

Benefits and Potential Risks of Mind and Body Practices

Use this job aid as a reference when discussing mind and body practices and their potential risks with your client.

Acupuncture

Acupuncture is the insertion of hair-thin needles into the skin at specific places or channels in order to change the flow of *qi* (pronounced “chee”) in the body. According to Traditional Chinese Medicine, each channel links to a specific organ system. The needles are usually kept in the skin for less than half an hour.

There are two main theories as to how it works. Conventional medicine explains that the needles cause the brain and spinal cord to release chemicals that dull pain and boost the immune system. Traditional Chinese Medicine explains that the needles help the body’s natural healing abilities by balancing *qi*.

Some studies suggest that acupuncture can help treat:

- Addiction and depression¹
- Asthma²
- Head, back and neck pain^{3,4,5}
- Fibromyalgia⁶ and osteoarthritis⁷ pain^{8,9}
- Morning sickness and other forms of nausea¹⁰
- Pain from surgery¹¹

Acupuncture may also help improve pregnancy rates after in vitro fertilization¹² (IVF).¹³

What is the potential risk or harm of acupuncture?

Side effects are rare. Providers are required to use sterile needles to prevent infection.

Alexander Technique

The Alexander Technique focuses on muscle control and how the body moves. The goal of the Alexander Technique is to correct body movements that lead to poor posture, body strain and tension. The method is generally taught one-on-one, but group classes may be held as well. During each session, students perform everyday actions (such as walking, standing or sitting). The teacher shows the students how to do those actions so their bodies work better throughout the day.

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Having better posture and movement can ease muscle strain, aches and pains. The Alexander Technique can help you improve your body and physical coordination. By helping to reduce stress, the therapy could help your body resist disease.

Some studies suggest that the Alexander Technique can help treat:

- Back pain¹⁴
- Depression and other symptoms of Parkinson's disease¹⁵
- Poor posture in older people¹⁶

What is the potential risk or harm of the Alexander Technique?

The Alexander Technique is considered safe for most people. However, talk to your doctor first if you have chronic pain or joint problems.

Art Therapy

Art therapy uses art to help people cope with symptoms of disease, stress and traumatic experiences. In art therapy, you may paint, draw, sculpt or use art media.

Art can provide a creative outlet for both adults and children that many find stress reducing and healing. Art therapists also help people discover connections between their physical health, their emotions and their thoughts. By learning to interpret their own art, clients are better able to appreciate all parts of themselves.

Some studies suggest that art therapy can help:

- Reduce anxiety and depression in cancer patients^{17, 18}
- People cope with physical and emotional trauma¹⁹
- People cope with addiction and eating disorders^{20, 21}
- People cope with dementia²²
- People cope with learning difficulties²³
- People cope with schizophrenia^{24, 25}

Art therapy can also reduce stress in family caregivers of cancer patients. In addition, this therapy is often used in palliative care and pediatric hospitals.

What is the potential risk or harm of art therapy?

Art therapy is considered safe for most people.

Biofeedback

Biofeedback involves training the mind to change your body's reactions. Patients are connected to equipment that measures certain body functions such as breath rate and blood pressure. This equipment allows patients to see how their bodies react to their behavior or thought processes. In time, patients can learn to change a reaction and thereby help them relax or reduce symptoms of disease.

By letting patients control their body's reactions, biofeedback can help reduce stress, tension, pain and other symptoms. This therapy also helps patients have a sense of control over their health.

Some studies suggest that biofeedback can help treat:

- Alcoholism and substance abuse²⁶
- Anxiety²⁷
- Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)²⁸
- Chronic pain and headaches^{29, 30}
- Diabetes³¹
- Epilepsy³²
- High blood pressure (HBP)³³
- Insomnia²⁹
- Motion sickness³⁴
- Temporomandibular joint disorder (TMJ)³⁵
- Traumatic brain injury²⁸

What is the potential risk or harm of biofeedback?

Biofeedback is considered safe for most people. However, the small amount of electricity used by the equipment might affect a pacemaker.

Chiropractic

Chiropractic is a type of healthcare that believes most illness comes from problems inside the spinal cord. A chiropractor tries to treat illness by adjusting the spine to allow the nerves to work better. Chiropractors may use other treatment methods as well.

Daniel David Palmer, who developed chiropractic in the 1890s, believed that problems in the spine could keep the body from working well and healing itself. This therapy may cause the body to release chemicals that affect how pain and pleasure are felt.

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Some studies suggest that chiropractic can help treat:

- Back pain³⁶
- Headaches³⁷
- Neck pain³⁸

What is the potential risk or harm of chiropractic treatment?

