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The Psychophysiological Effects of Yoga Nidra: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Chronic stress is a significant driver of the global rise in non-communicable diseases, such as hypertension and anxiety disorders, creating an urgent need for effective, non-pharmacological interventions. Yoga Nidra, a systematic method of guided relaxation, has emerged as a promising therapeutic modality. This systematic review synthesized the current scientific evidence on the effects of Yoga Nidra, examining its impact across four integrated domains: cardiovascular, psychological, neurological, and endocrine systems. A literature search was conducted across PubMed, PMC, and ResearchGate, with selection criteria prioritizing peer-reviewed systematic reviews, meta-analyses, randomized controlled trials, and neuroimaging studies. The evidence demonstrated that Yoga Nidra facilitates a state of parasympathetic nervous system dominance, leading to statistically significant reductions in blood pressure and the stress hormone cortisol. Neurologically, this state was characterized by a shift from active Beta brainwaves to restful Alpha and deep Theta waves. These physiological changes provided a clear mechanism for the practice's clinical benefits, including marked reductions in anxiety, stress, and depression across various populations. The findings of this review consolidate the evidence for Yoga Nidra as a potent mind-body therapy that promotes psychophysiological homeostasis. Through an integrated mechanism involving top-down regulation of the nervous and endocrine systems, it offers a viable and accessible intervention for managing stress-related health conditions.

Keywords: Anxiety, Autonomic Nervous System, Cardiovascular, Cortisol, Hypertension, Systematic Review, Yoga Nidra.

1. Introduction:

The global health landscape is increasingly defined by the burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), which are driven by factors inherent to modern society. Chronic stress, in particular, is recognized as a significant contributor to these conditions, highlighting an urgent need for accessible interventions that can mitigate its downstream physiological and psychological consequences [1] In this context, mind-body therapies like Yoga Nidra have garnered significant interest. Often translated as "yogic sleep," Yoga Nidra is a systematic method of inducing complete relaxation while maintaining conscious awareness. Originating from the ancient tantric practice of *nyasa* and systemized by Swami Satyananda Saraswati, it is distinct from both conventional sleep and other forms of meditation. The practice guides an individual through a series of stages including rotation of consciousness, breath awareness, and guided imagery to facilitate a structured withdrawal of the senses (*pratyahara*) and achieve a deep state of psychophysiological rest.

2. Aims and Objectives

Given the rising prevalence of stress-related disorders and the unique psychophysiological state induced by Yoga Nidra, there is a growing scientific rationale for investigating its therapeutic applications. While preliminary research is promising, a comprehensive synthesis is needed to clarify its efficacy. Therefore, the primary objective of this paper is to conduct a systematic review of the existing scientific literature on the effects of Yoga Nidra on both physical and mental health. Specifically, this review will synthesize and evaluate evidence across four key domains: cardiovascular regulation, psychological states, neurological activity, and hormonal responses. [2]

3. Methodology

This paper conducts a systematic review of existing scientific literature to synthesize current knowledge on the effects of Yoga Nidra. No original experimental data was collected. The methodology outlined below describes the process used to search for, identify, and select relevant studies for inclusion in this review.

3.1. Search Strategy

A systematic literature search was conducted to identify relevant studies. The primary databases searched were PubMed/PubMed Central (PMC) and Google Scholar. Additional articles and preprints were sourced from ResearchGate to ensure a comprehensive review of recent findings. The search included articles published up to September 2025.

3.2. Eligibility Criteria

Eligibility for inclusion in this review was determined by a set of predefined criteria aligned with the PICOS framework. For **Study Design (S)**, included publications were peer-reviewed original research articles, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses, with preprints from established archives also considered. Case reports, conference abstracts, and dissertations were explicitly excluded. The study **population (P)** was limited to human participants, including both healthy adults and various clinical populations. The core **intervention (I)** had to be a structured Yoga Nidra practice, while no restrictions were placed on the **comparison (C)** group. To be included, studies needed to measure at least one relevant psychophysiological **outcome (O)**, such as cardiovascular, psychological, neurological, or endocrine

variables.

