FACING ADDICTION WITH HOPE AND UNDERSTANDING

# Breathe Through It: How Yoga Science Is Reshaping Addiction Recovery — and What Families Need to Know

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## INTRODUCTION: A DIFFERENT KIND OF MEDICINE

When a loved one is struggling with a substance use disorder, families often find themselves searching desperately for answers. They want to know what works. They want to understand why their son, daughter, spouse, or parent cannot simply "stop." And increasingly, they want to know whether there are gentler, more holistic tools available — approaches that treat the whole person rather than just the addiction. A new randomized controlled trial published in *Substance Use & Misuse* (2026) offers one quietly revolutionary answer: yoga. Not as a replacement for clinical care, but as a meaningful, evidence-based companion to it.

The study, conducted by Kumar and colleagues, examined the comparative effects of two specific yoga modalities — Asana (physical postures) and Pranayama (breathwork) — on two of the most clinically significant obstacles in early recovery: hypertension and low self-esteem. These may sound like distinct medical problems, but for anyone who has watched someone they love cycle through addiction, they are deeply familiar symptoms of a system under siege.

## THE PHYSIOLOGY OF ADDICTION: WHY STRESS IS NEVER JUST STRESS

Substance use disorders, as the Kumar study frames them, are characterized by "a debilitating cycle of physiological stress, such as hypertension, and psychological deficits, specifically low self-esteem" (Kumar 2026). This framing matters enormously for families. It reframes addiction not as a moral failure or a weakness of character, but

as a biopsychosocial condition — one that is simultaneously attacking the body, the mind, and the social self all at once.

Hypertension in individuals with substance use disorders is not incidental. Chronic substance use dysregulates the autonomic nervous system, flooding the body with stress hormones, elevating blood pressure, and keeping the individual in a near-constant state of physiological alarm. The body, quite literally, does not know how to rest. And low self-esteem — the other target of the Kumar study — is both a precursor to addiction and one of its most devastating consequences. Shame is a fuel that keeps the addiction cycle burning. Recovery, then, is not only about abstinence. It is about teaching a human nervous system to find safety again, and rebuilding a self that feels worthy of that safety.

This is where yoga enters — and where the Kumar study breaks genuinely new ground.

WHAT THE SCIENCE ACTUALLY SAYS: ASANA VS. PRANAYAMA

Most yoga research in addiction contexts treats yoga as a monolithic practice. What is remarkable about the Kumar randomized controlled trial is that it isolates the specific components of yoga to ask a more precise question: does the body-centered practice (Asana) do something different from the breath-centered practice (Pranayama), and if so, what? As the study notes, "research rarely isolates the comparative efficacy of its specific modalities" (Kumar 2026). This is a meaningful gap to close.

For families, the practical implications are significant. If Pranayama — conscious, regulated breathwork — proves particularly effective at reducing physiological stress markers like blood pressure, this is a tool that requires no gym, no special equipment, no prescription, and no insurance approval. It can be practiced in a treatment facility, in a halfway house, or quietly on a couch at home. If Asana — the physical postures — proves more effective at rebuilding self-esteem through embodied experience and physical mastery, this tells us something

important about what bodies need in order to heal their relationship with themselves.

The study's framing of yoga as a "biopsychosocial intervention" (Kumar 2026) is language that echoes the most rigorous understandings of addiction science. The biopsychosocial model holds that addiction is not caused by any single factor — not by brain chemistry alone, not by trauma alone, not by social circumstance alone — but by the complex interaction of all three. An intervention that addresses all three simultaneously, as yoga in its various forms claims to do, is not a luxury. It is, potentially, exactly what the science has been asking for.

## THE FAMILY DIMENSION: WHY THIS MATTERS BEYOND THE INDIVIDUAL

Recovery does not happen in isolation. Families are not passive bystanders in the recovery process — they are an intimate part of the ecosystem in which recovery either takes root or fails to thrive. When a person in early recovery begins to practice yoga — particularly when they begin to regulate their nervous system through breath, to rebuild embodied self-esteem through posture and movement — the ripple effects reach outward into the family system.

Consider what it means for a family member to watch their loved one, who has perhaps for years appeared physiologically dysregulated — anxious, volatile, incapable of stillness — begin to demonstrate self-regulation. Consider what it means for a person in recovery to develop, perhaps for the first time in years, a relationship with their own body that is not defined by craving or shame. These are not small things. They are the building blocks of the relational trust that families spend years trying to rebuild.

Families themselves, of course, experience their own physiological and psychological toll. The research on secondary trauma among family members of people with addiction is substantial. The stress that a parent

carries when a child is in active addiction — the hypervigilance, the disrupted sleep, the chronic anxiety — is not metaphorical. It is physiological. Interventions that help the person in recovery regulate their nervous system also, indirectly, begin to de-escalate the family's chronic alarm state. And there is a compelling argument — one that goes beyond the scope of the Kumar study but is consistent with its logic — that mind-body practices like Pranayama might be equally valuable for family members navigating their own recovery journey.

## SYNTHESIS: WHAT "HOPE AND UNDERSTANDING" LOOKS LIKE IN A CLINICAL CONTEXT

The mission of FAHU — Facing Addiction with Hope and Understanding — is not a soft or sentimental idea. It is a position grounded in evidence. The Kumar study exemplifies what hope and understanding look like in practice: researchers who refuse to dismiss yoga as fringe or supplementary, who instead apply rigorous scientific methodology (a randomized controlled trial) to ask specific, actionable questions about which practices help and how.

This is what it means to face addiction with understanding. Not to excuse it. Not to minimize its devastation. But to look clearly and compassionately at the human being caught in its grip — a human being whose nervous system is dysregulated, whose self-esteem has been corroded, whose blood pressure reflects the toll of a body under chronic siege — and to ask: what does this person actually need in order to heal?

The answer, the Kumar study suggests, may be as old as human civilization itself. Breath. Movement. Presence. The body's own capacity for regulation, activated and supported through intentional practice.

## CONCLUSION: AN INVITATION TO FAMILIES

For families supporting a loved one in recovery, the emerging science of yoga and mind-body practice offers something rare and precious: a form

of hope that is specific, measurable, and actionable. You cannot force someone into recovery. You cannot think away their hypertension or argue them into self-esteem. But you can learn, alongside your loved one, what the science is showing — that the breath is a genuine clinical tool, that the body holds both the wound and part of the medicine, and that recovery is not simply the absence of substances but the slow, hard, beautiful work of rebuilding a self.

The Kumar study (2026) is careful to note that yoga functions as a complement to, not a replacement for, comprehensive addiction treatment. This is an important caveat. But it is also an opening — an invitation for families to explore, with their loved ones and their treatment teams, the growing evidence base for practices that are accessible, non-stigmatizing, and grounded in an honest understanding of what addiction actually does to a human body and mind.

Facing addiction with hope and understanding does not mean looking away from its severity. It means having the courage to look directly at it, and to bring to that gaze both rigorous science and genuine compassion. In that combination — evidence and empathy, data and dignity — lies the path forward.

# Works Cited

Kumar. “Comparative Effects of Yoga Practices on Self-Esteem and Blood Pressure in Substance Use Disorders: An Randomized Control Trial.” Substance Use & Misuse, 2026. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/42228994/.