

Yoga for Stress and Burnout

Reducing stress levels can greatly improve health and quality of life—and yoga is arguably the best overall system for stress reduction ever invented.

By Timothy McCall, M.D.

Just about any system of yoga can help reduce stress levels, and this is undoubtedly a major reason for the current surge in yoga's popularity: Sky-high stress is endemic in our society. Not only can stress make life less enjoyable and contribute to such bothersome symptoms as headaches, insomnia, and back pain, but it's linked to many of society's killers, including osteoporosis and heart attacks. Even conditions that aren't caused by stress can prove much more bothersome during stressful times.



Stress and Vata Derangement

High levels of stress are often correlated with what Ayurvedic doctors call *vata derangement*, when the "air element," associated with movement and instability, becomes increased. When vata levels are high, the affected person usually has a rajasic state of mind, flitting from one thought to the next without being able to focus. Typical symptoms of a vata imbalance include impatience, anxiety, insomnia, and constipation, all of which are commonly linked to stress.

While vigorous asana practices can help burn off nervous energy, stressed-out students need to watch the tendency to overdo. Strenuous workouts may leave them feeling temporarily more sattvic but, if not balanced by sufficient winding-down and relaxation, they can lead to increased vata derangement and, ultimately, a quick rebound of symptoms. Also be careful with strong breathing practices such as Kapalabhati and Bhastrika, which can increase vata. Specific yoga practices to lessen excessive vata include squatting, as in Malasana (Garland Pose), standing poses in which an emphasis is placed on grounding well through the legs, and a regular practice of inversions such as Sarvangasana (Shoulderstand).

Ayurveda would also suggest that people whose vata is high should try to stick to a regular schedule of sleep and meals and, whenever possible, eat warm, nutritious, sattvic foods. Sweet, sour, and salty tastes are considered beneficial for reducing vata. Crunchy foods such as corn chips, granola, or raw broccoli are said to increase vata levels. Caffeine, nicotine, and other stimulants may also make matters worse.

Breathing and Stress

One of the ancient yogis' most profound insights was the link between breathing patterns and state of mind. Shallow, rapid breaths—the way many people breathe most of the time—can, from a yogic perspective, be both a cause and a result of stress. Think of how you breathe if you are startled, with a quick inhalation primarily to the upper lungs. Physiologically, habitual rapid chest-breathing is a bit like getting startled thousands of times per day.

The yogic remedy is to slow the breath down. One way to do this is to breathe through the nose. The greater resistance to air flow in the nasal passages compared to the mouth results in a naturally slower respiratory rate, and nasal breathing is also beneficial because it warms and filters incoming air. Ujjayi breathing, in which the vocal cords are narrowed, similarly increases the resistance to air flow and allows the breathing to slow. The sound generated in Ujjayi can also be used as a meditative focus, further contributing to a calmer mind.

It's also calming to breathe more deeply than most people usually do. Abdominal breathing, in which the diaphragm is used to maximum advantage on the inhalation and the abdominal muscles help squeeze air out on the exhalation, results in larger breath volume. It turns out that slower, deeper breaths are much more efficient in bringing oxygen into the body while not exhaling more carbon dioxide (CO₂) than is desirable. Rapid, shallow breaths, in contrast, tend to deplete CO₂ levels, which has a number of negative effects, including promoting mental agitation.

A simple technique, which can provide almost instant stress reduction, is to lengthen the exhalation relative to the inhalation. Doing so increases the tone in the parasympathetic nervous system, which increases relaxation and decreases the sympathetic nervous system's fight-or-flight response. Have your students work toward a 1:2 ratio of inhalation to exhalation, but under no circumstances should they feel any breath hunger (which sets off the stress response) when doing the practice. Once students master this technique, they can use it whenever stress flares up—in the office, while driving, in an airplane—without anyone around them necessarily being able to detect it.

Pratyahara

Pratyahara, the turning of the senses inward, is the fifth of Patanjali's eight-limbed path of yoga and can be an important tool for stress reduction. I believe one reason so many people in the modern world are stressed out is because of the visual and auditory stimulation constantly bombarding us. Even if you don't realize it, ringing phones, blaring TVs, and traffic noises tend to activate the sympathetic nervous system. Many people add to their sensory overload by reflexively turning on the TV or radio while they eat or sit down to relax. You might suggest to students that, at least sometimes, they try to eat or sit in silence and see if it doesn't result in a sense of greater relaxation. It's not a bad idea to turn the phone off sometimes as well.