4. Discussion

The evidence synthesized in this review paints a compelling picture of Yoga Nidra as a potent mind-body therapy with multifaceted physiological and psychological benefits. The findings across the four domains of investigation cardiovascular, psychological, neurological, and endocrine, are not isolated phenomena but rather interconnected components of a holistic stress-reduction mechanism. This discussion will first synthesize these pathways, then critically evaluate the limitations of the current body of research, and finally, propose directions for future investigation.

4.1. Psychophysiological Findings

Cardiovascular and Autonomic Regulation

The primary mechanism by which Yoga Nidra exerts its cardiovascular benefits is through the profound modulation of the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS). The practice facilitates a decisive shift from the sympathetic nervous system (SNS), which drives the stressful "fight-or-flight" response, to the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS), which promotes the restorative "rest-and-digest" state. This process, known as the relaxation response, is not merely a subjective experience but a measurable physiological event. A recent systematic review and meta-analysis, which represents the highest level of scientific evidence, has quantitatively confirmed this effect. The analysis, combining data from numerous clinical trials, concluded that Yoga Nidra practice leads to a statistically significant reduction in both systolic and diastolic blood pressure, a finding which is consistent with results from smaller-scale pilot studies [3]. This effect is significant enough for the authors to recommend Yoga Nidra as a non-pharmacological intervention for managing hypertension [4]. This down-regulation of sympathetic activity also improves autonomic resilience, which is reflected in measures like Heart Rate Variability (HRV)

Table -1 :Cardiovascular & Autonomic Regulation – Relevant Studies. Adapted from Pandi-Perumal, S. R., et al. (2022)[2]

S. No.	Author (Year)	Population	Design	Intervention	Results	Finding
1	Kumar (2005) [5]	N = 40 (M = 30; F = 10), mild hypertension, aged 30–60	Uncontrolled before–after	30 min/day Yoga Nidra for 15 days	Significant reductions in systolic BP (t = 10.13), diastolic BP (t = 8.09), pulse rate (t = 6.47), respiration rate (t = 5.02); stress, anger, fear reduced	Yoga Nidra reduces physiological stress responses; effective in hypertension management
2	Monika et al. (2012) [6]	150 females with menstrual irregularities (75 Yoga Nidra + medication, 75 medication only)	RCT	35–40 min/day Yoga Nidra, 5 days/week for 6 months	Significant improvement (P < 0.05) in autonomic parameters – HR, postural hypertension, sustained handgrip, E:I ratio, 30:15 ratio, Valsalva ratio, cardiac output	Yoga Nidra improves autonomic nervous system regulation in addition to symptom relief
3	Markil et al. (2012) [7]	N = 20 (M = 5; F = 15), aged 18–47	Randomized crossover	Hatha Yoga + 30 min Yoga Nidra vs. Yoga Nidra alone	Both groups showed significant favorable HRV changes (P < 0.001)	Yoga Nidra enhances parasympathetic activity and stabilizes autonomic balance
4	Kisan et al. (2014) [8]	N = 60 migraine patients (30 Yoga Nidra + conventional care, 30 conventional care only)	RCT	Yoga Nidra for 6 weeks	Significant reduction in headache frequency/intensity (P < 0.001); enhanced vagal tone, decreased sympathetic drive	Yoga Nidra improves cardiac autonomic balance; useful as adjunct therapy in migraine

The findings presented in Table 1 illustrate a consistent pattern of evidence supporting Yoga Nidra's role in cardiovascular and autonomic regulation. Early research by Kumar (2005) [5] established a direct clinical benefit, demonstrating that daily practice could significantly reduce key cardiovascular markers such as blood pressure, pulse, and respiration rates in individuals with hypertension.

Subsequent studies have further elucidated the physiological mechanisms driving these outcomes. Markil et al. (2012) [7], for instance, specifically highlighted the practice's capacity to enhance parasympathetic activity, as evidenced by favorable changes in heart rate variability (HRV). This finding is corroborated

by research from Monika et al. (2012) [6] and Kisan et al. (2014) [8], who respectively reported broad improvements in autonomic parameters and enhanced vagal tone alongside decreased sympathetic drive.

Collectively, this body of work demonstrates a clear pathway from the practice of Yoga Nidra to improved autonomic balance, which in turn yields significant and measurable cardioprotective effects.

