

PSYCHOLOGICAL BENEFITS OF SAUNA CEREMONIES IN THE CONTEXT OF WELLNESS

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Abstract

The health benefits of sauna bathing are described in detail, including the psycho-hygienic effects. The article addresses the psychological benefits of sauna ceremonies in the context of wellness and well-being. The main aim of the study was to analyse the respondents' feelings and experiences of sauna bathing, including sauna ceremonies, and to find out whether it helps them in maintaining their psychological well-being and what they experience during sauna ceremonies. A semi-structured interview method was used. The research sample consisted of 27 respondents who regularly took sauna including sauna ceremony. When asked what respondents found to be the benefits of sauna ceremonies, the most common answers were that it was an ideal form of relaxation, psychological hygiene and a tool for stress relief. During sauna ceremonies they experience feelings of complete relaxation and relief, pleasant and joyful feelings.

Keywords

sauna, sauna ceremony, psychohygiene, wellness, well-being

INTRODUCTION

One of the world's best-known wellness treatments with many health benefits is sauna bathing. It is an activity that has been practised for centuries, especially in Scandinavian countries, and is particularly popular here. In many countries, sauna bathing is a complex ritual consisting of many different phases, and many different principles and rules must be observed.

The term *sauna* comes from the Finnish language and can be translated into Czech as „a house in the form of a bath where the air is heated by a furnace“. Experts believe that the term was derived from another Finnish term *sakna*, which is used for a hole in the ground or snow. The form of the sauna as it is known today, a wooden log cabin, dates back at least 2500 years (Mikolášek, 1972).

The first mention of „sauna“ facilities dates to ancient times. These included

the sweat tents built by the prehistoric Scythians on the Black Sea, the stone baths of the ancient Greek population in Laconia, the tepidarium baths of Pompeii, the baths built by Germanic tribes, and the smoke baths of ancient Slavic tribes (Kriš, 1999).

Over the years, buildings were also built directly for sauna use in the form of simple huts or log cabins. In modern times, these were buildings made of first-class wood, which were perfectly insulated thanks to the mineral fibres used, in which the hot stones are poured with water or electronic stoves are built in.

The first sauna was built on Czech territory in 1936, at a summer camp near the town of Borovec. The author of the first Czech sauna was František Vojta. In the post-war period, namely in 1946, the first sauna open to the public was built in Brno-Pisárky (Mikolášek, 1972).

In addition to the many different types of saunas, there are also different types of saunas in terms of the sauna process. Based on the number of times the sauna process is repeated within a single session and the final effect of the sauna on the human body, the following types can be distinguished:

- Sauna irritant
- Sauna invigorating
- Relaxing sauna (the most widespread and popular, in which the first three stages of the sauna process are repeated three times)
- Fatigue sauna
- Exhausting sauna.

In no case may the sauna warming phase be repeated more than five times. If this happens, sauna bathing can have a rather negative effect on the body. Specifically, it can induce an imbalance in the body's ion management and shock the body (Mikolášek, 1999).

Sauna bathing brings several health benefits when practiced regularly, especially in the areas of the skin system, cardiovascular system, respiratory system, immune system and also the psyche. Sauna bathing is considered a relaxation and therapeutic method. During the sauna, positive feelings are induced in the human psyche, the tensed mind is relaxed, and the general mood is lightened. In the same way, this activity has a positive effect on people suffering from anxiety or accumulated aggression and tendencies to violence. Sauna has a very stimulating to euphoric effect on the overall psychological state (Mikolášek, 1999).

Sauna ceremonies

Sauna ceremonies have become a part of the wellness practice. These are a cultural enhancement to the normal sauna session performed by an experienced sauna master. During the ritual, he pours aromatic essence on the

stones, swirls hot air with towels and wraps the guests (steam blast). The ceremony is also accompanied by relaxing or, on the contrary, rhythmic and dynamic music. The whole ceremony usually lasts 10-15 minutes. The whole sauna ceremony consists of several basic stages. Each sauna can implement its ceremony in its own way, but the basics always remain the same. Specifically:

- 1) A trained expert (sauna master) will first start pouring aromatic essence over the heated stones, thereby increasing the humidity and air temperature within the sauna.
- 2) Then comes the show itself, during which the sauna master agitates through a towel the hot air in the sauna room, which is held at the highest point in the room - under the ceiling of the sauna.
- 3) In the last step, the so-called steam blast takes place. This involves wrapping the towel around the body, which further multiplies the effect of the hot air on the body and helps to open the pores on the skin.

The above procedure is usually repeated several times, most often three times. During the last procedure, the temperature in the sauna can reach up to 93 °C. This is a physically demanding exercise for the sauna master, who is often rewarded with applause from the audience at the end.

