

Iyengar Yoga for Depression

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Depression can leave a person feeling disembodied and devoid of his/her sense of empowerment – often there is a sense of being shut into a dark and solitary place. Exercise in general is known to ease some of the symptoms. In Iyengar Yoga, strong and dynamic movements covering the full range of motion, inversions and sequences which build progressively toward proficiency can help to increase a sense of well-being and independence. In this session, a mix of presentation and practice will introduce several sequences along with the research supporting them.

The mind is a vital component of our life, along with mobility, awareness, breath, and sleep, to name a few. Most of us are habituated to experiencing life through our thoughts and feelings. Some have cultivated additional modalities with which to experience themselves, such as through the breath, sensation, and presence (mindfulness). The mind generally compliments and helps us interpret our experience, but sometimes it takes a different turn.

When the mind *sinks* into a deep melancholy and one feels paralyzed, we call it depression. In yoga these dark characteristics or expressions of energy are called *tamas*, or a *tamasic* stateⁱ. When the mind *surfaces* into a *stormy* reactive state and dominates life to overwhelm our experience with obsessive behavior, we call it anxiety. In yoga, too much *rajas*, or a *rajasic* state, is overly active and reactive.

In both conditions, individuals feel alienated and apart from life and from themselves. Yoga postures and a breath centered practice bring the physical body to the forefront. This is a practical, powerful and accessible way to help him/her reconnect in the moment with vitality and tranquility. In addition, Yoga asanas have profound and direct effects on our physiology and posture, which, in turn, can affect how we feel about ourselves. Can yoga offer an effective and practical option for supporting wellness and mental health?

There are different types and degrees of depression. In 2012, the National Institute of Mental Health estimated that 4% of the adult population suffered from major depression, with a total of 18% of adults suffering from some form of mental illness (excluding addiction)ⁱⁱ. Those with Persistent Depressive Disorder, or dysthymia, cycle through bouts of major depression along with periods of less severe symptoms. Anxiety disorders addressed by the NIMH are “Collectively among the most common mental disorders experienced by Americans.”ⁱⁱⁱ Medication and medical treatments for depression are effective, but can have unpleasant side effects. More people are looking for alternative resources to help manage or overcome these conditions. Depression is a risk factor for other disorders such as heart disease and for mortality in those who have heart disease.

Yoga is now deeply integrated into our mainstream culture. In spite of scarce funding, research on yoga has exploded, with studies on depression, low back care, and pain management being the most common. It will take time to form definitive evidence-based results pointing to yoga as a complementary or alternative therapy to drugs. Meanwhile, many find relief!

The postures themselves — how they are set up and adapted to each individual and the sequence of postures — are vital elements in designing effective programs. Here are a few principles:

- In general, postures that open the chest will counteract the tendency to shrink and withdraw and have been associated with improved mood (reference?). These can be supported or active.
- Keeping the eyes open and looking up will lighten the internal dark space. It brings the student's attention from the background to the foreground.
- Spreading the fingers draws attention to the periphery, drawing the sense of Self outward.

- Exposing the side chest/armpits by lifting the arms sideways or overhead widens the diaphragm and helps to breathe more effectively.
- Movement will excite the mind, and is a good beginning for those who are more remotely engaged, sedate, or overly anxious and unable to rest. In essence, the outliers will benefit more by beginning with movement. Both those who suffer from the sinking and the stormy forms of mood disorder will respond to simple movement.
- Supported postures that open the chest, throat and front body will fuel an awakening without taxing the student. With adequate support, the student can stay in these long enough to effectively free the breath and diaphragm, find ease with the heart space open, and build new neural pathways to help cultivate a sense of well-being.
- Once a student is adept enough to practice active backbends, these will become a primary part of the practice.
- Inversions have a direct effect in balancing the hormonal system. Physically due to the parasympathetic vagal response of the position of the brain below the heart and the gravitational pull on the carotid sinus, *Sirsasana* and *Sarvangasana* appear to have an immediate and strong impact in balancing the autonomic nervous system, in essence, to “right the ship”. And, by turning the world upside down, the student learns to reframe a new experience from a potential threat into a challenge. This can help to cultivate emotional stability.
 - Initially arousing, the stimulating effect of headstand or a supported and milder version such as *Adho Mukha Svanasana* can trigger a sympathetic nervous system response. This awakens those in a tamasic depressed state.
 - Alternately, inversions for the anxiety sufferer would follow a sequence of forward extensions and include shoulder stand. It is suggested that the Jalandhara Bandha position of the chin lock in *Sarvangasana* and *Setu Bandha* stimulate the vagus nerve, sending messages to the parasympathetic nervous system through the hypothalamus.
- Keep it simple. Breath is important. Both of these sequences help to create an internal locus of control, where the student can begin to drive the experience.

