



Battling depression
can feel like a

fight for your life.

Yoga can help you
stop struggling and

feel
happier

than you
ever thought
possible.

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY DEBRA McCLINTON



1

It happened 11 years ago, but
I remember the night
I had my first full-fledged
panic attack as if
it were yesterday.

I was sitting in the cramped balcony of the Marines Memorial Theatre in San Francisco with my then-boyfriend, watching a devastatingly sad and incredibly long play. By hour three my mood had plummeted. I fidgeted in my seat as I desperately wished that the performance would end. Then, suddenly, I felt my breath get stuck in my chest. I thought I was having an asthma attack. I put my hand on my heart and willed some air into my lungs, but it wouldn't go. I braced myself against the arms of my seat as I tried harder to suck the air in. Nothing. Even though my chest was completely expanded, it felt empty. Then I really started to panic; I became convinced that if I didn't take in a big breath soon, I was going to die.

With my heart pounding in my throat, I pushed through a row of irritated people and bolted out of the dark theater. As I stumbled down the stairs and onto the street, I felt faint and completely disconnected from my body.

The rest of the night is a series of blurry snapshots. I remember the stunned look on my boyfriend's face when he came out of the theater and saw me. I remember him dragging a woman out of a cab and ordering the driver to take us to the hospital. Then I recall a moment of comfort when, at the hospital, a nurse sat me down, put her hands on my shoulders, and said gently, "Just breathe, sweetheart. You can do it." In that moment, the terror dissipated and I felt a split second of relief as I realized that I was not

lift your spirits

If you feel anxious, this pose sequence can help ground your energy, taking you out of your head and into your body. By the time you reach the supported poses, you should feel calmer and ready to receive their healing benefits. However, this is only a suggested sequence. If you think you have serious anxiety or depression, first see your doctor to determine a treatment plan. Then work closely with an experienced yoga teacher to find the right yoga program for your needs.

1 adho mukha svanasana (downward-facing dog pose), variation

EFFECTS Combats anxiety and energizes the body

Lie on your stomach with your palms by the sides of your chest with your fingers well spread. Come onto your hands and knees. Set your knees directly below your hips and your hands slightly forward of your shoulders. Place one or two folded blankets in line with your breastbone. The blankets should be high enough to support your head, but low enough so that you can lengthen your neck. Come back to your hands and knees. Turn the toes under, and exhale as you raise your buttocks high in the air, moving your thighs up and back. Keep your elbows straight as you lift your buttocks up and release the crown of your head onto the support. The action of the arms and legs serves to elongate your spine and release your head. Hold for 30 seconds to 1 minute, breathing deeply.



2 paschimottanasana (a) to halasana (b) (seated forward bend to plow pose)

EFFECTS Brings relief from despondency or anxiety, energizes your whole body, and makes you feel more alive

Do not do this sequence if you have neck problems, high blood pressure, or heart problems; if you are menstruating or pregnant; or if you have diarrhea or feel nauseated.

Sit on one or two folded blankets with your legs stretched out in front of you. Take a full, deep breath. Inhale and lift up through your sternum and head, making your spine slightly concave. Exhale and extend your torso over your legs. Rest your head just beyond your knees and your hands on the floor if you can (see figure 2a). Do not allow your buttocks to lift off the blankets.

Come out of the forward bend, curling your back and pulling your knees up, and then roll backward into Plow. Raise your hands overhead to meet your feet (see figure 2b). If you feel neck strain, support your back with your hands. Go back and forth between the two poses 10 to 15 times.



3 **adho mukha svanasana** (downward-facing dog pose), variation

Repeat Downward-Facing Dog. Hold for 30 seconds to 1 minute.



Although no one knows why, most anxiety disorders are accompanied by depression, according to the National Institute of Mental Health.

going to die. But the relief was quickly replaced by overwhelming sadness. Sobs welled up from deep within. They didn't stop that night. They rarely ceased for several weeks.

When I returned home from the hospital later that night, my mental state worsened. Along with the anxiety that I still felt after the panic attack, I was joined by another visitor: depression. In the weeks that followed, I was completely unable to soothe myself. I cried constantly and felt detached from the world. I awoke every morning dreading opening my eyes and grew frightened of crowded places like movie theaters, airplanes, and buses. Then one day I was afraid to leave my apartment. The thought of looking up at the vast expanse of sky above while being surrounded by strangers was too much. I'd heard about this condition, agoraphobia, but I couldn't believe it was happening to me. At that point I knew I needed to find help, and I did.