Consciously going inward on a regular basis can be a partial antidote to regular assault on the senses, both calming the nervous system and making you more resistant to future assaults. Practices such as Savasana (Corpse Pose), pranayama, and meditation cultivate introspection. Regular practitioners can usually notice when external or internal stressors are mounting,

portending a serious flare of stress. Detecting the spark before the fire, as Buddhists put it, can help you institute breathing practices or take other action before stress spirals out of control.

Yoga's ability to reduce stress deepens with regular practice. Tell your students that a little bit every day is great preventive medicine for stress, and it will make the use of breathing practices, deep relaxation, and other yogic tools more effective. If they protest that they are too busy to practice regularly, tell them that's precisely why they need to find a way to do it.

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Yoga for Anxiety and Panic Attacks

Help your students use yoga to address anxiety—both its symptoms and its root causes.

By Timothy McCall, M.D.

Many of the principles discussed in my last column, *Yoga for Stress and Burnout*, are applicable to anxiety and panic attacks, as those are in many ways exaggerated forms of stress. Both conditions are marked by a rajasic (agitated) state of mind and by what is known in Ayurveda as *vata derangement*. And both respond to various yogic tools, including asana and pranayama, as well as lifestyle adjustments and the cultivation of *pratyahara*, turning the senses inward.



Yogic Tools

One of the most useful yogic tools in these cases is a good asana practice, which burns off the nervous energy that can contribute to anxiety. And a number of breathing practices, including abdominal breathing and lengthening the exhalation relative to the inhalation, help reduce symptoms of anxiety. Scientific studies suggest that left-nostril breathing can effectively reduce symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder (and it's probably also useful for less extreme forms of anxiety).

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 greater the likely efficacy.

For students who are open to them, bhakti practices such as prayer, chanting, and devotional singing may be highly therapeutic for anxiety. In the longer term, meditation and self-study (*svadhyaya*) offer the hope of getting at the deeper causes of the problem. Through meditation perhaps more than any other yogic tool, you start to see how busy your mind is, and you gain insight into some of the tricks that it plays. Many people may not realize how repetitive thoughts, of which they are usually barely aware, may be fueling their worries. Getting your students to start to see this pattern clearly is often the first step to bringing it under greater control.

Yoga Philosophy

In fact, seeing clearly can be helpful for anxiety and panic attacks in a variety of ways. Over the years I've seen many patients, most of whom were otherwise vigorous and healthy, with incapacitating panic attacks. Their hearts were beating hard and fast, they were hyperventilating,

and they felt as if they were having a heart attack and might suddenly die. But the reality is that a young and healthy person who is panicking is probably not going to have a heart attack no matter how fast and hard their hearts beat (when students are older or have risk factors for heart disease, such as high blood pressure or elevated cholesterol, you need to be more careful). It often helps them simply to understand that panic is at its core an emotional, not a physical, problem.

Seeing clearly is also useful in dealing with more run-of-the-mill anxiety. Most people who are anxious will admit, if they're honest and paying attention, that much of what they worry about never happens. And even if it does, the consequences are often not as negative as they would have predicted. Sometimes, in retrospect, they realize that the thing they feared the most was precisely what needed to happen for them to grow or learn or get out of a bad situation—in other words, it was ultimately a good thing. One useful self-study exercise is to have students write down the 10 things they're most worried about, then look back weeks or months later to see how many came true, and, if so, whether the consequences were as dire as they'd imagined.

Keep in mind that anxiety can be a useful symptom, and the ability to get anxious has survival value. Thinking about potential threats, and planning how you might lower the risk or respond appropriately, can be extremely useful, even lifesaving. Going over the same worry dozens or even hundreds of times, when the iterations bring no new insight, isn't helpful and can make you miserable.

This is where yogic philosophy can be useful. It teaches that, ultimately, no one can control what's going to happen. Despite your best efforts, some bad things undoubtedly will occur. All you can do is try to plan intelligently, give your best effort, let the universe take its course, and, when it does, respond as well as you can. When you realize that you ultimately don't have control over the future, it can take the pressure off—and that alone may reduce anxiety.

Take care of the present, said the great 20th-century master Ramana Maharshi, and the future will take care of itself.

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Yoga for Depression, Part I

By Timothy McCall, M.D. | Aug 28, 2007



When physicians use the word “depression,” they don’t mean feeling disappointed or blue, or grieving a loss—normal moods that everyone experiences from time to time. Clinical depression is a persistently sad, hopeless, and sometimes agitated state that profoundly lowers the quality of life and that, if untreated, can result in suicide. Doctors aim, with drugs and sometimes psychotherapy, to raise their patients’ moods, but yoga has much loftier goals. As a yoga therapist, you want not only to help lift your students out of depression but to quiet their restless minds, put them in touch with their deeper purpose in life, and connect them with an inner source of calm and joy that yoga insists is their birthright.