Psychological and Mood Regulation

The application of Yoga Nidra as a therapeutic intervention for psychological distress, particularly affective disorders such as anxiety and depression, is strongly supported by a growing body of scientific literature. The practice's efficacy is largely attributed to its ability to induce a state of deep physiological relaxation, which directly counteracts the somatic and cognitive symptoms of hyper-arousal characteristic of anxiety states.

Early investigations, employing standardized psychometric scales, quantitatively demonstrated these benefits, revealing a significant reduction in both state and trait anxiety, as well as overall stress levels (see figure 1)**[**9**]**. These foundational findings have been validated in specific clinical populations; for example, a randomized controlled trial (RCT) involving patients with menstrual disorders confirmed that a Yoga Nidra intervention led to a significant reduction in both anxiety and depression scores **[**10**]**.

The therapeutic reach of the practice extends to emotionally vulnerable groups. Research has confirmed a significant positive impact on the mental health of adolescents who have experienced emotional abuse, demonstrating its potential as a non-invasive, supportive therapy for trauma-informed care in younger populations **[**11**]**. Furthermore, Yoga Nidra has proven effective in mitigating the effects of chronic occupational stress. A study on college professors, a high-stress profession, found that the practice significantly lowered perceived stress and mitigated symptoms of burnout **[**12**]**, highlighting its utility as a preventative tool for conditions with significant public health implications.

Neurological Correlates (Brainwaves)

The profound state of relaxation achieved during Yoga Nidra is neurologically characterized by distinct, measurable shifts in brainwave activity. The practice facilitates a sequential transition from the high-frequency Beta waves (13–30 Hz), which are associated with active, waking consciousness and logical thought, into slower, higher-amplitude brainwaves. The first significant change is a marked increase in Alpha wave (8–12 Hz) dominance. This neurological shift provides objective, electrophysiological evidence for the subjective experience of calmness. The potentiation of Alpha activity, as confirmed by EEG studies, signifies a quieting of the analytical mind and a withdrawal of sensory input, a state of relaxed, inward awareness often likened to the yogic principle of *pratyahara* [13].

As the practice deepens, there is a further transition into the even slower Theta wave (4–7 Hz) state. This state is phenomenologically characterized by experiences of dream-like imagery and a diminished sense of time and space, representing a shift toward subconscious processing while conscious awareness is maintained, a process visually demonstrated by EEG brain maps (see **Figure 2**) [14].

The co-activation of Theta activity alongside sustained Alpha is particularly noteworthy, as it represents a unique neurological signature of "conscious sleep." This state of deep physiological rest, where the mind remains a lucid, passive observer, is what distinguishes Yoga Nidra from the onset of conventional sleep, where consciousness is typically lost [15]. Beyond these brainwave frequencies, functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) studies are uncovering changes at the network level. These studies show that Yoga Nidra alters functional connectivity between key brain networks, such as the Default Mode Network (DMN) and the Salience Network (SN), suggesting a neural basis for the practice's effects on emotional regulation and self-awareness [16].

Beyond its effects on anxiety and stress, the practice of Yoga Nidra induces a complex and measurable altered state of consciousness. A detailed phenomenological study by Zaccaro et al. (2021) used psychometric questionnaires to map these subjective changes. As shown in **Table 2**, a key finding was a statistically significant increase in the perception of being in an "altered state," along with changes in "body image" and a reduction in "rationality" and "volitional control." The overall pattern of these changes, which visually distinguishes the Yoga Nidra state from the baseline, is illustrated in the radar graph in **Figure 3**.

Table 2. Psychometric questionnaire results comparing the subjective experience of participants at baseline versus after a Yoga Nidra session. Statistically significant changes are noted in scores for CADSS (dissociative states), body image, meaning, altered state, rationality, and volitional control. *Adapted from Zaccaro, A., et al. (2021).(13)*