This might be the part of the story where you think I'm going to say that yoga saved me. That I traveled to India and meditated for 40 days in an ashram, which helped me find the true meaning of life and live happily ever after. I wish I could say that, but it was antidepressants and psychotherapy that initially helped me manage my anxiety and depression. When I did start practicing yoga three years later, it helped me feel happier—more whole and connected. Yoga didn't "cure" me, but it has transformed my life over time. In the past eight years, yoga helped me create new thought patterns, feel self-love, and return to the present moment when my mind wanders off into a fearful future. It's also taught me to trust that life is good, whether or not things are going well. All this just from practicing asana? Well, not exactly. Practicing yoga has altered my inner landscape in many ways. I offer some of them here not as a definitive guide—depression and anxiety are complicated and different for everyone, and it's important to get a personalized diagnosis and treatment plan—but in the hope that someone else might find support and solace too.

know your depression

For me, anxiety and depression have always gone hand in hand. Over the years I've noticed that a panic attack or prolonged periods of anxiety can trigger depression in me. Although no one knows why, most anxiety disorders—including panic disorder, social anxiety disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, and phobias—are accompanied by depression, according to the National Institute of Mental Health.



4 prasarita padottanasana
(wide-angle standing forward bend), variation

EFFECTS Calms jittery nerves and combats fatigue

Place a folded blanket or a bolster in front of you. Step your feet wide apart (about 4 feet or so), keeping the outer edges parallel. Keep your thighs well lifted. Exhale and bend forward from your hips, placing your hands on the floor between your feet. Lift your hips toward the ceiling as you draw your shoulder blades away from the ears. Head should be in the same position as if you were doing Handstand. Look up and extend your trunk forward, arching your back slightly so that the back is slightly concave from your tailbone to the base of your skull. Stay this way for 5 to 10 seconds. Then exhale, bend your elbows, and release the crown of your head onto the support. Stay here for 1 minute, breathing deeply. To come out, return to the concave back position, bring your hands to your hips, and raise your trunk. Intermediate or advanced yoga students can do Salamba Sirsasana (Supported Headstand) instead, which is energizing, balances the emotions, and rejuvenates the brain. *(For instructions, please see yogajournal.com.)*



5 dwi pada viparita dandasana
(two-legged inverted staff pose), variation

EFFECTS Opens the chest, lifts the spirits, and invigorates the body

Put a firm blanket on a chair placed with its back about 2 feet from a wall. Sit backward on the chair, facing the wall, with your feet through the chair back and your buttocks at the chair's edge. The chair should be far enough away that your feet can press into the wall when your legs are outstretched. Holding the back of the chair, arch back so that your shoulder blades are at the front edge of the chair seat. Take your feet to the wall, legs slightly bent, and place your arms between the legs of the chair to hold the back legs or rails. Lengthen your legs, pressing the chair away from the wall, and roll your thighs in toward each other. If you have neck problems, rest your head on a bolster. Breathe quietly for up to a minute, and then come out of the pose.



**6 urdhva
dhanurasana**
(upward-facing
bow pose), variation

EFFECTS Improves circulation, stimulates the nervous system, and generates a feeling of well-being

Position two blocks against the wall, shoulder-width apart. Lie on your back with your head between the blocks, your knees bent, your feet hip-width apart, and your heels close to your buttocks. Bend your elbows and place your hands alongside your head with your fingers pointing toward your feet. As you exhale, raise your hips and chest, straighten your arms, and stretch your legs. Lift your tailbone and move the backs of your thighs toward your buttocks. Hold for 5 to 10 seconds if you can. If not, come in and out of it two or three times. To come out, bend your knees and elbows and slowly lower your body to the floor.



7 balasana (child's pose)

EFFECTS Releases spinal muscles after back-bends and calms your nerves

Kneel on the floor with your big toes touching and your knees slightly wider than your hips. Bend forward and stretch your arms and trunk forward. Rest your head on the floor or a blanket.

do yoga and prozac mix?

Asana practice helps counteract anxiety-driven depression because it reduces stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline, inducing what's known as the relaxation response. Once the relaxation response kicks in, many people feel that instead of trying to escape their feelings, they can stay with them, which is essential to identifying the psychological factors that trigger their anxiety and depression. But the path to getting to this relaxed place varies by individual.

