

Turning Anxiety from Enemy to Ally:

A Yoga Therapy Approach for Today's World


By Antonio Sausys

C-IAYTs: EARN CONTINUING EDUCATION CREDIT

Read this article and take the quiz at iayt.org. Under **C-IAYT** on the top menu bar, go to **Professional Development/CE** to access the APD Course Listings. Enter "Yoga Therapy Today" in the Course Description field to search for this and previous articles. CE-eligible articles are available for 2 years after the original publication date.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand basic benefits and detriments of anxiety from psychological and yoga-informed perspectives.
2. Articulate the four steps of a practical model for processing anxiety.
3. Describe three yoga therapy tools and the rationale for employing them to help transform experiences of anxiety.



The magic isn't in eliminating anxiety—it's in teaching the client that they can stay functional even when anxious.

Layered on top is the reality—no longer theoretical—of climate change: fires, floods, storms, strange seasons...Nature is sending clear messages. We can now see what many once considered “someday” in the news and sometimes in our own neighborhoods. Alongside these experiences comes the uncomfortable recognition that we are not as prepared as we'd hoped to be.

Economic instability adds its own flavor to the stew of anxiety: inflation, housing challenges, uneven access to resources, and the general sense that the social contract is creaking under pressure. And then there is the constant hum of social media and its shadow companion, misinformation. Add the rapid and sometimes unsettling rise of artificial intelligence (AI), with all its uncharted ethical territory, and our nervous systems naturally begin scanning for danger, even when physical danger isn't present.

As yoga therapists, we see the effects of this environment in clients every day—and we feel them ourselves. We're breathing the same air of uncertainty and navigating similar stresses, often while holding space for others. Many people seek us out because their anxiety has become too heavy to carry alone, yet we, too, need practices that help us stay steady and clear as we offer support.

The reassuring truth is that anxiety, by itself, is not a problem. Anxiety is a messenger. A yellow traffic light. A signal that something matters and deserves our attention. The trouble begins only when we treat that yellow light as if it were red and slam on the brakes, or when we blow right through the signal without looking. The art lies in learning to pause at the yellow light long enough to understand what it's trying to say.

That's what this article is about: understanding anxiety not as an enemy to be conquered, but as an ally that can help us grow, adapt, and respond more wisely in the world, rooted in the insights of somatic psychology, classical yoga, and integrative grief therapy. Yoga therapy gives us practical tools for this shift in understanding. And in these times, knowing how to work with anxiety—in ourselves as well as clients—is essential, not just for specialists but for anyone seeking to support themselves or others.

What Anxiety Is—And Isn't

Anxiety is often described as the fear of being incapable of facing an impending circumstance. It's fundamentally anticipatory—an emotional projection into a future we don't fully trust ourselves to navigate. This is very different from fear. Fear is immediate and visceral. You step off the curb, hear a horn, and jump back. No analysis needed. Fear is fast, accurate, and built from millions of years of biological wisdom.

Anxiety is slower, more imaginative, and far more personal. This experience lives in the space of “What if...?” and tends to highlight

Anxiety as the Default

I recently heard a colleague say that “anxiety is now society's default state,” and I felt something inside me nod in recognition. It's hard to disagree. Everywhere we turn, an undercurrent of tension crackles. You can feel it on people's faces in the supermarket line, read it in the tone of emails, hear it in the way conversations begin with a sigh before a word is even spoken.

The world today pulls our attention in more directions than ever before. After the pandemic, communication norms loosened and shifted. The things that once felt socially predictable—simple greetings, boundaries, expectations—now feel blurred. With so much interaction mediated through screens, where tone and nuance are easily misread, and with many nervous systems already strained by prolonged stress, even small social uncertainties can feel amplified. People often find themselves unsure of how to connect, afraid of saying the wrong thing, or wondering whether they're reading cues correctly. That uncertainty alone can generate a surprising amount of anxiety.

not only potential external dangers but also the places inside us where we feel inadequate, fragile, or unprepared. In that sense, anxiety tells us as much about our self-perception as it does about our actual circumstances.

