

# Sahaja Yoga as A Stress Management Tool for Pain Relief and Its Implication for Intensive Care



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## Abstract

Pain and stress are deeply interconnected physiological and psychological experiences. Chronic pain often intensifies stress responses and persistent stress can increase sensitivity to pain through intricate neurological and hormonal mechanisms. Among the various non-pharmacological interventions, meditation techniques have gained recognition for their effectiveness in managing stress and altering pain perception. One such technique, Sahaja Yoga meditation, has shown promise as a natural and holistic approach to stress management and pain relief. This article explores the evidence supporting Sahaja Yoga as a stress management tool for pain relief and its potential implication for patient care in Intensive Care Units.

**Keywords:** Sahaja Yoga; Meditation; Stress Management; Pain Relief; Intensive Care

**Abbreviations:** ANS: Autonomic Nervous System; HPA: Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal; ICU: Intensive Care Unit; SY: Sahaja Yoga

## Introduction

Stress can be defined as “a state in which homeostasis is actually threatened or perceived to be so; homeostasis is reestablished by a complex repertoire of behavioral and physiological adaptive responses of the organism” [1]. Pain is defined as “a complex, multidimensional subjective experience with sensory, cognitive, and emotional dimensions” [2,3]. Stress and pain are closely linked and often influence one another [4,5]. Both are psychosomatic experiences, affecting the individual physically and mentally and impacting people’s quality of life [6]. They share overlapping neural and hormonal pathways, including the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, autonomic nervous system (ANS), and inflammatory pathways [7,8]. Stress activates the HPA axis, releasing cortisol and cytokines, which can initially reduce inflammation but lead to increased sensitivity and pain when chronic [5,9]. Pain, in turn, heightens stress levels, triggering more cortisol and further exacerbating anxiety and sleep disruption (ibid). This reciprocal relationship makes it increasingly difficult to manage both stress and pain effectively.

Given this link, stress reduction strategies are essential components of pain management. Stress management combines approaches like identifying triggers, meditation, and relaxation

techniques [10]. Cognitive reframing, transcendence, forgiveness and acceptance enhance resilience [11,12]. Additionally, currently, no pain relief methods completely eliminate discomfort without side effects, which is why medical attention turns to traditional treatments like yoga and meditation as they can lower stress and improve immunity, increasing resilience [13]. Generally, yoga and meditation are cost-effective practices without the side effects of medications (ibid). Sahaja Yoga meditation (SY), introduced by Nirmala Srivastava in 1970, is a traditional meditation system rooted in yogic principles [14]. Unlike other yoga practices, SY starts with self-realization and focuses on mental silence through meditation [15]. Overall, SY practice benefits many health conditions, including pain-related ones [16]. As SY caters for physiological, emotional, cognitive and spiritual wellbeing, it offers a unique holistic approach to health with great potential for therapeutic use [17].

## SY Benefits for Stress Management and Pain Relief

The physiological changes found with SY practice signify strong parasympathetic engagement and thus indicate relaxation, which has been associated with alleviating stress and might contribute to preventing stress-induced illnesses [18-20]. For example,

several studies showed lower heart rates and blood pressure for SY meditators [18,21-25]. Moreover, regular SY practice has been shown to lower cortisol levels, which is indicative of low stress levels [15,26]. Sympathetic overactivation from stress and pain reduces skin temperature. While traditional meditation increases skin temperature for homeostasis, SY practitioners exhibit colder skin temperatures, suggesting that SY meditation has a greater physiological effect [27].

SY also affects brain areas involved in emotional and pain processing [28-32]. Neuroimaging studies suggest that SY increases gray matter in regions related to pain and emotional processing [33-37], enhancing individuals' pain management and potentially lowering pro-inflammatory substances linked to chronic pain.

The psychological benefits of SY are crucial, as chronic pain is often accompanied by anxiety and depression. SY helps mitigate these conditions [21,38-42], encouraging a shift in focus from pain to mental calmness. Furthermore, it aids recovery from addiction [43]. SY also affects cognitive factors, which play a role in stress management and pain perception through attention control, expectation management and emotional regulation [18]. SY fosters interoceptive awareness and self-regulation, leading to improved responses to pain [14,15]. Additionally, SY's tangible experience of sensations can develop cognitive reframing and adaptive coping mechanisms with positive expectations while boosting some character traits like transcendence, forgiveness and compassion, which contribute to resilience and a more adaptive response to pain [12,44]. Overall, SY literature shows that SY significantly enhances the quality of life by improving mental health, reducing stress and anxiety, and promoting better physiological health outcomes [15,20,21,45].

## Intensive Care Implications

Patients in intensive care units (ICUs) often experience significant stress due to severe illness, invasive procedures, and prolonged hospitalization, which can hinder recovery and increase pain [46,47]. SY offers a promising approach to managing this stress and improving patient wellbeing [17-20,48,49]. Research indicates that ICU patients frequently face anxiety and depression [50,51]. SY helps alleviate psychological distress by promoting emotional regulation and mental silence, enhancing coping mechanisms [38-41]. It also serves as a non-pharmacological alternative for emotion regulation and pain management, potentially reducing the need for opioids and improving pain tolerance by positively influencing the brain's pain modulation networks [27-36].

Additionally, sleep disturbances are common in ICUs due to constant monitoring [52-54]. SY can enhance sleep quality, an important factor in stress reduction and pain recovery, by regulating autonomic functions and regularly emphasizing parasympathetic activity [15,17,21]. By stabilizing heart rate and blood pressure, SY

may reduce stress-induced complications [18,21-25]. Ultimately, SY fosters resilience to stress and improves emotional wellbeing [15,20,21,45], potentially leading to faster recovery and shorter ICU stays. This holistic approach can enhance patient outcomes, satisfaction of health service and reduce healthcare costs, making SY a valuable addition to traditional ICU care.

## Conclusion

SY offers a compelling, evidence-based approach to managing stress and pain. Its ability to reduce cortisol levels, influence pain pathways and promote relaxation makes it a valuable tool, especially for patients experiencing chronic pain. In ICU settings, integrating SY could help reduce psychological distress, opioid dependence, and autonomic dysregulation, ultimately improving patient outcomes. While more large-scale clinical trials are needed to establish standardized protocols for ICU implementation, the existing evidence supports the consideration of SY as a complementary intervention in critical care. With proper integration and patient-centered approaches, pain management and stress reduction strategies could benefit from SY, particularly in high-stress medical environments.

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