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The Healing Power of Yoga

Lived experiences of yoga rippling into daily life: thematic analysis of regular practitioners

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Abstract

This thesis aimed to understand the lived experiences of those who practice yoga regularly and how this has impacted their daily lives. Six participants (3 female and 3 male) were asked to observe their personal yoga practice over the course of 4-weeks. They were given a journal and thought-provoking journal prompts to help them reflect on how their practice may or may not be influencing their general health and wellbeing. Following the observation period, qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom with each participant. Phenomenological thematic analysis was undertaken with each transcript before comparing and contrasting these themes across the six data sets. Findings showed deep and meaningful data with eleven themes highlighting the healing power of yoga and how this practice may ripple into one's daily life. Themes included being able to notice thought patterns, present-moment awareness, the importance of yoga, taking yoga off the mat and the physical, mental and emotional benefits of a regular yoga practice. Concluding that the participants experience a healing power to the practice of yoga that they are able to observe, reflect upon and articulate.

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Pre-introduction reflection

Prior to reading this thesis the researcher wishes to inform you that this study is embedded in my own personal practice of yoga. This means that the researcher is a regular student of yoga and more recently a yoga teacher, therefore, holds this practice in high regard and hopes that others will too.

This may have affected the type of literature that I was aiming to find and review as I defaulted into the positive experiences of yoga on one's mental, physical and emotional well-being. Holding the practice of yoga in a positive light may have also affected the interviews that I had with participants and how I interpreted the data. For example, when one of the participants spoke to the yoga practice and journaling reflections bringing up lower emotions, thoughts or feelings that they did not realise were there, I was not prepared for that statement and had not thought about it from that perspective. Being in the researcher seat I automatically wondered if the journaling prompts and questions were too intense alongside their practice, however, the participant was free to share what they pleased and did not have to speak to anything that they did not want to. Although, this participant was not necessarily speaking to any negative sides of practicing yoga, they were instead stating that yoga has enabled them to be able to find comfort within the lows and know that it is okay to feel that way rather than needing to always feel good.

When interpreting the data I must assume that I may have subconsciously picked out information that was related to positive experiences of yoga. This is important for the reader to be aware of when reading through the results section of this thesis, as it is all based on the researchers interpretation of the data and how I am positioned in the field of yoga.

Chapter 1:

Introduction to the Field of Yoga

In today's modern, western world, yoga is commonly viewed as a form of physical exercise or 'stretching' where being able to touch your toes is essential before you are able to attend a class (Satchidananda, 1978) . It is seen as a type of movement that all may benefit from to increase flexibility and strength. There are so many different forms of a physical yoga practice including Hatha, Vinyasa, Bikram, Iyengar, Kundalini and Ashtanga that the choices may feel intimidating and overwhelming. However, the physical practice is a slither of what yoga completely encompasses. Yoga, as we know it today, is different to where yoga originated from thousands of years ago. The underlying concept of what yoga is remains the same, yet, the physical practice (asanas) is much more varied.

The word 'yoga' comes from the Sanskrit word 'yuj' which mean 'to join' or 'to unite' the mind and the body (Basavaraddi, 2015). The practice and history of yoga can be traced back to the Vedic period from 4500-2500 BCE where sages spoke of transcending consciousness and different states of meditation. Passing through the Brahmanical age, Upanishadic age, Bhagavad Gita, Classical yoga, Ayurveda, Tantra and Hatha to arrive in the 1900's in the post-classical era. It was during this time that the 'Grandfather of Yoga', Krishnamacharya created what we know and understand the practice to be today (YogaKoh, 2022).

Krishnamacharya had three main male students, Pattabi Jois who created Ashtanga, B. K. S. Iyengar who created Iyengar Yoga and one of his son's, Desikachar who created viniyoga / yoga therapy. Krishnamacharya also guided and taught the first female student, Indra Devi (YogaKoh, 2022). According to Desikachar (1995), his father Krishnamacharya was known for his unique approach to Yoga being tailored to the individual and their needs. He was a

healer that worked with the students on an individual level, tailoring the yoga practice to each person. Whether it be asana, pranayama (breathwork practices), prayer or rest to help with their ailments. “This implies that that progress on the path of yoga means different things for different people” (Desikachar, 1995, p. xix). I resonated with this quote as yoga will show up in your life when you need it and when you feel called to begin your spiritual journey. It is not a class that you simply book into, practice the asanas and then leave. It is a continuous journey and lifestyle that evolves and grows with you.

The ultimate goal of yoga is to reach Moksha which is translated into liberation, freedom, enlightenment or end of suffering (Basavaraddi, 2015). There are four main paths of yoga which include Bhakti Yoga (devotion to the divine), Jnana Yoga (knowledge), Karma Yoga (acts of selfless service) and Raja Yoga (self-mastery). I have recently completed my 200-hour vinyasa yoga teacher training which was rooted in ashtanga and I have based a lot of this knowledge from what I have learnt on this training. The main path of Yoga that this thesis is touching on is Raja Yoga as it encompasses both the mental and physical (meditation and asana). This is where yoga as we know it today stems from, through the practice of Hatha yoga.

Under the path of Raja Yoga (self-mastery) is the physical and mental aspects of yoga. The mental aspect speaks to meditation, whereas the physical aspect speaks to Hatha Yoga. ‘Ha’ translates to Sun and ‘Tha’ translates to Moon thus creating an opposition. Under this term ‘Hatha’ we have the physical practices of yoga being Iyengar, Vinyasa and Ashtanga (YogaKoh, 2022).

Throughout my teacher training we regularly attended ‘Sutra Circles’ where we would sit in a circle and unpack the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, a vital piece of text that speaks to around 200 sutras or ‘threads’ of the science of Yoga. We do not know who Patanjali was or whether this

person was singular, male or female. These sutras have been passed down and deciphered by different swamis and gurus for thousands of years.

The two sutras that we continuously came back to were:

Sutra 1.1. Atha yoganusasanam - 'the practice of yoga begins now'

Sutra 1.2. Yoga citta vritti nirodhah - 'yoga is the stilling of the mental modifications of the mind'

These sutras mean that moksha or enlightenment cannot be achieved without consistent, regular practice of Yoga. But what is Yoga? It is the calming of the constant chatter and thoughts that we have throughout our day. Learning to detach and arrive in the present moment, observing and witnessing what is happening within the mind space.

The term 'yoga off the mat' will appear throughout this thesis and I feel it is important to shed light on what this term means to me. When I step onto my yoga mat I treat it as if I am stepping onto a sacred alter, a space that is purely for me and houses my energy. I also feel that it is disrespectful to step on someone else's mat as this is where a lot of self-work and personal practice happens. Therefore, when I step onto the mat I am tuning into the sutra of *yoga citti vritti nirodhah*, and attempting to still the 'mind stuff'. I am able to do this through conscious breath linked with movement - also known as asana practice. It is through asana that we can find steadiness and comfort (sthira and sukha) within each posture (Satchidananada, 1978). How can we take these ideas off the mat and into our daily lives to find steadiness and comfort within this fast-paced modern world that we now live in. I have a strong passion for yoga and living yoga off the mat that I wanted to create a piece of research that gave insight into yoga experiences for those who practice yoga and those who don't. A thesis for anyone to read and gain understanding into what yoga is by those who practice it: taking a step out of the physical practice and tuning into how it may ripple into our daily lives and be used to enhance our

experience and physical time on this earth. A piece of research to read by those who may have never practiced yoga but become inquisitive enough to take their first step onto the mat and turn inwards, towards their true self, their Purusha (Satchidananda, 1978). Purusha is the big 'I', the true Self, the 'Seer'. Whereas, Prakriti is the little 'i', the small self and the 'seen'. Purusha is simply put as 'I am'. I am here to witness and observe life without attachment. I am able to embody experiences and be fully present, however, I do not attach to them and place my identity within them. Prakriti, is the 'seen', meaning the identity and attachments that you may have created for yourself. For example, I am Hayley the masters student, I am Hayley the Yoga Teacher, I am Hayley the daughter. The more attachments that we have, the more suffering we may be caused when we lose those attachments or 'parts' of ourselves that have been placed into 'things'. Yoga teaches us to let go of the 'seen' and step into the 'seer', where all knowing and joy resides within us as we fully embody and connect to our physical time on this earth (YogaKoh, 2022).

It is from my own personal practice and passion for living yoga off the mat that the question arose, how does yoga affect our health and wellbeing in general when we take these concepts off the mat or out of the studio? This gave rise to the title 'The Healing Power of Yoga. Lived experiences of yoga rippling into daily life: thematic analysis of regular practitioners'. Through a subjective lens, I aim to understand lived experiences of regular, disciplined yoga practitioners and how this is influencing their health and wellbeing. This is not limited to the physical practice, but also includes the emotional, spiritual and mental changes that may be occurring within the participants through postures, breath, yoga philosophy, meditation and present-moment awareness.

This research aims to study the lived experiences of yoga practitioners and uncover their journey within the realm of yoga. In my opinion, the physical practice of yoga is merely a

stepping stone and tool to becoming more present, aware and live a life full of joy. However, it is important that when approaching this research I am aware of the positive experience that I have had with yoga and that this may not be the case for all. This is important because it demonstrates the researcher becoming aware of their own bias and ideas towards the study. When the researcher is aware of their positionality in relation to the research field, they may be less likely to influence the data and findings. This also sheds light to the readers for the stance that the researcher is taking and how this may impact the project.

Chapter 2:

Current literature in the field of Yoga

Yoga is continuously growing within the research field and has a wide range of literature available. The literature is within the scope of how yoga positively impacts one's health and wellbeing, however, there are pieces of research that discuss the negative impacts of yoga as well. These include; the perceptions that practitioners have about their yoga practice in a positive or negative light (Park et al. 2016), the positive or negative impact that yoga may have on one's body image (Neurmark-Sztainer et al. 2018), teens positive and negative experiences of hatha yoga (Uebelacker et al. 2021), and the positive or negative experiences associated with a yoga intervention for treating hypertension (Wolf et al. 2017). Such articles indicate that yoga can negatively impact different groups of people in a variety of ways, and this should be acknowledged. Overall, the benefits of yoga appear to outweigh the costs and it is on the benefits that most of the research literature is focused. Hence, while acknowledging potential negative effects, the focus of the literature discussed will be on the positive potential of yoga.

The areas of most interest based on the themes that continuously presented themselves when researching past literature in this field are; yoga during the COVID-19 pandemic, yoga within schools, yoga and mental health, yoga and physical health, and general lived experiences of how yoga impacts one's health and wellbeing. Each area of interest will be presented separately to ensure the review is clear and coherent. Most of the current research investigates how yoga effects a specific illness or a specific group of people. The available research also tends to group participates into a specific programme and lineage of yoga that must be completed and assessed in order to answer the research question. Previous literature was found through keywords such as; yoga and wellbeing, lived experiences of yoga, yoga off the mat, yoga and journaling, understanding yoga, and the effects of yoga. This literature review will

assess the current research in the field of yoga with the aim to understand what has been done, where there are gaps and how my research is able to fit into the existing scope.

Yoga and COVID-19

Pandya (2021) stated that the recent COVID-19 pandemic generated feelings of loneliness and social isolation. Therefore, they conducted quantitative research among older women during the pandemic to examine the use of daily online yoga classes and its impact on health, wellbeing, anxiety and fear of living in a COVID-19 world. Participants were recruited through WhatsApp and friends of friends and were asked to participate in daily 30-minute online yoga lessons through zoom with certified yoga teachers and the researcher. Participants undertook a pre and post intervention questionnaire. Results showed that anxiety and fear of living among COVID-19 reduced in older women who participated in daily yoga sessions and wellness measures improved. This is good starting point for the researcher, however, I believe that a limitation would have been that 30-minute classes are very short and may not allow the participants enough relaxation time to truly test an outcome. Secondly, this research was quantitative using results from questionnaires rather than understanding the experience of those participating in the online yoga sessions. The researchers also state that this is a limitation "Qualitative data is also needed to study the nuanced experiences of older adult women in pandemics and their perceptions of yoga-based interventions" (Pandya, 2021, p. 1274).

Yoga in Schools

The impact that yoga has on school students has been researched through lived experiences of yoga programmes being incorporated into school life. Themes of lowered stress, greater sense of calm and better energy levels emerged throughout the research (Berezowski et al. (2017); Laxman, (2021); Taylor et al. (2019)). According to Berezowski et al. (2017) yoga as part of the school curriculum can only be found in Canada. This is called 'Yoga 11' and is a special

aspect of the physical education course. Research was conducted among high school students' in the province of Nova Scotia, Canada through narrative inquiry about their experience with yoga as part of the school curriculum. Four students were selected to participate in 30-40-minute-long interviews with questions relating to their experience of yoga such as answering the research question *'How is Yoga 11 experienced by students?'*. They found that the students experiences of yoga made them feel more confident, happy, kind, less stress and more presence. Alongside physical yoga postures (asanas), the students were also learning about yoga philosophy with the hope that the students form a personal relationship with yoga and take it into their everyday life to strengthen their relationship with the self and others. I was quite astonished at how progressive this Canadian school was in implementing yoga into the school curriculum and thought it would be incredible if this was a part of the normal school curriculum in New Zealand. I felt this way as learning these principles and way of life from a young age, I believe, would help the school children learn emotional regulation, managing stress and coping with the pressures of modern-day living navigating their way into adult-hood. The fact that students were also learning about the philosophy of yoga is already taking yoga beyond the mat and physical postures. The researchers chose narrative inquiry as their methodological approach as "we tell and listen to stories about our living and it is how we create meaning in our lives" (Berezowski et al. 2017, p. 48). This was originally what drew my attention to narrative inquiry and how this approach would be beneficial for my study as stories are how we connect with one another and can gain insight into how one perceives their world. Berezowski (2017, p. 49) also stated that "A yoga practice could also be described as a narrative in nature, as it tells the story of the practitioner".

New Zealand research was conducted by Laxman (2021) reviewing the impact of a local yoga programme and its effects on the wellbeing of New Zealand school children and how this

impacted their learning capabilities. This research was conducted as New Zealand school children are often under a lot of stress and pressure and require tools/skills that enable them to process these difficult emotions. Children spend the majority of their daily life at school, it is essential to create a nurturing environment where health and wellbeing can thrive. “Learning cannot begin until emotional stability is achieved. An overly anxious, depressed or stressed out kid will find it difficult to focus on learning” – this is where a yoga programme will be beneficial as yoga “positively results in lower anxiety, stress and improved emotional, social, physiological and spiritual well-being.” (Laxman, 2021, p. 35). The aims of this study were to showcase how important yoga is in schools and its impact on a positive body-mind relationship within NZ school students. Six primary school children took part in the intervention by attending a yoga class once a week for 5-weeks, at the end of each session were 15-minute long focus groups. After each session the participants wrote about their experience in their journals which were collected at the end of the intervention for data. Three data collection methods were used; semi-structured interviews, participant observation and reflection journals with data analysis through the use of explorative-reflective thematic analysis. One of the main themes that emerged was that yoga helped the school children to feel calm within, and deeply relaxed. In conclusion to this study, Laxman (2021) found that yoga had many positive impacts on school children within their health and wellbeing, especially as New Zealand has some of the highest rates of youth depression and suicide between 15 and 24 years old. Teaching school children yoga will hopefully impact how they interact with the world when they leave school in a positive and fulfilling way. The incorporation of journaling alongside this intervention was very thought-provoking for my own research as the school children were encouraged to go home and write about their thoughts and feelings towards the yoga practice. The researcher conducted the yoga sessions as they are a trained yoga teacher, which could either present as a limitation or strength to the research. It may be a limitation as the researcher is further

implicated in the study thus creating a bias towards the yoga classes that they were teaching. Or, this aspect could be viewed as a strength as the yoga teacher was able to see the direct influence of their class on the school children and draw findings from an observational standpoint.

The studies conducted by Laxman (2021) and Berezowski et al. (2017) focussed on developing yoga programmes within the schools and lived experiences of this impact on the school students. Taylor et al. (2019) looked at the lived experiences of school counsellors who already integrated yoga into their school programmes. 60-75 minute long interviews were conducted with 10 school counsellors. As these interviews were conducted with the school counsellors, they were only able to describe their perceptions of how yoga impacted the school students. A key theme that emerged relating to this thesis was that school counsellors perceived students taking yoga 'off the mat' through practicing their belly breathing outside of the school counselling period.

Laxman (2021), Berezowski (2017) and Taylor et al. (2019), demonstrated qualitative methods in understanding how yoga is able to impact school students and their learning capabilities alongside emotional regulation. However, what about how the school students use of yoga outside of the classroom? Will they continue to further their education in yoga and take these practices off the mat?

Yoga and Mental Health

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a result from exposure to a traumatic event and those who experience PTSD are suffering from a disconnect between the body and the mind. Mindfulness practices such as yoga and meditation are tools that can help people re-integrate their mind and body. Jindani & Khalsa (2015) wanted to understand the effects of yoga therapy for PTSD as 'yoga exercise and meditation engage the entire organism in the process of

psychological healing' (Jindani & Khalsa, 2015, p. 398). They did this through qualitative research using a descriptive design with a phenomenological methodology. 50 participants completed an 8-week Kundalini yoga treatment consisting of weekly 90-minute sessions and then participated in semi-structured interviews thereafter. The interviews were compared for patterns and similar responses with 40 of the participants. Responses showed heightened energy/renewal, self-esteem, centredness, greater spiritual strength, inner peace and connection with spirit/self/wonder. The overall conclusion was that Kundalini yoga can help support those who have PTSD, connect back to their mind and body (Jindani & Khalsa, 2020). Their participants consisted of 31 females and 9 males, which lead to the aim of this thesis having a balance of genders as the sample group was dominated by females in this study.