My work with students with depression has been deeply influenced by my teacher Patricia Walden, who, as a younger woman, struggled with recurrent depression. Yoga, particularly after she began her studies with B.K.S. Iyengar in the 1970s, spoke to her in a way that no other treatments had, including psychotherapy and antidepressant medication.

Are Antidepressants Bad?

In recent years, doctors have increasingly focused their efforts in treating depression on changing the biochemistry of the brain, specifically by using drugs to raise the levels of neurotransmitters such as serotonin. This is the mechanism of action of the most commonly prescribed antidepressants, the so-called selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) such as Prozac, Paxil, and Zoloft. But there are many other ways—including aerobic exercise and practicing yoga—to raise the levels of serotonin and other neurotransmitters linked to depression.

While many people in the yoga world have a negative view of antidepressant medication, I believe that there are times when these medications are necessary and even lifesaving. While they have side effects and not everyone responds to them, some people with recurrent severe depression appear to do best if they go on and stay on medication. Others may benefit from using antidepressants for a shorter time to help them feel good enough to establish behaviors—such as

an exercise regimen and a regular yoga practice—that can help keep them out of the depths of depression after the drugs are discontinued.

Still, many people with mild to moderate depression may be able to avoid drug therapy entirely. For them, in addition to yoga and exercise, psychotherapy, the herb St.-John's-wort, and increased amounts of omega-3 fatty acids in their diets can help lift mood. These measures can also help in cases of severe depression, though St.-John's-wort should not be combined with prescription antidepressants.

One caution to yoga teachers: I have seen a lot of guilt-tripping of patients considering antidepressants, which people wouldn't dare do if the medication in question was for diabetes or heart disease. I think that's partly a remnant of the outdated notion that, when it comes to psychological problems, you should just buck up and will yourself to feel better. This approach, of course, rarely works and results in a lot of unnecessary suffering. As Patricia Walden says of drug therapy, "Thank God we've got this option."

Personalizing the Yogic Prescription

You'll want to personalize your approach for each student with depression, but Walden finds it useful to divide students into two major categories, each with its own characteristics and yoga practices that are most likely to be helpful.

Some students' depression is marked by a dominance of *tamas*, the *guna* associated with inertia. These people may have a hard time getting out of bed and may feel lethargic and hopeless. Students with *tamasic* depression often have slumped shoulders, collapsed chests, and sunken eyes. It looks as if they are barely breathing. Walden likens their appearance to that of a deflated balloon.

A more common type of depression is marked by a predominance of *rajas*, the *guna* associated with activity and restlessness. These students are often angry, have stiff bodies and racing minds, and may appear agitated, with a hardness around their eyes. In Savasana (Corpse Pose) or restorative poses, their eyes may dart and their fingers won't stay still. These students frequently report difficulty in exhaling fully, a symptom often linked to anxiety.

Asana for Depression

From a yogic perspective, people with *tamasic* depression lack life force or *prana*. You'll want to concentrate on practices that bring breath to the body, particularly deep inhalations. If they are able to tolerate them, vigorous practices such as repeated Sun Salutations (Surya Namaskar), arm balances, and other challenging poses can be therapeutic. The body and mind are so occupied with the practice that it's hard to brood. When teaching vigorous practices to students with depression, don't worry much about proper alignment. As long as they aren't doing anything that might cause an injury, it's better to have them just do the practice and focus on the movement of the breath.

Backbends, in particular, can be stimulating and help fight *tamas*. These range from restorative poses such as supported Savasana (done with a bolster placed lengthwise under the torso) and supported Bridge Pose (Setu Bandha Sarvangasana) to more active poses such as Camel Pose (Ustrasana) and full backbends (Urdhva Dhanurasana). Once you've gotten students to overcome some of their *tamas*, they may be able to relax more deeply. If you try relaxation first, however, you may find them sinking into dark thoughts, defeating the purpose.

Students with *rajasic* depression also tend to respond to Sun Salutations and backbends, though some of them will find strong backbends too agitating. Vigorous practices have the advantage of helping students burn off some nervous energy, and also of being demanding enough to keep their attention from drifting.

