

Vinyasa Yoga and Flourishing: A Literature Review

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2026.1306000533>

Received: 09 July 2026; Accepted: 14 July 2026; Published: 24 July 2026

ABSTRACT

The growing emphasis on promoting psychological well-being has shifted attention from the treatment of mental illness toward understanding the factors that support human flourishing. Within positive psychology, Seligman's PERMA model provides a comprehensive framework for conceptualizing well-being through five interconnected dimensions: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. At the same time, yoga has gained increasing recognition as a holistic practice that supports physical and psychological health. This literature review examines the relationship between Vinyasa yoga, positive psychology, and psychological well-being through the lens of the PERMA framework. Drawing on theoretical and empirical literature, the review synthesizes evidence on the psychological benefits of yoga, with particular attention to the distinctive characteristics of Vinyasa yoga, including continuous movement, breath synchronization, mindfulness, and flow experiences. The literature suggests that these characteristics align closely with the five dimensions of the PERMA model and may contribute to flourishing by fostering positive emotions, engagement, supportive relationships, purpose, and personal accomplishment. Despite these promising findings, existing research has largely focused on general yoga practices or isolated psychological outcomes rather than examining Vinyasa yoga within a comprehensive positive psychology framework.

Keywords: Vinyasa yoga; PERMA model; positive psychology; well-being; flourishing; literature review

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, psychological research has increasingly expanded beyond the traditional focus on mental illness and psychological dysfunction toward understanding the factors that promote optimal functioning, resilience, and human flourishing. This shift has been strongly influenced by the field of positive psychology, which examines the strengths, behaviors, and experiences that enable individuals to achieve meaningful and fulfilling lives. Within this field, psychological well-being is understood as a multidimensional construct involving positive emotions, engagement, meaningful relationships, purpose, personal growth, and accomplishment rather than merely the absence of psychological distress.

One of the most influential frameworks within positive psychology is Seligman's PERMA model, which provides a comprehensive approach to understanding well-being through five interconnected elements: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment (Seligman, 2011). The PERMA model extends traditional views of happiness by emphasizing the importance of multiple domains that contribute to flourishing. Since its introduction, the model has been widely applied in psychological research and interventions aimed at enhancing well-being across different populations and settings (Butler & Kern, 2016).

Alongside the growing interest in positive psychology, mind-body practices such as yoga have received increasing attention as potential approaches for improving physical and psychological health. Yoga combines physical postures (*asanas*), breathing practices (*pranayama*), and meditation to promote balance between physical functioning, emotional regulation, and mental awareness (Cramer et al., 2016). Research has demonstrated that yoga practice may contribute to reductions in stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms while improving mindfulness, emotional regulation, and overall quality of life (Ross & Thomas, 2010). Among various yoga styles, Vinyasa yoga has become particularly popular in Western societies due to its dynamic integration of movement and breath. Characterized by continuous sequences of postures linked to mindful breathing, Vinyasa yoga may offer unique opportunities to develop attention, embodiment, and psychological engagement (Larson-Meyer, 2016).

Although existing research has demonstrated the potential benefits of yoga for health and well-being, much of the literature has focused primarily on reducing negative psychological outcomes, such as stress, anxiety, and depression. While these outcomes are important, positive psychology emphasizes that well-being involves more than the reduction of psychological difficulties; it also includes the cultivation of positive emotions, meaningful experiences, supportive relationships, purpose, and personal achievement. Therefore, examining yoga through a positive psychology framework may provide a broader understanding of how yoga contributes to human flourishing.

Despite increasing recognition of yoga's benefits, several gaps remain in the literature. First, relatively few studies have examined yoga practice through the comprehensive framework of PERMA, with existing research often focusing on individual outcomes rather than multiple dimensions of well-being simultaneously. Second, limited research has specifically investigated Vinyasa yoga and its distinctive characteristics, including continuous movement, breath synchronization, and flow experiences, which may influence psychological processes differently from other yoga styles. Third, although quantitative studies provide valuable evidence regarding yoga-related outcomes, qualitative exploration is needed to understand individuals' lived experiences and the mechanisms through which yoga may influence well-being.