Some people simply come into the world with a temperament more prone to anxiety. They feel life intensely. Their nervous systems notice things that others miss. That sensitivity is not a flaw but rather part of their design. Others experience anxiety only in specific situations: an exam, a medical appointment, a difficult conversation, a moment of visibility. And sometimes anxiety appears not as a personality trait or a situational response but as a symptom of something else: exhaustion, emotional overwhelm, chronic stress, nutritional imbalance, illness, or grief.

It's important to remember that anxiety can be useful for ourselves and clients alike. In small doses, it is a call to prepare, to refine our skills, to pay attention to something that matters. Anxiety helps us cross the street safely, remember our lines before speaking, and notice when a relationship needs repair.

Anxiety becomes problematic when we misunderstand its purpose. If we treat every anxious signal as proof that something terrible is about to happen, the system becomes overloaded. Instead of helping us prepare, anxiety begins to shut us down. We get caught in scanning, racing thoughts, looping worries, self-judgment, and vigilance. Think of an overly sensitive car alarm that goes off when the wind blows: Because it alerts us so often, we stop trusting it.

As yoga therapists, recognizing this distinction is crucial. We want anxiety to inform clients' lives, not dominate them. And we want to model that relationship in ourselves.

Why Anxiety Feels So Intense: The Nervous System's Perspective

The human nervous system is ancient. It evolved to protect us from predators, not from long email threads, social ambiguity, climate data, or questions about the future of AI. In other words, our biology is trying to do its job—with equipment that wasn't designed for modern life.

The amygdala, our brain's threat-detection center, has a simple mandate: better safe than sorry. From an evolutionary point of view, having ancestors who jumped away from a shadow that wasn't a snake was far more advantageous than having ancestors who didn't jump away from a snake that wasn't a shadow. We inherited the nervous systems of the jumpers.

This means that anxiety often overestimates danger and underestimates our capacity. It is not trying to tell us the truth—it is trying to keep us alive.

When anxiety becomes chronic, the brain begins to strengthen that pathway. Thoughts activate sensations, sensations activate thoughts, and the whole system becomes more reactive. But thankfully the nervous system is plastic. It learns. It adapts. We can build new patterns, new responses, new associations. Through awareness, breath, movement, and focused attention, we can create a different

internal climate, one where anxiety is still allowed to speak but doesn't get to run the whole show. This is where yoga therapy shines.

A Four-Step Model for Processing Anxiety

I often guide clients through a simple four-step approach to working with anxiety. It's gentle, practical, and deeply effective when done consistently.

1. Name the Experience

The first step toward changing our relationship to anxiety is simply recognizing what's happening: "I'm feeling anxious right now."

Naming creates just enough distance to interrupt the automatic swirl of sensations and thoughts. Beyond that, this step clarifies what we are actually feeling. Many people lump anxiety together with fear, agitation, restlessness, or even excitement. Each of these states carries a different message and calls for a different kind of response. When we mislabel what we're experiencing, we often end up treating the wrong issue—calming when we need grounding, bracing when we need soothing, or preparing for danger when what we're truly sensing is uncertainty.

Accurate naming helps us orient ourselves and minimizes the chance that we will misinterpret the signal the feeling is trying to convey. By acknowledging "this is anxiety," we recognize the feeling as an experience rather than an identity—and importantly, as a specific experience with its own texture, purpose, and invitation.

2. Identify How Anxiety Manifests

Once we acknowledge anxiety, we turn toward it with curiosity. The goal is understanding how the experience is showing up in our body, mind, and speech. Observing these three layers gives us clues about the type, intensity, and trajectory of our anxiety.

- **Actions—body (*kaya*):** Notice tension, shallow breath, restlessness, or other physical sensations. The body often signals anxiety first.
- **Thoughts—mind (*manas*):** Observe racing thoughts, imagined catastrophes, or looping worries. The mind projects anxiety into possible futures.
- **Ways you name your reality—speech (*vac*):** Pay attention to hurried words, negativity, or self-critical language. Our speech often reflects the story our anxiety creates.

These three layers correspond to the pan-Indian triad of body, speech, and mind, which later commentators used to interpret Patañjali's framework. This perspective also helps us recognize anxiety's natural flow: In Western psychological terms, the experience emerges at *onset*, often subtly through fleeting sensations, thoughts, or a quickened word; it intensifies during *transit*, when bodily tension, racing thoughts, and anxious speech loop together; and it gradually resolves at *offset*, as the system begins to return to baseline.