Indeed, some students have such a tendency to brood or get swept away with anxious or negative thoughts that asking them to close their eyes in Savasana and restorative poses (and even during Pranayama and meditation) may be counterproductive. Any of these practices can be done with open eyes or, if necessary, skipped entirely. In addition, Walden finds that propping students way up in Savasana, even having them lean on an inclined bolster placed against the wall, can be helpful. She'll often talk during Savasana, turning it into more of a guided relaxation practice.

In Part II of this article, I'll discuss using pranayama, meditation, chanting, and other yogic tools for depression.

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Yoga for Depression, Part II

By Timothy McCall, M.D. | Aug 28, 2007

In Yoga for Depression, Part I I discussed the two major types of depression, *rajasic* and *tamasic*, as conceptualized by my teacher Patricia Walden (and her teacher B.K.S. Iyengar), whose work has heavily influenced my own. That article described asana practices that can help lift students out of depression. Now let's review other useful yoga practices.



Pranayama Practices for Depression

For students with *tamasic* depression, pranayama practices that emphasize inhalation may be useful. Of course, getting your students to focus on engaging their abdominal muscles to help squeeze additional air out of the lungs on the exhalation facilitates an easier, deeper inhalation on the subsequent breath. Such breathing practices as three-part inhalation, and Ujjayi on the inhalation with normal exhalation, are examples of practices that increase the length of the inhalation relative to the exhalation.

Students with more *rajasic* depression may benefit from practices that bring attention to and lengthen the exhalation. Examples include three-part exhalations and 1:2 breathing, where, for example, you inhale for three seconds and exhale for six. Strong breathing practices such as Kapalabhati (Skull Shining Breath, sometimes called Breath of Fire) and Bhastrika (Bellows Breath), which tend to activate the sympathetic nervous system, may sometimes be too agitating for those who are already restless and fidgety. Let direct observation of the student be your guide, since finding the appropriate practice is ultimately a matter of trial and error. Furthermore, since a student's condition may change day to day, what's appropriate may also vary.

Other Practices for Depression

Chanting and other bhakti (devotional) practices can be useful for depression. Walden says that these practices bypass the brain and go directly to the emotions. Not all students respond to bhakti yoga, but in those who do, it can be powerful. Chanting tends to keep the brain occupied, and it's a natural way to extend the exhalation without thinking about it. You'd therefore expect it to be particularly useful for students with busy, rajasic minds.

Meditation can be a powerful tool over the long-term to facilitate greater levels of happiness. Dr. Richard Davidson at the University of Wisconsin has done research that shows that meditation tends to increase the activity of the left prefrontal cortex of the brain. Left-sided activation has been associated with greater levels of calm and happiness and well as more emotional resiliency, rendering practitioners better able to withstand the inevitable ups and downs of life. Students who are severely depressed may not be able to meditate, even if they keep their eyes open.

If that's the case, try to initiate meditative practices when they are out of the depths of depression to help insulate them against recurrences.

Yoga philosophy can also be of help. Yoga teaches that the more you do or think something, the more likely you are to do it or think it again. Any habit—what yoga calls a *samskara*—tends to get deeper with repetition. Thus a negative and self-flagellating inner dialogue may not just be a symptom of depression, it may help fuel it. One practice that Walden suggests is to consciously cultivate gratitude. “Count your blessings every day,” she tells her students.

It can be useful to get out a pad of paper and try to list all you have to be grateful for. When you think about all the things that had to happen even for you to be born, it's a miracle you are here. Then there are all the people who've loved you, fed you, cared for you, and educated you throughout your life. It's also helpful to be thankful for the practice of yoga, which has been passed to us from masters who lived thousands of years ago, and the line of teachers extending from them to the present day. Such an exercise is an example of what Patanjali called “cultivating the opposite.” The more you practice this—even if it's torturous at first—the deeper your “gratitude *samskara*” will become, and the more it can contribute to your well-being in the long run.

Taking a Step, No Matter How Small

Your students' journey out of depression begins with a single step from wherever they are right now. If they are severely depressed, it may be a struggle for them to practice at all. In that case, could you get them to commit to doing a single Sun Salutation, or even a single Down Dog Pose, every day? (Of course, once they get on their mats, they may find themselves doing more.) Or perhaps you could encourage them to study their interior dialogues to understand how recurrent thoughts may be sabotaging recovery. In severe cases, especially if suicide seems like a possibility, don't hesitate to refer your students to a doctor or psychotherapist. Even if such professional help is necessary, yoga can play a complementary role, likely rendering any psychotherapy or medication more effective.

Better still, even though yoga tends to help reverse depression slowly, its ultimate aim is much higher than achieving the “everyday discontent” that Freud viewed as the goal of psychoanalysis. Yoga, in contrast, teaches 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 in each of us. Various yoga practices are simply tools to help get us there.