Therefore, this literature review examines the relationship between Vinyasa yoga, positive psychology, and psychological well-being through the lens of the PERMA model. By synthesizing existing theoretical and empirical evidence, this review aims to clarify how Vinyasa yoga may contribute to flourishing and identify directions for future research on integrated wellness interventions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Psychological well-being

Psychological well-being is a multidimensional construct influenced by various factors, including physical health, interpersonal relationships, social roles, resilience, and age-related changes. Research suggests that higher levels of psychological well-being function as protective factors that reduce the risk of chronic illness, lessen the adverse effects of disability, and contribute to increased longevity, particularly among older adults. Furthermore, having a clear sense of purpose and engaging in regular physical activity are associated with improved emotional regulation and enhanced psychological well-being (Kusz et al., 2020).

Psychological well-being is commonly defined as the presence of positive emotions and the relative absence of psychological distress. However, contemporary perspectives extend beyond emotional functioning to encompass autonomy, environmental mastery, positive interpersonal relationships, personal growth, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. These dimensions collectively contribute to an individual's overall quality of life and have been consistently associated with improved mental and physical health outcomes, greater life satisfaction, and increased life expectancy (Dhanabhakym et al., 2023; Pollastri et al., 2023).

Rodríguez et al. conceptualized psychological well-being from a eudaimonic perspective, emphasizing the realization of one's potential rather than the pursuit of pleasure alone. From this viewpoint, psychological well-

being reflects individuals' ability to develop meaningful goals, maintain positive relationships, and continue personal growth. Their study of university students demonstrated that a strong sense of purpose and meaning helps students cope with academic demands and life transitions, whereas psychological distress and uncertainty are associated with reduced well-being. Similarly, Sandoval et al. reported that many university students exhibit moderate levels of psychological well-being, suggesting that while they encounter considerable academic and personal challenges, many also demonstrate resilience and adaptive coping strategies.

Collectively, these studies indicate that psychological well-being is a complex and dynamic construct influenced by psychological, social, and behavioral factors. Rather than merely reflecting the absence of mental illness, psychological well-being represents optimal psychological functioning characterized by positive emotions, meaningful relationships, personal growth, resilience, and a sense of purpose. These findings provide a theoretical foundation for examining interventions that promote flourishing and enhance overall well-being among young adults.

Positive psychology and PERMA

Positive psychology emerged as a distinct field of psychology in the late 1990s, emphasizing the scientific study of human strengths, optimal functioning, and the factors that enable individuals and communities to flourish. Rather than focusing solely on the prevention and treatment of mental illness, positive psychology seeks to understand and promote positive emotions, resilience, engagement, meaning, and other psychological resources that contribute to overall well-being. Founded on empirical research, the field examines the conditions that foster life satisfaction, psychological resilience, and human flourishing.

The development of positive psychology is closely associated with Martin Seligman, who introduced the movement during his presidency of the American Psychological Association (APA) in 1998. In his inaugural address, Seligman advocated for expanding psychology's traditional focus on pathology by encouraging the scientific study of positive human functioning and well-being. This shift initiated extensive research on interventions designed to enhance life satisfaction, cultivate individual strengths, and promote flourishing (Rusk & Waters, 2015).

To explain the nature of human flourishing, Seligman (2011) proposed the PERMA model of well-being, which identifies five core elements that contribute to optimal psychological functioning: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. According to the model, each element contributes independently to well-being and is pursued because it is intrinsically valuable.

The five components of the PERMA model are defined as follows:

- **Positive Emotion** refers to experiencing pleasant emotions such as happiness, gratitude, hope, contentment, and optimism.
- **Engagement** involves becoming deeply absorbed in meaningful activities, often characterized by the psychological state of flow, in which individuals experience complete concentration and lose awareness of time.
- **Relationships** emphasize the development and maintenance of positive, supportive, and meaningful interpersonal connections that contribute to emotional and psychological well-being.
- **Meaning** refers to having a sense of purpose and belonging by contributing to goals or causes greater than oneself.
- **Accomplishment** involves pursuing and achieving personally meaningful goals, thereby fostering competence, mastery, and a sense of achievement.