	Baseline (SD)	Yoga Nidra (SD)	z	p Value	Corrected p Value	r
CADSS	4.3 (5.18)	21.1 (15.65)	-3.064	0.002*	0.022*	0.885
Joy	2.0 (0.80)	3.1 (1.52)	-1.886	0.059*	0.161	0.544
Sexual Excitement	1.6 (1.96)	0.6 (1.18)	-1.476	0.14	0.308	0.426
Love	3.0 (0.43)	3.7 (0.85)	-1.838	0.066	0.161	0.531
Anger	1.2 (1.40)	0.9 (1.29)	-0.632	0.527	0.644	0.182
Sadness	1.3 (1.58)	0.7 (1.60)	-1.156	0.248	0.42	0.334
Fear	2.1 (1.66)	0.6 (1.16)	-2.246	0.025*	0.079	0.648
Body image	2.2 (1.00)	4.4 (1.40)	-3.061	0.002*	0.022*	0.884
Time sense	2.5 (1.21)	3.2 (1.01)	-1.335	0.182	0.364	0.385
Perception	1.5 (1.72)	2.1 (0.82)	-1.1	0.271	0.426	0.318
Meaning	2.3 (0.88)	3.8 (1.07)	-2.747	0.006*	0.026*	0.793
Imagery amount	2.4 (1.74)	2.6 (0.92)	-0.178	0.859	0.859	0.051
Imagery vividness	3.1 (0.63)	2.5 (1.21)	-0.866	0.386	0.566	0.258
Direction of attention	4.5 (1.28)	4.5 (1.35)	-0.222	0.824	0.824	0.064
Absorption	4.4 (1.14)	4.4 (1.03)	-0.508	0.611	0.708	0.147
Self-awareness	4.1 (1.57)	3.5 (0.93)	-1.177	0.239	0.42	0.34
Altered state	1.8 (1.11)	3.9 (0.91)	-2.904	0.004*	0.026*	0.83
Internal dialogue	1.8 (1.67)	1.2 (1.45)	-0.667	0.505	0.644	0.193
Rationality	4.9 (1.08)	3.8 (1.08)	-2.633	0.008*	0.029*	0.76
Volitional control	4.0 (0.54)	2.5 (0.96)	-2.807	0.005*	0.026*	0.81
Memory	4.5 (1.24)	4.6 (1.02)	-0.255	0.799	0.859	0.074
Arousal	2.0 (1.21)	1.9 (1.58)	-0.654	0.513	0.644	0.189

The yoga nidra state of consciousness was compared to baseline as assessed by CADSS total score and by scores of each PCI subscale.

*Statistically significant.

CADSS = Clinician-Administered Dissociative State Scale; PCI = Phenomenology of Consciousness Inventory; SD = standard deviation.

Endocrine System and Hormonal Balance

The influence of Yoga Nidra on the endocrine system provides a robust biochemical basis for its observed effects on stress and mood. This is primarily achieved through the down-regulation of the Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal (HPA) axis, the body's central stress-response pathway. Recent randomized controlled trials have provided direct evidence for this mechanism, showing that regular Yoga Nidra practice can significantly reduce total diurnal salivary cortisol, the body's primary stress hormone. This is not just a reduction in overall levels, but also an improvement in the natural circadian rhythm of cortisol release, which is crucial for healthy metabolic and immune function [17].

Beyond the HPA axis, Yoga Nidra's regulatory effects extend to other critical hormonal pathways. Studies on patients with menstrual irregularities, a condition closely linked to endocrine balance, have demonstrated that adding Yoga Nidra to conventional treatment results in significant improvements in hormonal profiles. Specifically, researchers have measured beneficial changes in levels of Thyroid-Stimulating Hormone (TSH), Follicle-Stimulating Hormone (FSH), Luteinizing Hormone (LH), and Prolactin [18].

Furthermore, the practice directly modulates the brain's reward and mood-regulating pathways. Seminal neuroimaging research using positron emission tomography (PET) provided the first direct evidence of this, observing a significant increase in endogenous dopamine release in the striatum during the practice [19]. Dopamine is a critical neurotransmitter for mood, motivation, and the feeling of reward. By simultaneously reducing stress markers like cortisol, helping to regulate the broader endocrine system, and stimulating the brain's dopamine-driven reward circuitry, Yoga Nidra facilitates a powerful shift towards neuroendocrine homeostasis.

4.2 How the Effects are Interconnected

The collective findings of this review point to an integrated psychophysiological mechanism through which Yoga Nidra exerts its therapeutic effects. The practice initiates what can be understood as a form of top-down regulation, beginning with a measurable shift in cortical activity. The induction of dominant Alpha and Theta brainwave states is the foundational neurological event that promotes a state of relaxed awareness.

