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## Introduction to the special issue on yoga and positive embodiment: a note from the editors on how we got here

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### ABSTRACT

Studying the practice of yoga and its relationship to body image, embodiment, and eating disorders brings together the professional and personal aspects of our lives as yoga practitioners, researchers, and women living in bodies within a society that can be tough on body appreciation. Developing this edition on “Yoga for positive embodiment in eating disorder prevention and treatment” has been a work of love for all of us. As yoga practitioners, we have personally experienced the benefits of yoga in our own bodies and felt that there may be benefits for others. As researchers, we are dedicated to the exploration and utilization of evidence-based practices to enhance well-being, promote a positive body image and sense of embodiment, and both prevent and treat eating disorders. Our experiences as yoga practitioners, in conjunction with our curiosity as researchers, led us to explore the extant evidence for yoga as a tool for leading to improvements in body image, disordered eating behaviors, and eating disorders, and to embark on our own research in this area to fill necessary gaps in our knowledge base. Our long-term dedication to the fields of body image and eating disorders, in conjunction with our emerging interest in yoga as a potential tool, led us to the compilation of this edition on yoga and positive embodiment.

Empirical research and theoretical models on yoga and body image, embodiment, and eating disorders are in the early stages. Yet this edition includes scientific papers that clearly demonstrate the passion for the topic at hand, deep thought regarding processes of influence and best strategies, and the beginnings of important research. Furthermore, the articles in this edition set the stage for future directions (Cox, Cook-Cottone, Tylka, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2020). We have included a construct review paper that provides an overview of the psychological theories of embodiment and the practice of yoga (Perey & Cook-Cottone, 2020) and a theoretical paper that applies of the Developmental Theory of Embodiment

specifically to the practice of yoga (Piran & Neumark-Sztainer, 2020). To support further research, we include a paper detailing a conceptual model exploring the mechanisms that connect yoga to positive embodiment (Cox & Tylka, 2020) and a perspective piece on social justice and intervention studies (Webb, Rogers, & Thomas, 2020). Along with the latest intervention studies (Brennan & Whelton, 2020; Cox, Ullrich-French, Cook-Cottone, Tylka, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2020; Diers, Rydell, Watts, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2020; Kramer, & Cucculo, 2020; Pacanowski, Diers, Crosby, Mackenzie, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2020), this special issue includes the most comprehensive review and meta-analysis on eating disorder and yoga to date (Borden & Cook-Cottone, 2020). You may choose to review all of the abstracts and then do a close read of one or two articles. Or, you may choose to read the whole edition from front to back to gain a rich perspective on the state of the field with regard to yoga and its potential to help with body image, a sense of embodiment, and eating disorders.

Given the strong intersection between the professional and the personal on the topics of yoga, body image, embodiment, and eating disorders, we take the unusual step here of providing some background on our own journeys through yoga both as a personal practice and an area of research interest. Some of us are clinicians; some of us are yoga instructors; and some of us have had body image concerns and/or eating disorders. All of us are serious yoga practitioners and researchers within the areas of body image and eating disorders. In studying yoga in relation to these health outcomes, we find ourselves in a situation where we have reached a state of “near-perfect union” between our personal and professional interests. Our personal experiences with yoga have greatly informed and enriched our theoretical writings and our empirical research. Yet, we know the importance of conducting strong research and avoiding bias in the design of studies, the implementation of data collection and intervention protocols, and interpretation of study findings. We have made every effort to avoid any bias in papers that we have either written or reviewed. But we also recognize the potential for bias. Thus, we share brief summaries of our own body image, yoga, and yoga research journeys, given that others on similar paths may be interested in our stories, and to be transparent about our own personal involvement in the topic at hand.

Anne E. Cox PhD writes: My struggle with body image started at the end of the first year of college when I had put on a tiny bit of weight. I was a college basketball player but instead of focusing on feeling good and supporting my performance, all I could think about was being thinner and lighter. It dominated my thinking and planning throughout the day. During the 15 years after college, I slowly healed somehow, but still ideas of having eaten too much or not burning enough calories would run through my head. The external focus did continue to loosen its grip. I remember one poignant moment when I felt so pleased to be a size smaller (compared to before pregnancy) a couple months after having my child. It quickly dawned on me

that I was smaller because I had lost so much muscle. The ridiculousness of feeling good about that sat like a weight in my bones—another nail in the coffin housing my body image concerns. There were many such nails, but yoga was the final one. I started practicing at a yoga studio 6.5 years ago when my daughter had just turned 5. I really can't remember why I was drawn to it, but each and every class was a revelation. As a researcher, I would sit and contemplate why I was feeling so damn good in my own skin. And the unique experience of being instructed to be in my body, breathe in my body, feel my body without judgment or comparison set this form of movement apart from anything I had ever experienced as an athlete or exerciser. I was hooked! It only took a few months before I really felt like my external, objectifying focus on my body became almost completely internal. So now I practice yoga almost every day and I never have negative thoughts or emotions about my body. It doesn't take up space in my thinking throughout the day. I am free to just be and live and experience. I am now teaching yoga and researching the effects of yoga on body image and physical activity motivation in the hopes of helping others on their journey.