Identifying anxiety in this structured way brings clarity. We can not only recognize that we are anxious but also discern the type, intensity, and timing of the anxiety, providing a foundation for regulation and conscious response rather than reactive overwhelm.

3. Manage and Regulate the Response

Although the processes of management and regulation work together, they are not the same.

Managing is primarily a cognitive skill. It involves engaging the mind to meet the feeling in its own nature and to understand what the anxiety is signaling. Anxiety is typically hyperactive, accelerating thoughts, heightening vigilance, and pushing the system into overengagement. At times, when the internal pressure becomes too great, it can flip into a hypoactive “shutdown” state.

Regardless of how anxiety manifests, our task is the same: Recognize its presence and respond skillfully.

The first management step is *paying attention*. Biological alarm systems are designed on a better-safe-than-sorry platform; their job is to get our attention, not to be ignored or pushed away. Paying attention is different from trying to get rid of the experience or wishing it would disappear—attending closely is the foundation for understanding the message the anxiety carries.

The second step in managing an anxious experience is *reality testing*. We ask, “Am I in danger? Is my integrity at risk?” This questioning helps differentiate anxiety from fear. Fear responds to an immediate threat; anxiety responds to a possible one. Reality testing brings us back to what is actually happening in the present moment.

The third management step is *recognizing* that anxiety is not reality but rather one possible reality. Anxious thoughts, like alarm systems, are persistent. They must be met with clear cognitive responses to form alternative synaptic pathways. For each anxious thought, we can generate three contingency plans:

- **a practical response**—something we can do;
- **a shift in perspective**—a different view that moderates or reframes the meaning of the thought; and
- **a strategy for creating a constructive outcome**—if things go wrong.

The most effective way to gain the benefits of anxiety while avoiding its pitfalls is to build a conditioned response that activates automatically with anxiety arousal. We’re aiming to create a well-worn path that directs attention toward improvement rather than escalation, toward problem-solving rather than catastrophizing. Racing and looping thoughts require answers to interrupt their momentum. Never let an anxious thought go unanswered, and always pair it with all three contingency plans.

In contrast to managing, regulating is a physiological skill. Anxiety starts in the mind, with racing thoughts, imagined threats, or worry. The body reacts automatically to these thoughts through the breath, muscles, and overall arousal. Regulation meets anxiety in the body when we use yoga therapy tools that speak directly to the nervous system rather than the intellect. Breath, focused attention, and stillness can help lower arousal and steady the system, creating the conditions for clarity and choice to return.

We’re not aiming to eliminate sensation but to modulate it. When we bring intensity into a manageable range, cognitive skills can do their work. This is where yoga therapy enters directly: Regulation works with the intensity of the moment, quieting the alarm system just enough for the mind’s managing skills to take root, allowing perspective and responsiveness to reemerge.

4. Stay Functional

Staying functional is the final step in transforming anxiety. Once the experience has been recognized, managed, and regulated, we aim to remain present for the functions of life—to act, work, and relate—grounded in the feeling, rather than waiting for it to disappear. Functioning while anxious teaches the nervous system that discomfort can coexist with capability.

This final step reinforces everything learned in the previous stages: attention, clarity, perspective, and bodily regulation. By staying engaged, we build resilience and confidence, showing both ourselves and clients that anxiety need not dictate action. Over time, the system learns a new rhythm: awareness without panic, presence without avoidance, and responsiveness without reactivity.

In practice, staying functional might look like completing a task while anxious, holding a conversation with tension present, or moving through a challenging situation with steady breath and attention. Each instance becomes an opportunity to integrate managing and regulating into real life, strengthening the conditioned response that transforms anxiety from a disruptive force into a guiding signal.



Yoga Therapy Tools that Help Anxiety Transform

One of the great strengths of yoga therapy is its ability to work with mind, body, and spirit simultaneously. When anxiety rises, the body often reacts faster than the intellect, which is why cognitive strategies alone aren’t always enough. The practices below are drawn from classical yoga traditions and texts, including the Hatha Yoga

Pradipika and related lineages on pranayama and meditation, and create physiological grounding that makes it easier to engage with anxiety constructively.