Twenty minute practice for a sinking mind, tamasic depression:

Supported Savasana W/



lift under thoracic spine.

One minute lying still, then extend arms to ceiling and overhead, dynamic, repeat several times



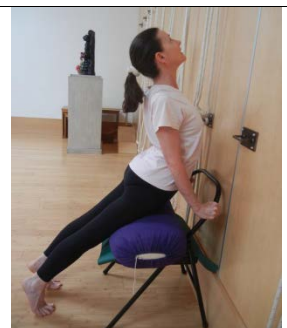
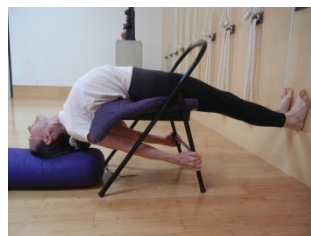
Cross Bolsters



**or Salamba
Purvottanasana**








Dwi Pada Viparita Dandasana

or hang head over side of bed.
With support under the head.
The chest opens and the world
takes on a new dimension.



**Urdhva Mukha
Svanasana:**

Upward Dog.

 <p>Urdhva Hastasana, repeat several times, picking up speed. Then, clap hands above head 10X, quickly.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Options</p> <p>Surya Namaskar: Any version. This is appropriate for someone who has already studied some yoga. Movement excites the mind. Focus on the rhythm of the breath.</p> <p>Cat-Cow: For new or stiffer students, alternating spinal movement between extension and flexion with the breath becomes a very absorbing activity.</p> <p>Paschimottanasana alternating with Halasana: This is excellent for seasoned or supple students (see pics).</p>		<p>Alternate Paschimottan</p>  <p>With Halasana, 10x</p> 
 <p>Adho Mukha Svanasana</p>	 <p>Sirsasana</p>	 <p>Salamba Sarvangasana</p>	 <p>Supported Setu Bandha Sarvangasana</p>

3' Supported Savasana with a blanket lift under the thoracic

3' Cross bolsters or Supported *Purvotanasana* over a chair back (will add pic)

1' 3 times; Supported *Urdhva Mukha Svanasana*, look up

Urdhva Hastasana in *Tadasana*; arms to the side and overhead (once, then repeated quickly)





Surya Namaskar or (or cat-cow) and/or Alternating *Paschimottanasana* - *Halasana*

OR *Adho Mukha Svanasana* → 5" *Sirsasana* → 5" *Sarvangasana*

Supported *Setu Bandha Sarvangasana*

Twenty minute practice for a stormy mind, rajasic or anxiety driven depression:

 <p>Urdhva Hastasana; repeat several times, then clap hands overhead 10X</p>	<p>Surya Namaskar + Cat-Cow</p> <p>OR</p> <p>Surya + Halasana, alternate Paschimottanasana, dynamic repetitions (see pics above)</p>		  <p>Adho Mukha Svanasana</p>	  <p>Adho Mukha Vrksasana or variation</p>
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 <p>Supported Sarvangasana or Viparita Karani</p>	 <p>Supported Halasana</p>	 <p>Adho Mukha Swastikasana Can be done with 2 chairs</p>	 <p>Setu Bandha Or Savasana</p>
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- 1" Urdhva Hastasana in Tadasana; arms to the side and overhead (once, then repeated quickly)
 2" Surya Namaskar & Alternating Paschimottanasana - Halasana (or cat-cow)
 1" Adho Mukha Svanasana
 1" Adho Mukha Vrksasana or Ardha Adho Mukha Vrksasana
 4" Supported Sarvangasana
 4" Supported Halasana
 2" Adho Mukha Swastikasana
 5" Setu Bandha or Savasana

Empirical evidence to identify and understand exactly how yoga affects the body and mind is slowly emerging, with more research studies forthcoming.^{iv} To date there are several key markers that help support the use of yoga for depression.

