

Yoga as a pathway to

By Sunnah Rose and Dr Radhika Shah



Yoga helps maintain a healthy body and nervous system

Depression and anxiety disorders are the most common forms of mental health problems encountered today. One in 10 people will have to deal with one or the other in any given year.

Yoga is a unique technique for dealing with these disorders. The ancient tradition of yoga is a practice that has always been devoted to the synthesis of physical and mental health and is a holistic approach that recognises 'physical states affect mental states, mental states affect bodily states and all actions can affect the body and mind'.

In effect it is saying that we have to work not only on the body but in conjunction with the mind to influence our mental state, and that we must have a healthy body and mind to fully reach a state of well being and wellness. This is where yoga comes in, a union between the body and mind, postures and breathing to keep the mind focused, the body supple and fit and to create mental harmony.

Yoga does not offer a cure for depression and anxiety disorders. However, it is powerful tool for symptomatic treatment. Yoga focusing on *asana* (postures), *pranayama* (breath-

ing) and meditation help to develop a stronger state of mind which in itself will help overcome fears leading to anxiety.

Depression is often caused by a combination of recent life events and personal factors including chemical changes in the brain and inherited disposition. Yoga gives back control over both of these factors, aiding stress control and helping to create a balanced, calm state of mind with which to approach life.

Healthy postures

By practicing *asana* (postures) we maintain a healthy body and nervous system. The approach into, during and the release gained from the postures all help create a sense of calm and well being as well as strengthening muscles, and increasing core strength.

The postures also improve one's moods as it moves energy around the body into places where feelings of anger or grief may be stored, allowing tensions to be eased out and redistributed. It also works on any physical symptoms that may be caused due to the mental state, a dangerous vicious cycle.

Something as simple as releasing the tension in the shoulders, helping to relieve postural pain and headaches, has a knock-on effect to mood, pain management and mental outlook.

Asanas put pressure on glands and organs, helping them to produce the soothing, healing chemical balance that is needed to feel well and be well. Each *asana* has its own benefits. All include improving circulation of blood and oxygen around

the body and helping to flush out toxins whilst stretching and strengthening.

Proper breathing

Breathing properly is essential for good health. In contemporary lifestyles, a day's shallow breath is all too common, which in itself is a symptom recognized in conjunction with someone suffering maybe from a panic attack.

Cells rely on a sufficient oxygen supply which means that we all have to learn to breathe properly. To stop and take a deep breath has an immediate calming effect as the body responds to the increased oxygen flow, allowing energy to flow throughout our bodies instead of being confined to the 'vital areas'.

We must learn how to breathe correctly, and then use this breath in a variety of ways. If we start with our every day breath, just some slight changes may be needed so as to train it to become calm and deep. Inhaling and exhaling through the nostril, drawing it down into the diaphragm.

Through practice and concentration we are able to approach our breathing differently, and this breath can be used as a constant tool to stabilise the body. Stress fuels depression and anxiety and they, in turn, fuel more stress. Breath can intervene in this cycle by reducing the stress and calming the body.

What is lovely about this technique is that we can use it alongside *asanas*. Within a posture, we come back to the breath, allowing it to find its normal pace in a calm manner and then notice how the body

recovery

will relax into its place.

This is especially good as some postures can be hard and if we use the breath to help ourselves focus we will notice a major difference in how we settle into it. The breath control that we develop whilst putting our body through mildly stressful poses can then be utilised in other areas of our life.

Breath also plays a major part in the practice of meditation. Meditation is a mental discipline by which one attempts to get beyond the conditioned, “thinking” mind into a deeper state of relaxation or awareness. Simply, meditation can involve turning ones attention to a single point of reference, commonly the breath.

Vital life force

Yoga also incorporates this breath into breathing techniques in forms of controlled breathing called *pranayama*. *Prana* is the word for the vital energy of the universe and *Ayana* generally means stretch. *Pranayama* is the practice of using deep breathing to create a balance of *prana* in the body. When there is not enough *prana* in the body, a person becomes restless and feels constricted. Stress and anxiety can be due to an imbalance of *prana* in the body, so by using certain

breathing techniques that are designed to bring more *prana* in the body we can re balance this issue.

In addition, the regular practice of both *asana* and *pranayama* leads to greater internal sensitivity, which can allow students to detect the first glimmer of an anxiety or panic attack and respond with yogic tools that might head off the problem. The earlier in the process you can intervene, the better it will work as a treatment.

Yoga is not a cure for depression and anxiety disorders but when yogic principles are incorporated into your life the symptoms become far easier to control. Many sufferers find themselves withdrawing from society, lethargic, tired, suffering from appetite problems, sleeplessness, frustrated, miserable and unable to concentrate.

Yoga provides a set of tools with which an individual can combat these symptoms and wrest control of their mental state back. The increased awareness of the body will allow sufferers to be vigilant of their inner states and the social situation and routine of regular yoga classes can help with some of the social problems that these disorders can provoke.



Sunnah Rose

Sunnah Rose and Dr Radhika Shah are directors of the Butterfly Yoga Trust, Community Interest Company. The Trust is offering a concessionary rate of £5 per session to all MDF members, which is half price. Contact Sunnah Rose at www.butterflyyogatrust.org or on 07941 321772.

Yoga and me

MDF groups coordinator **Nabina Mitra**



describes how yoga has benefited her life

I became aware of yoga at an early age. Growing up in a family of Indian origin it was something I just grew up with in the background, along with Indian clothes, food, religious festivals and practices such as massage.

Some of these things one experiences without realising that's what they are called. Like breathing for example, it's something we just do, without having to know what it's called.

My first experience of connecting the actions to the word yoga, and its perception in the West came from a Diana Moran aka *The Green Goddess Book of Yoga* that my mother had lying around. Being quite flexible I was able to do quite a few of the exercises and my mother explained that the book contained the physical exercises of but not some of the other aspects of yoga. I would have a go at the exercises, fascinated by what the other aspects of yoga might be.

Now I have more of an idea. Yoga is a huge field. From the physical, ranging from very gently types, which I like, to

some very strenuous types – not really for me, but all giving the body a good work out and stretch, but there is more. Yoga is not just about the physical. It's about staying grounded, about working on the breath and breathing, and other exercises to do with clearing the sinuses.

I don't practice yoga as often as I think would be good for me. At one time I took to a daily regime of half an hour a day and ideally I would like to go back to that. My mother has been doing daily exercises incorporating physical and breathing exercises for over 20 years now. She is a very able 60 plus year old, with naturally mostly black hair who, despite having a predisposition for rheumatoid arthritis and having the condition to some extent, went on a Himalayan foothills trek two years ago.

I use the breathing exercises more frequently. When in a stressful situation, try stopping what you are doing, taking a few large abdominal breaths. Congratulations, you have practised a form of yoga!