Yoga and psychosis was researched by Sistig et al. (2014) to establish whether this mindfulness practice has the ability to deal with more complex mental health issues. They conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with 10 psychiatrist patients in New Zealand after completion of x2 weekly yoga classes across 7 weeks. The participants were also encouraged to complete weekly journal entries as part of the intervention and included questions such as *'How did this help me in my day?'* and *'what motivates me to come to yoga?'*. Deductive analysis was used to decipher meaningful themes and to group them into bigger patterns. The themes that emerged from the journaling intervention were; relaxation, calm, reduced stress, energy and focus and feeling more motivated to be present and engaged in their lives. Themes of relaxation, focus and physical strength emerged from the interviews. Overall, they found the practice of hatha yoga positively enhanced the mental health of those suffering with psychosis and some relief from psychotic symptoms was found in some participants as yoga would have allowed their mind to become more calm. The researchers found that incorporating weekly journaling alongside practicing yoga may have enhanced these positive associations as journaling gave the participants a chance to reflect and deepen their awareness. Limitations were that sometimes

class attendance was not 100% due to reasons such as being mentally unwell, ill, an appointment or sleeping in.

The effects that yoga and meditation have on stress relief were researched by Hepburn & McMahon (2017) with five full-time teachers during a 6-week pranayama (yogic breathing) programme. Crossing between yoga in schools and yoga for mental health, this study used a mixed-methods approach through three data collection methods; The Perceived Stress Scale, 1:1 interviews and diary entries each week. After each weekly session the participants were emailed their reflection questions to answer. The results showed that perceived stress levels had dropped and they gained health benefits. In my opinion, being emailed reflection questions would not leave a lot of room for free-writing and thoughts to emerge. I would have had the participants write about whatever it was that arose for them that week, rather than them having to stick to certain questions. From reading about the different journaling interventions I realised that I wanted to have participants journal about their yoga experience, however, ensure that they knew they could also write about whatever else popped up in their life as well.

Yoga and Physical Health

Lim & Cheong (2015) researched the effects that yoga has on the human body such as oxidative stress, immune function and antioxidant levels. They took 25 young and healthy university students in Korea and sampled their blood pre and post data collection. The participants were split into two groups being a control group (no yoga intervention) and the yoga intervention group. Across 12-weeks the yoga group participated in one 90-minute weekly yoga session consisting of asana, meditation and pranayama. Participants were also asked to complete four DVD yoga sessions at home each week. Results from blood samples showed that oxidative levels reduced whilst antioxidant levels increased, and immune function also improved. This is an interesting approach to understanding how yoga impacts the body on a physical and

functional level, yet did the participants feel that their stress levels had also improved? It may have improved on a cellular level but that does not mean that the participants also felt relief.

Alongside experiences of yoga, Alexander et al. (2013) looked into the perceived benefits of practicing yoga among older adults at risk of cardiovascular disease (CVD). They took 42 participants who were predominantly overweight adults, into an Iyengar yoga intervention consisting of two 90-minute yoga classes and five at home sessions each week for 8 weeks. Weekly logs were to be completed followed by an exit questionnaire upon completion of the programme. The log required participants to record the amount of time they spent doing yoga at home as well as how they felt it was going on their own and in class. Four themes emerged from analysing the contents of interviews and weekly logs which were; improved physical function and capacity, reduced stress and anxiety, increased sleep quality and dietary choices improved. As these factors all influence CVD, the results suggest that yoga may benefit and help those to manage a chronic disease (Alexander et al. 2013). Great research showcasing how yoga may impact one's cardiovascular health, yet, the researcher was also a trained Iyengar yoga teacher who studied alongside B. K. S. Iyengar and therefore, may have presented bias towards this specific style of yoga being the be-all-end-all when benefiting those with CVD. What about all styles of yoga and how it impacts the general population?

General Lived Experiences of Practicing Yoga

A narrative inquiry was used when researching social workers' understanding of yoga and applying it in a professional practice (Mensinga, 2020). A narrative approach was adopted as social workers listen to their clients stories which is how they make sense of their situation. Nine social workers were interviewed in focus groups and/or individual interviews that lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. However, only three participants stories were chosen for analysis as it directly related to their experiences of yoga and social work. An umbrella question was

asked to which the participants were able to share their own meaning and stories – *What, if any, do embodied practices like yoga have on social workers', human service workers', and clients' experiences?* Themes that emerged throughout the interviews were; individual yoga practices, impact of a personal practice in social work practice, the place of the body in the professional conversation, integrating yoga practices into social work and yoga as a self-care practice. All three participants found that they had a daily personal yoga practice that either occurred before a client session or in the morning to positively begin their day. The researcher's main concern was how to integrate yoga into the social work practice due to this line of work being embedded in psychology. This was a concern as yoga was more beneficial to the social worker as it allowed them to become more present and aware when faced with client stories (Mensinga, 2020). A narrative inquiry was used, however, the researcher selected which stories to use through themes that emerged in the data and this was how they grouped the stories in the results section as well. This approach originally inspired me to select stories from my participants data and place them into themes based on what stories were shared as well. A gap in this study was that it was a very small sample group that consisted of all older aged women, therefore, once again the study of men within the realm of yoga is quite limited.

Wertman et al. (2016) explored the lived experiences of middle-aged and older-aged adults within their yoga practice, looking into the social contexts that may have lead them to practicing yoga or perceived barriers to beginning yoga. They chose to look into an older population "as the baby boomers continue to transition into their upper ages, the need for a more diverse set of activity options will be needed" (Wertman et al., 2016, p. 191). I thought that this reason for choosing an older-aged population for their sample group was applaudable as the researchers are aware that different types of movement and perhaps even the flexibility and strength that yoga provides would be beneficial for "the baby boomers". Framing their research was the

health-belief model which is commonly used when explaining and predicting individuals and their healthy behaviours. The health-belief model suggests that people will make choices about their health based upon access, barriers, how seriously they need to take action and how beneficial the action will be towards the outcome (Wertman et al. 2016). A mixed methodology of qualitative interviews (n = 20) and a quantitative survey (n = 452) was employed. Their study consisted of various research questions including; *"What are the pathways by which middle-aged and older adults begin yoga?", "Are there differences in motivations between the age groups and by gender?", "What are the perceived barriers, unique to each group to practicing yoga?", "And, are there age and gender differences in the perceived health benefits of yoga?".* From the qualitative interviews, the researchers found that those who were older were more likely to begin a yoga practice due to the connections it has with helping chronic illness. The middle-aged participants started yoga as they were exposed to how beneficial it is for ones health and wellbeing via the media. Influences to begin yoga were from books, advertisements, TV, friends, family and social contagion. This study tackled a large issue being perceived barriers to those even beginning their yoga journey. This is something that I could have continued in my research as I aimed to encourage people to begin a yoga practice, however, there may be barriers out of their control to taking a step onto the mat. This is a separate issue all on its own and was not able to be addressed in my study.

Yoga, breathing practices and meditation techniques were observed among nine participants who had experienced a stroke (Garrett et al. 2011). The researchers adopted an interpretive phenomenological approach looking into the lived experiences of these participants and how yoga, meditation and breathing could help them become more connected. Participants embarked on a 10-week programme encompassing these three connected modalities to understand how they perceived this practice to affect their life. This is one of the longer interventions among the studies which would have allowed for the participants to embody a

longer yoga practice and how it was impacting their recovery post-stroke. They found support and evidence from the participants through qualitative semi-structured interviews that yoga can in fact, help someone in their rehabilitation process (Garrett et al. 2011). Alongside previous literature, this study had a set yoga programme that was tailored towards beginners, showcasing a gap in the research being beginner-friendly interventions and not a large amount of research looking at regular yoga practitioners.

Previous literature in the research field of yoga focusses on particular illnesses and ailments amongst specific groups of people. This includes, but is not limited to, people suffering from psychosis (sistig et al. 2014), CVD (Alexander et al.2013), anxiety within a COVID-19 world (Pandya, 2021), social workers (Mensinga, 2020) and PTSD (Jindani et al 2015). Recent literature also tends to incorporate specific styles of yoga and interventions with participants who are not regular practitioners of yoga e.g. beginners. Examples of this are within Garrett et al. (2011)'s study using a 10-week programme tailored towards beginners.

This shed light on the current gaps within the research field. These gaps are research that works with people who are already regular practitioners of yoga and have been for longer than 6-months. This is important as the intervention process may not need to be as long as the participants have already had a disciplined and scheduled practice. Another gap in the research field is that yoga tends to be dominated by women as Pandya (2021, p.g. 1256) state that "most researchers suggest that more women practice yoga as compared to men". I wanted to ensure that I was able to find men who do in fact practice yoga regularly as within the current research there were always more women participants than male. I wanted to do this by finding a balance of genders who were already regular yoga practitioners so that they were able to speak about how yoga has impacted their life thus far, rather than across a short intervention period which is what most of the current literature has done. Another limitation in the current research field

was that all of the interventions were in a specific style of yoga that the participants had to partake in. This would have been due to the fact that they were beginners and therefore, it would have been more time efficient and practical to give the participants a set style to follow. In my research, I aimed to make sure that my participants were practicing in a style of yoga that met their needs and worked for them. Rather, than introducing a specific style of yoga (i.e. Kundalini Yoga) that they had to practice in order to participate. This meant that participants would be able to partake if they were regular practitioners of any specific asana, pranayama or meditation practice as these all fall under the yogic lifestyle. Within the current research field there is however, a lot of research using phenomenological analysis and discussing lived experiences which aligns with the type of research that I aim to conduct.

Chapter 3:

Methodology

Theoretical framework

A qualitative phenomenological approach was used for this thesis. A qualitative approach was essential as understanding experiences would not have been as accurate through quantitative approaches using numbers, charts, diagrams and questionnaires. This type of research needed to have depth and meaning which can be gathered through a phenomenological approach. The reason for this is because yoga is not a surface level topic, it is a spiritual journey that can involve a deep connection to self and spiritual awakening. This connection and awakening may feel different to each person. Therefore, individual semi-structured interviews rather than focus groups were needed.

Phenomenology attempts to gain insight into the significance and meaning of one's lived experience in a certain field. In order to do this the researcher must adopt an open mind and be aware of their own bias and reflexivity (Willig, 2012). I knew from the beginning of this research that I wanted to place myself in the shoes of each participant in order to attempt to understand what yoga means to them in their life. This also meant that I needed a smaller sample group so that I could gather rich and meaningful data without running out of time. Yoga is not a field in health and wellness that can have assumed benefits. It is perceived benefits based on someone else's reality of the practice. Eatough & Smith (2017) and Willig (2012) state that using an interpretive phenomenological approach to data means that the researcher is more interested in the experience that one has with an event rather than the actual event itself. This type of research also seeks to understand the nature of how things are lived by one's own experience of what that phenomenon was like to undergo (Willig, 2012). According to Eatough

& Smith (2017), an interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA) looks at how one is experiencing a whole situation in a meaningful way in the context of their own life.

Phenomenology also understands that knowledge is constructed from the participant and what they deem to be real in their own life (Lawthom & Tindall, 2012). It is then through this reality that the researcher must discern themes and make sense of the data, which is where the researcher needs to be aware of any reflexivity and application of their own 'voice' or lens on the data. According to Lawthom & Tindall (2012), when using a phenomenological approach, the researcher must interpret what they are seeing and know to be true within the data, rather than themes emerging from the data. Lawthom & Tindall (2012 pg. 9) also mention that phenomenology is different to other epistemology's as the researcher must set aside their own 'reality' which is also known as bracketing. This means that the researcher is aware of the biases, prior knowledge, attitudes and values that they currently hold and sets them aside so that the participants lived reality is able to materialise. Chapter 4 is dedicated to understanding my own reflexivity when approaching this research.

Method

Semi-structured interviews with the opportunity for the participants to go on a tangent or share their journal entries was used, therefore, this thesis conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews. Using narrative inquiry did strike me when reading about yoga in schools (Berezowski et al. 2017). This is based on the fact that we interact with each other and make sense of our experience through story-telling which I found thought provoking and aligned with the experiences I wanted to draw from my participants. (Berezowski et al. 2017. pg. 48). I originally went into the interviews thinking that I would use a narrative approach. Although, it seemed more fitting to adopt a thematic analysis approach once the interviews were complete therefore, a phenomenological thematic analysis (PTA) was used. This was due to the fact that

it was an analysis style that I was already familiar with and naturally adopted. It was also because there was not a large amount of story-telling during the interview process.

Idiography in Psychology is concerned with the study of the whole person, the concrete and wholeness of the individual. It is useful in a phenomenological approach and one must have a smaller sample size in order to fully grasp the individuals experience. Idiography and phenomenology would say that a sample size of one would suffice, however, for the purpose of this research and using an interpretive phenomenological approach there needed to be a slightly larger sample size to maintain rich data from a wider group of yoga participants as per my research aims. However, it is imperative to study the individual transcripts first before comparing and contrasting across the participants as this will address idiography (Eatough & Smith, 2017).

Participants

Six participants were chosen for this study, 3 female and 3 male. I wanted a balance of genders as comparatively, women tend to practice yoga more than men (Pandya, 2021). Therefore, men are less likely to be involved in the research field of yoga and I wanted to ensure they were included in this research. Surprisingly, I had found three male participants more rapidly than the female participants as the men asked their friends in the yoga community if they would like to participate. Participants were found through connections in the yoga community and mutual friends. In three cases, one participant introduced me to one of their friends whom they thought would fit the criteria, this is also known as the snowball effect (Tenzek, 2017). Each participant was emailed an information sheet with time to read it over and answer any questions that they may have. I also ensured that each participant met the eligibility criteria being:

- Either have a regular, personal yoga practice outside of attending studio classes and/or take your studio practice with you off the mat throughout your day.
- Participate in multiple aspects of yoga such as; asana, pranayama, meditation, kirtan etc.

- Have regularly practiced yoga for at least 6 months
- Have an understanding of 'yoga off the mat' and yoga philosophy
- A willingness to journal daily (or close to) for a 4-week period and speak to any stories that occur during an individual interview with the researcher
- Be reflective and committed to the research
- Have the time and energy to see the research through
- Be at least 20 years of age
- Are fluent in English

Once the participants agreed to the invitation they then received consent forms that included information about confidentiality and ethics. They had ample opportunity to ask any questions and if they were satisfied, they signed their consent forms which were stored on my password-protected laptop. Participants were able to select their own pseudonyms to use in the transcripts and write-up to ensure that their data was not able to be traced back to them.

Data Collection Phase

Originally, I aimed to meet with the participants in person upon finishing their observation period as all of the participants began their journaling process during the same week. Unfortunately, I caught COVID-19 and was unable to meet with them in person as I had planned. This meant that the interviews were delayed and I ended up running them on zoom across a week-long period. This seemed like a limitation at first as I thought the journaling period and reflections would not have been as clear and readily accessible in their minds as I wanted to speak with each participant as close to their observation period as possible for this reason. I also thought that narrative inquiries would be more suited to in-person discussions as it was more personable whilst sharing experiences and stories. Thankfully, each participant was happy to push their interviews back and conduct them on zoom. This also created more flexibility for interview times and was ultimately more time efficient.

The interviews ranged from 45-minutes to 1-hour in length and were all conducted in my home office. At the start of the interview we spoke casually to settle into the space and I went over the main ethical points from the consent form to give the participants another chance to ask any questions that they may have had. I then pressed record for both an audio and video recording and began asking the questions that I wanted to cover.

<u>These questions included but were not limited to:</u>

1. Describe the past month of your yoga journey and journaling experience.
    1. How have you found it?
    2. What have you enjoyed?
    3. What have you found challenging?
    4. What difficulties, if any, arose?
2. What thoughts, feelings or physical sensations arose during the past month?
3. Prior to this past month of journaling, how have you found your yoga practice?
4. How did your spiritual/yoga journey begin?
5. If comfortable doing so, please speak to any journal entries that you find relevant to how yoga has affected your health and wellbeing.
6. What does practicing yoga off the mat mean to you?
7. How has a physical practice (asana, breathwork, meditation, journaling), affected your day-to-day life?

a. Food choices

b. Energy levels

c. Sleep

d. Present moment living

e. Greater awareness

f. Peace, calm, clarity of mind

8. Share any stories or experiences you have had with yoga that created a turning point or shift in perspective.
9. How have you found the experience of journaling alongside practicing yoga, meditation, daily routines in general?
10. How would you describe the practice of yoga (beyond the asanas) to someone who has never practiced before?
11. End on a positive note: Over the past month, when was a time you felt most connected to yourself and at peace due to practicing yoga? What did you do?

I had also prepared a document during the interviews that I could follow and ensure that I did not miss anything. This included going through the main points in the consent form, ethical points, asking for their pseudonym, explaining how the data would be stored, reminding them that they can share anything from their diary entries if they wished and that they were free to keep these journals afterwards.

Good interviews are what will make for rich data and according to Hermanowicz (2002) there are 25 different strategies for conducting great qualitative interviews. The strategies that I acquired were leaving space for silence which Hermanowicz (2002, p. 485) refers to as "sometimes remain quiet when your date is quiet". This strategy will ensure the participants are able to reflect and add onto what they have shared without being interrupted. Showing respect for the content that they are sharing. Sectioning the conversation into different segments, this means that the questions flow in a clear and systematic way and generally range from easier to answer through to more difficult to answer as the participants relax more into the conversation. The strategy that most resonated with this research in the field of yoga was "embody detached concern" (Hermanowicz, 2002, p. 493). This strategy discusses remaining unbiased and reducing the amount of authority and power that you may have over the

participant and outcome of the data. This relates back to the research field as a core fundamental part of yoga is to practice non-attachment (Satchidananda, 1978). Therefore, this concept can be taken into a strategy of interviewing by becoming detached to what you expect or hope the outcome of the data to be.

