et al., 2017). The topics covered in the lessons resembled virtuous behaviour in the workplace that can benefit the organisational climate, work engagement and task performance (Geue, 2018).

Moreover, the lunchtime yoga sessions facilitated better physical health by aiding the release of muscular tensions and body pains commonly associated with sedentary behaviour (Howlett et al., 2018). Attending the sessions mentally rejuvenated participants which benefited their productivity. These findings corroborate previous research findings that lunchtime recovery boosts concentration and helps employees leave work in a positive mood, which can counter the negative spill-over effects of leaving work stressed and feeling drained (Michishita et al., 2017; Sianoja et al., 2018).

The findings also illuminated the benefits of offering an individual-based wellness programme in a group context. Not only did the participants actively encourage each other to attend, but seeing colleagues prepare for the practice sessions served as motivation on the days some felt uninspired. The lunchtime yoga sessions also created a space where colleagues from different departments could connect for the shared purpose of nurturing their health and well-being. Participating together in a uniform activity created a sense of camaraderie, connectedness and belonging. This finding corresponds with Michishita et al. (2017) who suggested that lunchtime group exercise is useful for improving relationships among workers.

Theme 3: Transformation process

Accounts of personal growth and transformation by participants showed that the yoga-based PPI provided a scaffolding for wellness promotion. Pathways that facilitated shifts in perspectives and behaviours that led to positive growth were identified. The programme design and implementation as well as participant attributes were distinguished.

Sufficient information, programme structuring and organisation, and supportive facilitators were identified as key to personal growth and transformation. Explaining the programme's purpose and structure, and emphasising the strengths-based approach to wellness promotion during the information seminar ensured that the correct tone was set. Interviewees were particularly drawn to the notion of targeting mental and physical well-being and that anyone could be accommodated regardless of body type, fitness level or previous experience. Informing employees of the approach upfront ensures proper understanding, which encourages involvement and commitment (Hoosain et al., 2023; Lyubomirsky et al., 2011).

Structuring the physical component to facilitate gradual progression and repetition helped participants overcome their physical challenges and build confidence. Overcoming physical challenges can precipitate psychological shifts (Mrazek et al., 2016) and the interviewees gave examples of this. Repetition was balanced with the introduction of new and more progressive asana. This contributed to keeping activities varied and thus counter adaptation effects (Sheldon et al., 2013). The programme thus serves as a guideline for structuring yoga-based employee wellness programmes.

Providing timely information on the unfolding programme components and weekly reminders of the physical practice sessions kept participants well-informed throughout the process. The commitment and passion of the facilitators inspired and motivated the participants. This corresponds to reports by Miglianico et al. (2019), who indicated that programme implementers play a key role in the intervention outcome and that two or more facilitators are desirable for maximum impact (Van Zyl & Rothmann, 2012).

Compassionate support and tailored guidance suited to the unique needs of the individuals created an atmosphere of acceptance and encouraged participants to overcome their physical limitations. Participants demonstrated that overcoming challenges on the yoga mat aided the dismantling of limiting beliefs, which helped to broaden their mindsets leading to shifting perspectives in other areas of their lives.

Participants' commitment and perseverance were critical attributes for positive changes to occur (Lyubomirsky et al., 2011; Ouweneel et al., 2013; Strijk et al., 2013). Reflections on the challenges they encountered over the 36-week programme are indicative of how the yoga-based PPI helped build resilience through the cultivation of self-compassion, improved emotional regulation, patience and perseverance (Akdeniz & Kaştan, 2023; Ross et al., 2014).

Theme 4: Looking ahead and making it work

Interviewees' experiences of participating in the yoga intervention were mainly positive and they highly recommended the programme as a suitable approach for promoting employee well-being. However, programme adherence was affected by various factors, including work and personal commitments and limited perceived support from line managers. High attrition is a commonly cited limitation in workplace intervention studies (De Miquel et al., 2024; Keeman et al., 2017). Although Strijk et al. (2013) recommended on-site access to intervention activities during working hours as a strategy to boost participation and compliance, the current findings showed that organisational support and employees' willingness to commit are further requirements for successful impact.

Organisational support is an essential requirement for successful uptake and is positively related to employee flourishing (Zhai et al., 2020). Organisations need to utilise official communication channels for advertising campaigns that are informative and highlight the focus on wellness promotion. Stereotypical misconceptions around the practice of yoga can impact programme uptake and need to be addressed in these campaigns. The study confirms the appeal of a yoga-based employee wellness initiative within the context of a multicultural society such as South Africa.