The PERMA model provides a comprehensive framework for understanding well-being by extending beyond the traditional concept of happiness to include multiple dimensions of psychological functioning. Since its introduction, the model has been widely adopted in research, education, healthcare, and organizational settings as a framework for assessing and promoting human flourishing (Butler & Kern, 2016).

Collectively, the principles of positive psychology and the PERMA model provide a strong theoretical foundation for examining interventions that enhance psychological well-being. In the context of the present review, the PERMA framework offers a useful lens for understanding how Vinyasa yoga may contribute to flourishing by promoting positive emotions, engagement, supportive relationships, meaning, and personal accomplishment.

Yoga

Yoga has become widely recognized as a holistic practice that promotes both physical and psychological well-being. Originating in ancient India as a spiritual discipline, yoga has evolved into a widely practiced health and wellness intervention, particularly in Western societies. Contemporary yoga practice typically integrates asanas (physical postures), pranayama (breathing techniques), and meditation to improve physical fitness, emotional regulation, and mental well-being (Cramer et al., 2016). As public interest in complementary and integrative health practices has grown, scientific research has increasingly examined yoga's therapeutic potential across diverse populations.

Among the various styles of yoga, Vinyasa yoga has emerged as one of the most popular forms practiced in Western countries. The term *Vinyasa*, often translated as "flow," refers to the coordinated synchronization of movement and breath through a continuous sequence of postures (Larson-Meyer, 2016). Unlike more static forms of yoga, such as Hatha or Iyengar yoga, Vinyasa emphasizes fluid movement, dynamic transitions, and sustained attention to breathing, creating an active and mindful practice.

National survey data reported by Cramer et al. (2016) indicate that approximately 21 million adults in the United States practiced yoga within one year, with Vinyasa or flow-based styles among the most commonly practiced forms. The study further found that yoga participation was more prevalent among young adults, women, and individuals with higher educational attainment. These demographic trends highlight the relevance of examining the effects of Vinyasa yoga on psychological well-being, particularly among young adult populations.

Substantial evidence supports the physical and psychological benefits of yoga practice. A comprehensive review by Ross and Thomas (2010), which synthesized findings from 81 studies, concluded that yoga may be as effective as, or in some cases more effective than, conventional forms of exercise in improving multiple health outcomes. The review reported consistent benefits in reducing stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms while enhancing flexibility, balance, muscular strength, and cardiovascular fitness. These findings suggest that yoga promotes holistic well-being by integrating physical activity with mindfulness and breath regulation.

Although the therapeutic effects of yoga have been extensively documented, relatively few studies have specifically examined Vinyasa yoga within the framework of positive psychology. The distinctive characteristics of Vinyasa practice—continuous movement, breath synchronization, mindfulness, and opportunities for social interaction—suggest that it may support multiple dimensions of psychological well-being. Consequently, the following section reviews the existing literature on how Vinyasa yoga may contribute to the five components of Seligman's PERMA model: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment.

Vinyasa Yoga Within the PERMA Framework

The PERMA model provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding how Vinyasa yoga may promote psychological well-being. Although relatively few studies have explicitly examined Vinyasa yoga using the PERMA model, existing research suggests that many characteristics of Vinyasa practice align with the five dimensions of well-being proposed by Seligman (2011). The dynamic integration of movement, breath

regulation, mindfulness, and social interaction may contribute to positive emotions, engagement, meaningful relationships, purpose, and personal accomplishment.