Overall, the interview process and data collection was smooth and enjoyable. It was easy and relaxed and I enjoyed listening to the astute pieces of information and stories that were shared as not one interview was the same. I found that each participant had insightful words to share about yoga and their journey with yoga. It was insightful listening to the participants stories, especially for what yoga off the mat meant to them and the different takes on this sacred, spiritual practice.

Data Analysis

This thesis used thematic analysis through a phenomenological lens which is known as phenomenological thematic analysis (PTA). This type of data analysis requires six phases in order to interpret rich and purposeful themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Braun & Clarke (2006) there is inductive thematic analysis and theoretical thematic analysis. For this research I conducted inductive thematic analysis which means that when I was coding the data, I was not trying to fit into a framework that already existed. I did have a theoretical interest in the topic, however, I looked at the data-sets to their entirety and was open to the research question changing or updating to what themes were presented within the data, which aligns with inductive thematic analysis.

The first step with thematic analysis is to become extremely familiar with the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts (Willig, 2012; Braun & Clark, 2006). I conducted this first step alongside re-watching each video recording to correct any errors in the transcripts and add in notations such as emphasis on words, upspeak and laughter. I then listened to the interviews a

second and third time to ensure there were no further errors before printing out physical copies of each transcript. I became even more familiar with the data and the shape of the interview by re-reading each transcript individually to at first, keep the data separate and maintain an open mind. This is also known as reflexive thematic analysis which needs to be maintained throughout the entire analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I approached the analysis phase as six individual data sets rather than one data set to begin with so that no descriptive codes were overlooked too soon in the analysis stage.

In the second phase I used the left-hand side margin to note down the first descriptive codes (Appendix 1). This step is necessary to gauge the general ideas and patterns throughout each section of the transcript. It is important to become familiar with all codes that could become potential themes as you won't always be sure what you will need to use further down the analysis journey (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I wanted to take my time with each transcript so I was not rushing the process as here lied the answers to my research question and how I would shape this thesis. I found it important to re-watch the video recordings as I could hear the tone of voice and emotions whilst re-reading each transcript. I started to do the first stage of coding for each transcript and then would move onto the second stage but I realised that I was already starting to compare and contrast each transcript after stage one of coding. This made me understand that I needed to complete coding for each transcript first and then move onto the next transcript. This would allow me to focus on one transcript at a time before drawing conclusions to make certain that no information would be missed.

The third phase according to Braun & Clarke (2006) is when you begin to search for the themes. However, I used this third phase to begin to narrow down my descriptive codes on the right-hand side margin by reading through each transcript individually and segmenting each paragraph into sections and topic points (Appendix 2). This is also known as second stage

coding and involves summarising each section and describing what has been discussed using less words to be more clear and concise (School of Psychology, Massey University, 2021). Second stage coding aims to create a more easeful process when searching through the margins to find themes based on each paragraph of the data. This sparked thoughts that if a different researcher were to look at the data they may segment and code each section differently based on their own perceptions of the world or stance on yoga. This is the reflexive analysis that Braun & Clarke (2006) discuss in their form of thematic analysis. Being a regular yoga practitioner myself, I wanted to make sure that I wasn't bringing my own experience and stories into the coding stage and this was something that I was consciously aware of throughout, which made the analysis stage slightly more challenging. I decided to keep a record of my reflexivity whilst coding, noting down the thoughts that came up for me during the process. I found that I was having to remind myself to adopt a beginners mindset of yoga so that I wasn't glossing over themes that may have been important to those who do not practice yoga. I also realised that I was coding and theming the data before I completed my Yoga Teacher Training and wondered if the outcome would have been different had I have completed the analysis stage after the training.

The next phase was to circle each code from the right-hand side margin (Appendix 2) that I found important to the research question and place them onto post-it notes (Appendix 3). This was so I had a visual representation and a way to map out the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) where each post-it note colour related to a different participant. Once all codes had been written on the post-it notes I then started to pair similar descriptions together, creating piles of what were coherent with one another and what one's weren't. I did not remove any codes during this phase as I wanted to keep as much of the data-set as possible so not to miss any important themes. One big factor of this PTA phase is to continuously compare and contrast each code to ensure there is room for flexibility and interpreting the data in new ways. This means that you

are constantly re-working your themes to see if they fit together, can be placed under another theme or are not relevant to the study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process was time consuming as there were a lot of different themes that could have been chosen, however, the first stage of theming was completed (Appendix 4). Finally, it was time to finalise the descriptive codes into their respective piles and name the themes (Appendix 5) by finding the "essence of what each theme is about" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 92).

Phase six involves the write-up of the themes into a results section in the report. The aim of this phase is to provide a detailed and coherent story of how the data supports the research question. It is important to choose extracts from the data that carry purpose and significance in relation to the research question and are able to tell a story to the reader (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Ethics and Funding

A low-risk ethics application was submitted and notified to Massey University Human Ethics application system and was valid for three-years. A funding application was also submitted and approved by Massey University for the total amount of $740. This included journals for each participant to write their reflections in which they were free to keep after the interviews. I also used this funding to gift wellness vouchers to each participant.

Ethical considerations during this thesis were outlined in the participant information sheet and consent form (Appendix 6 and Appendix 7).

Chapter 4:

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is when the researcher is aware of any preconceived ideas or bias towards the research field so that the data is reflecting the participants perceptions rather than through the researchers' lens (Shaw, 2010). There are many types of reflexivity and ways that the researcher is able to be aware of their perceptions towards different facets of the research (Shaw, 2010). However, I feel that as long as the researcher has a level of awareness of what they bring towards the study, this is suffice. Chamberlain (2015) states that the researcher should be transparent by stating their stance and position within the research field. This creates trustworthy and reliable studies. Throughout this thesis, in particular the data collection and analysis phase I made it a priority to make note of any pre-conceived ideas or bias towards yoga. I asked myself, what assumptions do I hold about the research?

I have grown up in a household where holistic health and well-being was openly talked about and put into practice. My Mum has completed her 500-hr teacher training in yoga and I have also completed my 200-hr teacher training in vinyasa yoga. Therefore, I already have my own experiences and stories associated with this practice. I have my own ideas about how yoga ripples into my daily life and hold it in a high regard hoping that others will want to begin their own spiritual journey too. This means that I come into the research bias towards yoga being beneficial for all and having positive associations with one's health and wellbeing, which is reinforced by the current research literature on yoga. I then assume that all yoga practitioners share the same view as myself otherwise they would not continue to be regular practitioners of yoga. This shaped the questions that I asked as I thought 'what would I want to be asked if I were the one being interviewed'? 'What questions will give the best answer as to how yoga ripples into my daily life?'. My supervisor alerted me to the fact that I was using language in

my research proposal that was in favour of yoga and assuming that each participant would have had the same beneficial experiences with yoga that I have had. This was important to highlight when stepping into the interview process as I needed to take the seat of the researcher, rather than Hayley, the yoga student and teacher.

Relating this back to the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali (Satchidananda, 1978) I asked myself how was I able to put the concept of non-attachment and Purusha (I am, the big I, the seer) into practice throughout the different research stages? Using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) meant that I was not attached to the research question and was open to the data informing a new take on the project. I also aimed to enter each interview with an open-mind and allowing the conversations to take shape however they saw fit. This meant that the interviews had specific questions that I wanted the participants to speak to, however, there was a lot of room for the participants to share their own stories, views, opinions and ideas. The concept of Purusha or 'I am' can be related back to this study as I aimed to let the interviews and analysis section take place without a certain expectation or desired outcome. This was challenging to accomplish as when entering any research project ideally one aims to answer their original question. However, I found that having a regular yoga practice myself and learning to trust in the process was beneficial for this thesis.

Transcription notations

_____ = an underlined word was more strongly expressed.

[voice up] = the intonation in their voice went up at the end of the sentence.

[laughs] = laughter during the talk

(.) = short pause

(...) = long pause

(5) = pause for 'x' amount of seconds

: = sounds dragged out

Chapter 5:

Results

There were eleven themes that were found within the data. This may seem like a lot of themes, however, this is the depth and meaning of research that I aimed to find. Yoga is a complete lifestyle, especially when you take it off the mat. Therefore, there were a lot of key ideas that kept showing up across all six transcripts that individually speak to the vastness of how yoga is able to show up in your life off the mat, how it is able to teach you how to honour your body, drop into the present moment and ripple forward into your day.

Themes:

4.1: Journaling alongside yoga as an intervention

4.2: Physical benefits of practicing yoga

4.3: Mental and emotional benefits of practicing yoga - 'feel better'

4.4: Yoga and relationships

4.5: Honour your needs and connect to self

4.6: Present moment living and awareness of self

4.7: Space to let go and practice non-attachment

4.8: Ability to sit with and notice thoughts

4.9: Gratitude and importance of practicing yoga

4.10: Spirituality - more than just asana

4.11: Yoga 'off the mat'.

I began by looking into the theme of *journaling alongside yoga as an intervention* as this was the focus point for this research. Using the tool of journaling and self-reflection as a pin-point

for a narrative inquiry and to jog the participants memory of how yoga truly affects their daily lives.

4.1 Journaling alongside yoga as an intervention

In this first theme, all six participants found that the journaling process for 4-weeks alongside practicing yoga was a great intervention as Amanda said *"it was quite a beautiful experience just to have those reflections everyday".* The purpose of using journaling as an intervention was so the participants had questions and prompts to draw them into deeper awareness within their yoga practice. Rather than continuing their day without an understanding of their experience and the impact that it may or may not have going forward. An example of this concept within the data was that a participant found they were able to notice shifts due to the fact that they had a journaling routine as Sirius stated *"I noticed that, which I didn't really notice as much without doing the journaling.* This *'powerful'*, *'super interesting'* and *'fascinating'* experience (Amanda, Iris & Gary) of journaling alongside a yoga practice was found across all six participants and can be exemplified in the detailed account provided by Amanda.

- I think for me it was really powerful like I practice most days anyway, um and journal most days regardless but um (.) having that pinpoint of attention on how actually is my practice affecting each and every day and having those moments of reflection think just drew [laughs] me back to the importance of it and how if I vary from consistency and practice, how much it can derail thoughts, feelings, um reactions/responses to the world around me as I go through day to day life, like <u>how</u> much of an anchor my practice is for me [voice travels up]. Yeah, it's was quite a beautiful experience just to have those reflections every day.

This extract shows that even though Amanda already had a consistent journaling practice, pairing this alongside their regular yoga practice was a way to cement how poignant yoga truly is for them in their daily routine. This can also be seen when Gary talks about their regular

journaling practice, *"having a little bit more um awareness, like jotting things down I have a regular journaling practice but having more of a, an acute awareness of being like focusing on how my yoga is affecting my daily life was a very fascinating exercise in itself."* This also shows how focussing on a particular subject whilst journaling (yoga in this instance), Gary was able to "*hone in my focus on one particular thing".*

William enjoyed the process of journaling and having prompts to unlock another layer of their self-awareness practice has encouraged them to continue the journaling intervention when they explained *"Yeah, so yeah, it's been um it's been good and I think it's something that I will probably to be honest, continue with, not as a daily thing, because, because life gets busy, but maybe just every couple of weeks or so, to just kind of like, I do a bit of journaling on the side anyway. So to try and incorporate it more into that because I have found it like a really useful tool".*

Iris found that reflecting on their practice enabled them to *"understand and catch myself when thoughts go through my mind. And it makes you feel way more in control and in power when you can do that."* as well as Sirius stating that "*Journaling about it made me inspired to practice more …. I was more excited to like do the practice … because I'm like (.) curious, I'm curious as to what's going to happen like what the result is going to be…"*. These two quotes from Iris and Sirius are important to note as the journaling prompts became more of an intervention than I had intended them to be and this is shown positively throughout all six participants.

However, Amanda and Gary also found that journaling about their yoga practice may have made them more aware of any '*detachments'* or *'low spaces'* which could have been *'confronting'* to them as they may not have been used to becoming so aware of their practice.

I did not think of this outcome and, therefore, I found it quite interesting when this came up during the interviews. This is shown in the two accounts provided by Amanda and Gary.

Amanda

- Sometimes it was just feeling like okay, I've got to face up to how I'm feeling inside or where my thoughts are going like, I can't not show up for this today, like some days when I might be feeling a little bit um, detached or could feel myself intentionally detaching from what I was feeling and then having to sit and having to reflect on 'Okay, today I actually have to sit down and write; What am I feeling? What came up in my practice?' Um, was sometimes confronting. Um, also brought to my attention, how much I might be kind of skirting around [smiles] instead of just showing up and being present with it every day, um so yeah, that was one difficulty was like, 'Okay, I'm actually going to have to dig deep into stuff that I might not want to dig deep into [laughs]'. Um but it's always, you never regret it you know, like, there's always some sort of seed or nugget or something that you pull from um (.) being present with yourself, yeah.

Gary

- funnily enough, like some days ah I would be like, "I'm fine", you know, like, I do a class or whatever happened, and I'd be like, my my conscious mind would be "yeah, everything's sweet as I'm feeling great" And then I would do a practice or maybe two classes in a day, and then it would be after the classes, after having some time with myself ah I would actually feel 'worse'
- and I was feeling a little bit um (.) ah not upset but you know, like more conscious of my feelings and my feelings were perhaps flatter or in a more low space than I was consciously aware of until after a practice if that makes sense.

These extracts show that whilst Gary and Amanda enjoyed reflecting on their practice to have a focal point for the journal entries, they also felt that at times sitting with those emotions and as Amanda says *"being present with yourself"* can be challenging. However, this is part of the practice of yoga. Becoming aware of how you are feeling and being okay with those feelings, allowing them to pass.

4.2 Physical benefits of practicing yoga

This next theme discusses the physical benefits that participants observed from a regular yoga practice. All six of the participants noticed positive changes within their physical body with some of these benefits being stated by William as '*a sense of ease and like feeling a little bit lighter and more relaxed',* Iris *"I feel really energized physically and open and strong…. I just love how the movement makes me feel",* Amanda *"I get more energy in the mornings if I've done a practice um and my energy levels are more consistent throughout the day."* and Sirius *"helps me be in a more sustainable energy state".* Iris spoke to many of the physical benefits that yoga brings throughout the interview which can be used to summarise how the practice of yoga is able to positively impact ones physical wellbeing.

Iris

- In the yoga practice in the asana practice, um those abdominal pains went away, unfortunately, they came back up after the yoga practice, but I, I mostly live with without pain in my body um and that does huge wonders for my mental state because I can go throughout the day and and really feel open and feel um you know, strong posture, and I can breathe easily. … But you know, living without a pain is such a huuuge way to keep yourself present [voice up] um and so just feeling super open and strong as well…. So just physically doing the asana practice, it allowed me to feel those feelings within the body um and it also meant that I'm able to recover easily more easily between classes that I teach.
- Like I just, just notice that I just feel so much more open and lifted and light and malleable and um (..) free from pain as I said. Like I feel like I can move and um move with freedom, which is really beautiful and I think so many people are kind of stuck within their bodies and are restricted by you know, by pain or tightness and most of the time I, I don't feel that um (.) because of consistent asana practice.

Living in a body that is without pain was a regular theme for Iris and they found that having a regular asana practice (physical postures) was a way to remove pain from the body and enable more space or freedom to take place. As Iris also mentions *"Physical movement is designed to (.) well, how they describe it in in some of the old um (.) scriptures and stuff is designed to*

reduce physical pain, which allows you to sit in meditation for longer." This is why we practice asana, to find sthira and sukha (steadiness and comfort) within the physical postures so that we are able to take those feelings of focus and ease into our lives and bring them to any challenges that we may be presented with (Satchidananada, 1978).

In this modern day society that we are living in where we have become quite sedentary, yoga can be a way to relieve the stagnation in the body as Penelope mentions "*I felt um a lot better like much less kind of yeah sluggish and fatigued and less tight um after sitting at a desk all day um and yeah.".* This also shows that the physical side of yoga is beneficial to those who may be seated during their day as the time and space that you have on your mat can enable the body to move in new ways. This can also be seen when Gary speaks to "*The ickyness that I might feel in my body or the stagnation that I might feel in my body um can definitely get alleviated completely in some cases from <u>just</u> moving you know".*

Gary shared an excerpt from their journal discussing how during a 20-minute meditation they were able to notice the nuanced changes within the body:

> my practice today was one of meditation. I found it quite hard to drop in today. I actually came to the realization that I had not felt really grounded in my being since having COVID. I did a 20-minute meditation to start off and that took me to depths I haven't been in a long time. I felt clear in my mind, if only for a short time, it was beautiful to notice subtle changes in my physical body. I felt like my breath found more ease, like my face had less tension. I guess I decided to practice from a space of curiosity today, to find new areas in my heart and mind.

This extract shows that a yoga practice does not need to be a full 60-minute class with intense postures, it can be a simple 20-minute guided meditation as discussed by Gary. Yoga is able to impact the body physically from just sitting and breathing into space within the body as William mentions *"it was very simply that physical feeling of like having a bit of space.".* William also shared how their yoga practice has encouraged them to continuously show up on

the mat because of the physically changes and benefits that they feel; *"Finishing a practice and feeling like you're floating and that the world is an easier place to be in when you when you walk out onto the street, you walk out of the shala and you're, you feel lighter and easier and just happier and so I guess that physical feeling was like 'oh man, if this if that can make me feel this way and I can carry this through rest of my life, then that's gonna make that's gonna make my life a lot better."*. This quote shows one example of why regular practitioners may continue to practice and may turn their physical practice into leading a yogic lifestyle, moving more towards the spiritual benefits of yoga and self-development.

