

Brahma Kumaris Rajayoga Meditation and Emotional Self-Awareness Among Youth: A Review of Psychological, Educational and Yogic Perspectives

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Abstract

Emotional Intelligence is generally accepted as being highly influential in both psychological well-being and the development/maintenance of strong interpersonal relationships and values-based behavior. Much of what we currently know about EI, however, has been based on cognitive and behavioral theories/models of psychological development. Traditionally, however, many Eastern philosophies/yogic practices have approached emotional regulation from a different point of view than Western psychology; as emotional regulation through inner awareness and self-control.

This review paper discusses Brahma Kumaris Rajayoga Meditation (BKRM), a psycho-spiritual practice which may help in the development of emotional intelligence. Psychological models of EI, classical yogic philosophy, and empirically supported outcomes of rajayoga meditation will provide support for the assertion that BKRM leads to improved emotional regulation, reduced stress, increased empathy and increased values-based behavior in individuals who use it. Additionally, the paper will identify some conceptual similarities between Goleman's (1995) "mixed" model of emotional intelligence and the tenets of Rajayoga such as: soul-consciousness, detachment and cultivating virtues.

As is true for all forms of research pertaining to rajayoga, however, there are limitations to the present literature including: relatively small sample sizes, reliance on cross-sectional designs, and a lack of specific research regarding the effects of BKRM on adolescent populations. Therefore in general, this study supports the idea that Rajayoga Meditation can be viewed as a culturally acceptable emotionally intelligent practice to promote emotional intelligence in children and adolescents, and suggests additional research of higher quality.

Keywords: Brahma Kumaris Rajayoga Meditation, Youth, Emotional Self awareness, Yogic Psychology

1. Introduction

The way we feel can influence our thoughts, our motivation levels, and our social interactions with other people. Additionally, there are studies that show that the quantity of emotional distress experienced by young people is increasing. The rise in emotional distress among youth has been associated with increased school pressure, increased social comparison as a result of social media usage, over exposure to digital media, and less values-based guidance. As a result of this research, it has become evident to researchers that Emotional Intelligence (EI) is a critical psychological construct for education, mental health, and organizations. EI is defined as being able to recognize and control your own emotions and those of others.

In recent years, researchers have defined EI as "the ability to understand, recognize, and effectively manage emotions in oneself and others." The research on EI has established that individuals with high EI also tend to have improved mental health, academic performance and social relationships. For centuries, the mastery of emotions has been a central theme in all major Indian philosophies, and most likely can be achieved by a combination of awareness and disciplined self-regulation.

The Rajayoga Meditation technique used by the Brahma Kumaris, involves cultivating reflective awareness, and identifying oneself as a spiritual entity instead of physically positioning themselves or manipulating their breathing. Studies have shown that practicing Rajayoga results in positive changes in the way an individual regulates their emotions. A systematic review does not exist that combines EI theory with yogic philosophy. Therefore, the primary goal of this study was to fill this gap.

2. Models of Emotional Intelligence

Basically there are three main models that describe EI; The first model was developed by Mayer and Salovey in 1997. They defined EI as a group of cognitive abilities which included recognizing and identifying emotions, utilizing emotion as a guide to aid in thought processes, understanding and comprehending emotions, and controlling/adjusting one's emotional state. This model views emotions as information signals to process information to make decisions and reason. Because emotions provide signals to process information, this model views EI as a measurable cognitive skill.

The second model is the mixed model developed by Goleman (1995) and includes a number of personality-related traits such as motivation, empathy, impulse control, and social effectiveness in addition to the cognitive abilities described above. The mixed model has gained much influence in educational, organizational and leadership domains due to its ability to provide a practical representation of EI for use in many real world contexts. Detractors from the model have criticized the mixed model for being overly general and lacking in theoretical clarity. Nevertheless, continued research has demonstrated that there is an association between the application of the mixed model, well-being and adaptive functioning (i.e., self-regulatory behaviors and empathy).

The third model, that is the Trait Model of EI developed by Petrides and Furnham (2001). According to the

Trait Model, EI is defined as a group of emotional self-perceptions, which are components of an individual's personality structure. Therefore, unlike the ability models of EI, the Trait Model defines EI as being about how individuals typically experience and regulate their emotions as opposed to how well they can process emotional information. Additionally, research has demonstrated that the trait definition of EI is a predictor of stress tolerance, emotional stability, and social adjustment, with the greatest predictive value being found in educational and developmental environments.

