Yoga for Wellbeing in Autistic Adults

Rachel Robertson & Sally Sherman (School of Education), Marissa Vogel (Open Up Pittsburgh), Caitlin Conner and Carla Mazefsky (School of Medicine)

Autism

- Involves a wide range of social and communication challenges.
- Is currently diagnosed in 1 of 44 births (Maenner et al., 2021).
- Thanks to decades of research and practice, children with autism are being included in classrooms with typical peers, forming friendships, and learning new social and communication skills

But In Adulthood

- Increases in anxiety, depression, physical health challenges, isolation/loneliness, unemployment, suicidality, incarceration (Lawson et al., 2020)
- Lack of research serving this population

Our Solution

- Community-based yoga designed with and for autistic adults
- Our team will conduct communityengaged research investigating the benefits of community yoga for autistic adults' mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing
- In a randomized waitlist-controlled trial.

Yoqa

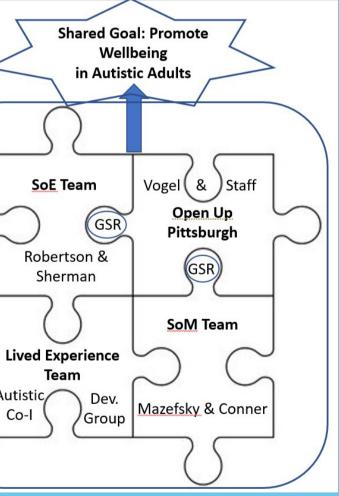
- Yoga has been found to reduce anxiety and depression while improving physical health in adults with a variety of health conditions (Pascoe et al., 2017).
- Further, mindful movement and yoga is an evidence-based practice for children with autism that provides social, communication, and behavioral benefits (Hume et al., 2021)
- However, the benefits of yoga have rarely been studied in autistic adults.



We will co-construct a **community-based** yoga program with and for autistic adults to support their mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing.

Broader Partner Ecosystem Robertson (PI; Special Education) • Project Implementation and Management, Research Design, Data Collection and Analysis, Autism and Behavioral Wellbeing, Academic **Dissemination and Grant Writing** Vogel (Co-I; Open Up Pittsburgh) • Setting, Participants, Instructors, Programming, Community Dissemination, Community Leadership Sherman (Co-I; Exercise Physiology) • Renowned Expert in Yoga Research and Practice, Physical Wellbeing, Mindful Movement Programming, NIH Funded Mazefsky & Conner (Co-Is; Psychiatry) • Renowned experts in Autism, Mindfulness, and Emotional Wellbeing, NIH-Funded Co-I on the Autism Spectrum (TBD) & Develop. Group Lived Experience with Measurement Constructs of Interest, Assure Autistic/ Relevance and Value to Lived Experience of Autism Co-I GSRs (1 in SoE; 1 in SoM; Embedded at Open Up)

• Data Collection and Analysis





Community Partner

- Research Site and Community Partner, Open Up Pittsburgh
- 501c(3) teaching inclusive mindfulness tools through movement and art practices that center people living with disabilities.
- Serves over 2,000 community members through in **Lawrenceville** studio and virtual classes
- Over 60 diverse participants join weekly in studio
- https://www.open-up.org/



Project Description

- Phase 1: Development of yoga program tailored to support mental and physical needs of autistic adults
- Development team includes: Pitt researchers in autism, yoga, mindfulness, and mental health
- Autistic Adults Participating in Open Up Pittsburgh's ongoing programs Open Up Pittsburgh Leaders and Instructors
- Phase 2: Randomized waitlistcontrolled test of program with
- Pittsburgh area autistic adults **Phase 3**: Project and community • dissemination; Applications for external funding

Potential Impact

• Leverage the Teaming grant into a mutually beneficial collaboration that generates new knowledge, gains external funding, and delivers services that positively impact wellbeing in our communities.

References

- Hume et al. (2021). Evidence-based practices for children, youth, and young adults with autism: Third generation review. Journal of autism and developmental disorders.
- Lawson et al. (2020). Cross-sectional and longitudinal predictors of quality of life in autistic individuals from adolescence to adulthood: The role of mental health and sleep quality. Autism, 24(4), 954-967.
- Maenner, M. J. et al. (2021). Prevalence and characteristics of autism spectrum disorder among children aged 8 yearsautism and developmental disabilities monitoring network, 11 sites, United States, 2018. MMWR Surveillance Summaries, 70(11), 1.
- Pascoe et al. (2017). Yoga, mindfulness-based stress reduction and stress-related physiological measures: A meta-analysis. Psychoneuroendocrinology, 86, 152-168.