Alongside these physical benefits, four of the participants found that their sleep quality had also improved with a regular yoga practice which can be exemplified in the account by Sirius.

- Sleep definitely, sleep definitely helps like, if, we've been doing um yin yoga every week this week, and I know that doing yin yoga in a class setting or doing yoga nidra in a guided way, just like in terms of sleep is amazing for that and I think what I've noticed is that, the quality of sleep after that kind of practice is, is so much more um (.) beneficial for like yeah how I feel when I wake up [laughs] I feel way more rested if I've done something like that before the night before.

This extract demonstrates how yoga is able to enhance the quality of your sleep by bringing you back into your body, the present moment and hopefully relieving any stressors that may have come up throughout your day. Amanda also mentions that they have *"more consistent sleep"* if they have practiced yoga as well as Penelope stating that they *"always sleep so well after I've done a Yin class".*

Based on the information provided by all six participants it is clear that yoga is able to positively impact their bodies physically depending on what it is in their life that they are needing. Whether that is better sleep, more ease in the body or more consistent energy levels, yoga is able to play a role. Amanda stated that they have a "*calmer mind, um other physical*

things like finding more strength um and that's physical strength, yes, but also mental and emotional strength." which segues into the third theme.

4.3 Mental and emotional benefits - 'Feel better'

This next theme is a continuation from the physical benefits of practicing yoga by discussing the mental and emotional benefits that one may encounter as Gary states that "*it definitely has a correlation between my mental state and my physical state"*, with a common thread among a few of the participants being feeling better. These extracts were chosen with an aim to show how each participant was able to *feel better* in their daily routines and life as Iris states that *"I always know that I always feel better afterwards and I always feel better during"* and that yoga is *"designed to not only improve your physical health, but your mental and emotional health."* This can be demonstrated throughout Penelope's extracts.

Penelope

- practicing itself is just a, part of my life that is a non-negotiable really because I know that it makes me feel better.
- I guess emotionally just like a general improvement of mood um either after teaching or after practicing myself, even if like, I sometimes find at times when I arrive on my mat and as I've journaled um a few times, I feel really like a little bit irritable or if something had happened to practice or if I was feeling tired, and that would I would kind of bring that with me, but generally always, after leaving I would feel better [laughs] um and in a better headspace.
- improving stress levels like there's so many ways that just the general population who don't practice yoga can, can yeah, benefit from it as a practice.

Penelope speaks to the general population being able to benefit from practicing yoga as it helps to reduce feelings of stress and irritability. The fact that Penelope knows this and has made their yoga practice a *"non-negotiable"* speaks to how powerful yoga is in their life as they will find themselves on their mat if they need to feel better.

Sirius discussed how their perception of their emotional states would change due to a yoga practice.

- my attitude to those emotional states would shift. Um so there'd be like, maybe resistance to having like anxiety or frustration or whatever and then doing certain practices like meditation or little things throughout the day would kind of shift my um perspective on it to like be more accepting and, um and yeah, like just okay with it being there and then it could just move in its own time so ah I think the journaling just brought me more into that, that awareness.

This means that Sirius found they were able to be mentally and emotionally okay with whatever feelings were coming up for them as the practice created a sense of acceptance. Sirius also stated that having a yoga practice alongside therapy may have accelerated their healing process when they said "*I've done the therapy I've needed to, to help with my OCD but, but the yoga practice that I've been doing for so long has like, accelerated that and helped, like, get me to a place of like mental and spiritual well-being a lot faster than maybe I otherwise would of."*

Amanda also felt called to share a story about a time on their mat when a teacher said something 'profound' and it created a shift in their healing journey:

- When I was kind of from my early 20s through to mid 20s, um I struggled a lot with an eating disorder, and disordered eating. And I vividly remember just vividly remember being on my mat and a teacher kind of saying "myself as I am, things as they are" and just bursting into tears and just finding like this complete new perception of myself, of my body and of just (.) loving myself um yeah, so yoga for me was basically the tool in which I navigated that healing process and without it, without those seeds of acceptance of yourself, of love for yourself. Um yeah, I don't know where I would be today, but I definitely [laughs] wouldn't be where I am so that for me was super poignant in my practice.

This story demonstrates not only the profound impact that yoga can have on one's mental and emotional well-being, but also speaks to the importance that yoga teachers may have in our lives as well. One class with a specific teacher was able to propel Amanda forward on their

healing journey which created a turning point and shift in perspective. Amanda also shared how they noticed their mental and emotional health specifically speaking to the 4-week observation period.

- Mentally, emotionally um, it was there was quite a lot going on um across the month and I found that actually, if I needed to come home to peace to stillness to some sort of semblance of ground beneath me and really draw back into my heart, practice was, the key to it um yeah, there was days where my head was so wild and so busy with frantic thoughts and quite a lot of inner critic stuff coming up as well um and practice was just a way to quiet quieten it all down, um yeah so incredibly valuable in that and just recognizing the power of three mindful breaths, or you know just a little bit of cat cows or three sun salutations just to bring to bring myself back to centre, um yeah that was really, really big over the course of the month.

This reinforces the fact that life situations whether that be work, family, friends or personal circumstances will come up and having a reflection period to check-in and notice how your regular yoga practice is able to help you face those situations is a powerful tool. As Amanda speaks to *"the power of three mindful breaths",* being able to draw yourself inward and become aware of whatever you may be dealing with that day.

All of these extracts show the different ways in which yoga is able to create a positive change in one's mental and emotional health by enabling you to feel better throughout your day. Grounding yourself onto your mat and turning inwards, to step out of the busy world and constant stimulus that may be creating stress and dis-ease in the body.

4.4 Yoga and relationships

The following theme was prevalent throughout 4 out of the 6 participants as they shared stories of how yoga has helped them to, in Gary's case, '*navigate difficult conversations',* foster a sense of community and deepen connections with others off the mat as you deepen the

connection with yourself. As this theme is speaking directly to how each participant notices yoga affecting their relationships, I have included an example from each of the four contributors.

Gary

- Finding more awareness within yourself um allows you to take responsibility for your stuff for your feelings for your emotions and I think (.) I think if you're relating to anyone, whether it's yourself or your partner or your wife or husband or um your mum, or people that you work with, I think if you were taking, if you are one finding awareness of, of your state of mind and your emotions, you're vastly better ah equipped to be able to navigate conversations and um dynamic interactions with other people that are experienced, experiencing something completely different through their completely different set of life circumstances. So yoga and all that is yoga has helped me in a ginormous way like an unfathomable way to be able to um better ah navigate all of my relationships. The relationships with my parents and my relationship with my partner, all those ah drastically changed because of my ability now to be able to take responsibility for my feelings um I suppose as the broad scale, but to be able to even figure out what my feelings are you know? and sometimes that's really difficult and sometimes it's ambiguous but just being able to have time ah say in an asana practice sitting on your mat before class and just being like, moving through something on your mat being like, 'oh why am I feeling so ugghghh [noise with mouth]' And you know, you have an hour or two hours or an hour and a half, whatever it is on your mat to be able to be curious um and have time by yourself and you're encouraged by teachers um to be able to do that. 'Hey, have a think about how you're feeling.' And I think that's so beautiful because it's it's (..) yeah it's been um (.) it's been one of the most life changing aspects of, of um the yoga practice you know it's being able to live a more harmonious life with other people off the mat.

William has noticed a wider sense of community from practicing with like-minded souls.

- This sense of community that it fosters is really nice and (.) like a friend of mine I've now become closer with them and then new friendships have sort of arisen just even in this four week block that whether or not they will become bigger, more important friendships, it doesn't really matter. But the fact that there are now people in my life that weren't, just from practicing is like a really nice thing

- My partner commented that I'm just say a better person when I practice… And it was in a, it didn't sound so harsh when they said it they were just like really acknowledging they were like, ‘Man, this makes you so happy and like you're just, you’re in such a good mood.’ And so that was quite a nice reminder of yes and that has got to be like a motivation for why I practice, because it's great that I feel better, but then the motivation for me is wanting to be a better partner for them and wanting to be a better, a better person in my communities as well.

Amanda

- Noticing the power of women connecting with women. Um and that's been through practice, I held like a woman's circle as well, which was one thing where I was like right, this is something I want to do I'm just going to start showing up for myself and doing things that my heart feels really called to do. And, yeah, really feeling into the power of that connection and of community and of friends, and particularly finding solace in women supporting women. Um think when you come into a new relationship, it's incredible and like you want to fully immerse yourself in every moment. Um but realizing that I could be a bit of partner when I honoured that part of myself as well um and had that space and that time.” … “I would say practicing yoga and being aware of your practice um, you yeah it completely revolutionized my relationships and actually showing up authentically um and connecting with people, you find deeper connection with yourself on your mat and then you can find deeper connections with others after that. So yeah, its yeah it’s every breath I take.”

Sirius

- Um an:d definitely, like the yoga practice and um ability to stay with discomfort and stuff like that has made a huge um impact in my relationship life um because part of my OCD was like part of the OCD themes that I had was like around relationship OCD, which is um one branch of OCD, where like there's constant obsession about whether the partner is the right one and you know, some of the symptoms can be like, compulsive breaking up with your partner even though you really don't want to like you just feel like you have to because you can't handle the anxiety and stuff, so that was a huge issue at the start of our relationship and it meant, in hindsight, my whole adult life I was really unable to like, be in a romantic relationship because I wasn't aware enough of my emotions and didn't have the insight and um resilience to like be with that anxiety and still like behave in a way that's coherent with my values and stuff. So yeah when I had enough experience and, and um resilience through the yoga practice.

To summarise all of these deep and meaningful accounts, yoga is able to positively enhance your relationship with yourself and others through a myriad of ways. These include; creating a greater sense of awareness with others but also self-awareness to be able to take a step back and respond to a situation rather than react, fuelled with emotion. This is seen when Gary mentions that they are able to "*navigate difficult conversations*" as you have *"awareness of, of your state of mind and your emotions".* Yoga has also helped Amanda and William foster a greater sense of community and connecting with like-minded souls whether that be the power of women coming together or practicing alongside people whom you know share a similar interest with you. To conclude, yoga enables you to deepen connections off the mat, take what you have learnt on the mat and apply it to those who you relate to in order to be "*able to live a more harmonious life with other people off the mat."* (Gary).

4.5 Honour your needs and connect to Self

This section touches on the participants views of how important it is to honour your body and connect to what you need as Amanda mentioned, *"I tried to tune into what my body needed each day"* and Gary shared that they checked in with how their body was and what movement it was needing *"I'm really fatigued and I need to honour myself by this evening (.) doing this, or tomorrow morning, not waking up at 530 and going for a 10k run".* Penelope also shares that *"I think that also comes with a regular yoga practice and getting to know your body and yourself better is recognizing um what you need on any given day"* with Sirius confirming this idea by stating *"I think (.) yoga is (.) living in a way where you make conscious choices to nurture your physical, emotional, mental, spiritual well-being."* These concepts of nurturing your body and honouring what it is that you need are shown throughout Iris and Amanda sharing excerpts from their diary entries across the observation period.

Iris

- *Hands on my third eye I can see I understand, hands on my heart I love. If I lead with my heart, I will always be supported, leading with love, not expectation for myself and others. If you lead with love, you feel the value you have with others and you don't feel reciprocated, you don't need reciprocation.* - "Umm, so in that way, like (.) it's easy to kind of justify not doing a practice, whereas it's super important to include those nourishments in times of, of self-love and understanding and reconnection."

In this entry Iris shared that it can be easy to neglect your practice and keep going about your day, perhaps creating excuses and reasons as to why you can't practice. However, you will feel more nourished and be living a life full of love if you honour your body and show up for yourself and your practice. Iris then goes on to speak about how honouring your body is also about honouring your needs as you may not be able to do an intense physical practice, but it is just about making the time and space to do what your body is able to do in that particular moment.

- If you were to practice yoga, and you're like, 'I'm going to be super disciplined. I'm going to practice every day, seven days a week it may not look the same'. And then you couldn't for whatever reason, miss that day and you freaked out. That's not necessarily practicing yoga if you freaked out at that it's you know, yoga (.) the time that you allow for it gives you a really in depth um practice but it also is designed for you to be adaptable and flexible, not only in the body, but also in the mind as well and so that means overcoming rigidity and overcoming um 'this is how it's meant to be' and rather the 'I'm going to do the best that I can'. Yeah, and so I think (..) noticing what I need, and tapping into that and not forcing myself has been good. Yeah, I think I've learned that, more through yoga.

Amanda spoke about three excerpts from the journaling period sharing what the practice had taught them about honouring their body and needs:

- *Today, my practice is teaching me to be with sensation or lack thereof. To be where I am and trust that all will be revealed as it's meant to be. I am not broken. I do not need to be healed. I will awaken and I will awaken to trust and know I have all I need* … "So that just like just trust you're not broken. Everything's, everything's as it's meant to be that was a big theme."

- *Today woke up feeling full of stories. I found I had doubts which I've never had before, it was fascinating to observe them, and then came the epic power of practice, I got out of bed and grounded myself with breath. I used my breath to see the stories as stories and observe what I knew to be true, really true and what I was creating. It's incredible to witness how the simple act of focusing on the breath and sitting still with feeling, zooming out on your thoughts and zooming into truth, that the mind loves to create stories and to hold us in discomfort, to relish in misery. Through the simple act of just breathing and being still I could feel my heart soften into truth. I could feel a physical lightness, a weight lifted off my heart space. In fact my whole being felt relaxed and connected. My breath and sitting practice has been a rock for me as I navigate COVID. It's felt so beautiful clearing, settling and grounding. It's provided me with these beautiful and albeit brief glimpses back into the connection of body, mind and spirit which I felt really hard to tap into at times. After my practice, I felt like the darkness had shifted a bit more to make way for desire, lightness, joy and appreciation for this amazing man, [names partner and smiles], as well as for life. When I tap into presence it makes everything feel lighter and more achievable, more holdable. I'm able to move through. How blessed I am to have these tools to be with, observe and move through the clouds all the way back to truth and back to love.*
- And there's a bit in here about honouring my body, um, realising that I was asking too much of it um and being gentle, yeah (5) [laughs] this is quite a nice sentence *my practice is a pocket of tranquillity and calm in a day that would otherwise feel hectic, rushed, nonstop. I'm grateful for this time on my own to be still.*

All three of these diary entries speak to showing up for yourself in any given moment, checking-in and noticing what it is that you're actually needing rather than what you think you need, as you learn to "*start showing up for myself and doing things that my heart feels really called to do."* Especially as Amanda specifically links these concepts back to their practice being *"a pocket of tranquillity".*

These participants are shedding light on this idea that as a society we are constantly striving for more and are potentially pushing past our limits of what our bodies can handle, leading to burnout and an overload of stress as Iris stated that *"we can get so busy with like things that we need to do and um and then kind of mind-numbing activities that we forget to um to listen*

to ourselves and then act accordingly." Gary has also learnt through the practice of yoga *"to make better choices that ah I hate, I kind of hate this word only because it's overused in 'alignment' [quotes] or more in aligned you know I'm making choices for myself to be like, 'yeah this makes more sense to me I feel more comfortable in this decision here because this is how I choose to live my life' and I feel like I've been able to take more agency because of practices like this and being like, 'mm actually, I'm all good. Like you go do that, I'm, I'm going to be okay here'."* These participants are using their yoga practice to step into their own power or as Amanda referred to it as a *"reclaiming of power".* You are in the drivers seat of your life and a way to live a fulfilling life is to honour what it is that you are needing from it, which leads into the next concept of having self-awareness.

4.6 Present moment living and awareness of Self

Continuing on from honouring your needs comes present moment living and being aware of where you are in time and space. According to all six of the participants the main key words that yoga is able to bring is awareness and presence. Penelope shares that "*if you're in a practice and you notice that you're thinking about like, something for study or work that you've got to do later on, drawing yourself back to the present moment and also doing that in life [voice goes up] like rather than um you know, thinking about something you need to do in four hours time actually being in exactly what you're doing or where you are at that moment."* as what they "*have been working on is to being present and being mindful and being in the moment, um which is like a constant work in progress cos I'm a real planner [laughs] um but just, yeah, drawing myself back to the present, I guess, as well."* In this excerpt, Penelope is sharing that practicing yoga is a great tool, although, if you find yourself showing up on the mat already thinking about what you need to do when you are off the mat, then perhaps that is not stepping into the entirety of what yoga is.

Iris speaks to how yoga is "*all those times throughout the day being present and noticing the thoughts that arise (.) with it."* by *"bringing awareness throughout my day, whether that was eating um with no phones, really understanding the textures and the colours and thinking about like the nutrients, the nutrients in the food that I was eating and how that's nourishing my body. Whether that was kind of walking without headphones on and just looking at the people around me and the trees or noticing the birds um and so I don't think the yoga practice has to look like a full on amount of time."* In this extract Iris is speaking to how they are taking presence off the mat and bringing it into everyday routines such as noticing the food that they are eating, removing extra stimulus and listening to the sounds of the birds or witnessing the colours of the surrounding trees.

Amanda's experience with present moment living is that "*without practice, there would be no contrast point. There would be no (.) my practice makes me aware of my inner landscape and if I wasn't aware of that, then I wouldn't <u>feel</u> any shifts or resistances or um yeah, I wouldn't notice the difference in my daily life so practice <u>definitely</u> is that, plants that seed of awareness, that solid foundation of right this is (.) alignment or what feels good or yeah, just shines the spotlight of awareness on, on who you are and how you're doing and how you want to show up and yeah, yes, it's definitely brought that to light for me."* Amanda is discussing how yoga has helped them to notice the shifts in their being when they are in the present moment versus when they are not and their practice is what helps them to ground into the now.

