

Yoga for Depression

Depression is an often misunderstood illness and has been labelled a modern day epidemic. The World Health Organization describes it as an epidemic that within two decades will be second only to cardiovascular disease in terms of global disease burden (1). The USA, has the highest incidence of depression in the world, with as many as one in ten people affected over the course of a lifetime (2). In order to understand depression, it is important to distinguish it from merely 'feeling blue' or normal grieving, which are emotions we all feel from time to time. Depression distinguishes itself from these passing emotions, by being a persistent state of sadness, hopelessness and potentially agitation. It is also characterized by a general loss of interest in previously pleasurable activities, feelings of guilt or low self-worth, disturbed sleep, altered appetite, tiredness and poor concentration. In severe cases, and if left untreated, may result in suicide (3).

Western science has for decades tried to make sense of this condition. Today, the origin of depression is thought to lie within the brain, and specifically in altered biochemistry of neurotransmitters which regulate emotions and mood. These neurotransmitters are primarily serotonin, dopamine and norepinephrine and they are essentially the body's feel-good chemicals. In particular, low levels of serotonin have been linked to depression (4). As a logical deduction, one of the main avenues of western treatment is drugs, namely antidepressants, which artificially manipulate the levels of these chemicals in the brain. The other usual line of treatment is psychotherapy. Psychotherapy aims to give the patient a new perspective on their problems and provide coping skills in times of stress. Drugs undoubtedly have an important role to play, especially in cases of severe depression, where it can be life saving. However, there are additional options available today, one of them being yoga. Yoga, combined with its sister science of Ayurveda, is a powerful healing system for complete health. Health, not only on a physical level, but very much on a mental and emotional level as well. The problems facing mankind are much the same as it was facing people that lived 5000 years ago, from where we have the earliest records of yoga. Technology has certainly changed, but the human brain and its emotions and sorrows are essentially the same. It would be irresponsible to say that all sufferers of depression should throw their medication away and head off to yoga class. The real boon of yoga is that it is not an all or nothing situation. It is perfectly reasonable to combine allopathic treatments, with yoga as therapy in addition to and not instead of. In cases of mild to moderate depression, it is possible to avoid drugs altogether by combining yoga and psychotherapy to lift mood. In fact, research has shown that in the case of mild or moderate depression, drugs are only little more effective than placebos and psychotherapy can be just as effective as medication (5). The ideal is obviously for each person to be able to understand and manage their own condition effectively, and this is where yoga can be highly valuable.

If we reconsider the western view of depression, some potential flaws may exist. Is it really possible to isolate the origin of depression to a single organ, namely the brain? And the source of the symptoms to a few molecules, namely neurotransmitters? Is it possible, that such a simplistic view does not honor the complexity of the human body, nor does it acknowledge the body's own natural healing mechanisms? From a yoga perspective, the body is a complex interplay of many systems, with dysfunction manifesting in many different ways. Yoga views a human being as comprising three aspects:

body, mind and spirit. The health of one, is fundamental to the health of all three. Yoga addresses the health of the person holistically and there are several ways in which yoga may help in the management of depression:

- Yoga Asanas affect the body and the mind positively. Through the practice of asanas, the body's natural feel-good hormones are released, which promote a sense of well-being.
- Pranayama exercises are useful as the quality of one's breathing affects the quality of one's mind. Pranayama is able to soothe the nervous system. Care must be taken though as incorrect practice can lead to negative effects. Pranayama is best practiced with the guidance of a teacher.
- Meditation - although this may not be suitable when depression is severe, once the worst of the symptoms are alleviated, meditation can induce feelings of calm and happiness, as well as aid in the development of emotional 'resiliency'.
- Yoga has a soothing effect on the nervous system, taking it from a state where the sympathetic nervous system predominates, fight or flight mode, to a parasympathetic state, rest and repair mode.
- Yoga can normalize the levels of neurotransmitters in the brain which are responsible for feelings of well-being (serotonin, dopamine and norepinephrine).
- 'Fake it till you make it' - asanas affect our attitudes. The warrior poses, Virabhadrasana I, II and III promote feelings of strength and confidence, as we try to emulate the warrior Virabhadra, whom the pose is named after.
- Joining a class setting, promotes a sense of connectedness and community with others. When depressed many people isolate themselves which exacerbate morbid feelings.
- Yoga does not only encourage connectedness with others, but even more importantly cultivates a connection with the self. This is healing on the deepest level.
- Yoga fosters an attitude of equanimity, by letting go of negative judgments and replacing them with loving acceptance and gentle matter-of-factness.
- Central to alternative healing modalities, is the patient's active role in his treatment and rehabilitation. This is a very empowering state.

