

Yoga for Depression



by Kim Childs

Every day, millions of Americans turn to medication for relief from debilitating depression. While antidepressants can be effective, they can also trigger problematic side effects. A more holistic treatment for depression can be found on the yoga mat, according to instructor and author Amy Weintraub, who speaks from personal experience.

Weintraub is a former media professional who was struggling with severe depression in 1989 when she took her first yoga class and felt a remarkable shift in her mood. The effects of yoga were so positive that Weintraub kept practicing, and feeling better. Within a year she was able to stop taking antidepressants. Today she is a teacher and advocate of this ancient science.

“Almost daily, someone tells me how important their practice has been in sustaining their mental health,” says Weintraub, whose book *Yoga for Depression* is popular among other yoga teachers who have battled depression.

“[They] tell me that they began a daily yoga practice after reading my book. Eventually, they were able to manage their moods well enough to stop taking antidepressant medications, and like me, they became passionate about sharing what they feel saved their lives.”

While exercise is often prescribed to treat depression, yoga practice demands more attention to breath and body sensations than most other forms of exercise. Weintraub says that this is exactly what makes yoga effective for relieving depressed minds.

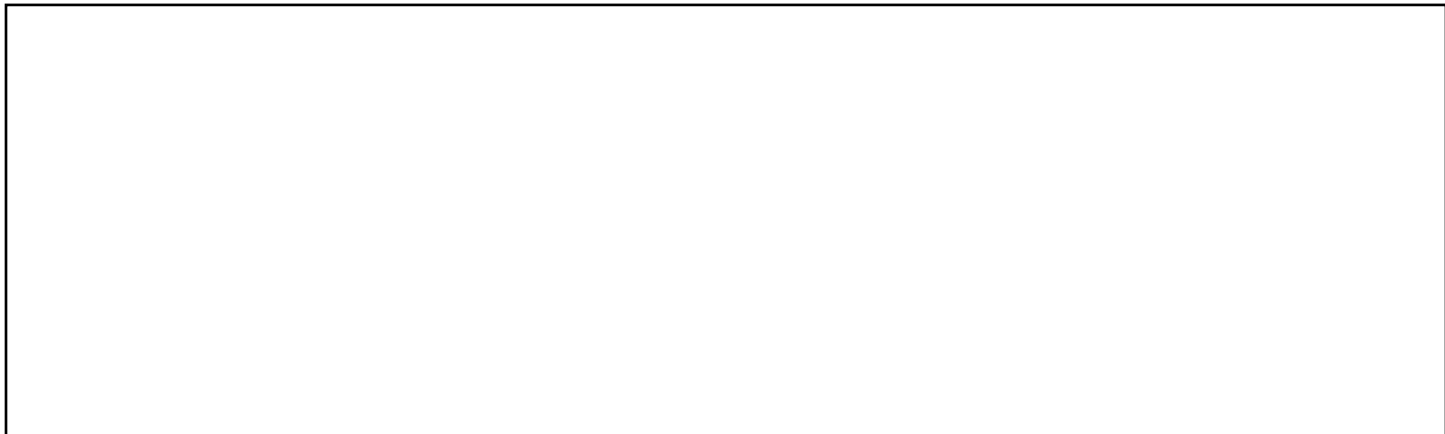
“Almost daily, someone tells me how important their practice has been in sustaining their mental health,” says Amy Weintraub (left), author of *Yoga for Depression*.

“Psychologists and yogis agree that the feeling of happiness arises when we are absorbed in the present moment,” she observes. “The body is always present. The mind is a time traveler. So, when we bring awareness to sensation and breath as we practice yoga, we become the presence we seek.”

In addition to cultivating mindfulness, the physical practices of yoga nourish the brain and balance the nervous system, says Weintraub. The kind of deep, diaphragmatic breathing done in yoga reverses the shallow breathing patterns associated with depression and anxiety. Studies also show that yoga practice lowers cortisol, the “stress hormone”, and raises “feel good” hormones like endorphins. Certain yoga poses (asanas), like backbends and inversions, can be especially beneficial to those struggling with depression, Weintraub notes, but only if they are done mindfully.

“The importance is in the way in which asana is practiced,” she says. “If you’re not attending to the breath and sensation in your body, you may as well go for a run.”

These days there are so many styles of yoga being taught that most people can find a class and a teacher to suit them. Weintraub, who has worked with teens, elders in wheelchairs and people of various ability levels, says that even



simplified poses can be powerful when combined with conscious breathing and affirming thoughts.

“Let’s say a student is unable to hold the traditional warrior pose,” says Weintraub. “Instead, she can stand straight with her arms overhead, taking long deep breaths in mountain pose, breathing in all that she seeks—be it peace, clarity or ease of being—through her open arms.”

When someone is so focused on the details of posture alignment and conscious breathing, it’s hard to think of anything outside of yoga class, notes Weintraub. With time, yoga practitioners can develop a kind of witness consciousness, as they watch internal sensations shift, and learn to see that moods also come and go. Thus “I am depressed” becomes “I see that depression is present, and so are other sensations.”

“Just as daily yoga practice strengthens the immune system against common colds and other viruses, it also strengthens and soothes the emotional body,” Weintraub says, “bringing highs, lows and emotional extremes into balance. In every stage of yoga, practitioners report that they also find relief from obsessive negative thinking.”

Teachers and practitioners alike report that a daily yoga practice is crucial for anyone seeking to relieve their depression this way in order to keep the body and mind anchored in the positive benefits. A home practice can be done with an instructional CD or DVD, while yoga classes add the benefit of community and support from teachers. While Weintraub and others have been able to reduce or eliminate their use of antidepressants with yoga, this will not be the case for everyone. Those seeking help for depression and anxiety should check with a doctor before designing a treatment plan.

Amy Weintraub is the author of Yoga for Depression (Broadway Books) and founding director of the LifeForce Yoga Healing Institute. She leads professional certification trainings in LifeForce Yoga for Depression and Anxiety. For more on Weintraub’s audio and video products and bimonthly newsletter, visit YogaForDepression.com.