In addition to the above-mentioned models, research has also begun to explore EI as a self-regulatory system based on reflective awareness. For example, Gross' (1998) Process Model of Emotion Regulation describes how conscious monitoring and reappraisal of emotional experiences lead to various behavioral reactions. As such, this supports the metacognitive interpretation of EI as the ability to reflect on emotional states prior to those states being able to be successfully regulated (Morin, 2011).

While each of the various models may define EI differently, or provide differing theoretical explanations for the nature of EI, there exists a commonality among all of these models. Specifically, each model views EI as dependent upon the ability to reflectively monitor, interpret, and consciously control the experience of emotional events. In doing so, the emphasis on reflection within each of the models provides a connection between psychological theories of EI and meditation-based traditions that promote systematic self-awareness.

3. Philosophical Traditions of Yogic Psychology

Yogic psychologists view emotions as different states of consciousness (chitta vritti's or chittavrittis), in constant motion, caused by a lack of awareness of the ego-state (asmita) in our attachment to all emotionally experienced things (attachment/love raga), aversion to loss of them (dvesha), and a lack of awareness of our true essence (the Self) (avidya). Thus, it is not the emotion itself, but rather a lack of awareness of our own emotional states (emotional self-awareness) that creates disturbances.

Therefore, as stated in Yogic Psychology; The regulation of emotions happens with a higher level of awareness which allows an individual to be aware of their emotional responses, not by having their emotional responses happen unconsciously.

The definition of yoga, according to Patanjali's Yoga Sutras is chitta vritti nirodhah, or the regulation or stilledness of the mind's (consciousness') fluctuation (Patanjali, trans. Taimni, 1961). The commentators of Patanjali's sutras have emphasized that when it comes to the definition of nirodhah, it is not about suppressing the conscious or subconscious activity of the mind, but developing discriminative awareness (viveka), thus eliminating the compulsiveness of the emotional states. Discriminative awareness will allow for a decrease in the amount of fluctuation of consciousness, and therefore, a decrease in emotional reactivity allowing for an increase in a balanced and clearer consciousness.

This process of emotional regulation through discriminative awareness is similar to Gross' (1998) view that conscious awareness is necessary for the effective regulation of emotions.

From a different perspective, the Bhagavad Gita describes the emotionally mature individual as someone who exhibits emotional balance (samatva) and is characterized as being wise (sthitaprajna) (Radhakrishnan, 1951). The emotionally mature individual is not detached from life but is a person whose inner orientation is centered in self-knowledge (atma jnana) and is capable of remaining steady amid pleasure and pain, gain and loss, and success and failure.

The Bhagavad Gita outlines how a combination of disciplined action (karma yoga) and non-attachment to ego based results can lead to emotional balance (Radhakrishnan, 1951).

Classical yogic texts show us that we will never achieve emotional control until we discipline ourselves to follow ethical practices. Yamas (restraints) and Niyamas (observances) are the yogic practices that help remove internal conflict and emotional chaos when our actions are aligned with universal values of Ahimsa (Non-Violence), Satya (Truthfulness), and Atmavairagya (Self-Control) (Iyengar, 1993).

Therefore, yogic methods for emotional regulation are both cognitively regulated as well as morally regulated.

Western Psychology often utilizes emotional expression, cognitive reappraisal and behavioral modification for emotional regulation. Yogic Psychology treats the root cause of emotional turmoil – misidentification with transitory mental states (Feuerstein, 2001).

Emotional stability is attained not by changing the outer world but rather by changing the way an individual relates to their experiences. As one develops awareness beyond identifying with ego centered thinking, they begin to perceive emotional experiences less reactively and more informatively.

We should point out that while yogic regulation of emotion does allow individuals to be emotionally sensitive and empathize with others, it allows them to develop emotional maturity (patience, tolerance and peace within themselves) by removing self-centeredness and allowing them to respond to others' emotional experiences in a more empathetic manner (Radhakrishnan, 1951; Feuerstein, 2003).

The yogic method of regulating emotions therefore integrates the concepts of emotional equilibrium, ethically good behavior and spiritual consciousness into a single system of thought. Therefore, this model of regulating emotions is both a depth oriented model of emotional regulation and a complementary model to contemporary research on emotional intelligence.

