



Yoga Helps Beat The Winter Blues

worry gives a small thing
a big shadow -Swedish proverb

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Winter months are often times when we retreat indoors waiting for the cold to pass. For some, the prospect of snow, hot chocolate and a good book initiate a time of rejuvenation and rest after the frenetic holidays. For others, the waning daylight and cold gloomy weather is cause for the "blues". Depression and anxiety may remove interest and pleasure from most things, for most of the day. It can affect your appetite, your sleep and your ability to concentrate.

The good news is that yoga offers a prescription for overcoming the challenges of many kinds of anxiety and depression. The practice is simple and accessible to anyone.

"When all else fails, sit quietly and breathe" - anonymous.

From a purely yogic perspective, there is also a connection between posture and mood. An open chest lifts the heart and lungs and allows you to breathe more deeply (BKS Iyengar). A challenging practice, encouraging our body and mind to go beyond its previous limits allows one to discover strengths they may not have known existed. This realization can be invigorating. As yoga teachers we aim to lift all students' moods, but also to relieve agitation and bring us closer to our source--our sense of self. The yogic tool of "self-study" (svadhyaya) allows one to reflect on areas of their life which may need to be changed in an honest and systematic way. Society tends to view psychological symptoms as moral failing, or personal weakness. This stigma may exaggerate feelings of sadness or anxiety and can prevent people from seeking help. Sometimes symptoms are a healthy reaction to a challenge or trauma. The process of self-study allows one to identify the problem and "deal with it" -- recognize negative

& self destructive thoughts and consciously replace them with a "more positive story"-- and or seek help. This "thought recognition and replacement" technique is also a fundamental aspect of cognitive-behavioral therapy (Gardiner), the most effective treatment for depression in the medical community. It should be no surprise that clinical studies support the anecdotal findings of yoga practitioners, students and teachers- **Yoga works.**

Since the 1970's studies and clinical trials have shown yoga to be effective as a treatment or adjunct therapy for depression, anxiety and seasonal affective disorder. Stress is a big factor in depression, and much of yoga's effectiveness comes from its ability to alleviate tension and increase mental focus. Stress causes persistent activation of the sympathetic nervous system and elevation of the stress hormone **cortisol**. Yoga has been shown to significantly lower cortisol levels (Woolery) by balancing the action of the sympathetic & parasympathetic nervous system.

When incorporated with meditation mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) studies like the one at UCLA show that the positive effects of yoga were greater and persisted after the study was completed for those who continued to practice (Richardson 1995).

Yoga and other forms of exercise increase serotonin levels and endorphins (mood hormones). Geist (1978) has shown that yoga, swimming and running (in that order) show the greatest measurable mood enhancement of all forms of exercise, and yoga "brings a heightened sense of well-being and calm. It provides a method to find purpose, joy and contentment when these are difficult to locate." Yoga also increases blood flow and oxygenation of the cells in the body. In this way, aerobic activity whether through breath control, movement or both reduces aches and pains and produces what we common call the "runner's high".

Finally, meditation & breathing techniques are highly affective in reducing the symptoms of anxiety

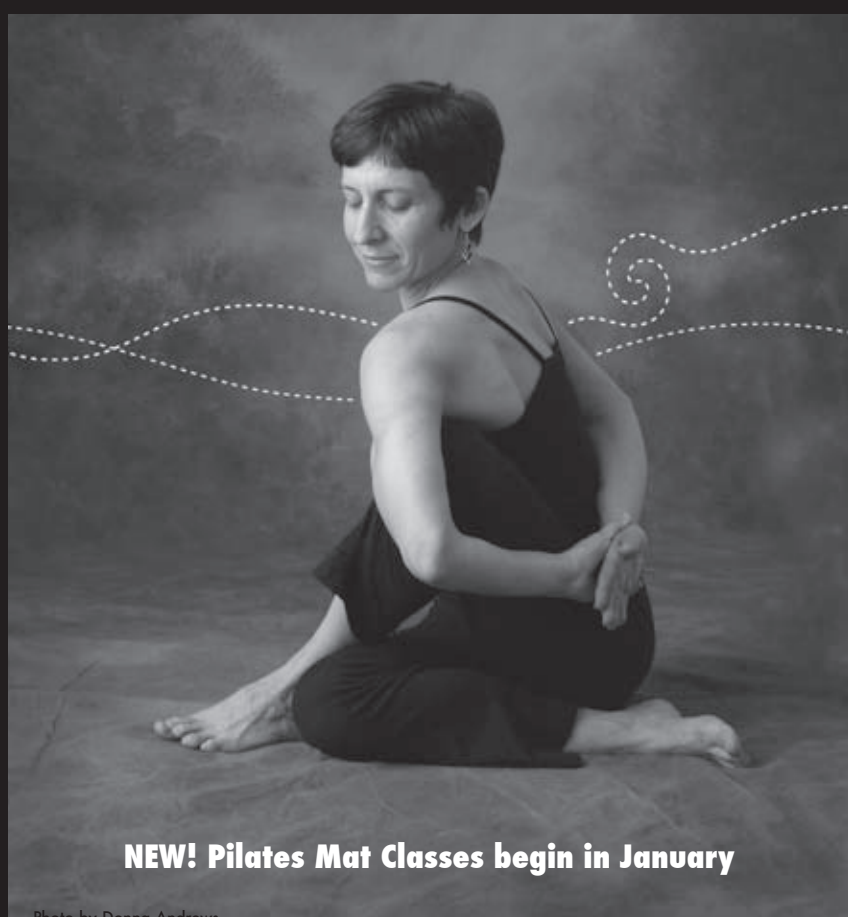
and depression and act as tools for preventing the onset of acute episodes of suffering. Alternate nostril breathing (nadi shonana) balances and calms the nervous system, more forceful breath like victorious breath (ujjayi) and skull shining breath (kapalabhati) reduce anxiety and provide mental focus and a release of physical tension. Meditation is a part of self-study, but also may be practiced strictly as a technique to clear the mind of anxious thoughts and allow greater concentration, focus and peace of mind.

Yoga is easily learned and accessible to all individuals. It lacks the side affects and counter indications that often accompany drug treatments. Yoga can also allow an individual to gain a sense of control, since the practice is one that offers tools to heal oneself. This self healing reduces anxiety and is empowering. Yoga truly does beat the blues; it is a way to reconnect with our sense of self.

**New Year's resolution:
rediscover joy.**

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