Tracy Tylka PhD shares the following: I struggled with disrupted embodiment from a very early age. My sister, who is 14 years older, was always on a “strict diet” and complained incessantly about her body. When I was 4 years old, she served as a template for how to experience my body in this world (as disconnected and a source of discomfort). I internalized her disrupted embodiment, which was fueled within family interactions laden with weight stigma. Cognitive-behavioral therapy eventually helped me arrive at a place of “neutrality” toward my body, meaning that I didn't have any recognizable symptoms of negative body image or disordered eating, but I didn't feel positively towards it either. Instead, I tried to not think about my body much. Self-care was more mechanistic at this point, such as following a food plan with little attention of what my body needed beyond its most basic requirements. Rooted in my personal experiences and my interest in psychology, I began conducting research on body image and disordered eating in my undergraduate and graduate research in psychology. After I joined the Department of Psychology at The Ohio State University, I started wondering if there was a place beyond “body neutrality” and I started studying positive body image, which including developing a measure of it, the Body Appreciation Scale. My research had a side benefit of helping me shift my attitude towards my body from neutral to positive. Yet, reflecting back, I don't think that I experienced positive embodiment at this point (i.e., I appreciated my body, but was not particularly connected to it or comfortable with or within it). A few years after I was promoted to full professor, when I was separated from my husband, I started yoga at a nearby studio at the suggestion of a friend. Through yoga, I physically worked through my difficult emotions surrounding the separation and my body discomfort and disconnection—I was finally “in my body.” I felt these emotions, which were once stuck inside, work their way up from my core to the surface and

were released in my movement through the asanas. In addition to sweat, my mat would include my fallen tears. Yoga helped orient me toward my body in a way that I never felt before—as a source of strength, connection, and comfort. It also provided patience and forgiveness, as well as space for me to sort out my confusing thoughts and experiences. Unfortunately, I had to recently postpone vinyasa flow due to a broken metatarsal, severe toe arthritis, surgery, and recovery, but other yoga practices have kept me centered, focused, calm, and appreciative during this time of restricted body function. For me, yoga has been the therapy that has lifted me to positive embodiment, picking up where more traditional Western therapeutic approaches and even studying body appreciation left off. I view yoga as a gift to my body, an intentional practice to build and maintain positive embodiment.

Catherine Cook-Cottone, PhD, E-RYT 500 shares: In 9<sup>th</sup> grade I was officially diagnosed with an eating disorder, culminating years of at-risk behavior, negative body image, and an embattled relationship with my body. Because of my not-good-enough body, I was a failed dancer, a soccer player who flinched rather than scored, and a swimmer who wasn't ever quite fast enough. My body, despite my ongoing efforts to oppress it, was also not thin enough, pretty enough, or generally enough in any way. By the time I was a tenure-track researcher, through counseling and my own personal work, I was relatively recovered, except that I still was not at home in my own body and sometimes, to be completely truthful, still hated it (and I know hate is a strong word).

Early in my career as a professor, one of my students who was also in yoga teacher training invited me to take one of her yoga classes. She said that my ideas, theories, and approaches were very aligned with yoga. I demonstrated my forward fold, to show her one of my body's many inadequacies and explained that yoga was not for me. Disagreeing, she said anyone could do yoga. I said that "Maybe. Maybe, I will come to your class." A year later, I registered for her beginners' yoga class. We started out in Corpse Pose. "Morbid," I thought. I now see this as perfect. Death and rebirth—start in corpse—perfect. We placed one hand on our bellies and one hand on our hearts. She showed us how to breathe. For those of you who were born yogis this might sound ridiculous, but these breaths were miraculous to me. I wanted to cry. After class, I was, well, a few things. I declared to all who would listen, "This is the best I have felt without a few glasses of red wine in years, perhaps ever." And I felt successful, "I can do yoga!"

So, here I am, 20 years later, embodying self-love. After two decades of yoga, my body and my mind have gotten to know each other. It was in that first yoga class that I began to see and know my body in a new way and not from my outward, judgmental gaze. I began to inhabit, sense, and move from my body. I did not know the term at the time, but I was moving toward what is now called positive embodiment. I have researched eating disorders and

yoga for many years. More importantly, I do yoga. I practice nearly every day. I also teach yoga. I want as many people as possible to feel like I feel when I do yoga. When I look out at the class in final resting pose, I can only imagine that these deeply personal and embodied transformations will make the world a much happier place.

Dianne Neumark-Sztainer PhD MPH RD RYT-500 writes: My yoga journey began nearly 40 years ago on a kibbutz in Israel. I loved the practice of yoga, but it got shelved for many years, as life got busy. I returned to yoga about 15 years ago—this time in Minnesota. I took up yoga for physical reasons (i.e., lower back pain), but continued the practice for a combination of physical, energetic, mental, emotional, and spiritual reasons. Through practicing yoga I became more in touch with sensations in my body and found myself better able to respond to them throughout my day. Over a few years, my yoga practice grew from participating in weekly classes at a community center to trying different classes at a local yoga studio, seeking extended yoga workshops and retreats, and developing a regular home practice. My curiosity grew with regard to the potential value of this practice for the fields of body image and eating disorders. I decided that I wanted to learn more so I took a sabbatical leave from my academic career and embarked on a deep study of yoga, including participating in an advanced yoga teacher-training program. For a few years, I had the amazing experience of teaching yoga to individuals with body image concerns at an eating disorders treatment program. And, I began to develop a line of research in this area. The knowledge gained from my personal practice, the teacher-training programs, and the experience of working within an eating disorders treatment program has guided the research questions that we are exploring. I have been involved in a few intervention studies, but the bulk of my work is linked to my ongoing longitudinal population-based study, Project EAT, to which we added questions on yoga. Perhaps of less relevance to this edition, but of great relevance to my life, when I became Chair of a large academic department and had to deal with many challenging situations, my yoga practice served me well. The personal and the professional have certainly come together for me.

We hope you will enjoy reading the articles in this edition as much as we have enjoyed compiling the edition. More importantly, we hope it will serve as a jump-off point for your own personal and professional explorations of the topic of yoga and its potential to help improve body image, a sense of embodiment, and eating disorders. We welcome your thoughts!

Dianne  
Catherine  
Tracey  
Anne

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