William shares how their practice has enabled them sit with what they are feeling and be in the present moment knowing that it will pass and is "*temporary"* as "*with yoga it feels like it's not a running away from your problems, but it's like a, a sitting with them and acknowledging that it is okay that you don't feel awesome all the time. Because, sometimes you feel great, sometimes you feel terrible, but whatever you're feeling like that will pass as well. And, and*

the good stuff passes too and it's been quite a nice reminder to I guess to just to not get hooked on whatever feeling pops up at the moment, because it's all, its all temporary, yeah."

According to all six participants, yoga is able to help you potentially feel more comfortable coming back into the present moment, rather than projecting forward into the future or ruminating in the past as Sirius mentions that *"there's little pockets during the days where I would just, you know, tune into um like my sensory experience um to bring me into the present, um tune in yeah, tune into like what's happening around me.".* This is not only beneficial to the person who is practicing present-moment living but may also help those around them as if you lead by example, others may be more likely to follow suit. Present moment living is made available by letting go of the past and future and allowing yourself to practice non-attachment (Satchidananda, 1978). William sums up the essence of what yoga is in one sentence when they said that *"Yoga is, just, yoga is just being.",* it does not need to be complicated, you do not need to own a mat or attend a luxurious studio, just sit and be.

4.7 Space to let go and practice non-attachment

This theme explores how yoga enables you to detach from any narratives that may be present in your day-to-day life and the fluctuations of the mind that may be causing anxiety and stress. It is about understanding that as humans, we do not need to attach to everything whether that be materialistic 'things' in our lives, habitual thought processes, or in Iris' case, letting go of the perfect practice; *"The practice of like letting go of, I need to do this and being like no I'm, I am free and easily adaptable and if I if that doesn't mean that I get a 60 minute practice in, but I still get to have, but it means I get to have time with my partner then I'm okay with that."* This theme is able to be explored further through three daily life stories that William, Iris and Penelope shared during their interview.

William shared a story about a time when they noticed benefits from practicing non-attachment and letting go during a physical practice at their studio.

- In paschimottanasana, I really love having an adjustment there and for these three weeks that I was going to this studio, never once did the teacher do that and I was like getting really caught up in this like 'oh he was doing adjustments in other postures', which was really great. But I was like I just want that. And then, then like this one morning I was like oh you know, it doesn't matter, It doesn't matter, maybe he just doesn't do that. And I don't need that and then he did it that morning. And it was the morning that I had finally like let go of wanting him to do it. And it was like, I don't think he read my mind. But it was that real nice moment of like oh yeah, letting go of thinking that I know anything but letting go of thinking that I know what I need in my practice on like a day to day basis and just being more open to it as well.

In this example William is talking about letting go of the need for a hands-on assist which ultimately lead to William receiving that hands-on assist. When you drop the ego and idea of what "you think you need" and trust in the flow, you are opening up the space to receiving. This concept of letting go can be explored beyond the mat when Iris speaks about a time when they were able to practice letting go and "embracing the uncertainty".

Iris:

- It was a huge practice of letting go. Of being embracing the uncertainty and opening the expansiveness of like this as you know what's going wrong is such a small period of time and small period of things and in fact this doesn't actually matter in a whole (.) the whole realm of life. Like you're not really going to remember this in like five years time, like even though it's a big deal for you now, and it's stressful. And so like, I had to just go super deep within that, I could feel my sympathetic nervous system just going off like crazy. You know crying and like not being able to think or talk straight. But, I had to talk to myself (.) and I made the choice and I made the decision and I think yoga teaches that to you as well that you always have the choice to respond. Like you can't control the things that happen to you, but you can choose how you react, and it encourages by giving ourselves that pause and that time to think in like savasana or um you know, the time in between movements and stuff to reflect. And I chose to show up even more, like I showed up with so much determination to be kind to people and to see the good and I

was like, ‘Oh my gosh, this I just feel so vibrant right now’, even though externally like things have fallen apart I've had three hours of sleep, um, just I, I was just like, no, and when I did that, so many beautiful things happened and I could really (.) appreciate the generosity that was coming but if I hadn't made that decision to put my perspective that way, then I would have just been super down and wanting to tell everyone what happened to me, ‘blah, blah, blah, blah, blah’. Whereas I was like, ‘No, I'm letting go. I'm not. I don't need to tell anyone about this. I just need to be the best person I can be and turn up’ and and yeah, and I think that was the most vibrant that I've felt. Um yeah, which is super strange, super strange. Um but I was very proud of myself for how I responded.

In this extract, Iris is exemplifying how the practice of letting go enabled them to “feel so vibrant” as they were creating space for light and love to enter their life. It was a practice of not feeling the need to share what was happening in their life with their friends and family in order to fully drop into what was taking place to enable change. An example of how the practice of non-attachment is able to take place in a daily scenario, Penelope shares how they were able to let go.

- I don't know one of the main teachings of yoga is like non attachment right. So last night, my flight was delayed … and I kind of was like, ‘Oh, well, it is what it is’ [laughs] like what else am I gonna do? I’ll just, you know, hang out at the airport. Um, versus I don't know I guess like another option could have been to get really upset about it and think like ‘oh I could have been home an hour ago, but instead I'm stuck at … airport’, so yeah maybe not the best example but [laughs].”

This story shows that Penelope could have chosen the latter which may have left them feeling frustrated and annoyed at the situation, ultimately causing suffering (Satchidananda. 1978). However, they chose the path of least resistance and protecting their peace as there was nothing that could be done to rectify the situation.

William also relates this back to the Eight Fold Yoga Path which is spoken about in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali (Satchidananda, 1978). Two of these paths are known as the Yamas and Niyamas which are the ethics of yoga or the ‘do’s’ and ‘don’ts’. William is discussing how a

yogi has a choice to either follow these "hard rules" and reach Moksha (enlightenment), or they can use them as a guideline but have the flexibility to adapt to the modern day world that we are living in.

- Looking at like the Yamas in the Niyamas and like that feeling of, well, is this a rigid framework of how I should live my life like, should I abstain from drinking, like I smoke occasionally all these things that I'm like, is this a hard framework for 'don't do this, do do that?' And I guess what is the endpoint of it? like I think I mentioned earlier, I'm not gonna achieve samadhi or enlightenment in this lifetime [laughs]. And I think it's acknowledging well, what behaviours are making me a better person to be around a better, like a better part of the community, a better part of my family? And maybe that means never drinking alcohol ever, or maybe it just means acknowledging that some behaviours and some practices are better than others, and that that can change and fluctuate all the time, as well. And so having these things that are about having like a holistic lifestyle, but also not (.) if I'm going to behave in ways that maybe don't align with the yogic lifestyle, to, to be okay with that or not do it, but not to do them and then beat myself up about it, as well, you know? If that kind of makes sense? Like it's not a, not a letting myself off the hook for behaving in ways that I know are detrimental to myself, but it is a like a, we are living in a crazy time and there's so much from the yoga knowledge or framework that can be applied, but also then, just remembering that we're also people trying to exist in, in the modern world at the same time, as well. Yeah, which can be like a real source of stress and anxiety, because you're like 'oh how do these two things fit together?' But yeah, I don't know that's been, that's definitely a challenge, but it's been, it's been quite interesting and it's quite freeing to sort of let go of the, the hard rules around it too.

These stories were chosen with an aim to shed light on how this idea of letting go can be used in different ways throughout one's life. Relating this back to how a regular yoga practice is able to do this, William said *"I would do my physical practice and it just makes it all so [laughs] much better and so much easier and you sort of, you let go of all those like, that rumination and those voices that you're like giving yourself a hard time",* and *"you get different benefits out of it, but also like just trying to let go of that, that ego I suppose and letting go of what your, your physical practice has to look a particular way, because it's definitely the quality of intention that you bring to your practice that's more important than that physical*

side of it. So it's nice for me that I have like now literally written down my thought process of acknowledging something and then getting trapped by it and then acknowledging it and trying to let it go again.". In this last account, William shares that a large part of yoga is to practice non-attachment, therefore, if you are practicing from your ego which may include pushing beyond your bodies capabilities that day, then you may not be embodying what yoga truly is.

4.8 Ability to sit with and notice thoughts

This next theme is a continuation of practicing non-attachment, however, it specifically relates to the mind. According to the yoga sutras an important aspect of yoga is being able to witness and observe the mind without attachment as yoga is the stilling of the mental modifications of the mind (Satchidananda, 1978). This means that according to Patanjali, yoga is being able to calm the mind from the constant chatter that many of us so regularly experience. These participants spoke about their ability, through the practice of yoga, to be comfortable with these mental modifications and sit with them, let them pass rather than attach to them. This comes with a disciplined practice, where some days may be harder than others. This can be exemplified through one of Amanda's diary entries:

- *I got out of bed and grounded myself with breath. I used my breath to see the stories as stories and observe what I knew to be true, really true and what I was creating. It's incredible to witness how the simple act of focusing on the breath and sitting still with feeling, zooming out on your thoughts and zooming into truth, that the mind loves to create stories and to hold us in discomfort, to relish in misery. Through the simple act of just breathing and being still I could feel my heart soften into truth. I could feel a physical lightness, a weight lifted off my heart space.*

This diary entry shows that tuning into your breath and returning home to yourself is one method of how to still the mind and observe thoughts as waves crashing on the shore, let them wash in and out as like Amanda says *"the mind loves to create stories and to hold us in discomfort".*

In the below account, Sirius speaks to *'going towards discomfort'* and *'creating space around it'*, which fits in with the theme of sitting with thoughts and noticing them. Sometimes thoughts can be uncomfortable and if you create space and lean towards them, you are therefore, acknowledging their presence and becoming familiar with discomfort rather than pushing it aside.

- I've been practicing, basically that thing with like asana yoga for so long, where you like sit with the discomfort of the stretch and you breathe into it and learn that it's like promoting growth …Feeling emotions is okay and um so I think it's like, that helped me um be okay with the duality and like some of the paradoxes of life um and more embracing of um my experience, no matter what it is, whether it's like some spiritual like transcendental experience or more, just like very human sadness, grief, stuff like that."

William

- I do think that having this practice, having a meditation practice and having this physical practice where in those moments I am able to check in and notice feelings that are popping up for myself. I think it has given me even just like a tiny little bit of, of a way of also dealing with those feelings, anger, sadness, whatever, when they pop up in the moment off the mat and it's given me like, maybe a little bit of a better chance of noticing those hooks and those feelings and then, being able to just let them go because they're just, they're just a narrative you know.

This is an example of how William's practice is able to ripple into their daily life as they *"have a better chance of noticing those books and those feelings"* due to a yoga practice.

Iris talks about how they *"just notice things a lot more"* when they recited one of their diary entries during the interview:

- So I say here like *'I do tend to notice quite significantly how I talk to myself and catch myself when I turn into a lacking / comparative mindset'*

The fact that Iris is able to notice when their thoughts are controlling their life could be pinpointed to a regular yoga practice and learning how to tune into the self. There is evidence

of this in the below account from Iris when they say *"the yoga practice allows, gives you space to practice that."*.

- It's not like things are happening to you, you can observe your thoughts and, and question them and reflect on them rather than being like, these thoughts are just going and I'm going to let them (.) I'm not going to change anything about them it's like no you can actually reflect and change them with intentional practice and that's you know, the yoga practice allows, gives you space to practice that. Um, yeah!"

These accounts from four participants show that a regular yoga practice has been able to help them *'observe your thoughts', 'check in and notice feelings that are popping up'* and understand that *'feeling emotions is okay'* (Iris, William and Sirius).

4.9 Gratitude and importance of practice

This next theme speaks to some of the participants views on how yoga is an important part of their life, as Iris mentioned how yoga " *allows you to slow down and take your time, which I think is super important."*. These feelings of gratitude and the importance of yoga can be demonstrated in the below accounts by Sirius and Penelope.

Sirius

- Um and then there is like, also, appreciating and like amplifying positive experiences in life off the mat. Um I think having an awareness of the power of gratitude and like, um, and, like cultivating like positive and pleasant mind and emotional states in yoga. Um, yeah when that happens off the mat in everyday life there's like, you just getting more into the pattern of, of yeah, being in a place of gratitude around those things and also cultivating them more in your life.

Sirius is speaking to what yoga off the mat means to them and how they are able to encompass *"the power of gratitude"* in everyday life. During the interview Sirius also stated that *"Yoga and m:indfulness practice has like, basically transformed my life"* which is a substantial statement to make and shows the potential for how powerful a personal practice can

be. This statement also may show that Sirius' yoga practice is of high importance to them as it has had a positive impact on their life and they also *"realized that like, yeah, I've done yoga for so long that it's just kind of, it's just part of it's just actually not part of my life, it basically is mostly how I operate"*.

In the below extracts, Penelope spoke directly to how they are grateful for this practice and how important it is to them in their life:

- It went really well and I guess reflecting and looking at my journal entries um kind of just reinforced for me how important yoga is in my [laughs] daily life and in terms of my own overall well-being.

Showing that the journaling prompts and reflection period strengthened Penelope's association with yoga and how it is benefiting their life.

- I guess with my own practice, it's just like this gratitude for this thing that, this thing [laughs] this practice that makes me feel really good and I'm so glad that I found it um and also just the ability to yeah move our bodies like its such a privilege.
- Um, but think that there is like a form of practice of yoga and a teacher for everyone and that it can benefit everyone in some way. Be it um you know, by improving lack of flexibility or be it by improving stress levels like there's so many ways that just the general population who don't practice yoga can, can yeah, benefit from it as a practice … that yoga is something that can benefit everyone, be it through added flexibility and mobility or through stress relief and the benefits that come with that.

Penelope views yoga as a 'non-negotiable' in their life and that it can benefit everyone in different ways. If Penelope did not place high importance in a regular personal practice, then they may not have stated that yoga is able to benefit everyone, therefore, I am able to infer that yoga is indeed a meaningful part of Penelope's life.

4.10 Spirituality - more than just asana

The next two themes contain extracts that touch on yoga beyond the mat and beyond a physical practice. Encompassing all that one has learnt during their time on the mat and moving it toward

'becoming a better person' according to William as that is a motivator as to why they practice yoga. The first section is based on yoga being more than just an asana practice which shifts towards the final theme of taking yoga off the mat. All of the participants spoke about how their yoga practice started as purely a physical practice of moving their body or a form of exercise, which lead to them wanting to gain a deeper knowledge of the practice and understand the spiritual journey of yoga. This is directly shown when Penelope stated, *"I've noticed with my practice over the years is that it's become a lot less physically focused".* As these two themes are discussing how yoga is able to be taken off the mat and is more than just a physical practice, I thought that it was important to share and unpack accounts from all of the participants.

Penelope

- I guess it's like most people, well a lot of people you come to yoga, for the physical side of things um as a form of movement and then you realize that there's a lot more that keeps you coming back to your mat you know, you feel more grounded and calmer when you leave and yeah. And then I guess the spiritual side of things or like becoming um more aware of the other elements of yoga, that it's not just a physical practice that just kind of comes with time um and like learning.
- Um, I mean, during Teacher Training was I guess that was a really big um shifting point. I would even say up until that point, my practice was still very like, physically focused. It was definitely shifting more towards like, um more of an awareness of the other like limbs of, of yoga and the importance of mindfulness and meditation and the philosophy behind it… we did a lot of physical um practices and a lot of asana but it was so much more than that. It was like um yeah you just kind of come out just a different person.

In these accounts, Penelope discussed how yoga started out as a physical practice that with time, shifted into a curiosity for the spiritual elements of yoga as their awareness of this grew. Completing a yoga teacher training was a shifting point for Penelope as that experience deepened their understanding of yoga and how there is more to this lifestyle than the asanas.

William started yoga as a physical practice when their Mum *"packaged it pretty nicely in the 'you should probably do some stretching'"* and then went on to state that *"I sort of, I really dived into like, a little bit of reading and listening more about yoga, more than just the physical practice and I was also talking with my partner about how like (.) I'm not doing, this yoga, to reach Samadhi you know, I, that's not attainable in this lifetime, at least. But, but what I am doing this yoga practice for is to be a better person for myself, but more importantly for the people around me and I think that is part of being like a well-rounded person."* This is not only showing the importance of why William practices yoga, but it shows that they started a practice because their Mum suggested that they needed to incorporate more stretching into their fitness routine, which then lead to William finding a place within the yoga community and ultimately wanting to become a better person through this practice.

William then shared how yoga transformed from beyond a physical practice and that anyone can do it if you *'Just sit and see what comes up for you':*

- That cliche idea of yoga being just the physical practice, is, that's an idea that a lot of people have when they come to yoga or when they think about yoga. But I would say that like as a starting point, yoga is, just, yoga is just being and that in some ways, everybody is doing yoga already, every day. But, but you can do yoga consciously, or you can do yoga unconsciously and I think, that for me yoga is just being conscious of everything from your breath, and from this physical moment to the connection with other people and other beings and it's <u>everything.</u> And I think that when we try and like quantify it, and put this like framework around what yoga is, I think that's what kind of turns a lot of people off. But for me, like, you can't really even explain to somebody what yoga is, its just like just turn up, just do it and that doesn't mean turn up to a studio because, I think that form of yoga is very prohibitive and puts a lot of people off and I'm very lucky that it works for me. But like I'm very, my body allows me to do a lot of the things that I want to do. And I'd say like anyone who's yeah trying to figure out what yoga is and be like just, just sit, just sit and see what comes up for you because I don't think, I don't think that we we sit and be enough. Yeah.".

