



# Worry Thwarts

**Mainstream therapists are catching on to what yogis have always known: Yoga is one of the best ways to ease an anxious mind.**

**THE ATTACK STARTED**, as they almost always do, late at night. While my two daughters slept, I paced the darkened kitchen, mentally ticking off an unending list of things that felt like they needed to be done *right that minute*. My breathing was rapid, my nerves jittery, my stomach queasy. Then I tried the trick a therapist taught me long ago and carefully jotted down my “worry list.”

The next day, hoping to assuage my anxiety with action, I raced around trying to take care of everything on the list. But my thoughts swarmed in a vibrating hum and I couldn’t concentrate on anything long enough to be effective. I returned an important call, and then couldn’t remember what I’d meant to talk to the caller about. I went grocery shopping, but left a bag of groceries in the cart. The absurdity of the situation hit me when my 12-year-old daughter picked up the list and read it out loud: “Pay overdue mortgage,” certainly a legitimate concern, was followed by “change lightbulb in closet” — surely not worth losing sleep over.

Although I’ve sought countless therapeutic remedies for my anxiety, the eventual breakthrough I experienced didn’t happen on a therapist’s couch. It occurred in a single moment in a yoga class, when I finally managed to get into Setu Bandha Sarvangasana (Bridge Pose) — and stay in it for a full five minutes. Something happened: My back arched, my chest expanded, I breathed more deeply than

I would have thought possible. And my mind cleared. All that constant, overwhelming clatter was just gone, blessedly gone.

As I discovered later, my yoga breakthrough wasn’t unique. More and more anxiety experts are recommending yoga — along with meditation and other mindfulness techniques — as part of an effective strategy for bringing a worried mind under control.

“In the past few years, yoga has gained widespread acceptance among those working with anxiety disorders,” says psychologist Christian Komor, an expert in obsessive-compulsive disorders (OCD), who directs the OCD Recovery Centers of America, based in Grand Rapids, Michigan. “There’s a real buzz about it — people are taking it seriously as we see research that validates its benefits.”

This is good news, considering that anxiety disorders are the most common mental illness in the United States. According to the Anxiety Disorders Association of America, more than 13 percent of the adult population is affected. And that’s counting only those with a diagnosed anxiety disorder; there are many

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### asanas for anxiety

So many poses, so little time: It's easy to get overwhelmed just trying to figure out which asanas might calm you down. Here's help:

**BREATHE EASY** If you suffer from acute anxiety, try a gentle restorative class with plenty of focus on breathing, suggests San Francisco Bay Area yoga teacher and physician Baxter Bell. Viniyoga, in which poses are synchronized with the breath, is a

good option; even better would be to find a teacher who stresses pranayama, the science of yogic breathing. One breath pattern Bell recommends calls for adding one second to each exhalation, so your exhalations grow increasingly longer than your inhalations. "This is a quieting, calming breath pattern that combats stress," Bell says.

**OPEN UP** My favorite poses are backbends and chest openers such as Bhujangasana (Cobra Pose), Matsyasana (Fish Pose), and Setu Bandha Sarvangasana (Bridge Pose), simply because they make me feel free and open. And these are among the poses yoga teachers most often recommend.

**GO UPSIDE DOWN** Other favorites are supported inversions because they give you the relaxation benefits of going upside down without the hard work—and stress—of a challenging pose such as Handstand. "When the blood rushes to your head, your body interprets it as a rise in blood pressure and reacts to calm you down," Bell says. Your heart rate and breathing slow and your blood vessels dilate. However, if inversions scare you, they may trigger the fight-or-flight response, which in turn boosts anxiety. If that's the case, you should practice Salamba Sarvangasana (Supported Shoulderstand) or Viparita Karani (Legs-up-the-Wall Pose) as the perfect compromise. Lastly, Bell recommends sitting and standing twists to release emotional tension. M.H.

more people, like me, who struggle with a chronic tendency to worry over anything and everything.