Conceptual Framework of Brahma Kumaris Rajayoga Meditation

Brahma Kumaris Rajayoga Meditation (BKRM) is a system of knowledge for understanding consciousness through awareness. The concept of soul-consciousness (the state of being aware of one's self as a non-physical, conscious being), is used in the BKRM system. BKRM differs significantly from other meditation systems by not using physical sensations such as breathing or body position as a means of promoting relaxation and reducing emotional response. Rather, it relies upon a series of cognitive techniques that allow individuals to recognize the nature of their thoughts and emotions and develop a sense of separation from them. This sense of separation enables individuals to better manage their impulsive reactions to their environment.

The BKRM system assumes that people have an inherent tendency to identify with their physical bodies and the many roles we play throughout our lives (body-conscious identification) (Pandiamani, 2021). When we identify with our role as parents, employees, etc., we tend to take those roles personally and become attached to them. Through the intentional application of BKRM, the practitioner systematically focuses his/her awareness on the realization that he/she is a stable, observing consciousness. This realization is believed to lead to weakening of ego-based patterns of emotional reaction (e.g., anger, fear, attachment) and, ultimately, to the ability to regulate one's emotions using insight rather than suppression (Feuerstein, 2003; Pandiamani, 2021).

Another important part of BKRM is that it involves developing a sense of purposeful ethics and values through the practice of the meditation, which allows the practitioner to take their values (such as peace, tolerance, purity, compassion) developed during the practice and incorporate them into their daily actions. In terms of emotion management, the values being cultivated also serve as a moral compass. From a psychological standpoint this is similar to the Self-Regulation Theories (Carver & Scheier, 1981) but BKRM includes both a spiritual component and an ethical component of the internal standard.

In addition to cultivating values, BKRM involves the practice of remembrance (smriti) or maintaining awareness of one's spiritual identity in relationship to a larger universal consciousness. The incorporation of smriti into BKRM is expected to contribute to increased emotional resilience by providing a sense of inner stability and security during periods of high emotional distress.

Beyond the development of values through BKRM, participants engage in the practice of remembering (or "remembrance," smriti) their spiritual identity and how they relate to a higher universal consciousness. Through smriti, it is expected that participants will experience an increase in their ability to be emotionally resilient through a sense of internal stability and security while experiencing high levels of emotional distress.

Research has demonstrated that people develop a framework for understanding themselves and the world around them which enhances both their capacity for emotional coping and their existential well-being

(Frankl, 1963), therefore developing a theoretical link between the philosophical underpinnings of BKRM and current psychological thought processes.

BKRM uses a teleological approach to direct awareness toward the intentional transformation of the self, rather than a descriptive observational focus (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 2003) as compared to mindfulness-based meditation which focuses on a non-judgmental awareness of sensory experiences occurring in the present moment (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

The primary distinction between BKRM and Mindfulness-Based Meditation lies in their focus on awareness to the individual's internal transformation through the development of personal values and their expression through conscious action in daily living.

Consequently, BKRM defines emotional intelligence as the process of developing a continued process of value-based emotional maturation rather than simply functional effectiveness. Brahma Kumaris Rajayoga Meditation can be seen as a model for the psycho-spiritual regulation of emotion, utilizing reflective awareness, value-based regulation of self, and awareness of a spiritual identity.

Thus, BKRM is consistent with the growing trend in Positive Psychology and Transpersonal Psychology (e.g., Davidson & Lutz, 2008) to conceptualize emotional well-being in terms of the relationship among an individual's sense of meaning, values, and self-concept. In addition, BKRM views emotional intelligence as one component of a broader process of transformation of consciousness and therefore provides a culturally grounded and theoretically coherent model of regulating emotions consistent with the major paradigms of contemporary psychology.

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The Rajayoga Meditation and Emotion Literature Review, Empirical Evidence

Evidence of the effects of BKRM on emotions has grown considerably over the last two decades using various methodologies, i.e., physiologic, psychologic, and qualitative. While the overall body of evidence is still limited, there appears to be a consistent theme in the studies reviewed here. That is, the results indicate that a person's emotional equilibrium improves and his/her stress-induced reactivity decreases after engaging in the BKRM practice for a period of time.

Physiologic studies were the first to examine emotional regulation. Physiologic studies investigated the emotional regulatory status of BKRM practitioners relative to non-practitioners. These studies indicated that BKRM practitioners had lower resting heart rates, lower blood pressure, and greater parasympathetic activity when compared to non-practitioners (Desiraju, 1993; Sukhsohale, 2012). Lower resting heart rates and less sympathetic nervous system activity are considered to be indicative of better emotional regulation (Gross, 1998).