Serious side effects are rare. Case reports have linked high-pressure neck adjustments to a certain kind of stroke, but the risk seems to be very small. Chiropractic is not recommended for patients with bone cancer and diseases of the spinal cord and bone marrow.

Dance/Movement Therapy

Dance/movement therapy is based on the idea that your body and mind are connected. Providers work with clients in groups or one-on-one in settings that include hospitals, clinics, wellness centers, schools and nursing homes.

Dance/movement therapy can increase self-esteem and self-confidence in people with body-image problems such as those caused by eating disorders and breast cancer treatment. It can reduce pain related to chronic muscle tension, help you move easier and be more coordinated and help make your heart and lungs stronger. Dance/movement therapy also helps people feel “at home” in their bodies and give them a source of joy.

Some studies suggest that dance/movement therapy can help treat:

- ADHD³⁹
- Autism and other developmental delays or disorders^{40, 41}
- Cystic fibrosis^{42, 43}
- Dementia⁴⁴
- Depression⁴⁵
- Parkinson’s disease⁴⁶
- Schizophrenia⁴¹

What is the potential risk or harm of dance/movement therapy?

Dance/movement therapy is considered safe for most people. If you try this kind of therapy, let the provider know about any health problems you have. This will allow the provider to change the therapy based on your needs.

Feldenkrais Method®

Developed by Russian-born physicist and athlete Moshe Feldenkrais (1904–1984), this method teaches people to move with more ease and less pain. In group classes, the teacher guides students in simple exercises involving bending, turning and other movements. In private sessions, the teacher provides gentle hands-on lessons based on the individual's needs. Clients remain fully clothed during both group classes and private sessions.

Providers help clients learn about the way they move and try new movements that may be easier. Some people claim that this method can help people who have a hard time moving because of injury, stroke or other conditions. It is also popular with actors, musicians and athletes.

Some studies suggest that the Feldenkrais Method can help treat:

- Anxiety in people with multiple sclerosis^{47, 48}
- Balance and mobility problems in older adults⁴⁹
- Lower back, neck and shoulder pain^{47, 50}
- Problems with body image in people with eating disorders⁵¹

What is the potential risk or harm of the Feldenkrais Method?

The Feldenkrais Method is considered safe for most people. Speak with your doctor if you have any chronic health problems or if you are recovering from injury or surgery.

Guided Imagery

Guided imagery is a way of using your imagination to improve your health. Imagery involves what you see, hear, smell, taste and feel in your imagination. If you imagine a place that relaxes you, your body will feel more relaxed.

Research shows that imagery can change your heart rate, blood pressure and other actions in your body. Guided imagery can be used for specific health concerns. For instance, people with high blood pressure might imagine their blood flowing through open, relaxed blood vessels. Cancer patients might picture their immune system cells gobbling up cancer cells like Pac-Man.

Some studies suggest that guided imagery can help treat:

- Asthma⁵²
- High blood pressure⁵³
- Migraines and tension headaches⁵⁴
- Osteoarthritis pain⁵⁵

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- Poststroke paralysis⁵⁶
- Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)⁵⁷
- Symptoms of Parkinson's disease⁵⁸
- Symptoms related to surgery⁵⁹

What is the potential risk or harm of guided imagery?

Guided imagery is considered safe for most people.

Healing Touch

Healing Touch (HT) is an energy therapy that is used mostly by nurses. HT providers use light touch near or on the client's clothed body. People often report feeling deeply relaxed during and after a session. HT is used with standard medical care at some hospitals, long-term care facilities and private practices.

By putting the client's energy field in balance, HT providers try to improve the person's well-being and natural ability to heal.

Some studies suggest that HT can help reduce:

- Anxiety and stress⁶⁰
- Recovery time after surgery⁶¹
- Fatigue and nausea in cancer patients^{62, 63}
- Chronic headaches⁶⁴
- Symptoms of dementia⁶⁵

What is the potential risk or harm of Healing Touch?

HT is considered safe for most people.

Hypnosis

Hypnosis involves entering a state of focused attention to promote physical or mental health. A therapist with training in hypnosis may help you to enter this state by having you focus on a small object. Once you are in a state of focused attention, the therapist offers ideas specific to your health concern. Even while hypnotized, you remain in complete control, just as someone who is daydreaming can decide to stop at any point.

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Some scientists believe that hypnosis can cause the brain to release natural painkillers to ease pain. Others believe that hypnosis acts through the unconscious mind and the power of suggestion.