In using yoga as therapy for depression, it is useful to classify it into different types, depending on how the depression manifests in the individual (6). This classification comes from the work done by Patricia Walden on the treatment of depression with yoga. (Patricia Walden is a classical Iyengar yoga teacher, who herself experienced a period of depression, and was helped by yoga.) This classification is relevant as it guides the approach using yoga as therapy. There are 3 main types of depression:

Tamasic depression - identified by predominantly melancholic, lethargic feelings. Typically the person would have slumped shoulders, a collapsed chest, shallow breath and an expressionless face.

Rajasic depression - is marked by high levels of tension, agitation, anger and tightness in the muscles. The person often presents with hardness in the eyes and restless fingers.

Hormonally-related depression - which would be associated with pre-menstrual syndrome, post-partum, peri-menopausal and menopausal depression.

In using yoga as therapy for depression, knowing the type of depression, taking to account age, previous asana experience and general health, a suitable asana prescription can be devised. The yogic approach is always to: balance tamas and rajas principles, in order to cultivate sattva (7). Sattva is the quality of clarity, balance, peace, lightness and luminosity, which is regarded as the ideal state of being. To balance tamas, one needs more rajas, and to balance rajas one needs some tamas. In choosing an appropriate sequence, one would consider the effects certain asanas have on the body and mind/psyche:

In general back-bends and inversions are seen as anti-depressant poses. Backbends oppose the 'drooping shoulder' posture of a 'depressed person' and open the chest/ heart region. Back bends promote courage and will power (8). Inversions cultivate emotional stability (9).

It is important to monitor the effects whilst in the poses, if the mind becomes restless or anxious, or tends to brood, it is best to come out of the pose. Different people will respond differently to poses, so it is best to observe what happens to the mind individually and tailor a practice to suit different needs at different times (6). Below are examples of how an appropriate asana practice can be formulated:

In depression where tamas predominates, a rajasic practice would be more appropriate. In planning an appropriate sequence, the practice could begin with supported back-bends to open the chest and lungs, then move onto more active poses and end off with inversions to quiet and calm the mind. In depression, where a state of rajas predominates, a restorative sequence would be more appropriate, beginning a practice with more active poses, including back-bends, and then end the practice with inversions and supine poses to calm and soothe the mind.

Below is an example of a sequence for a rajasic type depression, the poses are given and the effects of the pose in brackets. The effects are as described in Geeta Iyengar's book, *Yoga - A Gem for Women* (10). Special precautions have to be taken for persons with back problems or neck conditions, and coexisting conditions such as high blood pressure, but the sequence serves to illustrate how various poses can be linked to form an 'anti- depressant' practice.

Vrksāsana (develops balance and poise)

Utkatasana (develops groundedness)

Virabhadrasana II (develops poise, balance, confidence)

Virabhadrasana I (as above)

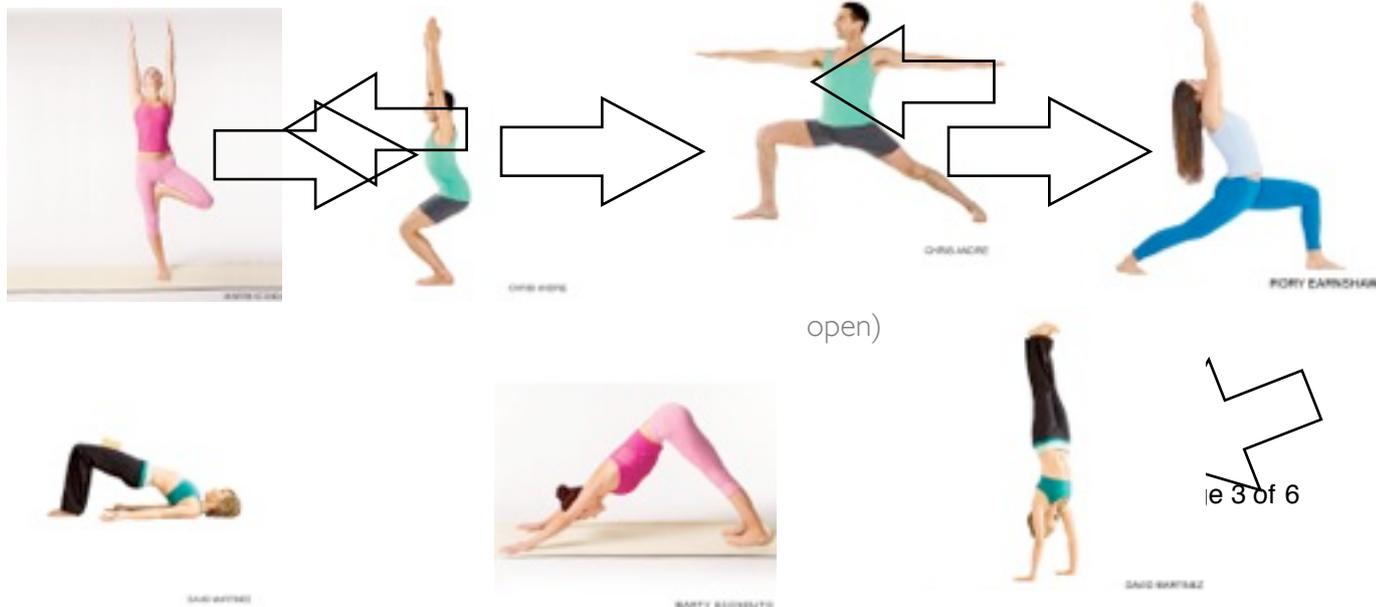
Adho mukha vrksāsana (develops mental and physical focus, caution in case of hypertension, headaches, back and shoulder injuries)