The later studies regarding subjective emotional experience followed the initial research and indicated that individuals who consistently engaged in BKRM (Brahma Kumaris Raja Yoga Meditation) would report an increase in emotional stability, more positive affect in their daily life and have better coping mechanisms than those who did not engage in BKRM (Verma, 2015; Ramesh, 2013). The data collected from these studies suggest that the development of mindfulness that occurs during BKRM practice allows for conscious regulation of emotions and the adoption of adaptive behaviors. Additionally, a study of young people demonstrated that BKRM practitioners were both emotionally more stable and perceived themselves to be more efficacious than non-practitioners (Gupta, 2019), suggesting that increasing awareness through meditation may also promote resilience in adolescents dealing with difficult emotional times.

In addition to providing a quantitative analysis of the effects of long-term BKRM practices, qualitative studies have also provided insight into the types of emotional changes that occur as a result of engaging in BKRM for extended periods of time. In her ethnographic study on the Brahma Kumaris, Ramsay (2009) described how BKRM practitioners gradually transitioned from being impulsive and reactive to their emotions to demonstrating greater patience, compassion and moral sensitivities. According to the BKRM practitioners, developing this capacity enabled them to pause and think before they acted in emotionally charged circumstances. Similarly, Nagesh (2023) found that BKRM practitioners reported experiencing greater emotional stability and balance, greater purpose and greater clarity of thought, and greater confidence in their internal world through participant observation and interviewing of participants at the Brahma Kumaris World Headquarters. Therefore, similar to the quantitative studies, the qualitative studies indicate that developing emotional regulation through the use of Rajayoga is directly associated with developing a sense of self and developing personal moral values.

The findings from both qualitative and quantitative studies described earlier demonstrate some commonalities. In addition to noting several positive outcomes associated with BKRM (e.g., better emotional equilibrium, lower levels of anxiety/stress, improved ability to regulate emotions), the studies also found that many of the benefits identified in this research were enduring and not limited to the immediate time period during which they were studied. Additionally, each study provides evidence for the idea that the ability to regulate emotions is a skill that may be acquired through practice/learning. Finally, the studies serve as a clear example of the role that programs based on values and spiritual principles may play in enhancing individuals' ability to manage their own emotions.

However, there are a number of challenges in conducting research on BKRM. First, most studies have employed a cross-sectional design that precludes establishing causality between BKRM practice and emotional outcomes. Second, many studies rely on self-reporting that may be subject to response biases and social desirability biases. Third, many studies have been conducted on small and geographically localized samples that limits the generalizability of the findings (Sukhsohale, 2012; Verma, 2015).

It will be necessary to conduct additional longitudinal research, randomized research, use larger and more geographically representative sample sizes than have been used in previous research studies in order to fully understand the relationship of BK Rajyoga Meditation with emotional regulation in youth populations.

There is a significant amount of empirical research that supports the positive correlation between Rajayoga Meditation, emotional regulation, empathy, and overall psychological stability. However, we should be cautious in drawing conclusions about the efficacy of BK Rajyoga Meditation due to the relative lack of methodologically robust research that has been conducted to date. There is a scientific basis for why Rajayoga Meditation can be associated with the body of literature on emotional intelligence and mindfulness/contemplation practices as indicated by both the physiological and psychological assessment data as well as the qualitative data.

Rajayoga Meditation in comparison to Mindfulness-Based Approaches

Mindfulness based programs (e.g., MBSR, MBCT) have been established to help develop nonjudgmental awareness of present moment experience. Individuals trained using these programs learn how to recognize their thoughts, emotions and physical sensations as they occur, and to do so without evaluating them as good or bad. The amount of research regarding the effects of mindfulness has demonstrated that individuals who practice mindfulness exhibit better emotional regulation, lessened reactivity to stressful stimuli, and overall greater psychological well-being across many different groups of people (Gross, 2015; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

Although both Rajayoga Meditation and secular mindfulness-based programs share some similarities in terms of function (attentional stability and reflection on mental processes), there are significant differences in philosophy. Generally speaking, secular mindfulness-based programs are more descriptive, attempting to increase awareness of experience "as it is," without promoting particular values or ways of interpreting what one experiences (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Conversely, Rajayoga Meditation represents an explicit, value-oriented system of thought. In addition to providing awareness to aid in regulating emotion, awareness is also intended to provide insight into the self as a spiritual entity, and to promote desirable qualities such as peace, tolerance, and compassion (Pandiamani, 2021).