Endocrine System: Yoga helps to regulate hormonal swings, thus decreasing the perceived sense of stress, anxiety and pain. Measuring levels of salivary cortisol is a standard and practical method frequently used to assess the efficacy of an intervention, such as yoga.^v

Gamma-aminobutyric acid, low levels of GABA in the brain correlate with depression, anxiety, and other stress induced mood disorders. Research shows that Iyengar yoga practice increases levels of GABA in the brain.^{vi}

Inflammatory response: Studies indicate that a regular yoga practice minimizes the inflammatory response to stressful influences.^{vii}

Nervous system: By stimulating the vagus nerve, yoga has shown to help decrease heart rate and lower blood pressure, both effective indicators of an improved response to stress. Yoga practice improves resting vagal tone, which may help those suffering from depression cope more effectively with their condition.^{viii}

Social Behavior: In addition, participants in research studies benefited from activities that included a social component, such as a yoga class.^{ix}

Yoga may be a practical blessing to anyone who suffers within a dark space. To befriend the body can be a powerful, self-affirming process. The pallet of yoga postures directly impact the body by reducing muscular tension, improving structural imbalances, facilitating better breathing, and by building a healthy coordination within the endocrine and nervous systems. Yoga is truly a body-mind-heart centered practice that is accessible to all. In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna counsels Arjuna: One should uplift oneself by the Self / One should not degrade oneself/ For the Self alone can be a friend to oneself/ And the Self alone can be an enemy of oneself.^x

The wound is the place where the light enters you. Rumi

ⁱ Patricia Walden, Jarvis Chen, ScD, Timothy McCall, MD., "Take a Step No Matter How Small: Yoga For Depression, Self Published, 2002

ⁱⁱ Health & Education Statistics, National Institute of Mental Health (<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/index.shtml>)

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*

^{iv} Arndt Büssing, Andreas Michalsen, Sat Bir S. Khalsa, Shirley Telles, and Karen J. Sherman, "Effects of Yoga on Mental and Physical Health: A Short Summary of Review," *Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine Volume 2012* (2012): Article ID 165410,

^v Marcy C. McCall, "How Might Yoga Work? An Overview of Potential Underling Mechanisms," *Journal of Yoga and Physical Therapy*, 2013, 3:1

^{vi} Streeter CC, *et al.*, "Effects of yoga on the autonomic nervous system, gamma-aminobutyric-acid, and allostasis in epilepsy, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder," *Med Hypotheses* (2012), doi:10.1016/j.mehy.2012.01.

^{vii} Janice K. Kiecolt-Glaser, Ph.D., Lisa Christian, Ph.D., Heather Preston, B.A., Carrie R. Houts, M.S., William B. Malarkey, M.D., Charles F. Emery, Ph.D., and Ronald Glaser, Ph.D., "Stress, Inflammation, and Yoga Practice," *Psychosom Med.*, 2010 Feb; 72(2): 113.

^{viii} David Shapiro, Ian A. Cook, Dmitry M Davydov, Christina Ottaviani, Andrew F. Leuchter, Michelle Abrams, "Yoga as a Complementary Treatment of Depression: Effects of Traits and Moods on Treatment Outcome," *Evid Based Complement Alternat Med.* 2007 Dec; 4(4): 493–502

^{ix} Patricia Anne Kinser, Cheryl Bourguignon, Diane Whaley, Emily Hauenstein, Ann Gill Taylor, "Feasibility, Acceptability, and Effects of Gentle Hatha Yoga for Women With Major Depression: Findings From a Randomized Controlled Mixed-Methods Study," *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing*, 2013

^x Winthrop Sargeant, "The Bhagavad Gita"; State University of New York Press, Albany, 1994