This shift in brain activity directly mediates a corresponding shift in the Autonomic Nervous System towards a state of parasympathetic dominance. The resulting increase in parasympathetic tone is the primary mechanism responsible for the observed improvements in cardiovascular markers, such as reduced blood pressure and enhanced heart rate variability. On a biochemical level, this autonomic regulation corresponds with a down-regulation of the Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal (HPA) axis, evidenced by decreased salivary cortisol, and a potentiation of the brain's reward system via increased striatal dopamine.

Therefore, the reported psychological benefits including significant reductions in anxiety, stress, and depression can be understood as the synergistic clinical outcome of these integrated changes. The practice simultaneously promotes cortical quieting, enhances autonomic balance, and restores neuroendocrine homeostasis.

4.3. Limitations of the Current Research

A primary limitation in the field is not necessarily a lack of evidence, but a lack of recognition for its specificity. Yoga Nidra's distinct neurological and autonomic signatures are often overlooked as the practice is reductively grouped with general "meditation" or "relaxation." This has slowed its recognition as a unique modality with a targeted mechanism of action.

Methodologically, the existing research, while compelling, has clear areas for improvement. Many foundational studies are constrained by small sample sizes, which limits their statistical power and the ability to generalize findings to broader, more diverse populations. Furthermore, the majority of clinical trials are short-term, demonstrating clear benefits over weeks or months but leaving the long-term efficacy and potential for lasting neuroplastic change largely unconfirmed. Finally, a lack of standardized protocols across studies makes direct, meta-analytic comparisons of different Yoga Nidra styles challenging and can obscure which components of the practice are most effective.

4.4. Advancing the Research

The strength of the current evidence provides a clear and exciting path forward. The most pressing need is for large-scale, multi-center Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) that use standardized, manualized protocols. This is the next logical step to definitively validate the findings in diverse populations and move the practice toward a new level of clinical precision. Building on this, longitudinal studies that track participants for a year or more are essential to finally answer critical questions about the long-term sustainability of Yoga Nidra's benefits.

To truly differentiate the practice, component analysis is also a crucial direction. Rigorous studies designed to dismantle the practice comparing its core elements like the body scan versus visualization will help isolate the most therapeutically active ingredients for specific conditions such as anxiety or hypertension. Finally, the neurochemical investigation must expand. While the effects on cortisol and dopamine are clear, future research targeting a broader array of biomarkers, including inflammatory cytokines and neurotransmitters like serotonin and GABA, is needed to create a comprehensive biochemical profile of Yoga Nidra's restorative effects.

5. Conclusion

This systematic review has synthesized evidence across neurological, autonomic, endocrine, and psychological domains to evaluate the therapeutic effects of Yoga Nidra. The findings consistently demonstrate that Yoga Nidra is far more than a simple relaxation technique; it is a potent mind-body intervention with measurable, multi-system physiological benefits.

The evidence points to an integrated mechanism of top-down regulation, initiated by a shift in brainwave activity to dominant Alpha and Theta states. This neurological quieting mediates a cascade of restorative effects, including a shift to parasympathetic nervous system dominance, a down-regulation of the HPA axis with a corresponding reduction in cortisol, and a potentiation of the brain's dopamine-driven reward system. These physiological changes provide a clear biochemical basis for the significant clinical improvements observed in cardiovascular health and psychological well-being, such as reduced hypertension and anxiety.

As a safe, accessible, and non-pharmacological practice, Yoga Nidra holds significant potential as a complementary intervention in the management of chronic, stress-related non-communicable diseases. It represents a promising tool for improving public health by empowering individuals to actively regulate their own physiological and psychological states.