Due to its intentional focus on developing ethical qualities, the development of emotional regulation in Rajayoga is situated within a larger moral context. Disturbances in emotion are seen as the result of identifying with the ego and experiencing dissonance between one's values, rather than simply viewing them as maladaptive patterns of cognition. Therefore, emotional regulation in Rajayoga results from a change in how the individual conceptualizes themselves (self-transformation), rather than solely as a product of learning to pay attention (training of attention). This philosophical orientation to self-regulation parallels other theoretical orientations to self-regulation that highlight the importance of internal standards and goal alignment in facilitating emotional and behavioral regulation (Carver & Scheier, 1981).

There is another significant difference between the two techniques - the permanence of the changes in emotions made through each technique. The mindfulness based methods are well documented to reduce stress and emotional distress, however, the effectiveness of these interventions appear to decrease once an individual ceases practicing them (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). On the other hand, Rajayoga practitioners integrate their meditation practice with their ethical reflections and their spiritual identity which creates long-term changes in both the behaviors and emotions of the individuals (Nagesh, 2023; Ramsay, 2009), moving the focus from simply relieving symptoms to creating a sense of personal growth. It is likely the reason why Rajayoga practitioners show increased patience, greater emotional stability in regards to how they relate to others and more moral sensitivity than those who participate in mindfulness based interventions.

These two types of meditations can also be viewed as two different levels of psychological complexity and therefore as two different ways to increase awareness in one's life. Mindfulness allows an individual to regulate his/her emotions, using the process of being focused on the present moment. Rajayoga places awareness in a comprehensive set of values and an existential context. Over the last few decades, the emerging field of Contemplative Science has come to realize that practices that incorporate a person's values and give them a sense of purpose in addition to increasing awareness and emotional regulation can create a reservoir of resilience and help people develop the ability to ethically self-regulate (Davidson & Lutz, 2008; Frankl, 1963).

Therefore, Rajayoga meditation is not counterintuitive to mindfulness based interventions but is instead an alternative to improve an individual's emotional life by going beyond regulating their emotions to develop an individual's moral and spiritual development. Therefore, for individuals seeking culturally sensitive or value-driven ways to develop emotional intelligence – particularly in school or youth settings – Rajayoga provides a unique model that incorporates attentional awareness with intentional ethics.

Its Educational and Psychological Implication

Emotional Intelligence will continue to grow in relevance as a vital element of Holistic Education. Mediation through Rajayoga provides an easy-to-use, culturally-relevant method to develop emotional equilibrium in children & youth. Incorporating Rajayoga into Educational or Counseling settings aligns with National Education Policy's (NEP) emphasis on Experiential and Value-Based Learning (NEP, 2020).

In Counseling, the emphasis of Rajayoga's focus on Self-Reflection & Detachment from one's emotions can be used to enhance clients' ability to engage in reflection about themselves, thus providing increased Emotional Resilience & Cognitive Behavioral Strategies..

Research Gaps and Future Directions

Although the amount of literature in the field of Rajayoga is increasing, the area remains constrained with respect to methodology. One of the primary issues is that while most of the research utilizing Rajayoga has utilized cross-sectional study designs that limit the ability to assess the causal relationship between Rajayoga and the emotional outcomes as well as other issues with cross-sections, most of the research on this topic utilizes self-reporting measures which raises questions regarding response biases as well as social desirability biases (Verma, 2015; Sukhsohale, 2012). In addition, nearly all of the existing research have utilized extremely small and/or highly localized sample sizes, thereby limiting the generalizability of the findings (Verma, 2015; Sukhsohale, 2012).

Therefore, future studies utilizing longitudinal designs, randomized studies and larger and more geographically diverse samples are required to expand our knowledge of the relationship between Rajayoga and emotional regulation. Additionally, future comparative studies examining Rajayoga in conjunction with mindfulness and other forms of contemplative practices will help to further elucidate the unique aspects of Rajayoga in contributing to the development of emotional intelligence.

4. Conclusion

This review demonstrates that Brahma Kumaris Rajayoga Meditation provides a culturally appropriate and spiritually based model for developing an individual's ability to emotionally interact with others through awareness, self-regulation of emotions, and ethical behaviors and therefore is an extension of the more traditional psychological models of EI. Nonetheless, it is necessary to have additional and more rigorous multidisciplinary research to determine whether Rajayoga has a place within the theoretical

frameworks of current emotional intelligence scholarship.

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