#### WHY YOGA WORKS

"When you practice yoga, you're able to be more aware of thoughts as they come and go. You can see them in your mind but not chase them," says Lizabeth Roemer, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Massachusetts at Boston. Roemer is at the forefront of what she calls a "pretty substantial movement" to harness the power of mindfulness strategies such as yoga and meditation to supplement traditional anxiety therapy. With collaborator Susan Orsillo, Roemer has spent the past four years developing a treatment protocol for anxiety that blends traditional cognitive-behavioral therapy with the

mindfulness program of yoga, meditation, and breathing techniques developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn. The study, funded by the National Institute of Mental Health, wraps up this year, and Roemer says preliminary results are more than encouraging.

Roemer and Orsillo aren't the only ones studying yoga's benefits for mood disorders. Alison Woolery, a doctoral candidate at UCLA and a certified Iyengar Yoga teacher, found that undergraduates at UCLA suffering from mild depression saw a significant improvement in their depression and anxiety symptoms after they were randomly assigned to a five-week Iyengar Yoga program.

Nowadays, experts are suggesting tactics for dealing with worry that are similar to what you might hear in a yoga class. Instead of arguing with yourself when you start worrying, which only makes the worry more persistent, you should do the opposite. "Think of worry as a heckler," says David Carbonell, direc-

tor of the Anxiety Treatment Center in Chicago and creator of the Anxiety Coach website ([www.anxietycoach.com](http://www.anxietycoach.com)). "What you don't want to do is duke it out with him." The yogic practice of noticing thoughts as they come into your mind but detaching from them is perfect training to keep worries in perspective.

Jack Kornfield, of the Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre, California, has a particularly useful meditation technique. As you sit, you bring attention to, and name, the many ways your chattering mind intrudes on your concentration. When you notice that your thoughts have once again turned to the next day's to-do list, Kornfield suggests you make the gentle observation, "Oh, planning mind." So when I notice my thoughts spinning into hyperdrive, I say to myself, "Oh, worrying

mind." By acknowledging what's happening—and how ridiculous it is—I take away some of anxiety's power.

#### LEARN TO LET GO

None of this comes as a surprise to yoga experts. "Yoga has a sly, clever way of short-circuiting the mental patterns that cause anxiety," says Baxter Bell, a physician who teaches yoga in the San Francisco Bay Area and is the author of *Yoga Rx for Stress*.

Yoga's benefits come in two forms: Concentrating on poses clears the mind, while focusing on the breath helps the body shift out of fight-or-flight mode. "When you have a lot of anxiety, you're always on orange alert," Bell says. Because you never fully let go, it's almost as if your body has forgotten how. Yoga essentially reteaches you what a relaxed state feels like. Although I first turned to yoga for back pain, I come back because it reminds me what it feels like *not* to be tense. (See "Asanas for Anxiety," facing page, to learn which poses are most likely to help.)

#### DON'T TRY TOO HARD

Of course, for us worrywarts, yoga has a paradoxical downside: We can even get anxious about doing *it* properly. I've spent way too many classes feeling my tension ratchet up rather than down as I strain to copy my teacher's elegant Halasana (Plow Pose) without falling over.

The solution is to keep it simple. "I tell my students that when they're anxious, that's the time to go back to basics," Bell says. Limiting your practice to 15 minutes or three poses might be plenty when you're feeling overwhelmed. And feel free to pick and choose, skipping anything that starts the wheels spinning again.

That's what I'm trying to do. I'm applying the same approach to yoga that I'm trying to use in other parts of my life: Show up, do your best, and let go of the consequences. If it's a good day and I can manage a one-legged Vrksasana (Tree Pose) without toppling, I'm happy. If not, I just stretch, breathe, and cultivate awareness: "Oh, worrying mind in yoga class." ■

*Melanie Haiken is a freelance writer in San Rafael, California.*



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