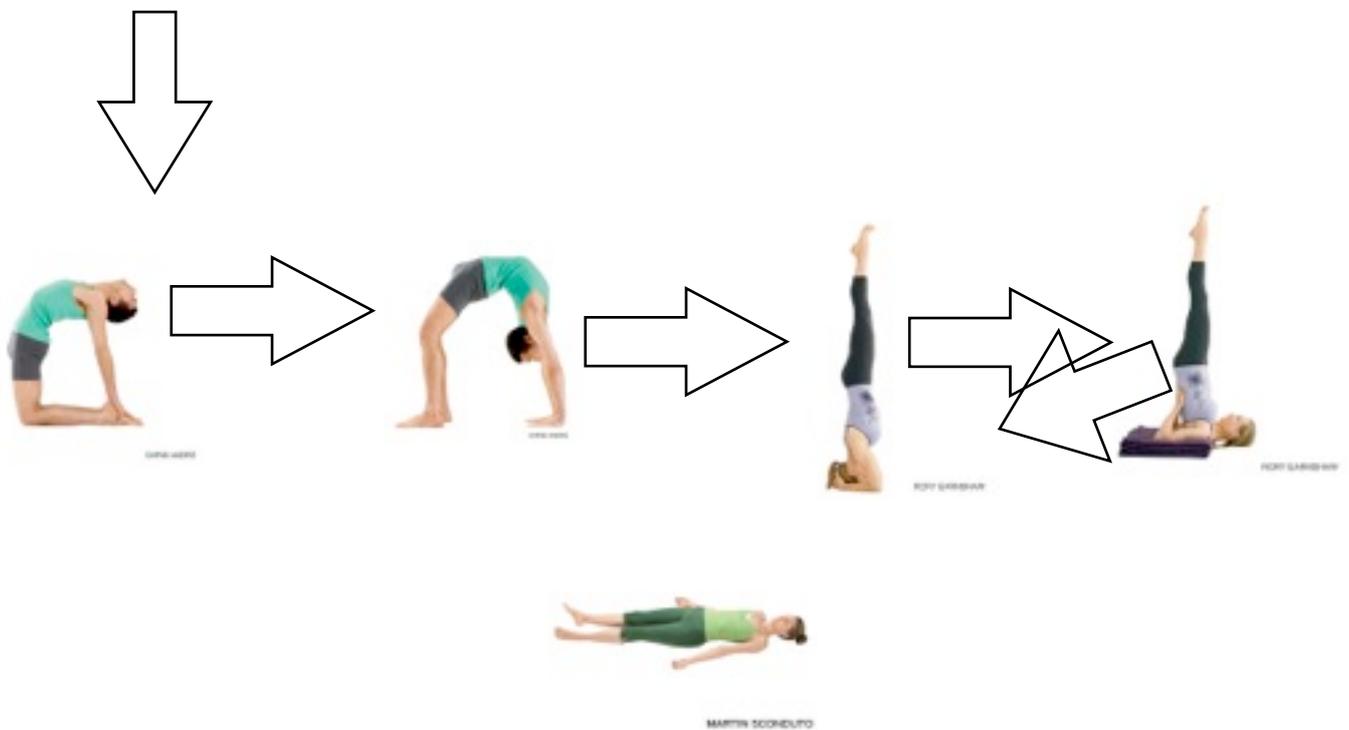
Adho mukha svanasana (relieves fatigue and has an exhilarating effect on the body)

Setu bandha Sarvangāsana, Ustrāsana, Urdhva dhanurāsana (these are all backbends that broaden the chest, improve breathing, relive tension and soothe the nervous system and brain, caution in case of hypertension and back injury).