Patricia Walden, a senior Iyengar Yoga teacher, and the physician Timothy McCall, author of the forthcoming book *Yoga as Medicine*, who together teach workshops on yoga and depression, categorize depression based on the *gunas*—*rajas*, *tamas*, and *sattva*—which, according to ancient yogic texts, are three types of energy that manifest as behavioral patterns. *Rajas* is often characterized as dynamic and excitable; *tamas* by inertia, sloth, fear, or confusion; and *sattva* as pure “beingness” and lucidity, a state of equilibrium. Walden and McCall refer to an agitated, anxiety-infused depression as “*rajasic*” and a more lethargic, despondent depression as “*tamasic*.”

If you're feeling *rajasic*, that is, agitated, anxious, and fearful, you might assume that the best yoga practice for you would be one made up of calming poses such as forward bends or restorative poses. But if your mind and energy are out of control, being completely still and willing yourself to relax may make you feel worse. In those situations, Walden recommends starting your practice with dynamic, invigorating poses such as *Adho Mukha Vrksasana* (Handstand), *Virabhadrasana II* (Warrior II), or Sun Salutations to burn off nervous energy and to give your buzzing mind something to focus on. If those poses are too difficult, Walden suggests that beginners try *Adho Mukha Svanasana* (Downward-Facing Dog). If you find Downward-Facing Dog too stimulating, use a bolster or block under the head. From there, supported backbends such as *Viparita Dandasana* (Two-Legged Inverted Staff Pose; see page 103) can then lift the spirits without overly stimulating the nervous system, provided you focus on your breathing and don't aggressively work the pose. Walden recommends backbends because they open the chest, which is essential for relieving both anxiety and depression. For depression, Walden suggests focusing on the inhalation, which draws life force into the body; for anxiety, it's best to focus on the exhalation, which promotes a calm, peaceful mind.

Once you feel more balanced and calm, restorative poses such as *Supta Baddha Konasana* (Reclining Bound Angle Pose) or *Viparita Karani* (Legs-up-the-Wall Pose) can offer much-needed rest. Walden also recommends keeping your eyes open in *Savasana* (Corpse Pose), since closing them can often intensify feelings of restlessness and anxiety. (If you're unfamiliar with these poses, learn about them on the *Yoga Journal* website, yogajournal.com. Click the Pose Finder link on the left menu.)

Even after starting a yoga practice, I continued to take antidepressants to manage my anxiety and depression. I'm acutely aware that, especially in holistic communities, a stigma is attached to taking medication. Behind it lurks the idea that you should be able to heal yourself naturally, and if you don't, you've failed. Then there's the belief that antidepressants mask your true problems, so you can't truly be a yogi and do deep inner work if you take them.

When I asked the psychotherapy community to weigh in on the issue, I found varying opinions. One psychologist and yoga teacher I interviewed told me that when it comes to treatment, his motto is “Skills, not pills.” Admittedly, this is not where I'm coming from, and I was disturbed hearing it. It felt judgmental to me, as opposed to compassionate and accepting, two principles that yoga teaches.

Mark Epstein, a psychiatrist and longtime Buddhist meditator based in New York, believes that this tendency to classify antidepressants as unspiritual is antithetical to nondualist yoga philosophy. Nondualism doesn't make such rigid divisions between good and bad, because everything is part of the same whole. Epstein

believes that our inclination to make such divisions can be traced in part to our country's Judeo-Christian history. “We naturally create polarities and decide one thing is spiritual and the other is not. So, we decide that spiritual desire is good and sexual desire is not. Likewise, doing yoga is spiritual and taking antidepressants is not,” Epstein says. “But *yoga* means union. Those types of polarities are what yoga and Buddhist philosophy are out to change.”

Epstein doesn't see taking antidepressants as working against the yogic process. He embraces a medical model that holds some people to be genetically predisposed to anxiety and depression, and encourages patients to make choices that help them cope with and decrease their symptoms. “This isn't just something you get over,” Epstein says. “It's often something you have to manage for the rest of your life.”

A small dosage of antidepressants can be effective in treating not just depression but also anxiety disorders. So, instead of seeing medication as an impediment, Epstein sees it as something to be grateful for. “Whatever alleviates suffering is what the Buddha was after,” he says. I know that I continue to be grateful for the option, because it helped get me to a state where I was calm enough to talk to a therapist, live my life, and feel some peace. A. F.