Gary speaks to why they did a yoga teacher training and how that was able to deepen their understanding of what yoga is:

- My initial reasoning for it was to purely to deepen my understanding of the shapes um whatever the shapes were the asana and then also the deeper under my, under:stand myself. Um I realized that there was something intrinsic that was drawing me into the whole yoga world and it, yeah it was enticing. Um and when I finished that first training I definitely did have a better understanding of um of myself and the trainings that I've done since then, more so. And yeah the yoga teacher training of asana is beautiful um but with good teacher trainings um like the one I did ah last year, that was [laughs] that was almost nothing about the asana and more about the philosophy behind it and the way that you can implement the ideas within your own life".

Like Penelope, Gary also found a greater depth to their yoga practice from partaking in a yoga teacher training which sparked curiosity into learning more about this practice. Gary then shared how their physical practice and spiritual journey began:

- I started going to those classes more and felt very comfortable there and um I was 'good' at the asana so I felt like it was nice and then from there, the asana progressed, um that teacher told me to read a book a very beautiful book by Eckhart Tolle um 'the power of now' and that book um at a pivotal point in my life, [clicks] just changed everything, me wanting to be more curious about other things, meditation and and um and the deeper aspects of figuring out who I was as a human. I'd had inklings about that sort of thing from other friends, I had a friend's granddad taught me how to meditate, you know, and before I'd read that book, and there were a few things where there was all these signs of people just telling me about things and my openness and my curiosity, helped me to lean into them, but when there were enough of them, sort of drawing towards me, I couldn't ignore it and I feel like I, yeah I sort of ended up falling into a more deep relationship with a different type of spirituality. But only a very slightly different flavour. I feel like my ideas of a higher power, or a God or whatever are still there very strongly, um and very respectfully like that there is something that is helping us whether, whether that something is within us, or whether that something is in a distant universe it's kind of irrelevant to me, but I do feel like the transition into taking more ownership for my own stuff came very strongly through the yoga world and practicing, practicing how the whole concept of yoga, I guess.

According to this extract, Gary started with a physical yoga practice that lead to a teacher introducing them to a book and this rippled into other areas of yoga.

Iris spoke about a *'need for more'* when practicing the physical asanas of yoga and turning towards the textbooks from their training as they "*noticed throughout it that I was wanting more, I was I was needing more than just physical and so I started to look back at my textbooks and the books on yoga that we got given for our yoga teacher training um and that was a really beautiful way to kind of reconnect and realign myself with you know, the philosophy as well as kind of the intention and yeah."* as they have *"always been very in:terested in the more and under or reflecting on the more and understanding how things work um beyond just the, the realm of society capitalist society today that tells you to (.) you know that finances are really important and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah …".* Iris discussed how yoga is more than just a physical practice as "*it's also a way to explore yourself, explore the different energy centres, both physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and designed to take away, not take away but to expand the consciousness expand the I and the ego and, and look out for other people and other things and other beings because we are all one. We are all connected.".* Lastly, Iris speaks to being able to apply the yoga philosophy into your daily life as "*knowing the philosophy but then relating that to you is the most important thing. Like you can learn, like it doesn't matter if you learn all the philosophy behind it if you can't apply it to you and you can't practice it within your own right, cos then you're not a yoga practitioner, yeah.".* This final quote is interesting as they are explaining that in order to be consciously practicing yoga, you must be applying it throughout your day. This is essentially Iris stating that you need to take what you are reading or learning on the mat, and put it into the situations or circumstances that you face in your life. This is the definition of yoga being more than an asana practice as the physical postures may only get you so far in life, but taking the teachings into your daily life may benefit you greatly.

Amanda mentions that they started out their yoga journey as a physical practice which turned into a more spiritual practice as they grew curious about the changes that they were noticing within their body.

- I started volunteering there and that's when I developed a regular practice so that's when I started really consistently practicing and then you know, little seeds started to be planted and I started to get more curious about okay, what's this breathwork and wow, that feels incredible in my body or, you know, lots of emotional release of hard days at work and going through burnout and just getting on the mat and finding that release of feeling. Um and that was really beautiful and that's where it started to become not just physical but also spiritual. Um yeah, and built a community there and they were my people and kind of hearing about different walks of life and watching them just soften into existence rather than kind of pushing through life like head-first so yeah, that was really um a beautiful eye-opening experience and heart opening experience as well. I haven't looked back [laughs].

Amanda's yoga journey also started out as a physical practice, which grew into wanting to learn more as they were releasing a lot of emotions and wanted to "*soften into existence"* as they were witnessing others experience around them.

Sirius shared a story about a breakup that ultimately lead to them finding the spiritual elements of living a yogic lifestyle:

- I found a book in the um in the bookshop, it was like the Dalai Lama … and it was called 'The Way to a Meaningful Life' or something and um it just like really, at that time it connected so much, so like the whole philosophy of that um just was so helpful. And um from that I started exploring a lot more different things like I read um the Bhagavad Gita and like, a bunch of other um you know, well known books in yoga and Buddhist philosophy. And um that really got me into it um so since I've been 18 I've been practicing…

In this story Sirius mentions that they began their spiritual yoga journey when they found a book written by the Dalai Lama. Unlike the other participants who started their yoga journey

through a physical practice, this story shows that you are able to begin a yoga journey simply by sparking an interest through reading a philosophical book.

Some of the participants found that their yoga journey began with an asana practice that slowly turned into a more spiritual practice as they became more regular practitioners of yoga whilst others were guided towards books that sparked a curiosity and need for knowledge. Although, no matter how the participants started their journey, they all discussed wanting to understand more about it and how they can continue feeling this way off the mat.

4.11 Yoga 'off the mat'

The final theme, *yoga off the mat* was the driving force of this research as it aims to answer the question; How does a regular yoga practice ripple into our daily lives?. This question asks us how we can take what we learn on the mat and bring it into our entire existence, rippling through our being. The below extracts touch on stories and circumstances where each of the six participants were able to take their practice into their daily life.

Amanda shares what practicing yoga off the mat means to them:

- Oh its everything [laughs]. It's every moment um yeah I feel (.) that to me is the advanced practice. Um, (.) and I vividly remember um I did like this advanced class regularly on a Saturday morning in the UK and the teacher just being like, "the actual most advanced part of practice and what I really want to drive home in these classes is that it's what you take off the mat as well." So whether it's um grounding, you know, feeling, feeling the earth beneath you and pulling from the earths strength that you need that can be in any situation, you know, could be a tough conversation at work and you just need to kind of like feel the ground beneath you and draw from that strength. It could be creating space and when you're practicing physically, that might be like, "Oh, okay, if I just relax a little bit there, I can create more space across my heart" and then you think about yoga off the mat and it's "actually, I shouldn't catch up with that friend today because I need space for me to kind of feel into how I'm doing". Um, presence, presence on your mat and presence off the mat and conversations with everyone and just how you show up day to day. Did you notice the person that you ordered your coffee off this morning? You know, like how are

they doing or did you just kind of take it and run cos you were so in your head? Um, yeah, all of those, those little things and just noticing how you're doing and how you're showing up and what you need and um yeah, (.) it deepens relationships as well, I would say practicing yoga and being aware of your practice um, you yeah it completely revolutionized my relationships and actually showing up authentically um and connecting with people, you find deeper connection with yourself on your mat and then you can find deeper connections with others after that. So yeah, its yeah it's every breath I take."

In this extract Amanda's main theme of what yoga off the mat meant to them was bringing presence and awareness into your everyday routine. This can be done by noticing things throughout your day such as communicating with those around you and how you "show up" for yourself.

Penelope shares what practicing yoga off the mat means to them:

- For me yoga off the mat is living in such a way that the awareness we gain through time on the mat positively impacts our daily lives and the way we interact with ourselves and those around us, and respond to situations/the things life throws at us.
- Practicing yoga off the mat is taking all of these great things that we learn on the mat and applying them to our daily lives. So noticing, I guess becoming more in tune with ourselves which in turn means we're more in tune with the world around us so becoming um you know more aware of the little nuances in our body noticing how we're feeling um and then also, I guess, applying that intelligence to um sort of the broader world. Um, Yeah, so (.) I guess (…) hmm I don't know if there is anything else I want to say um [laughs] yeah, just, just yeah being more aware is the main thing and then and then taking those learnings these things that we learn on the mat like about being mindful and in the present and all the other, like there are so many teachings in yoga um that we can apply to our daily lives and I guess just yeah once we have that awareness of them, weaving them into, to life as best we can.

The key themes that came up for Penelope whilst discussing what practicing yoga off the mat meant to them was that they were more in tune with themselves and their surroundings. As well being aware of the teachings and applying them as best they can to "the broader world" whether that be through mindfulness and presence or any other teaching that you can "weave

them into life". Penelope finishes off by saying "as best we can" which I inferred to mean that it may be challenging to do so within this fast-paced modern-day world that we live in as we are continuously bombarded with stimulus. Therefore, take the pressure off yourself and apply what you have learn on the mat in the best way possible for you.

William also shared that we can take yoga off the mat but, *"just remembering that we're also people trying to exist in, in the modern world at the same time, as well."* which I interpreted to mean that we can take the intensity off of ourselves to try and do everything perfectly and instead *'just sit'* as they put simply. William explained how *"people have told me that they think my yoga practice has made my life better in some ways. So that's been quite a nice like, yeah physical marker of that, I guess."* This would be another motivation for William to continue their yoga practice and let it ripple into their daily life as they described what this term yoga off the mat means to them:

- So for me yoga off the mat is how can I live my life in a way that is gonna maximize the well-being of like, I guess immediately the people around me, but then bigger picture everybody in the world? As unachievable as that is sometimes, um but yeah, but it really does for me at this moment in time anyway, it does mean how can I live my life in a way that is going to be the best, the best most rounded way to live my life that I can.

For William, taking yoga beyond the mat is all about how they can be a better person to those around them so in turn the world is better place.

Iris spoke to practicing yoga when you are unable to roll out your mat which describes how they view taking yoga off the mat and into your daily life.

- I could still practice paying attention and bringing awareness throughout my day, whether that was eating um with no phones, really understanding the textures and the colours and thinking about like the nutrients, the nutrients in the food that I was eating and how that's nourishing my body. Whether that was kind of walking without headphones on and just looking at the people around me and the trees or

noticing the birds um and so I don't think the yoga practice has to look like a full on amount of time. But it's all those times throughout the day being present and noticing the thoughts that arise (.) with it.

Like Penelope and Amanda, Iris speaks to learning how to bring the awareness that they cultivate on the mat, into their general routines such as walking and eating. Iris recounted a story with their sister about a time when they were able to apply what they learnt on the mat.

- Yeah, um, it's yeah, it's all about practicing that awareness hey, like I wrote down in my journal, there was one time where my sister pissed me off. She was being unreasonable and she was being bratty and just like a little sister is sometimes. Um and I could feel myself when she was sending these messages through I could I could feel my breath stop and like all tighten and I was so close to retaliating and being super rude back to her and being like this 'I don't deserve this'. Um but I had to stop and put my phone down and just question, my intentions here and whether it was worth (..) being rude back to her, or if I just let it go. And it's really hard to remove your ego and be like 'I'm, I'm not going to um (.) I'm not going to put any more attention onto this because I know it's just it's bringing me down' and so as hard, hard as it was I didn't reply. Um and I think I may not have done that a, a few years ago before I started practicing yoga. Um and it's yeah, noticing my energy and what's worth pursuing and not and letting go letting go is a huge thing. Um and just protecting my peace. And yeah, not pursuing things that's going to disrupt that peace, even if it's hard for my ego to understand [laughs].

An important part of this story was when Iris mentioned that they *'may not have done that a few years ago before I started practicing yoga'.* This reinforces the idea that yoga can be taken off the mat and positively impact a real-life situation. Yoga has value and importance in Iris's life as they explained how they were able to protect their peace through tools learnt on the mat.

Gary shares how the forms of yoga have enabled growth off the mat in relationships, 'dealing with people' and this has been more prevalent throughout the month long observation period:

- I see it as it starts to weave itself through with, um with you know the conversations that I'm having the interactions that I'm having with other people, it was the nuance things that I started to realise a few years into my practice it took me a long time to realize the benefits of what I was doing on the mat, for example, or sitting in a quiet position in my living room or whatever it was to filter into the rest of my life and the practice as I said over the last month when I started realizing what the full extent of what that might mean

is you know when I'm dealing with some of my employees and their being difficult or what have you and I'm having to take, I'm having to take ah time (..) to be able to be with my own thoughts and my own feelings and not allowing that to affect how I am dealing with (.) people in a professional manner or in a loving kind manner or whatever it is, so when my practice ah the full scope of it is with almost every conversation that I'm having, it's with every time I'm being conscious and connecting with people, you know, eye gazing, you know whether it's a sit down and, you know, plan thing or whether it's just when I'm conversing with someone and I am fully present with the conversation and really connecting to what is going on I feel that it is that is the yogic philosophy, starting to really come into, weave its way through the rest of my life.

Gary also related this idea of yoga beyond the mat into how they communicate with others using eye contact and being in full presence during the conversations that they are having. This is how they are able to see the practice blossoming into their life in the most tangible way. They also spoke to how yoga influences the way that they consume things.

- As far as sort of off the mat in other aspects my physical health um it definitely has had some impact with the way I consume other things like alcohol or drugs or all those sorts of things they've never been something that's been massive in my life. Um (.) perhaps because of the religion thing but also um it hasn't like it's always yeah, I think a lot because of the religion thing but um after doing more of you know more (.) yogic practices, whatever they may be, I have felt um (.) I've felt more from an adult perspective let's call it um of being like 'I need to take care of myself um ,because I want to…' ah whatever my plan is the next day, that's all well and good being like, Oh, 'I don't want to be hungover' or I don't want to be this and that, but also from a perspective of um 'I don't want to have my mind unclear right now'.

The teachings of yoga have been able to impact Gary in a way that they are perhaps more aware of what they are putting into their body, as they want to be as clear as possible within their physical body and mind space.

Sirius discussed what yoga off the mat means to them and this is followed by a story that they shared of a time when they were able to use these teachings in a real-life situation.

- I think the main thing is, like (.) being able to do what you do on the mat … being able to transfer those skills into your emotional and and mental life and being able to like, move towards, embrace and um like put some insight into like, emotional, mental discomfort and, and, and suffering and then, like, use various yoga practices or just be, be really mindful of that and yeah, I think the result for me with that um is a more um, (.) a more present life like and enjoying well, no, not necessarily enjoying because it's like, um sometimes it's still uncomfortable and stuff but like having a more fulfilling life …

In this extract, Sirius is describing how taking yoga off the mat means bringing more mindfulness and presence into a situation, even though it may be uncomfortable, you are learning how to sit with discomfort and ultimately have a "more fulfilling life". This is shown in their real-life situation when they shared, *"I was in an Uber ride and like feeling super lethargic and heavy and anxious and overwhelmed. Um, but just like having the skills that I've developed in yoga and mindfulness to like just watch that there and not kind of get tangled up in it. Yeah I had like insight into like, that it was just all my OCD um operating there and then like, just like a shift that's that I started to like, actively, like pull my attention away and direct it to like, what's happening in the present moment and then this huge shift in the emotional state came."*. When asked what created a shift or turning point in their yoga practice, sirius answered:

- Yeah, that's a good question. Um, I think (.) I had one experience well, my whole experience with ashtanga yoga was a huge shift in perspective. Um, it my interpretation of Ashtanga Yoga from what I've learnt is that like it's a very um ve:ry Yang practice … what I found was that actually the more that I was able to relax in a very intense posture or intense position, relax and soften, um that actually, the more I was able to be in that strong pose and stuff, and that was a huge shift for me … But, I think what it taught me for my life is that um you can, actually the most effective way is like um bringing softness into the, the intensity, and also bringing a bit of strength and intention into those soft moments actually really helps as well. Um so I think in terms of my everyday life … It was either like go super hard and kind of disregard my emotions and stuff and like achieve goals, or kind of be overwhelmed… I think what that Ashtanga thing has helped me is now it feels more balanced where like I can go for difficult goals and

> do difficult things, but I have like this awareness that keeping a bit soft and gentle around my heart and stuff at the same time is possible and is really helpful.

This touches on the power of an Ashtanga practice and how bringing softness to the intensity of the asanas was able to be translated off the mat, by bringing softness into one's daily life when you may be presented with challenges and difficulties.

Chapter 6:

Discussing the data

A phenomenological thematic analysis requires the researcher to draw deep and meaningful data from the lived experiences of the participants (Lawthom & Tindall, 2012). Based on the results I am able to conclude that there was a substantial amount of rich and meaningful data within each transcript, making it difficult to narrow it down for the purposes of this research. The aim of this research was to understand how regular yoga practitioners experience this practice throughout their everyday life. How this practice may influence their overall health and wellbeing. The data shows that yoga is able to influence how one approaches their usual day and routines through becoming more present and aware, noticing thoughts and feelings, their ability to be free of physical pain in the body, feeling open and more expansive, more calm and grounded and generally a sense of feeling better, lighter and happier. This then leads onto answering the question of; how is yoga able to ripple into our daily lives and influence our overall health and wellbeing?

How can the practice of yoga ripple into one's daily life?

According to the six regular yoga practitioners, the process and experience of journaling alongside a yoga practice helped to enhance feelings of how their practice is benefiting them throughout their day. The focus of this research was the observations during a 4-week period so that there would be a pin-point of discussion throughout the interviews, however, this resulted in the participants enjoying their journaling process which meant that this could be seen as an intervention and something to take forward with them beyond this study.