Śīrśāsana, Salamba Sarvangāsana (these are inversions and help to cultivate emotional stability, mental clarity, forbearance and an attitude of non attachment, caution and possibly contraindicated in case of hypertension and neck injury).

Śavāsana (in the poses the mind and body are linked, if the mind tends to brood it is best performed with the eyes





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In creating a truly holistic program to manage depression, it would be incomplete without considering Ayurveda, the sister science of yoga. Ayurveda is the oldest system of natural medicine in the world. It traces its origins back five thousand years or even more, to the Vedic culture of India. Ayurveda is an holistic approach to health and its aim is to prevent and treat illness by maintaining balance in the body, mind, and consciousness through proper drinking, diet, and lifestyle, as well as herbal remedies. In Ayurveda, health is viewed as a state of complete physical, emotional, mental and spiritual well-being. Not merely the absence of disease. In Ayurveda there must be a free flow of life energy and this is fundamental to health. Where depression manifests, Ayurveda defines it as a state where life-energy is depleted or blocked (11). This is interesting, because from an Ayurvedic perspective, depression is created by incorrect habits and choices and can be undone with correct habits and choices (11). In other words there is no mystery to it, and it can be treated. The Ayurvedic approach would be to focus on regaining life energy. Ayurveda has its own unique system of interpreting and classifying this life-energy.

According to Ayurvedic beliefs, each person has a distinct pattern of energy -- a specific combination of physical, mental, and emotional characteristics. It is also believed that there are three basic energy types called doshas, present in every person. The three doshas are:

Vata -- energy that controls bodily functions associated with motion, including blood circulation, breathing, blinking, and heartbeat. Vata governs the nervous system and keeps our biorhythms in tune with the cycles of day and night and the seasons. When vata energy is balanced, there is creativity and vitality. Out of balance, vata produces fear and anxiety. When unbalanced it manifests as a depression where there is lack of enthusiasm, anxiety, difficulty falling asleep and a feeling of being overwhelmed and out of control.

Pitta -- energy that controls the body's metabolic systems, including digestion, absorption, nutrition, and temperature. In balance, pitta leads to contentment and intelligence. Out of balance, pitta can cause ulcers and arouse anger. In depression, when this dosha is out of balance it manifests with feelings of irritability, frustration, disrupted sleep, waking in the early hours unable to sleep again.

Kapha -- energy that controls growth in the body. It supplies water to all body parts, moisturizes the skin, and maintains the immune system. In balance, kapha is expressed as love and forgiveness. Out of balance, kapha leads to insecurity and envy. A depression which results from an imbalance of this dosha typically manifests with lethargy, loss of interest, feelings of being 'weighed down'. Here excessive sleep is more of a problem than lack of sleep.

Everyone has elements of vata, pitta, and kapha, but usually 1 or 2 are dominant in a particular person. Many things can disturb the energy balance, such as stress, an unhealthy diet, the weather, and strained family relationships. The disturbance shows up as disease. Ayurvedic practitioners prescribe treatments to bring the doshas back into balance.

Ayurvedic treatment for depression would include, but is not exclusive to (11):

- Diagnosing the type of depression, using the Ayurvedic classification of energy mechanisms/ doshas. This is similar to the yoga classification, but in Ayurveda it determines the prescription of herbs, food, sunlight, type of exercise etc.
- A prescription of foods and food-combining that balances the doshas
- Introducing good habits concerning digestion of food, rest and sleep. An example would be, going to sleep by 10 pm and waking by 6am.
- An exercise prescription including yoga and breathing exercises
- Instruction in meditation which relieves stress and is a form of restorative rest
- A prescription of herbal remedies to balance the doshas, aid sleep and digestion etc.
- Abhyanga -- rubbing the skin with herbal oil to increase blood circulation, draw toxins out of the body through the skin and promote restorative sleep.

It is possible to combine the practice of yoga and the science of Ayurveda to manage depression in way which addresses all the facets of what it means to be human. The body is healed, repaired and strengthened through yoga and Ayurvedic practices, the mind is soothed and the spirit is revived and revitalized. In so doing chances of recurrence are also minimized.

Western medicine has treatments for many ills of the body, but it has no remedy for life's trials and sorrows. This is where yoga comes into its own. Through its practice and philosophy it aims to replace our egocentric obsessions, agitations and insecurities of the mind with an open-hearted outlook, serenity, clarity, self-assurance and self-knowledge.

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