

ABSTRACT

The global refugee crisis has displaced millions of individuals, forcing them to live in camps where they experience ongoing stress, trauma, and uncertainty about the future.^{1,2} Limited access to mental health care exacerbates these challenges, making alternative approaches to psychological well-being essential.³ Yoga and mindfulness training groups provide an innovative, cost-effective, and accessible method to support the mental health of refugees, offering a structured way to cultivate resilience, reduce stress, and promote healing.⁴⁻⁶ This outcome study examines a 10-year follow-up of lessons learned and outcomes by social worker/yoga instructors who have implemented yoga groups in refugee camps in Asia, Europe, and Africa.

INTRODUCTION

This outcome study evaluated yoga group leaders and teachers (both virtual and live) who were implemented in refugee camps over the last 10 years. Yoga is being used in some refugee camps, like Kakuma in Kenya, to promote mental well-being and self-acceptance.⁷ Ugandan refugees use yoga to help cope with the challenges of living in a refugee camp.⁸ Yoga can also be used to help refugees and migrants, and can be a tool for helping other vulnerable populations.^{9,10} Yoga teachers around the world have made yoga a survivor-centered healing modality developed that is rooted in both trauma research and yoga, and adapted it to the cultures and languages of those living in the camp.^{5,11,12}



METHODS

A qualitative program evaluation was conducted through in-depth interviews with 22 Yoga Group Leaders. The semi-structured interviews explored key domains including program implementation, cultural adaptations, camp conditions, contextual challenges, use of trauma-informed principles, and observed participant changes. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded. A grounded thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring patterns and emergent themes across participant narratives.¹³ This approach facilitated an in-depth understanding of how the yoga program functioned within displaced populations and the perceived psychosocial impact.¹⁴ The study aimed to evaluate both process and outcome dimensions in culturally and contextually sensitive ways.^{2,8}

RESULTS/DISCUSSION

The most common themes that were reported are as follows:

- Cultural adaptations for the time of day and to not interfere with other activities (such as prayers).⁸
- Some felt more comfortable in same gender only classes.⁵
- Trauma-informed training for yoga teachers and leaders was helpful.^{6,15}
- Routine of 1 x per week was most successful (Daily was difficult to maintain for both leaders and participants).¹²
- More than one Yoga group leader is ideal for sustainability.⁹
- Careful reminders to never push to pain were important to minimize injuries, but in groups with males, this has to be mentioned and reminded frequently.¹¹
- Virtual check-ins or information to yoga group leaders were helpful, but the internet is often not available or spotty.¹⁶
- Materials and charts were beneficial to sustain the groups when the internet was not an option.¹⁷
- Rain is the biggest barrier.⁷

Perceived benefits:

- **Improved Mental Health:** Many studies report reductions in symptoms of PTSD, anxiety, and depression. Yoga is often cited as a tool for emotional self-regulation, helping participants feel calmer and more in control.¹⁸⁻²⁰
- **Enhanced Body Awareness and Safety:** Refugees often experience disconnection from their bodies due to trauma. Trauma-sensitive yoga helps individuals reconnect with their physical selves safely and gently and improves their sleep and self-care.^{11,21}
- **Community Building and Social Connection:** Group yoga sessions foster a sense of belonging and collective healing, especially important in refugee camps or resettlement contexts where isolation is common.^{5,22}



CONCLUSIONS

Yoga groups have demonstrated strong sustainability across diverse refugee camp settings, despite logistical and environmental challenges.^{7,8} Group leaders consistently reported perceived benefits among participants across six key domains: enhanced physical wellbeing, improved sleep quality, greater emotional regulation, reduced anxiety symptoms, strengthened community connections, and a deeper sense of healing from trauma.^{4,11,12} These outcomes reflect yoga's capacity to support both individual and collective resilience, particularly when implemented through a trauma-informed and culturally sensitive framework.^{15,23} The continued presence of these groups, often led by community members or supported virtually, underscores yoga's unique adaptability as a psychosocial intervention. As refugee populations face prolonged displacement and limited access to mental health care, yoga may serve as a vital, low-cost complement to more formal therapeutic systems, fostering dignity, hope, and restoration in the aftermath of upheaval.^{1,3}

REFERENCES