<http://www.yogajournal.com/article/teach/yoga-for-depression-part-ii/>



Yoga for Psychological and Emotional Problems

Yoga is a perfect complement to psychotherapy and other approaches to a variety of psychological conditions, including anxiety and depression.

By Timothy McCall, M.D.

You may think of yoga therapy as useful primarily for physical problems, but a major subject area in yoga is the mind, making it particularly useful for treating mental illness. In future columns, I'll talk in more detail about using yoga to relieve stress and burnout, anxiety and panic attacks, and depression, all of which yoga can help improve.

But one of the great beauties of yoga is that it's not just about taking your students from a negative state of mind to feeling "normal," which is the goal of most psychologists and physicians. Yoga aims much higher, seeking to put its practitioners in touch with a state of peace, joy, and equanimity that yogis insist is everyone's birthright. The key is getting your mind to work for you, not against you; millennia ago, yogis discovered a wide variety of practices to help achieve this end.

The Gunas

Yoga and Ayurveda, and the Samkya philosophy from which they both sprang, identify three general states of mind, called *gunas*. The three *gunas* are *tamas*, *rajas*, and *sattva*. *Tamas* is the state of heaviness or lack of movement; metaphorically, being stuck. The kind of depression in which a person sleeps excessively would be considered tamasic. *Rajas* implies movement, and a rajasic mental state is characterized by restlessness, agitation, and even panic. *Sattva* is the state of clarity, peace, and balance.

Even when two people carry the same diagnosis—say, depression—if one is tamasic and the other rajasic, your approach as a yoga therapist may need to be very different. In general in yoga and yoga therapy, the idea is to raise people who are tamasic to a rajasic state. A vigorous practice involving repeated Sun Salutations (Surya Namaskar, for example) might be appropriate. Once you've gotten them out of a tamasic slump, you can shift your focus to moving them from rajasic toward *sattva*, perhaps with inversions followed by deep relaxation (Savasana, or Corpse Pose).

When the guna of rajas dominates, it can be very useful to use an invigorating practice to "burn off steam." Afterward it may be possible for your students to settle into restorative practices or meditation, for which their minds may have been too "busy" earlier.

Thus, both the predominately tamasic and those who are more rajasic tend to benefit mentally from the kind of practice sequences that are common in general yoga classes. Most people feel sattvic after a practice that gradually builds in intensity and then winds down toward the end.

One caution, though: Students who have reached the state of physical and emotional burnout or vital exhaustion, even if their condition is rajasic, may not be capable of a strong yoga practice. Rather than giving them a workout, you'll need to focus on more soothing practices, perhaps flowing from one gentle pose to the next. Or use guided imagery exercises such as Yoga Nidra to keep their busy minds occupied while not taxing their bodies too heavily.

Svadhya: Studying the Mind

Yoga teaches that the more you have certain thoughts, or certain kinds of thoughts, the more likely you are to have them in the future. These are mental *samskaras*; like grooves in a muddy road, they tend to get deeper over time. Modern science is confirming the truth of this ancient yogic insight with new understanding of neuroplasticity. Scientists now understand that the more you think or do something, the stronger the neural pathways become that connect the specific brain cells (neurons) involved. Thus the more you beat yourself up emotionally, for example, the more likely you are to do it again and again.

Before you can change a pattern, however, you first need to see it clearly. People often aren't fully aware of recurrent thoughts that may be undermining their health and well-being, or they may not be aware of how pervasive they are. Therefore, part of the yogic remedy is to encourage your students to consciously tune in to their inner dialogue. A good place to begin such svadhya is during asana practice: Are your students judging themselves as they attempt a pose? Is fear limiting them from attempting practices, such as Handstand, that their bodies are ready for? Are they telling themselves that they'll never be any good at yoga? Students who have such thoughts during their practice are likely to have similar ones at other times, and these thoughts may be limiting their lives. The habit of self-study you help them cultivate on their yoga mats can spread to a broader awareness of mental habits—allowing them, for example, to bring greater precision to the work they do with a psychotherapist.

While it is not always possible for people with psychological problems to meditate, meditation is, ultimately, probably the most powerful yogic tool for studying the mind, and in the long run it often proves to be the most useful tool for dealing with psychological problems. But trying to get people who are seriously depressed or panicking to sit and meditate can be next to impossible, and potentially even counterproductive. The more sattvic they become from other practices, however, the more likely they will be to eventually tackle a sitting practice successfully, and reap its many benefits.

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