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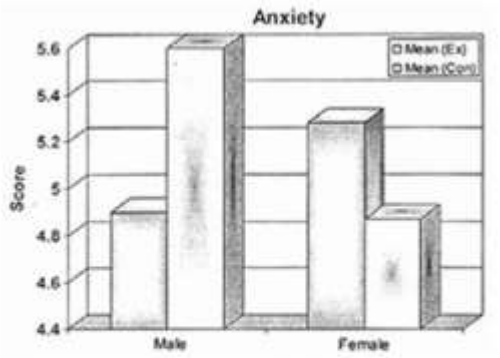
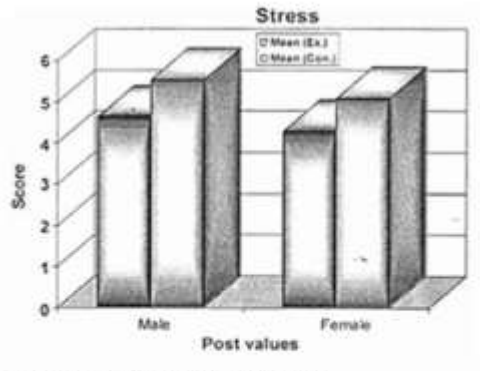
Figure 1.



Effects of yoga Nidra on anxiety level

	Mean	sd	"i" value	Significant level
Experimental	4.90	1.22	2.5	At 0.01
Control	5.60	1.45		



Effects of yoga Nidra on stress level

	Mean	sd	"i" value	Significant level
Experimental	4.95	1.26	2.48	At 0.01
Control	5.67	1.23		

Figure 1: Comparison of mean anxiety and stress scores in participants before and after a Yoga Nidra intervention. The data shows a statistically significant reduction in both metrics. *Adapted from Kumar, K. (2008)*

Figure 2.

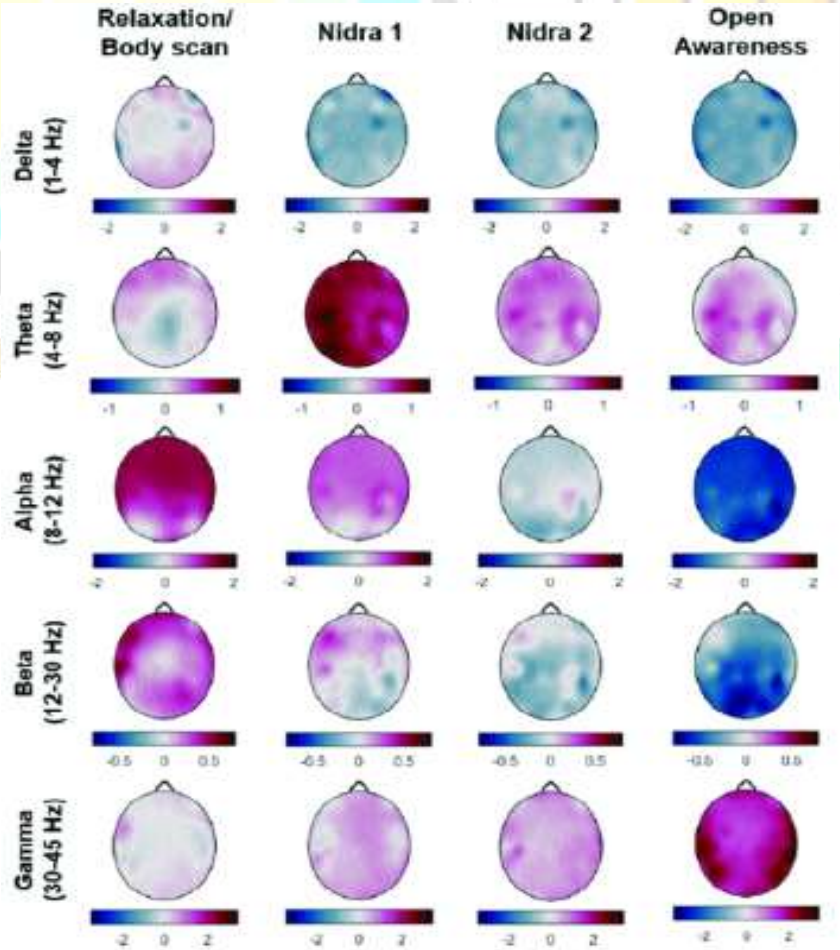


Figure 2. Topographical EEG maps showing the power spectral density of different brainwave frequencies across the stages of Yoga Nidra. The increase in Theta power during the "Nidra 1" and "Nidra 2" stages is visibly prominent. *Adapted from Zaccaro, A., et al. (2021).*

Figure 3.