Focused Gazing (Tratak)

The focused gaze of tratak often employs a candle flame or a small point in front of you. Although the practice looks simple on the surface, its effect on the mind is profound. Tratak gathers the attention, which is usually scattered during anxiety, and encourages the thoughts to settle. Many clients with whom I've worked describe it as "a mental exhale." It brings the mind into one-pointedness, which interrupts looping worry and creates a sense of internal steadiness.

Left-Nostril Breathing (Chandra Bhedana)

Breathing through only the left nostril gently activates the parasympathetic nervous system. This pranayama slows the inner tempo, cools agitation, and brings the emotional temperature down to something manageable. Clients often feel the shift within a few breaths as a softening of the chest, a lengthening of the exhale, a sense of clarity returning.

Through awareness, breath, movement, and focused attention, we can create an internal climate where anxiety is still allowed to speak but doesn't get to run the whole show. This is where yoga therapy shines.

Inhalation Retention (Antar Kumbhaka)

Retention at the top of the inhalation teaches containment, an essential skill when anxiety feels like too much. Holding the breath briefly allows the practitioner to feel a sense of internal strength and presence. This practice trains the nervous system to stay with sensation rather than flee from it. Used gently, antar kumbhaka builds confidence in our capacity to hold and process emotional energy.

These practices form a powerful foundation. They are also part of a larger framework I teach, which includes asana, sequencing strategies, and additional tools for reducing reactivity and enhancing resilience. Even on their own, these three practices are beautifully effective and easy to integrate into daily life or clinical sessions. For those interested in deepening their understanding of anxiety from both yoga and somatic perspectives, useful resources include *Yoga for Anxiety:*

Meditations and Practices for Calming the Body and Mind, by Mary NurrieStearns, LCSW, and Rick NurrieStearns, and *Mindful Somatic Awareness for Anxiety Relief: A Body-Based Approach to Moving Beyond Fear and Worry*, by Michele L. Blume, PsyD.

Bringing These Tools into Practice and Befriending the Yellow Light

When clients arrive overwhelmed, it's tempting to jump directly into techniques. But often the most healing moment comes from helping them understand what their anxiety is trying to do—protect them—and showing them that response rather than reaction is possible.

Imagine a client who becomes anxious before public speaking. Their heart races, their breath shortens, and their thoughts spiral into catastrophes. Together, we pause and name the feeling. We explore the sensations in the body, the stories in the mind, the language they're using about themselves. Then, before going into the cognitive work, we regulate. A few minutes of focused-gaze meditation or left-nostril breathing opens a doorway to clarity. Suddenly the spiral slows. From there, contingency planning and perspective shifts become possible.

The magic isn't in eliminating anxiety—it's in teaching the client that they can stay functional even when anxious. That the sensation isn't too big for them. That they are capable, resourceful, and alive.

As yoga therapists, we ourselves need these practices just as much. The world asks us to hold space for many, often while navigating our own uncertainties. We are not immune, nor should we pretend to be. When we integrate these tools into our own lives, we model a healthy relationship to anxiety. We become living proof that anxiety can be worked with, softened, redirected, and even befriended.

Anxiety is not an enemy. It is a messenger—sometimes loud, sometimes clumsy, sometimes insistent, but always trying to protect us. When we learn to listen without panicking, anxiety becomes a guide telling us where we need preparation, self-care, honesty, or courage.

Through awareness, breath, focused attention, and steady practice, we can transform our relationship with anxiety from one of fear to one of collaboration. May we all learn to pause at the yellow light, listen to its wisdom, and proceed with clarity, groundedness, and trust in our own resilience. ●



Antonio Sausys (www.antoniosausys.com), MA, CMT, C-IAYT, is a somatic psychologist and yoga therapist who has created yoga for grief relief and cancer programs that blend modern psychotherapy with yogic teachings. Antonio also authored *Yoga for Grief Relief: Simple Practices for Transforming Your Grieving Mind and Body* and founded the *Yoga for Health International Yoga Therapy Conference* in 2006.