Positive Emotion

Positive emotion is a fundamental component of the PERMA model and refers to experiencing pleasant emotional states such as happiness, gratitude, optimism, and contentment. Research suggests that yoga practice contributes to positive emotional experiences by increasing mindfulness, body awareness, and emotional regulation. Impett et al. (2006) found that greater body awareness developed through yoga practice was associated with increased positive affect and reduced negative emotions. Similarly, Hötzel et al. (2015) reported that participants engaged in a flow-based yoga intervention experienced significantly greater vitality and positive affect than those in a control group. Although the intervention was not explicitly identified as Vinyasa yoga, its emphasis on continuous movement synchronized with breathing closely resembles Vinyasa practice. Collectively, these findings suggest that Vinyasa yoga may enhance positive emotions through mindful movement and embodied awareness.

Engagement

Engagement refers to deep psychological involvement in an activity and is often associated with the experience of flow. Within the context of yoga, the continuous coordination of breath and movement requires sustained attention and present-moment awareness, creating conditions that facilitate this optimal psychological state. Gaiswinkler and Unterrainer (2016) reported that individuals who practiced yoga more frequently demonstrated higher levels of mindfulness and psychological well-being, with mindfulness acting as a mediator between yoga practice and well-being. These findings are consistent with Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) theory of flow, which proposes that activities balancing challenge and skill while providing clear goals and immediate feedback are most likely to induce complete absorption. The progressive and rhythmic nature of Vinyasa yoga closely reflects these characteristics, suggesting that regular practice may enhance engagement through repeated flow experiences.

Relationships

Supportive interpersonal relationships represent another core dimension of the PERMA model. Although research specifically examining Vinyasa yoga remains limited, available evidence indicates that yoga practice may strengthen both interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships. Kishida et al. (2018) found that yoga practitioners reported greater self-awareness, self-compassion, patience, and empathy, which positively influenced their relationships with others. Similarly, Park et al. (2016) observed that group exercise environments, including yoga classes, foster social connectedness and a stronger sense of belonging. Because Vinyasa yoga is commonly practiced in group settings that involve synchronized movement and breathing, it may further promote social support, shared experiences, and interpersonal connection.

Meaning

Meaning refers to having a sense of purpose and belonging to something greater than oneself. Several studies suggest that yoga contributes to this dimension of well-being by integrating philosophical reflection, mindfulness, and personal growth. Ivztan and Papantoniou (2014) reported that individuals who practiced yoga more frequently demonstrated higher levels of eudaimonic well-being, including a stronger sense of meaning and purpose in life. Likewise, Wachholtz and Pargament (2005) found that meditation practices incorporating spiritual elements produced greater reductions in anxiety and larger improvements in positive mood than secular meditation. Although Vinyasa yoga often emphasizes physical movement, many classes also integrate yogic philosophy, intention setting, and mindfulness practices that may foster a deeper sense of meaning and psychological well-being.

Accomplishment

Accomplishment reflects the pursuit and achievement of meaningful goals and the development of competence and mastery. While this component has received comparatively less attention in yoga research, existing evidence suggests that regular yoga practice promotes self-efficacy and personal growth. Birdee et al. (2009) reported that yoga practitioners frequently experienced increased confidence, personal development, and perceived mastery through continued practice. Similarly, Taspinar et al. (2014) found that participation in a flow-based yoga program resulted in significant improvements in physical fitness among young adults. These progressive gains in strength, flexibility, balance, and technical skill may reinforce feelings of accomplishment and competence, consistent with the Accomplishment dimension of the PERMA model.

Overall, the available literature suggests that Vinyasa yoga aligns closely with the five dimensions of the PERMA model. Through the integration of mindful movement, breath regulation, progressive skill development, and opportunities for social interaction, Vinyasa yoga appears to support positive emotions, engagement, meaningful relationships, purpose, and personal accomplishment. Nevertheless, relatively few empirical studies have examined these dimensions simultaneously within a single PERMA-based framework. This gap highlights the need for further research investigating the mechanisms through which Vinyasa yoga contributes to flourishing and psychological well-being.