Relating these results back to previous literature, the physical benefits of practicing yoga according to Lim & Cheong (2015) were that yoga lowers stress levels, increases immunity

and antioxidant levels in the body. As this thesis was qualitative rather than quantitative, these physical markers were unable to be assessed, however, the participants in this thesis shared that they felt more open, less sluggish and fatigued, lighter, live without pain, physically open, strong and energised and a common thread throughout was improved sleep. Pandya (2021) examined how yoga was able to help the health and wellbeing of women during the COVID-19 pandemic and found that it reduced their anxiety and fear as well as improvement in general wellness measures. Two participants in this thesis mentioned how during their COVID-19 recovery, they felt more grounded after a practice and their 'breath and sitting practice was a rock' for them as they leaned into the recovery process (Amanda).

The mental and emotional benefits observed from a regular practice were generally feeling better, mental and spiritual wellbeing, relaxed, calm, ability to heal, ability to return to your centre, improved quality of life, enhanced creativity and improvement of mood. These outcomes also aligned with the outcome found in Sistig et al's (2014) study with psychosis patients who practiced yoga. Improvement of stress levels was also found and this aligns with the findings in Lim & Cheong (2015) and Hepburn & McMahon (2017) as stress levels decreased in both of these studies alongside a yoga practice.

According to a handful of participants, yoga enabled them to navigate their way through relationships and difficult conversations with more ease, by taking ownership and agency of feelings and emotions. This enabled Gary to "live a more harmonious life with other people off the mat". Yoga also fostered a greater sense of community, whether that be by holding women's circles or by having a space to go and practice with like-minded individuals, connecting through a spiritual journey and passion for self-development. Participants also noticed that they were able to become better partners with their significant others even

commenting on how much “better of a person” they were when committed to their practice (William).

Connecting inwards, becoming more aware of what your body needs and living in the present moment were sizeable themes that came up in the interview process of how yoga expels into your life. This was seen through participants sharing how they ‘trust and know I have all I need’, by tapping ‘into presence it makes everything feel lighter and more achievable’ (Amanda), by recognising that there is no perfect practice as you need to be adaptable and flexible, just show up, everything is okay and it is okay not to feel okay, honouring what your body needs in any given moment, feeling more calm and grounded after a practice, continuously having awareness of the benefits of ‘drawing myself back to the present’ (Penelope). Iris mentioned the *Sutras of Patanjali* (Satchidananda, 1978), by stating that ‘yoga is the restraint of the fluctuations of the mind’ and learning how to become aware of this and return to your truth. One large statement that was made during an interview was that “yoga and mindfulness practice has like, basically transformed my life” - Sirius, which shows the powerful effect that present moment living, honouring your needs and stepping onto your mat can have. Jindani & Khalsa (2020) found that kundalini yoga enabled a re-integration of the body and mind to those suffering from PTSD. These participants did not speak to experiences of PTSD and this research was not focussed on this specific field, yet participants did speak to yoga bringing them back into the present moment and becoming aware of their body’s needs. Mensinga (2020) found that social workers who integrated a daily routine of yoga were able to be more present and aware with their clients which aligns with the findings of this study as the participants were able to bring presence and awareness into their conversations with others.

According to Satchidananda (1978) and the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali,* practicing non-attachment and letting go is a fundamental aspect of what yoga aims to achieve. Participants

were able to speak to experiences like this when mentioning that practicing ‘makes it all [laughs] so much better and so much easier and you sort of, you let go’. This also means that participants felt ‘free and easily adaptable’ by adopting a non-attachment mindset (Iris). One participant spoke to how you can bring this mindset forward into your daily life if you are stuck at an airport needing to get home but do not wish to enter a space of suffering, you are able to practice non-attachment and let go of rigidity. The findings showed that letting go can also include the need to always ‘feel better’ and feel good by ‘being able to navigate the lows’ along with the highs and ‘going towards discomfort’ because ‘feeling emotions is okay’.

Yoga is an important part of the participants lives as Penelope stated ‘in terms of my own overall well-being’. Participants found that they were grateful for this practice as if they ‘vary from consistency and practice, how much it can derail thoughts, feelings…’ and has become a ‘pocket of tranquillity’ (Amanda). Their practice may have started out purely physical in order to encourage them to step onto the mat, yet ‘you realise that there’s a lot more that keeps you coming back to your mat’. Continuously showing up on the mat and as William shared, ‘just being’ has led to the participants ability to share how they experience these tools rippling into their lives. This is seen through bringing more presence into your day, noticing ‘the person you ordered your coffee off’ (Amanda), stopping yourself from retaliating to certain situations by ‘removing your ego … let it go’, having a desire to ask yourself ‘how can I live my life in a way that is going to the best, the best most rounded way to live my life that I can’ (William). Yoga off the mat is also seen as ‘being conscious and connecting with people’ (Gary) through full presence and awareness, and being able to use the tools in real-life situations where you may be feeling ‘heavy and anxious and overwhelmed’ (Sirius). Linking this to how yoga helped school children learn emotional regulation and understanding coping mechanisms with the pressures of modern day society, shows the importance of yoga and being able to learn and experience these tools from any age (Berezowski et al. 2017).

One of the gaps found in previous literature was that men are understudied in the research field of yoga. I addressed this gap by having an equal number of each gender in this study. What I found was that there were no significant differences between the men and women and how they found their yoga practice rippling into their daily life. Both male and female participants shared their experiences of yoga equally speaking to how yoga is able to impact their overall health and wellbeing physically, mentally and emotionally.

Through this research process, it was my aim to gather meaningful and complex stories from regular practitioners that would show an insight into their yoga practice and how this can foster a more joyful life full of love and light. Based on the findings from the interviews and journaling process I conclude that yoga is able to be taken off the mat and expand one's time on this earth in a positive and fulfilling way.

Inspiring words from the participants to those beginning their yoga journey

Each interview aimed to finish on a positive note as the participants were asked to share the most recent time that a yoga practice left them feeling inspired and uplifted. It was my aim in this thesis to inspire those who may have never stepped onto a yoga mat, to do so. Therefore, I have concluded this thesis with what I deem to be inspiring words from the participants when asked *"How would you describe yoga to someone who has never practiced before?":*

- I'd say like to anyone who's yeah trying to figure out what yoga is and be like just, just sit, just sit and see what comes up for you because I don't think, I don't think that we, we sit and be enough. - William
- I often say to people 'can you breathe?' and they go 'yeah' and I'm like 'okay cool then you can do yoga' [laughs]. … it's a beautiful way to check-in with your body … you'll find that that intention will shift and what might have been a physical motivation to get

onto your mat for the first time will turn into a mental, emotional motivation with time [laughs]. - Amanda

- It's an incredibly beneficial practice that you can come to, no matter what your ability, physical ability because it's not about the physical movement - Iris
- For starter's it's not about flexibility … people do think that it is a form of exercise or it'll make them have better abs or whatever [laughs] but it's so much more than that and I think that's why it's a real shame that so many people um are kind of scared off from yoga … there is like a form of practice of yoga and a teacher for everyone and that it can benefit everyone in some way. - Penelope
- If you're wanting to try yoga in the asana sense try it on the internet in your own living room and just have a little bit of a play, there's heaps of free stuff, um where they can try things out in their body. It's not necessarily about doing any shapes ever it's about finding time in, in solitude or time within some safe space for yourself, whether it's at your house or on a studio on a mat, um where you will eventually find comfort you will find um you'll find some inner peace from, from a regular, regular practice. - Gary
- Living in a way where you make conscious choices to nurture your physical, emotional, mental, spiritual well-being… living in a way that you are connected with who you truly are. – Sirius

Limitations and Future Recommendations

Potential limitations to this research could have been the time period in which the participants were observing their yoga practice for. To gather more meaningful and rich data I would recommend a longer time-frame being more than 4-weeks, to enable the participants to undergo various life experiences whilst journaling about how their practice may impact this.

As a researcher with a time constraint and needing to compare and contrast themes across six different data-sets, there may have been opportunities within the data that were overlooked. As I completed the data analysis before my yoga teacher training, the final themes may have been different if I were to have completed the data analysis after the teacher training. This is a limitation of a phenomenological thematic analysis as the data is open to interpretation and what the researcher perceives as 'real'.

Implications

Based on the findings from this thesis, a regular practice of yoga has the potential to positively benefit an individual's overall health and wellbeing, should they decide to step onto their mat and begin a yoga journey. This conclusion is able to be drawn based on the six participants and their own personal experiences with this sacred practice. Another implication was that the journaling process became an intervention after learning how beneficial the participants found this process. These six participants practice yoga regularly and may not have been as aware of how this practice was truly affecting them, without journaling about it. All participants were encouraged to keep their journals and continue observing their practice outside of this study. Hopefully, this intervention continues to serve the participants as they grow and evolve with their practice.

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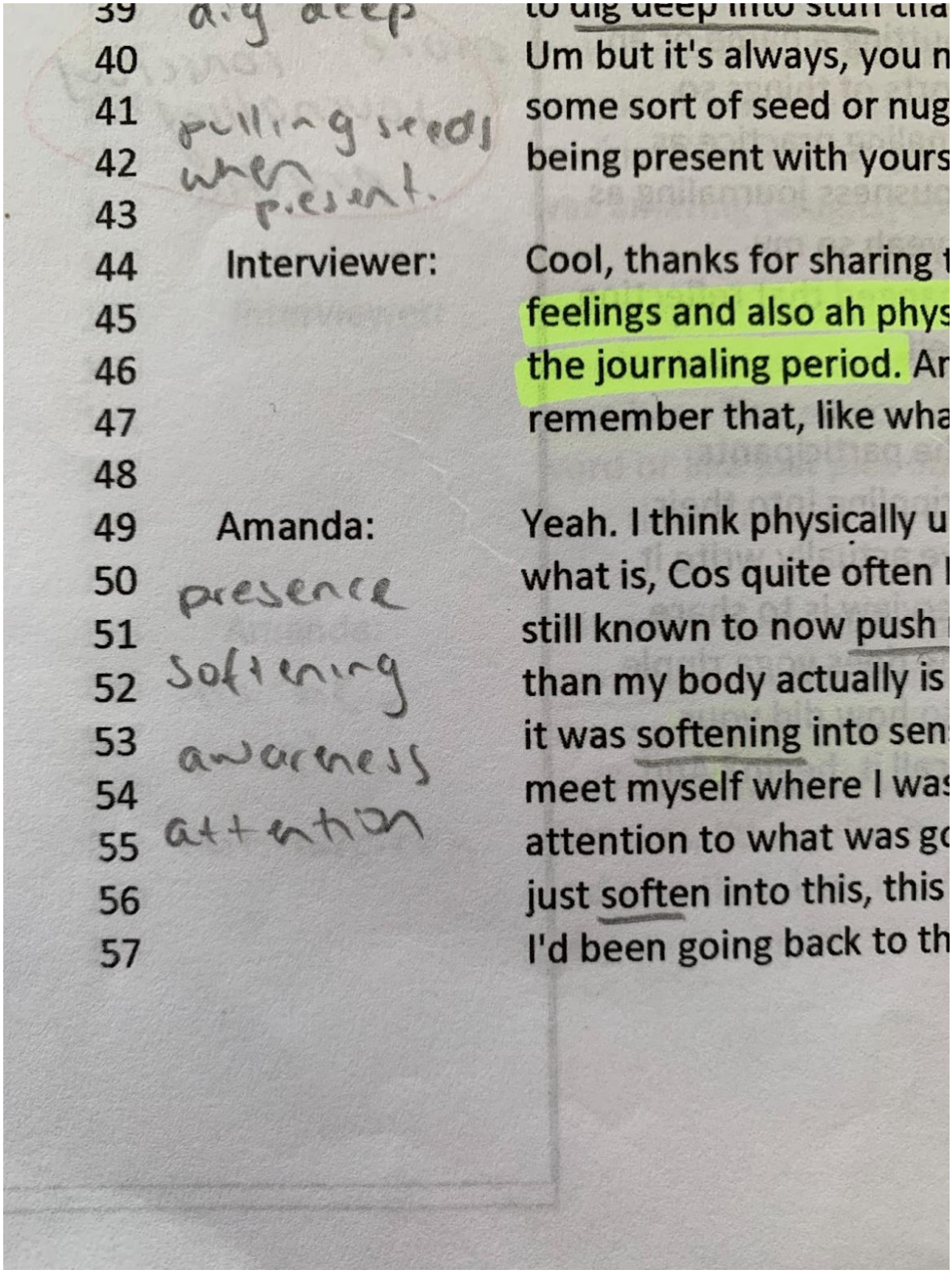
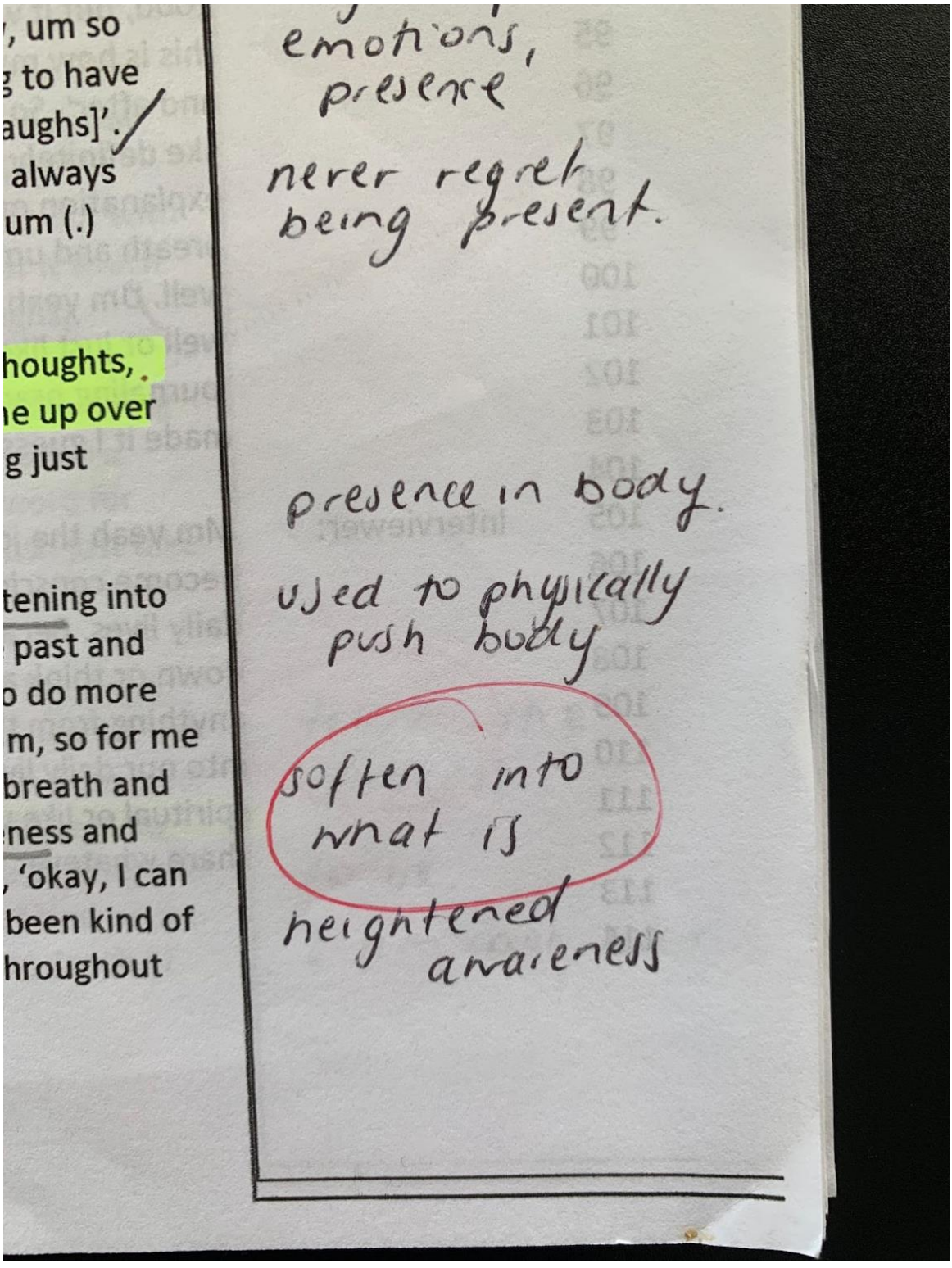
Appendix 1. Initial Descriptive Coding



Demonstrating use of the left-hand side margin for initial descriptive codes.

