Viniyoga for Stress Reduction: The Aetna Mind-Body Pilot

- The *Viniyoga Stress Reduction Program* is a specialized Viniyoga Therapy intervention developed for a mind-body pilot for Aetna Inc., one of the nation’s largest health insurance companies.

  J Occup Health Psychol. 2012 Apr;17(2):246-58. **Effective and viable mind-body stress reduction in the workplace: a randomized controlled trial.**
  Wolever RQ, Bobinet KJ, McCabe K, Mackenzie ER, Fekete E, Kusnick CA, Baime M.

  Int J Yoga Therap. 2012;(22):91-2. **Building bridges for yoga therapy research: the Aetna, inc., mind-body pilot study on chronic and high stress.**
  Kusnick C, Kraftsow G, Hilliker M.

- The *Viniyoga Stress Reduction Program* provides tools for managing stress including physical yoga postures, breathing techniques, guided relaxation and mental techniques. The original pilot study was a 12-week program, 1 hour each week. The current program taught in Aetna facilities is 50 minutes/week for 10 weeks to accommodate corporate schedules and cycles.

- Objectives of the *Viniyoga Stress Reduction Program* include yoga methods to help participants:
  - Relieve musculoskeletal tension in back, neck and shoulders
  - Relieve headaches caused by musculoskeletal tension
  - Improve sleep
  - Increase feelings of well-being
  - Improve coping strategies for dealing with stressful events and the subsequent negative symptoms of stress
  - Adopt home and office strategies for reducing stress through yoga.

- The intervention includes a weekly on-site class, home and office practice tools and weekly educational/motivational e-mails.

- See the back the Aetna Mind-Body pilot study results.

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The *Viniyoga Stress Reduction Program* was developed by Gary Kraftsow and the American Viniyoga Institute for the Aetna Mind-Body Pilot Study. Mary Hilliker, RDN, E-RYT 500, CYT, 5 Koshas Yoga & Wellness, Wausau, WI coordinated the program in the original pilot and for several years as the program was institutionalized in Aetna facilities.

The *Viniyoga Stress Reduction Program* is taught by Certified Viniyoga Teachers who are trained by Gary Kraftsow and the American Viniyoga Institute. 5 Koshas Yoga & Wellness and the River Flow Yoga Teacher Training School train 200 hour Viniyoga Wellness Instructors in central Wisconsin.
Aetna Inc. Mind-Body Pilot Results

Statistically significant results on primary and secondary objectives:
- Perceived stress scale
- Sleep quality
- Heart rhythm coherence ratio of heart rate variability (measure of autonomic balance)
- Current level of pain (Viniyoga intervention)

Directionally favorable results:
- Breathing rate
- Worst pain ever and average pain
- Symptoms of depression

Virtually all participants in the initial yoga study group reported that they had incorporated some of the Viniyoga Stress Reduction Program tools into their daily lives. Participants reported that they:
- Used yoga breathing techniques to reduce stress, prepare for sleep or increase energy levels
- Started a home practice or desk break practice to relieve muscle tension and improve postures
- Increased awareness about how they respond to perceived stressors and use of coping strategies.

Half of the participants in the yoga study group reported barriers to participation in the VSRP with work-related issues being the most frequently cited barrier (meetings, phone calls, last-minute assignments, customer problems, heavy workloads).

Quotes from Participants in the Viniyoga Stress Reduction Program

“I can consciously alter my physical state by practicing these techniques on a consistent basis.”

“I’m more aware of the moment stress begins and use breath to reduce it. I also use mini-postures, poses, and breath to reduce keyboard, back and neck stress.”

“I can now identify when I’m starting to feel stressed (tension in my neck and faster breathing and heart rate) and can counteract the stress by doing a breathing exercise. I immediately feel calmer and have less tension in my body.”

“I never thought yoga would be for me… the breathing and relaxation has kept me from losing my temper.”

“For me it has been a life-changing event and may have saved my life. I feel my future is brighter. I have a greater sense of well-being.”

For More Information
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Mary Hilliker, RDN, E-RYT 500, CYT, is available to discuss Viniyoga stress management program options for health care, corporate and worksite settings. Contact Mary at mary@5koshasyoga.com or 715.218.7120.