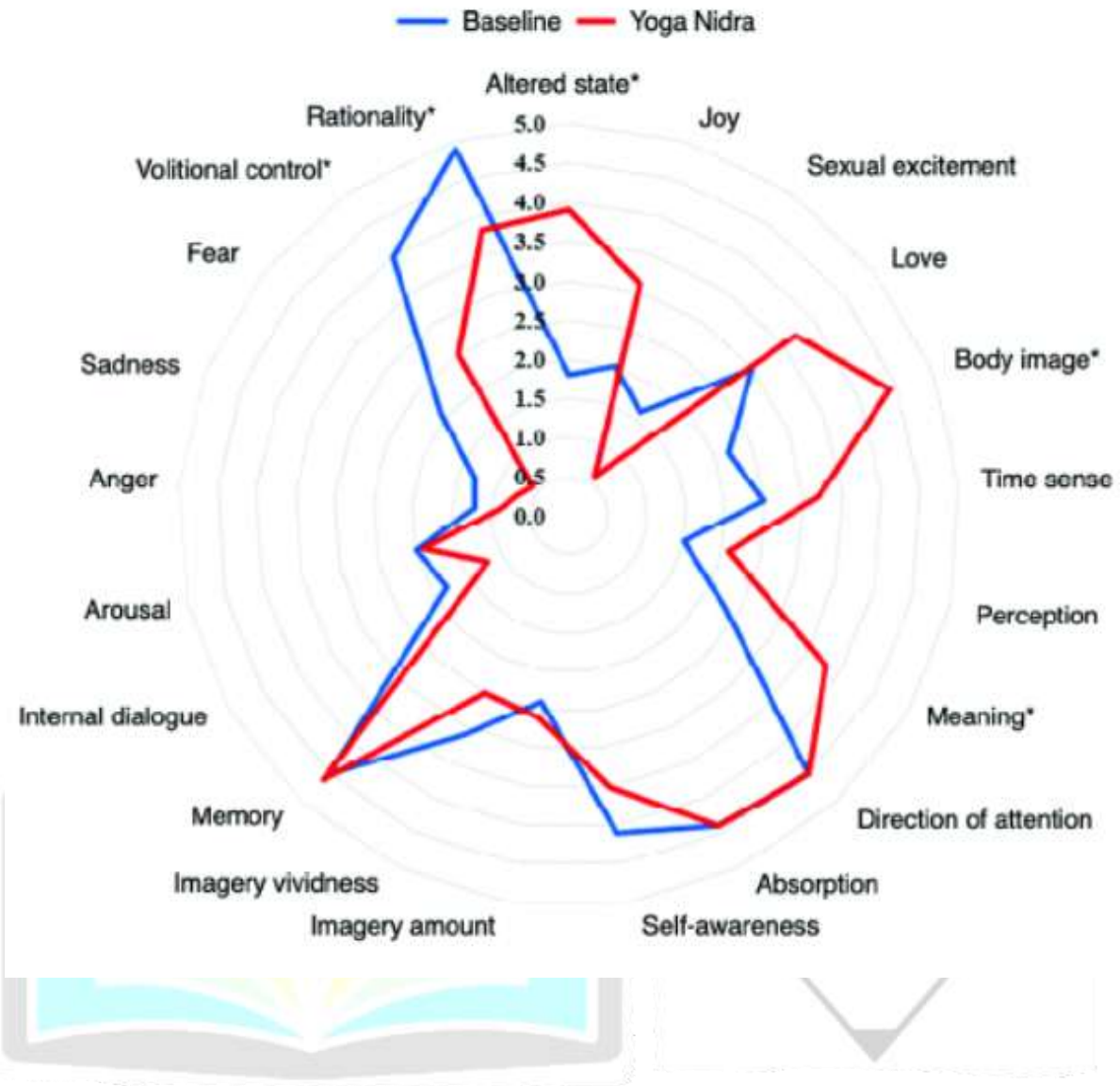


Figure 3. *A radar graph visually representing the shift in the state of consciousness from baseline (blue) to the Yoga Nidra state (red). The graph highlights a notable decrease in rationality and volitional control, alongside an increase in the sense of being in an altered state and altered body image. Adapted from Zaccaro, A., et al. (2021)*