Flourishing

Flourishing represents an optimal state of psychological functioning characterized by positive emotions, meaningful engagement, supportive relationships, purpose, and personal accomplishment. Unlike traditional definitions of well-being that focus primarily on happiness or the absence of psychological distress, flourishing reflects the active presence of a fulfilling and meaningful life. Within positive psychology, flourishing is considered the outcome of developing and sustaining multiple dimensions of well-being rather than achieving a single emotional state.

Seligman (2011) proposed that flourishing can be understood through the PERMA model, which identifies five essential components of well-being: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. According to this perspective, individuals flourish when they cultivate positive experiences, become deeply involved in meaningful activities, establish supportive social connections, pursue purposeful goals, and achieve personal growth. The PERMA framework has therefore become an influential model for conceptualizing and assessing human flourishing within positive psychology research.

Research on positive psychology interventions has demonstrated that flourishing can be enhanced through intentional activities that promote positive emotions, strengths, and meaningful engagement. Seligman and colleagues examined several interventions designed to increase well-being and reduce depressive symptoms, including the "Three Good Things" exercise, which involves reflecting on positive experiences and their causes, and strengths-based interventions using the Values in Action (VIA) Character Strengths framework. These approaches have demonstrated potential for improving well-being by encouraging individuals to recognize positive experiences, utilize personal strengths, and develop greater self-awareness.

The concept of flourishing provides an important theoretical foundation for understanding how wellness interventions may contribute to psychological health. Practices that encourage mindfulness, self-reflection, positive emotional experiences, social connection, and personal growth may support multiple dimensions of flourishing. In this context, Vinyasa yoga may represent a complementary approach to promoting flourishing by incorporating mindful movement, focused attention, social interaction, and opportunities for personal development. However, further research is needed to examine how Vinyasa yoga specifically contributes to flourishing through the mechanisms described within the PERMA framework.

CONCLUSION

The literature reviewed demonstrates that psychological well-being is a multidimensional construct encompassing positive emotions, meaningful engagement, supportive relationships, purpose in life, and personal accomplishment. Within positive psychology, Seligman's PERMA model provides a comprehensive framework for understanding flourishing by emphasizing these interconnected dimensions of well-being. Rather than defining wellness solely as the absence of psychological distress, contemporary research recognizes flourishing as the presence of optimal psychological functioning and the capacity to live a meaningful, engaged, and fulfilling life.

Existing evidence suggests that yoga is an effective holistic practice for promoting both physical and psychological health. Through the integration of physical postures, breath regulation, mindfulness, and meditation, yoga has been associated with improvements in emotional regulation, stress reduction, resilience, and overall well-being. Among the various styles of yoga, Vinyasa yoga appears particularly relevant to positive psychology because its dynamic synchronization of movement and breath may foster positive emotions, deep engagement, social connection, personal meaning, and a sense of accomplishment. Collectively, these characteristics indicate that Vinyasa yoga aligns closely with the five dimensions of the PERMA model and may serve as a valuable approach for promoting flourishing.

Despite these promising findings, important gaps remain in the literature. Most studies have examined yoga in relation to isolated psychological outcomes, such as stress, anxiety, or depression, rather than investigating how it contributes to multiple dimensions of well-being simultaneously. In addition, relatively few studies have focused specifically on Vinyasa yoga, despite its distinctive characteristics that may influence psychological processes differently from other yoga styles. Furthermore, existing research has relied predominantly on quantitative methods, limiting understanding of the lived experiences and personal meanings individuals attribute to their yoga practice. Greater use of qualitative and mixed-methods approaches may provide richer insights into the mechanisms through which Vinyasa yoga supports psychological well-being and flourishing.

Overall, the literature suggests that Vinyasa yoga holds considerable potential as a positive psychology intervention that promotes holistic well-being and human flourishing. Examining Vinyasa yoga through the PERMA framework offers a more comprehensive understanding of its psychological benefits by moving beyond the reduction of distress to consider the cultivation of positive emotions, meaningful engagement, supportive relationships, purpose, and personal growth. Continued research integrating positive psychology and yoga is needed to strengthen the evidence base and inform the development of effective, evidence-based wellness interventions for diverse populations.

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