8 salamba sarvangasana (shoulderstand)

EFFECTS Relieves irritability. Balances the emotions by quieting and nourishing the nervous system. Also, balances the endocrine system.

Do not do this pose (or Halasana) if you have neck or shoulder problems, have high blood pressure, or are menstruating.

Lie on two folded blankets supporting your neck and shoulders, with your arms stretched out alongside your body. Exhale, bend your knees, and raise your legs toward your chest. Pressing your hands into the floor, swing your bent legs over your head. Then support your back with your hands, with your fingers turning in toward the spine. Raise the hips and thighs even farther, straightening the legs as they come up. The top of the sternum should move toward the chin. Keep the elbows in toward each other, pressing the palms and fingers into the back as much as possible, and feel that the whole body is long and straight. If you have trouble keeping your elbows in, secure a strap around both arms just above the elbows. Stay here for several minutes.



9 halasana (plow pose)

EFFECTS One of the most quieting poses for the nervous system; relieves irritability

Continue to support your back with your hands and lower your legs over your head, placing your toes on the floor behind you. Firm your thighs to create space between your face and your legs. Stay here, breathing deeply and slowly for several minutes or as long as you're comfortable. To come out, slowly roll down one vertebra at a time. Rest with your back flat on the floor for several breaths.



happy ending

At this point in the sequence you have several choices. If you feel calm and ready to rest, you can lie in Savasana (Corpse Pose) for 10 minutes or longer. If you still have anxiety or depression after this sequence, you can choose to do a restorative pose like Viparita Karani (if you need help, go to yoga-journal.com and enter the pose in the search box) or you can do another set of invigorating poses to end on an energetic, positive note. If that's the case, repeat step 2, Paschimotanasana to Halasana, 10 to 15 times.

strengthen yourself with awareness

In addition to its physiological benefits, yoga teaches awareness, an invaluable skill for people who struggle with anxiety or depression. If I'd had more awareness that night in the theater, I could have responded differently to my body's cues and perhaps been able to stave off a full panic attack. I would have noticed my shallow breathing—often a sign of anxiety—and tried yoga breathing techniques to help me focus and calm down. Or I might have noticed earlier in the day that I was exhausted and in no condition to be in such a stimulating environment. I might have even observed the effects of some deeper issues going on—at that time my job was miserable, my relationship was unstable, and I was sad being far away from family without a sense of home. If I'd been able to recognize any of those things, I could have made different choices along the way and perhaps reduced my suffering.

Usually, the first way Westerners learn to build awareness in yoga is by practicing the poses. But the myriad instructions heard in class aren't just designed to improve your poses. They give your busy mind something to focus on and therefore keep you in the present moment. For people with anxiety, this is a particular blessing. "When you're anxious, you can't focus on anything because you feel overwhelmed," says Judith Hanson Lasater, Ph.D., P.T., who wrote *30 Essential Yoga Poses*. "Having something concrete to focus on, like a pose or your breath or a mantra, is very settling."

Complex instructions also force you to tune in to the subtle shifts occurring in your body. As you become more aware of these changes, you'll begin to notice subtle alterations in your mind and in your mood, too. You'll feel in a tangible way how the body and mind are connected. "By building awareness of your body, you start to notice the content of your mind," McCall says. "You see what's going on in your mind as you're doing each pose. Maybe you're beating yourself up. Maybe you're as proud as a peacock. Maybe you just want to escape."

As you continue to hone moment-to-moment awareness of your body, breath, emotions, and thoughts in your yoga practice, you'll bring that awareness to your daily life. "When you're paying attention, you're more in touch with your thoughts and feelings as they arise in the moment, which is half the battle of resolving them," Lasater says. In other words, when you're able to identify that something is wrong, you can address that particular issue in the moment, rather than ignoring it and unleashing it later in some painful way, which Lasater calls "being at the mercy of your energy."

add acceptance

So, what's the key to *not* being at the mercy of your energy? It's learning what's behind it (your awareness practice helps with this) and staying present with what's going on, even when you want to escape. That night in the theater, I wanted nothing more than to flee. I became convinced that once I got out of that building, I would feel better. But I didn't feel better. The truth is that for weeks, wherever I went, I wanted to jump out of my own skin. I learned from that experience that running from difficult emotions rarely works—eventually they catch up with you in all kinds of ways. But at that

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