

Yoga Therapy for Depression

ARE YOU FEELING DEPRESSED OR DOWN? DO YOU HAVE A CASE OF THE POST-HOLIDAY OR WINTER BLUES? Everyone feels sad from time to time, but when sadness deepens and persists, it can suppress energy and make everyday life seem like a burden. When identified early-on, depression can be warning that can help you proactively protect your mental and physical health.

From a spiritual perspective, many people suffering from a mild form of depression feel a sense of isolation from the world and an inability to find connection or see themselves as part of the divine reality. Yoga views this separation through the veil of ignorance. As we live farther from the truth of our wholeness, we become more and more despondent. We forget, as author Stephen Cope puts it, that "...in some parallel universe, we are unutterably fine just the way we are."

Yoga offers us the opportunity to find union with our true nature. Through postures, breathing exercises, meditation and other practices we can help to create a state of positive mental health. A daily practice will bring both the physical emotional bodies into balance. From a physical perspective, yoga tones the nervous system, stimulates circulation, promotes concentration, and energizes the mind and body. Yoga postures also help improve blood circulation, and make it easier to break through the

lethargy that often accompanies depression. The idea is simple, when we feel good, we are less apt to fall into a state of melancholy. Yoga teaches us that life can be peaceful, full of purpose, happy, and even joyful, and that the source of that joy and contentment is found deep inside each of us. Various yoga practices are simply tools to help get us there.

To help combat the blues, create a daily yoga practice that includes at three or more of the following options: pranayama (breath work), mantra, mudra, asana (yoga poses), stretching, visualization/meditation and savasana (relaxation).

PRANAYAMA AND ASANA FOR DEPRESSION

From a yogic perspective, people who suffer from depression are depleted in vital life force, also known as prana. In order to bring more energy into the body, concentrate on practices that bring breath to the body, particularly via diaphragmatic or three-part breath. Energizing breathing practices like breath of fire, breath of joy, kaphlabhati and bhastrika can help to stimulate the 3rd chakra (solarplexus), the seat of our self-esteem and will power. Sun Salutations can be very therapeutic, especially when done while visualizing bringing the energy and heat of the sun into the body and mind. Backbends in particular can be stimulating. These range from restorative poses such as reclining supported bound ankle (done with a bolster placed lengthwise under the torso) and supported bridge pose (using hands or a block) or more active backbends like camel and bow pose. Invigorating inversions that stimulate the brain like shoulder stand, plough or even legs up against the wall are also good to practice daily. Overall, any balanced yoga class or practice will offer a balance of

stimulation and relaxation to the brain via the spinal cord, literally changing the chemistry of your brain and giving you a "feel good" effect.

CROWN CHAKRA MEDITATION

The 7th chakra relates to the spiritual dimension of reality and is the directory of our lives, resting on the top of the body. A healthy crown chakra influences the body, mind and spirit dramatically. A blocked crown chakra can result in a lack of life, depression, confusion or rigid belief system. This exercise should help bring balance and awareness to this energy center.

From a lying or seated position, settle in a take several deep breaths while you visualize a bright white light that begins at the top of your head and runs down through your spine, out of your tailbone and into the earth beneath you. Feel your connection to the earth and let the light turn into a violet hue as you draw it back into your body. Let it travel up the spine until it settles as a ball of energy at the top of your head. With each inhale allow the light to grow bigger, until you are surrounded by a violet glow.

Realize that you are no longer alone as a separate being; you are one with all. Feel a sense of spiritual protection as you align with the Divine reality. Breathe out, and send the energy of your being to the Divine and the world around you.

As you practice different things, remember that the journey out of depression begins with a single step from wherever you are right now. Taking a proactive approach is half the battle. Simply putting forth the effort to heal the mind and body through awareness and movement is a positive step on the path to well-being.

Authors Note: The practices discussed here are not meant to replace medical care. The suggestions may help those suffering with mild non-clinical depression, and sufferers under the care of a licensed counselor or physician can also benefit. ▲