Although there are many sauna ceremonies and they can differ significantly, there are generally two main types of sauna ceremonies. Specifically:

- Relaxation ceremony – this is a type of sauna ceremony, which is intended for all visitors who are looking for rest, peace and relaxation. In this type of ceremony, slow, calm and relaxing music is played, the darkness adds to the intimate atmosphere

and the sauna master uses mainly relaxing and soothing scents. In this type of ritual, the main goal is to make the participant as relaxed as possible.

- Dynamic ceremony – in this case, it is a type of ceremony that is mainly aimed for amusement and relaxation. It is meant to be a cultural experience that takes place in a slightly busier and more dynamic style. Accompanied by fast paced and dynamic music, a light show and stimulating essences, the participant can enjoy the experience and relaxation all in one moment.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main aim of the study was to analyse the respondents' feelings and experiences during sauna ceremonies and to find out whether they help them to maintain their psychological well-being.

Research question: How do the respondents subjectively perceive the effect of sauna including sauna ceremonies on their psychological well-being?

METHODS

A semi-structured interview method was used.

Respondents were first asked about their age, education and occupation.

Then they answered the questions:

- What does the sauna ceremony give you personally and what is the importance of ceremonies for you in terms of psycho-hygiene?
- What are your feelings during sauna ceremonies?
- Do you prefer relaxation or dynamic ceremonies?

Responses were recorded in written form and transcribed into a selective protocol and then a thematic analysis was conducted.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RESEARCH SAMPLE

The research was conducted anonymously and 27 respondents participated. The participants were individuals who regularly attend sauna sessions and were over 18 years of age. They visit saunas in the capital city of Prague, specifically in Step Praha, Sauny Vltava and Sauna Spot. Here the respondents were also approached.

Of the 27 respondents, 16 were women and 11 were men.

The most frequent age group (14 out of 27 respondents) was 19-30 years old; 4 respondents were 30-40 years old; 6 respondents were 40-50 years old, and 3 respondents were 50-60 years old.

In terms of educational attainment, 17 out of 27 respondents were persons who had attained a university degree. The current occupation of the respondents was variable (students, doctors, lawyers or people working in IT fields, and others).

RESULTS

When asked what specifically sauna ceremonies bring to the respondent, what this activity gives him/her, the most frequent answers were that it is an ideal form of relaxation, psychohygiene and a tool for stress relief.

R1 commented on this topic that sauna use *brings him mainly peace, rest and overall relaxation. During this activity, the respondent's mind completely switches off.* R2 stated that sauna

bathing *brings him relaxation* and R3 stated that sauna ceremony *brings relaxation* and considered it as *a form of mental cleansing*. The same answer was given by another respondent (R4) who stated that for him the sauna ceremony is *a relaxation after a busy week and an effective tool for stress relief*. R5 perceives the sauna ceremony as *a form of rest and relaxation, in which he gets rid of accumulated stress*. R6 perceives sauna ceremonies *primarily as a form of rest and relaxation, or as a time to enjoy every moment. As well as a tool that can relieve him of accumulated stress*. The same answer was given by R7, who stated that *sauna ceremonies are mainly a form of mental cleansing and relaxation for him. Similarly, for him, sauna sessions are a tool that he uses to relieve himself of stress from work*. R8 also stated that he perceives sauna ceremonies *mainly as an experience and a diversification of the traditional sauna, similarly as a form of mental cleansing and relaxation*. R9 sees sauna ceremonies primarily as *a form of mental cleansing, relaxation and rest*. R10 perceives sauna ceremonies as *a habit, an addiction and a form of relaxation* and R11 perceives sauna ceremonies as *an experience to look forward to throughout the week and feels happy during the ceremony*. R12, on the other hand, stated that he perceives sauna ceremonies as *a non-traditional experience, a form of relaxation, regeneration and mental cleansing*. R13 perceives sauna ceremonies as *a non-traditional experience, a form of relaxation and stress relief*. Even R14 perceives sauna ceremonies primarily as *a non-traditional experience, a form of rest, relaxation and stress relief*. R15 stated that sauna ceremonies are *a non-traditional experience for him, a form of rest, relaxation and stress relief*. R16 perceives sauna ceremonies as *a non-traditional experience, a form of rest, relaxation and stress relief* and

R17 and R18 answered the same. R19 also answered that he perceives sauna ceremonies as *a form of rest and part of his psychohygiene* and R20 answered the same. R21 perceives sauna ceremonies as *a cultural experience but also as an effective form of rest, relaxation and part of his psychohygiene*. Similarly, R22 sees sauna ceremonies as *a cultural experience but also as an effective form of rest, relaxation and part of his psychohygiene*. R23, R24, R25 and R26 are also of the same opinion, and consistently stated that they see this activity as *a cultural experience, but also as an effective form of rest, relaxation and part of their psychohygiene*.

Respondents were also consistent in their answers to the question of what specific feelings they experience during a sauna ceremony. Most often they experience feelings of complete relaxation and relief during sauna ceremonies (14 out of 27 total). Eight respondents reported experiencing pleasant, joyful and wonderful feelings during ceremonies. Seven respondents then reported that sauna and sauna ceremonies bring them new energy.