Appendix 2. Second-stage Descriptive Coding

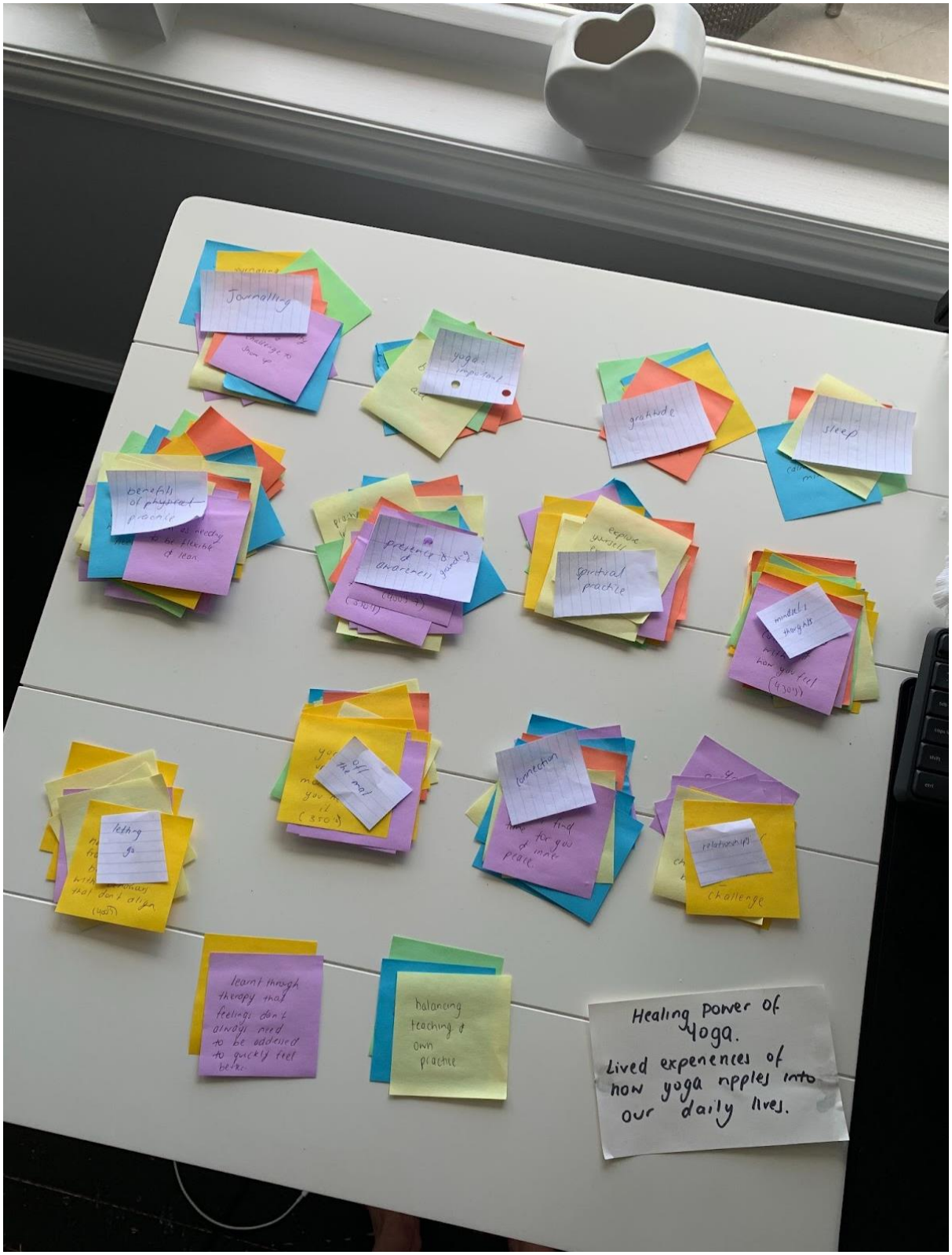


Demonstrating use of the right-hand side margin and finalising descriptive codes for the post-it notes.

Appendix 3. Initial mapping of codes

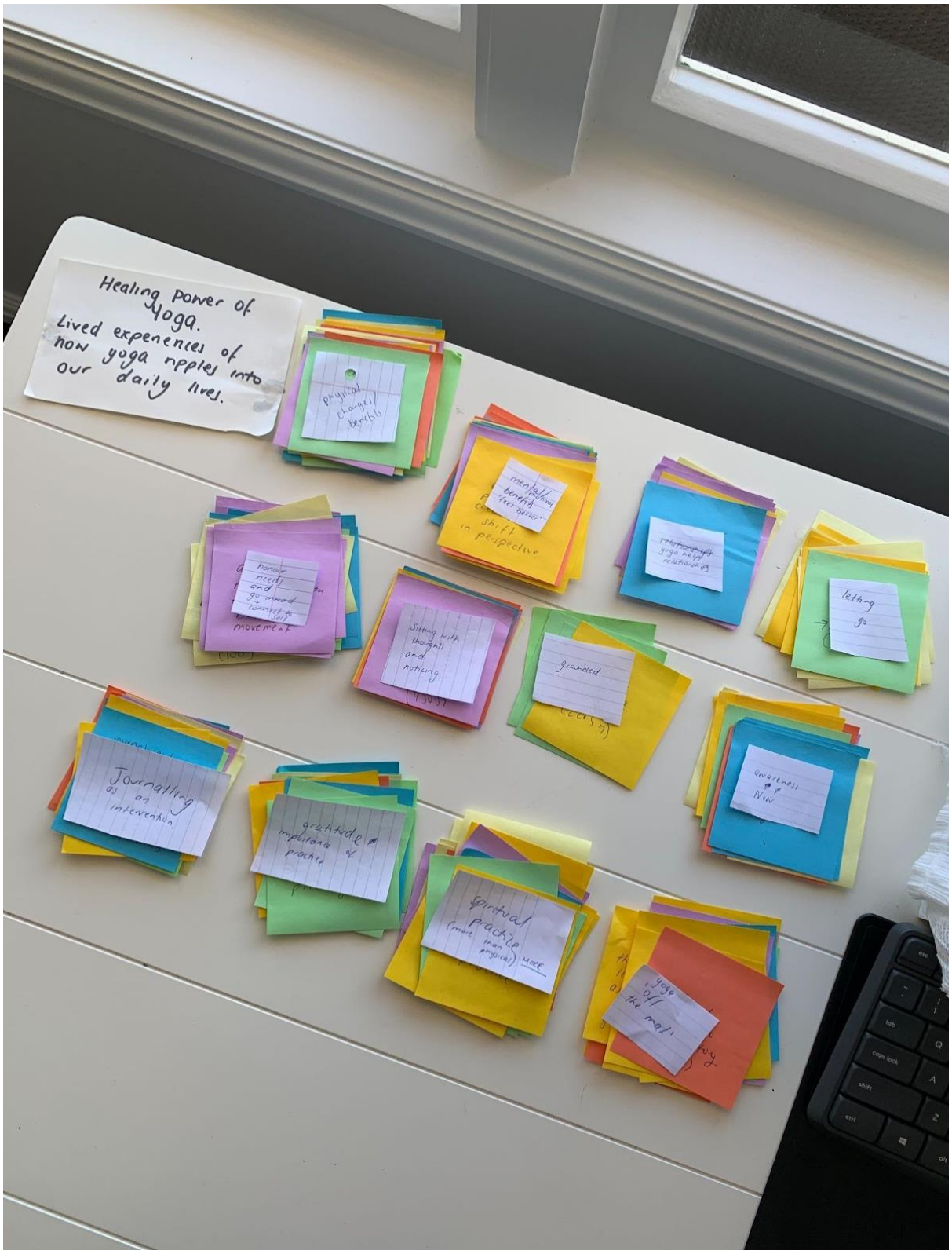
First step of thematic analysis showcasing the six participants descriptive coding.

Appendix 4. Initial themes



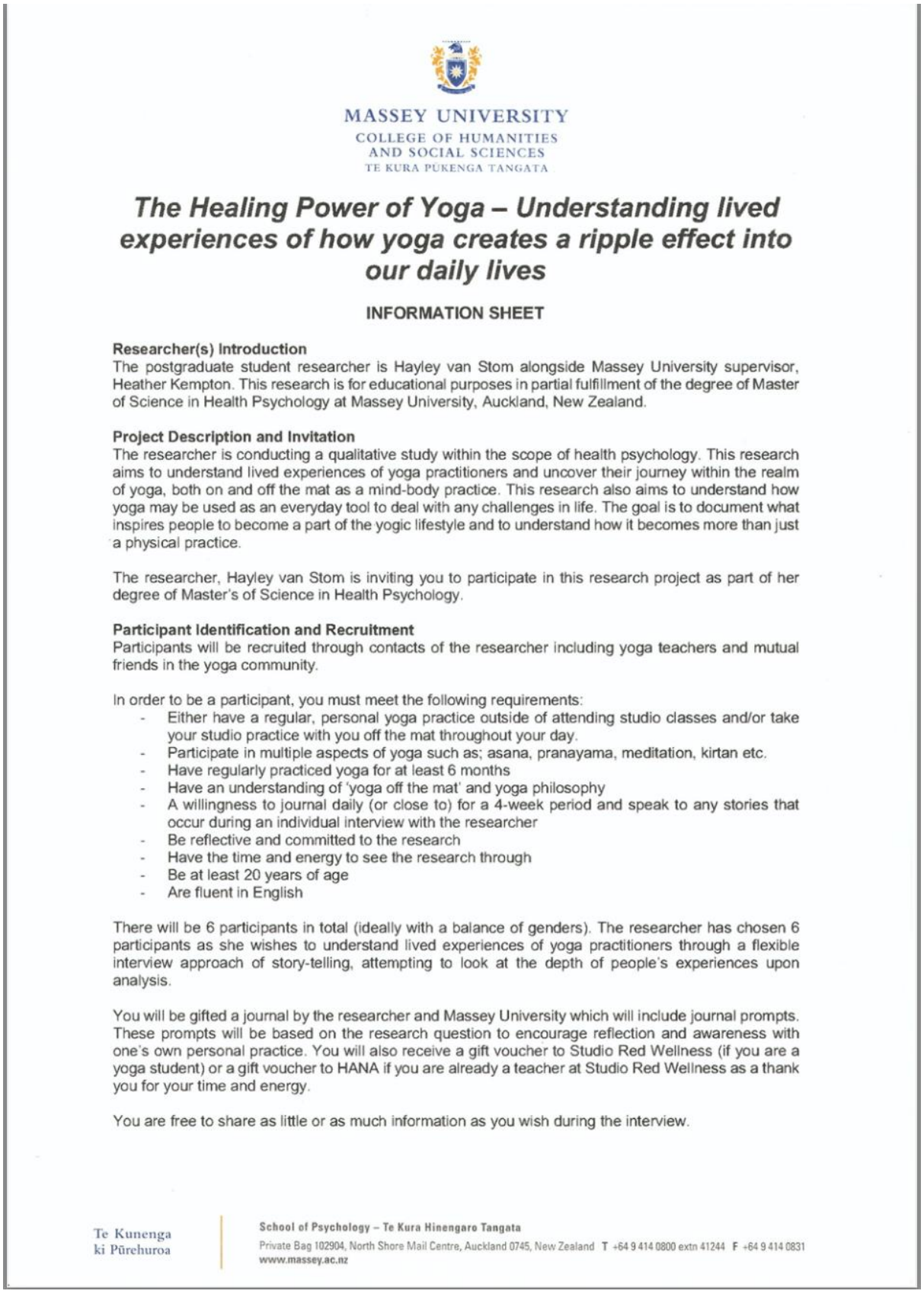
Second step of thematic analysis and first-time placing similar descriptive codes together.

Appendix 5. Final Themes



The final groups of descriptive codes put into their relevant themes.

Appendix 6. Participant information sheet



MASSEY UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES
AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
TE KURA PŪKENGA TANGATA

The Healing Power of Yoga – Understanding lived experiences of how yoga creates a ripple effect into our daily lives

INFORMATION SHEET

Researcher(s) Introduction
The postgraduate student researcher is Hayley van Stom alongside Massey University supervisor, Heather Kempton. This research is for educational purposes in partial fulfillment of the degree of Master of Science in Health Psychology at Massey University, Auckland, New Zealand.

Project Description and Invitation
The researcher is conducting a qualitative study within the scope of health psychology. This research aims to understand lived experiences of yoga practitioners and uncover their journey within the realm of yoga, both on and off the mat as a mind-body practice. This research also aims to understand how yoga may be used as an everyday tool to deal with any challenges in life. The goal is to document what inspires people to become a part of the yogic lifestyle and to understand how it becomes more than just a physical practice.

The researcher, Hayley van Stom is inviting you to participate in this research project as part of her degree of Master's of Science in Health Psychology.

Participant Identification and Recruitment
Participants will be recruited through contacts of the researcher including yoga teachers and mutual friends in the yoga community.

In order to be a participant, you must meet the following requirements:

- Either have a regular, personal yoga practice outside of attending studio classes and/or take your studio practice with you off the mat throughout your day.
- Participate in multiple aspects of yoga such as; asana, pranayama, meditation, kirtan etc.
- Have regularly practiced yoga for at least 6 months
- Have an understanding of 'yoga off the mat' and yoga philosophy
- A willingness to journal daily (or close to) for a 4-week period and speak to any stories that occur during an individual interview with the researcher
- Be reflective and committed to the research
- Have the time and energy to see the research through
- Be at least 20 years of age
- Are fluent in English

There will be 6 participants in total (ideally with a balance of genders). The researcher has chosen 6 participants as she wishes to understand lived experiences of yoga practitioners through a flexible interview approach of story-telling, attempting to look at the depth of people's experiences upon analysis.

You will be gifted a journal by the researcher and Massey University which will include journal prompts. These prompts will be based on the research question to encourage reflection and awareness with one's own personal practice. You will also receive a gift voucher to Studio Red Wellness (if you are a yoga student) or a gift voucher to HANA if you are already a teacher at Studio Red Wellness as a thank you for your time and energy.

You are free to share as little or as much information as you wish during the interview.

Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa

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www.massey.ac.nz

Page one of the participant information sheet.

Project Procedures
Upon agreeing to be a part of this research, you will commence a 4-week observation period. During this period, you will continue your personal yoga practice as normal whilst journaling about your experiences. You will be given journal prompts to help you reflect on your practice each day, however, you are welcome to free write whatever comes to mind or anything that you wish to become aware of. The researcher trusts that you will continue your practice as usual and use the journaling as a tool to gain deeper awareness and insight into your practice. Once the observation period is complete, the researcher will meet with you for an interview that aims to be no longer than 1 hour. The interview will be semi-structured to allow for flexibility, and the interview transcripts will be subject to narrative inquiry. You will be encouraged to bring your journal to the interview and speak to any entries that you feel comfortable sharing. The researcher will not read or collect the journals as the exercise aims to enable you to connect deeper to your practice, rather than the journals being subject to analysis. You are free to keep your journal after the interview process.

Data Management
Only the interviews will be recorded, transcribed and analysed, the journals will be your property and you are free to share any insights during the interview if you wish. The interviews will take place in person or on Zoom and will be audio recorded (video recorded if on Zoom) and transcribed through a software called Otter. The recordings and transcriptions will be safely secured on the researchers' personal password-protected laptop until the thesis has been submitted. All data will then be secured on an external hard-drive and deleted after 3 years. When writing the thesis, your choice of pseudonyms will be used in place of your name and any personal information that could identify who you are. Your information will be kept private and confidential and only the researcher and supervisor will have access to your personal information. The data will be used to support the findings of the research question: Understanding how lived experiences of yoga create a ripple effect into our day-to-day lives.

You are free to withdraw from the study at any stage during the 4-week observation period and interview. After your interview you will have up to 1 week to decide if you wish to alter your responses or withdraw the transcripts inclusion entirely. You are welcome to add any more information to the research at any stage if you see fit. Once the researcher has completed her thesis, you are welcome to request a summary of findings.

Participant's Rights
You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:
- decline to answer any particular question;
- withdraw from the study during any stage of the journaling/interview process and withdraw your transcript inclusion up until 1 week after the interview;
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded;
- ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview.

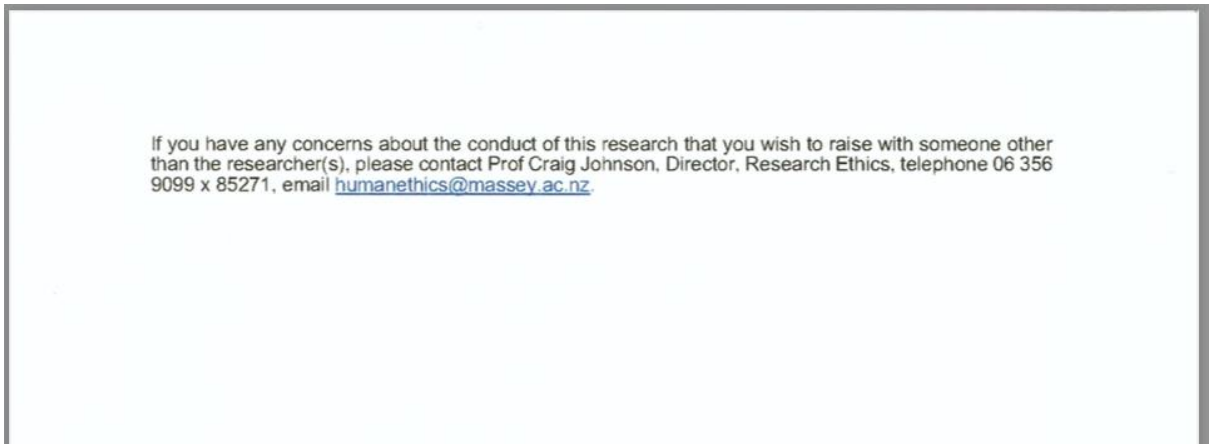
Project Contacts
Postgraduate student researcher: Hayley van Stom – [redacted]
Massey University supervisor – Heather Kempton – h.kempton@massey.ac.nz

You are welcome to contact the researcher and/or supervisor if you have any questions about the project.

LOW RISK NOTIFICATIONS

This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named above are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.

Page two of the participant information sheet.


If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you wish to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Prof Craig Johnson, Director, Research Ethics, telephone 06 356 9099 x 85271, email humanethics@massey.ac.nz.

Page 3 of the participant information sheet.

Appendix 7. Consent Form

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The Healing Power of Yoga – Understanding lived experiences of how yoga creates a ripple effect into our daily lives

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM - INDIVIDUAL

I have read, or have had read to me in my first language, and I understand the Information Sheet attached as Appendix I. I have had the details of the study explained to me, any questions I had have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time. I have been given sufficient time to consider whether to participate in this study and I understand participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study at any time.

1. I agree/do not agree to the interview being sound recorded.
2. I agree/do not agree to the interview being image recorded if taken place on Zoom.
3. I wish/do not wish to have my recordings returned to me.
4. I wish/do not wish to have data placed in an official archive.
5. I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Declaration by Participant:

I _____ hereby consent to take part in this study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

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