Some studies suggest that hypnosis can help treat or reduce:

- Anxiety and phobias⁶⁶
- Eczema^{67, 68}
- Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)⁶⁸
- Nausea and vomiting due to chemotherapy⁶⁹
- Smoking⁶⁸
- Symptoms of dementia⁷⁰
- Tension headaches⁶⁸

What is the potential risk or harm of hypnosis?

Hypnosis is considered safe for most people.

Massage Therapy

Massage therapists rub and knead the body's soft tissues. Several different types of massage have developed over time around the world. These include Swedish massage (the most popular form in the United States), shiatsu (from Japan), Thai massage and tuina (from China). Massages often occur in a warm, comfortable room and last 15 to 90 minutes.

Massage helps your muscles relax, which in turn reduces stress. It is helpful in treating problems made worse by muscle tension, such as headaches, backaches and insomnia. As muscles are rubbed, blood and oxygen start moving through your body more easily. Patients with serious diseases find that massage helps them relax and feel better.

Some studies suggest that massage therapy can help treat:

- Anxiety and depression⁷¹
- Back pain⁷¹
- Knee arthritis⁷²
- Migraines⁷³
- Neck pain⁷⁴
- Pain from surgery^{71, 75}

Interestingly, studies show that premature babies gain weight faster if they are massaged. However, it is unclear why.

What is the potential risk or harm of massage therapy?

Massage should be avoided in the following situations or areas of the body:

- Bone metastases⁷⁶
- Bruised, damaged or infected parts of the body
- Circulatory problems such as phlebitis⁷⁷ or varicose veins
- Following surgery, chemotherapy or radiation treatment
- Risk of bleeding or tissue damage
- Tumors

Meditation

Meditation involves focusing on one thing, like your breath or a repeated word or phrase. Many forms of meditation come from Eastern and Western religions. However, you do not need to be part of these spiritual traditions to try meditation. Meditation helps to clear the mind of anxious thoughts and relax the body. To get the full benefits of meditation, try it once or twice a day for 10–20 minutes.

Meditation can increase activity in the parts of your brain that control good emotions such as happiness. Plus, regular meditation may slow brain decline related to aging. It may also lower blood pressure, relax breathing rates and increase healthy blood flow.

Some studies suggest that meditation can help:

- Anxiety and depression⁷⁸
- Arthritis⁷⁸
- ADHD⁷⁹
- Back pain⁸⁰
- Heart disease and high blood pressure⁷⁸
- Hot flashes⁸¹
- Irritable bowel syndrome⁷⁸
- Premenstrual syndrome⁷⁸

Meditation may help to improve cognitive function and blood pressure.⁷⁸ It can boost mood, improve sleep quality and reduce stress in cancer patients.⁷⁸

What is the potential risk or harm of meditation?

Meditation is considered safe for most people. However, people at risk of mental illness should talk to a doctor before starting meditation.

Music Therapy

Throughout history, people around the world have used music in stress reduction and healing. Music therapy may be good for patients of any age, ethnicity, religious background or stage of illness. It may involve listening to music, playing instruments, singing or writing your own songs.

Listening to slow, relaxing music can lower your heart rate, blood pressure and breathing rate. Listening to music with a lively beat can give you energy. Research also suggests that music can affect the hormones in your body. These hormones can reduce pain and stress levels, and can help keep you from getting sick.

Some studies suggest that music therapy can help treat:

- Anxiety and depression⁸²
- Autism⁸³
- Chronic pain⁸⁴
- Memory problems in Alzheimer’s patients⁸⁵
- Sleep problems⁸⁶
- Symptoms of neurological problems⁸⁷

Music therapy can also help premature infants gain weight.⁸⁸ In addition, music therapy is used in some hospices to ease the dying process.⁸⁹

What is the potential risk or harm of music therapy?

Music therapy is considered safe for most people.

Qigong

Qigong (pronounced chee gung) is a physical and mental exercise that combines breathing techniques with simple movements. It is based on traditional Chinese beliefs in qi, the life force. Qigong means “cultivating energy.” It resembles tai chi but often consists of shorter sets of movements that are easy to learn.

The traditional Chinese purpose of qigong is to rebalance the inner qi. This calms the mind and energizes the body and all of its systems. In Chinese medicine, qi is believed to affect blood flow, the lymph and nervous systems, blood pressure, heart rate and stress levels.

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Some studies suggest that qigong can help:

- Encourage sleep and relaxation⁹⁰
- Reduce anxiety, stress and depression^{91, 92, 93}
- Improve balance and reduce the number of falls^{94, 95}
- Lower blood pressure⁹⁶
- Treat asthma⁹⁷
- Treat arthritis⁹⁸
- Improve movement problems in people with Parkinson's disease⁹⁹

What is the potential risk or harm of qigong?