R1 *can feel his own body, which brings him pleasant and carefree sensations*. R2 responded to this question that *he feels mostly energetic and refreshed*. R3 feels *mainly energetic, relaxed and optimistic and lives in the current moment*. R4 feels *pleasant feelings and euphoria when taking a sauna*. R5 feels *content, relaxed and pleasant*. R6 also experiences the same feelings when sauna bathing and stated that he feels *content, relaxed and pleasant*. R7 experiences *a complete switching off the mind during the sauna, or the emergence of new ideas*. R8 feels *wonderful and fulfilled*. R9 stated that he feels *absorbed by the atmosphere, relaxed, satisfied and energised*. He

experiences feelings of euphoria and happiness during the ceremony. R10 feels *invigorated, satisfied and energized*. R11 briefly expressed that *he feels happy*. R12, R13 and R14 experience *mainly carefree feelings*. R15, R16, R17, R18 and R19 said that they feel *comfortable, relaxed and full of energy*. R20 feels *rested and relaxed*. R21 feels *blissful, content, and feels a rush of euphoria during the ceremony*. R22 feels *content*. R23 feels *content and relaxed*. R24 and R25 feel *mostly content*. R26 feels *rested, relaxed, refreshed and energized* during the ceremony. R27 stated that he feels *at ease*.

When asked which type of sauna ceremony respondents prefer, dynamic or relaxation, respondents were most likely to not care. Respondents most often stated that they like to alternate the types of sauna ceremonies or do not care which type of ceremonies are available. This option was chosen by 17 of the 27 respondents. 6 respondents stated that they prefer the relaxation type of ceremonies, while the remaining 4 prefer the dynamic type of sauna ceremony.

LIMITS OF THE RESEARCH STUDY

We consider the research study to be a pilot study in terms of the number of respondents and the scope of the survey. Its results serve as a basis for further investigation of the influence of sauna on well-being, for a deeper analysis of human experiences associated with the specific physical state induced by sauna and also for the specification of psychological benefits of sauna ceremonies.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of our study demonstrating that sauna use, including sauna ceremonies, brings respondents

relaxation, stress relief, and joyful feelings are seen as significant in the context of the potential use of sauna bathing in interventions aimed at promoting well-being.

The influence of sauna bathing on the psyche is mostly studied from the perspective of psychohygiene and prevention of pathological phenomena, but not as a means of promoting well-being, which is where we see the contribution of our work. However, anxiolytic and antidepressant effects are significantly related to the promotion of well-being.

There are several studies showing that sauna bathing can be beneficial for people suffering from depression or increased fatigue. In a randomized controlled trial, patients with mild depression underwent sauna sessions at a frequency of five days a week for two weeks. Compared to the control group, scores for somatic complaints and overall relaxation improved significantly (Masuda, Nakazato & Kihara, 2005).

Patrick and Johnson (2021) describe the effect of heat stress on promoting neurogenesis, reducing anxiety and depression, and reducing the risk of neurodegenerative diseases.

Dudzik, Dudzik, Koziel & Domański (2024) also reported the effects of sauna use on reducing anxiety and depression and reducing the risk of neurodegenerative diseases, as well as promoting well-being, improving sleep and reducing stress.

Hussain & Cohen (2018) in their review study also mention the effect of sauna bathing on reducing depression as well as its positive effect in the treatment of headaches.

Laukkanen, Laukkanen & Kunutsor (2018) describe the effect of sauna use on reducing the risk of psychotic disorders. Their study showed a relationship between sauna use frequency and the risk of psychotic illness in men with no prior history of mental illness.

In the Japanese context, the effect of sauna on mental health is usually associated with the *tononou state*, which is described as a state of harmony of body and mind, associated with a feelings of relaxation and happiness.

Chang, Ibaraki, Naruse & Imamura (2023) in their study looked at changes in the nervous system induced by sauna exposure. Participants in the study had changes in brain activity measured by EEG and changes in mood measured by scaling after sauna bathing in a *tononou state*. Significant increases in theta and alpha waves after sauna bathing were found to correlate with subjectively perceived improvements in emotional state.

The results of our study are consistent with the description of the sauna-induced *tononou state*. This state has elements close to the meditation state and thus one could also consider possible spiritual aspects of sauna bathing.

In the Czech Republic, the sauna is perceived and scientifically studied most often as a means of regeneration and relaxation. We see the analysis of psychological benefits of sauna as a topical issue especially for the fields dealing with wellness and well-being and we consider further research in this area desirable.

We also see the prospects for further research in a more detailed investigation of the mechanisms of the effects of sauna use on the psyche. Probably

both direct and indirect (i.e. changes in the psyche mediated by changes in the physical state) effects are involved.

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