Offering three or more practice session per week could boost programme adherence as it offers more opportunities to make up missed sessions. The value of having a dedicated space that is easily accessible to employees can further demonstrate organisational commitment to wellness. However, work-related obstacles such as work demands and a lack of managerial support need to be addressed to enable regular attendance and promote programme uptake. We suggest that managerial buy-in could be fostered through dissemination of evidence of what works as well as the benefits of such programmes to organisational leadership and performance. In addition, a pre-intervention consultation with managers in order to understand what their needs are as well as determining the extent to which well-being interventions can address those needs, could encourage ownership and uptake. It is critical that organisations afford employees time to engage in well-being interventions (Talati et al., 2021).

The small group of highly committed participants can serve as an inspiration to other colleagues, showing evidence of the potential for a positive contagious effect to occur over time (Geue, 2018; Spreitzer & Hwang, 2019). Interviewees mentioned that other colleagues showed interest in joining, which suggests that uptake may improve over time as employees become aware of the programme and see how it benefits attendees. This highlights the need for long-term investment in a yoga-based PPI to benefit workplace well-being (Salanova et al., 2013; Talati et al., 2021).

Practical implications

Increasing demands which are characteristic of the South African higher education context, call for an inclusive and holistic proactive approach to workplace well-being promotion. While participants echoed common benefits associated with practising yoga, the findings showed that programme success depends on careful design and implementation strategies. The study illustrates the importance of a wellness programme that includes theoretical and practical components to provide employees with functional tools to manage stress and improve well-being. This offers a novel approach to wellness intervention. Designing the programme in a way that encourages gradual development ensures inclusivity and is conducive to the transformation process.

Furthermore, on-site access to intervention activities and the implementation of a yoga-based intervention during working hours may improve uptake. Although lunchtime

access to yoga sessions is convenient, issues of workload and managerial support for employee wellness activities are critical aspects that need to be addressed to boost programme uptake and participation. Evidence-based information on the benefits of such programmes could contribute to managerial buy-in. Active advertising is essential to get interested employees involved, but personal commitment and motivation are key attributes necessary for sustained well-being. This yoga-based wellness promotion programme emphasises flourishing and it could thus counter the stigma often linked to reactive mental-health initiatives.

Limitations and recommendations

This study is not without limitations. The findings were generated from a small mostly female sample from one South African HEI and therefore cannot be generalised and neither can causality be inferred given the qualitative method of investigation. Nonetheless, these qualitative accounts may have transfer value to other contexts (Noble & Smith, 2015) which warrants duplication of the intervention in other settings.

While the multi-role positioning of the first author – including researcher, programme coordinator and wellness facilitator – offered unique insights to draw on during the analysis and interpretation of the data, there is some risk of positive bias. Furthermore, the relationship that formed between the first author and interviewees over the intervention period may have led to social desirability bias during the interviews (Barns, 2019).

A mixed-method longitudinal investigation of the programme in other work environments is recommended to further map the success pathways of this yoga-based workplace PPI as well as long-term feasibility. This study solely reflects the experiences of programme participants. Future studies could include interviews with those who dropped out to shed light on possible reasons that could impact the feasibility of the programme as a proactive wellness strategy.

Conclusion

This study qualitatively investigated the value and feasibility of using a yoga-based PPI as a proactive strategy for employee wellness promotion in a South African HEI. The study's findings provide evidence-based support for a unique strength-based employee wellness initiative that includes a variety of yoga practices in a workplace PPI that targets various emotional, psychological, physical and social well-being dimensions.

The programme is relevant to the work context and employees' personal lives. To the authors' knowledge, this study is the first to apply yoga in a workplace PPI within the South African higher education context. Overall, the interviewees' experiences show that this type of yoga-based PPI offer a viable approach for holistic wellness promotion, but that long-term feasibility depends on employee interest and commitment

and organisational support. Further research is needed to explore the transferability of these findings to other settings.

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Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

L.M. was responsible for the conceptualisation of the study, and the acquisition and analysis of the data. R.v.E. and A.W.F. supervised the project. L.M., R.v.E. and A.W.F. contributed to the design, writing and review of the manuscript.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available because of ethical restrictions preserving participant anonymity and confidentiality and are available from the corresponding author, R.v.E., upon reasonable request. Full interview transcript data will however not be made available for the reason stated.

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