Qigong exercises do not challenge strength or stamina and can even be used by people in wheelchairs and individuals with frail bones. Qigong is considered safe for most people.

Reiki

Reiki (pronounced ray-key) is a spiritual healing practice that seeks to restore balance. Providers place their hands lightly on the patient's body to send subtle energy to the patient. The patient remains fully clothed and often lies on a padded table. Patients typically feel very relaxed and peaceful and sometimes fall asleep. Some people may sense a feeling of heat or coolness or very subtle pleasant waves.

It is believed that Reiki increases levels of peace, balance and relaxation. Reiki healing is understood to be drawn through the provider in a way that is based on the recipient's need. In this way, it is the recipient, not the provider, who controls what is happening on a subtle level.

Some studies suggest that Reiki can help reduce:

- Behavioral and memory problems in people with mild Alzheimer's disease¹⁰⁰
- Pain and anxiety^{101, 102}
- Symptoms of depression¹⁰³

What is the potential risk or harm of Reiki?

Reiki is considered safe for most people.

Tai Chi

Tai chi (pronounced “tie-chee”) is an ancient Chinese martial art based on the philosophy of Taoism. Its movements are gentle and well suited for those who are not physically strong, healthy or flexible. Deliberate movements are combined with meditation and controlled breathing.

Tai chi improves health through exercise, which helps you relax and reduce stress. According to Traditional Chinese Medicine, tai chi exercises also balance qi. Tai chi is thought to improve concentration, energy, posture and circulation. It can also give you an increased sense of well-being. Tai chi is best regarded as a lifelong preventive strategy to keep you healthy.

Some studies suggest that tai chi can help:

- Lessen arthritis pain and disability¹⁰⁴
- Lower blood pressure¹⁰⁵
- Improve heart and lung functions¹⁰⁶
- Increase balance and flexibility¹⁰⁷
- Lower the risk of falls in older people¹⁰⁶
- Maintain bone density in postmenopausal women¹⁰⁸
- Improve sleep in seniors¹⁰⁷

What is the potential risk or harm of tai chi?

As with any fitness program, you could get sore muscles or even sprains if you exercise too much. But in general, these exercises are considered safe for most people.

Therapeutic Touch®

Therapeutic Touch (TT) is based on the idea that a life force within and around the body is essential to good health. Most often practiced by nurses, TT involves sweeping the hands down the patient’s body to smooth energy fields and remove blockages in the patient’s vital energy. Sessions typically last about 30 minutes. Despite what the name implies, TT does not call for actually touching the patient’s body.

Some people believe that TT removes blockages and harmful energy in the patient’s energy fields. Patients have reported that they feel more relaxed, feel less stressed and have less pain after TT treatments.

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Some studies suggest that TT can help:

- Treat burns and other wounds^{109, 110}
- Relieve osteoarthritis pain¹¹¹
- Relieve tension headaches¹¹²
- Lower anxiety¹¹³
- Relieve symptoms of dementia¹¹⁴
- Promote well-being in cancer patients¹¹⁵

What is the potential risk or harm of Therapeutic Touch?

TT is considered safe for most people.

Yoga

Yoga exercises help the body and mind work together. Yoga is often done in group classes. There are three main parts: breathing exercises, body poses and meditation. Through a series of positions, all the muscle groups in the body can be strengthened and stretched. Through breathing exercises and meditation, yoga poses seek to bring balance between the body and the mind.

Yoga connects the mind, body and spirit together. Yoga has been defined as a system of personal development. When practiced regularly, it can help you relax, reduce stress, strengthen your body and improve flexibility.

Some studies suggest that yoga can help treat:

- Anxiety, depression and insomnia^{116, 117}
- Arthritis^{118, 119}
- Carpal tunnel syndrome¹²⁰
- Chronic low back pain¹¹⁶
- Diabetes¹¹⁶
- High blood pressure¹¹⁶
- Symptoms of menopause¹¹⁷

Yoga has been shown to improve sleep, mood and overall quality of life in cancer patients. It has also been found to reduce the risk of falls by older people¹²¹, and to improve lung function in people with asthma.

What is the potential risk or harm of yoga?

As with any exercise program, people under medical care should consult their doctors to be sure that yoga is appropriate. Since yoga involves moving your body, you need to be careful about pushing yourself too hard. Some poses can cause problems if done too hard or for too long. Tell your yoga teacher about any health problems, including joint problems, high blood pressure and glaucoma. Your teacher will show you which positions to avoid or change.

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