For three years, a 41-year-old art historian named “Elizabeth” knew that something beyond the pain she was feeling in her joints was wrong. She remembered a time when she rode her bike nearly every day, when she had a circle of women friends with whom she went salsa dancing, when she went to sleep with a new idea for an exhibit at the museum where she was a curator and woke up already writing the catalogue copy, happy to rise from her bed and go to work. But for three years, her bike had leaned against the wall with a flat tire and her friends had fallen away. Her phone didn’t ring anymore. She stopped dancing when her physician diagnosed her aching joints as fibromyalgia and said she might have a degenerative arthritic condition in her spine.

When her younger sister called to say she was coming for a visit, Elizabeth made an effort. She changed her sheets, made her bed and had highlights put in her hair. She shopped for food she hadn’t bothered to cook in years. But the clean house and the new hairstyle couldn’t hide the lack of energy, the slumped shoulders, her forced and artificial laughter at her sister’s humor. When her sister asked if she was depressed, Elizabeth denied it. “I never cry,” she said. “I don’t feel sad.”

“What do you feel?” her sister asked.

“Nothing.”

“That’s depression.”

For the first time, Elizabeth admitted that, yes, maybe she was depressed.

Sometimes, like Elizabeth, when we deny depression, it shows up in our bodies as physical symptoms—aches and pains that rise out of nowhere and often recede when we receive treatment for depression. Many of us may not recognize our depression until the people we love don’t want to be around us anymore or someone who loves us puts a name to what we feel.

In working directly with Elizabeth, together we have found that a slow, gentle yoga practice that also includes some dynamic movements and energizing breathing exercises works best to alleviate her symptoms. She begins slowly in seated meditation, focusing on the breath, and scanning both her physical body and her emotional body to determine the kind of practice she needs. She gradually begins to deepen her breath, expanding her lungs with Dirga Pranayama (Yogic Three-part Breath).

She holds a posture like Tadasana (Mountain) or Virabhadasana (Warrior) in order to witness, with equanimity and awareness, all the feelings she is experiencing in her physical body and her emotional body, without reaction. Holding the poses for a length of time gives us an opportunity to notice the places in the body where energy is blocked, where emotion or even trauma is stored. Eventually these energy blocks can lead to symptoms and then illness, both physical and mental. By focusing the breath and the awareness where the sensation is strongest, Elizabeth has begun to allow energy to flow through the areas of her body where she has felt blocked. According to yoga doctor and author, Jeff Migdow, M.D., on a physical level as we hold a yoga pose, we create a pressure gradient in the contraction of the muscles involved in the posture, so that in addition to the emotional clearing that can take place upon release, there is the physical cleansing of the lymphatic system.

On the other hand, some people,
especially those whose depression is attended by anxiety, find that a more active practice meets their mood. Someone suffering from anxiety might feel impatient with a slow, steady practice. She might need to begin more vigorously, and then slow the movements down.

The beauty of yoga is that anyone can do it. There's an appropriate practice for every body, even a body impaired by injury or disease. I have an 84-year-old woman who comes regularly to one of my yoga classes in Tucson, and I volunteer at a juvenile detention center, where a study has shown that teenagers, who are often angry and depressed at the start of a yoga class, find relief from their worries and are less depressed afterwards. All the many tools of yoga — and by this I refer not only to postures, be they easy and gentle or more vigorous and advanced, but also to the yogic breathing exercises called pranayama and to the meditation techniques and the use of mantra and affirmations — are meant to bring balance to the emotional as well as the physical body. If someone can't stand on her head, she can perhaps stand straight with her arms over her head, taking long, deep breaths in mountain pose. And if she can't do any kind of movement, she can perhaps learn a simple breath like Yogic Three-Part Breath that studies have shown calms the mind and elevates the mood.

In the West, we think of mental health from the perspective of illness. But we practice yoga as preventative and positive medicine. Just as the immune system is strengthened against the common cold and other viruses with daily practice, the emotional body can be strengthened as well. The highs, the lows, the extremes of all the emotions are brought into balance by the physical practice and the mind is soothed by the philosophy. In every stage of yoga, you will find relief from obsessive negative thinking. To learn the pose, your mind must focus on the details of alignment. Later, when you are in the pose and allow your mind to become absorbed in the sensations in your body, you're very far from everyday troubles.

The word in Sanskrit for happiness is Sukha, which literally means unobstructed space. When we practice yoga, we're clearing the space within — dissolving tension in the body and mind. The subjective experience can be anything from a greater sense of peace and contentment with reality as it is, to feelings of elation and connectedness with others. Why might this be so? Let's look at the research that's been done.

A small Scandinavian study that measured brain waves before and after a two-hour yoga class found that alpha waves (relaxation) and theta waves (unconscious memory, dreams and emotions) increased by 40 percent. The increase in alpha and theta waves measured in the Scandinavian study means that the brain is more deeply relaxed after yoga and that the subjects have better contact with their subconscious and their emotions. Previous research has shown that depressed, introverted people typically have more alpha waves in the left frontal-temporal region, while optimistic, extroverted people have more alpha on the right. In the Scandinavian study, after the yoga session, alpha waves increased in the right temporal lobe. That theta waves also increased supports the notion that yoga works to alleviate depression not only by increasing brain chemicals that contribute to a feel-good response — endorphins, enkephalins, and serotonin — but also through greater access to feelings.

Another reason why yoga practitioners feel good after a single class is because, as has been shown in two separate studies, the stress hormone, cortisol, is reduced. In another study in France, when daily yoga sessions were offered to hospitalized psychiatric patients, the authors of the study observed that "following the yoga session, patients feel a sense of relaxation and mild euphoria, lasting for several hours. After eight to ten days of daily practice, certain physical symptoms may start to disappear. And after a period of one to two months, psychiatric symptoms may start to diminish.”

Janis Carter, a psychiatrist in Brisbane, Australia, uses Iyengar-style yoga therapy in her clinical practice with patients suffering from depression and Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. When her patients practice the yoga she prescribes at home, she has found that they have a diminished need for medication. Even patients who believe themselves to be too inflexible to practice yoga have benefited from their work with...
Manifest Abundance in All Areas of My Life

Abundance is the richness of life as a whole, not just an emphasis on wealth or material things. Our abundance can be in our relationships, our play, our food, our health and our spirit. To manifest abundance — bringing what you wish into reality — you must be clear and precise with your intentions, knowing that the manifestation is ultimately a gift from the Creator.

ACTION: Say to yourself every morning "I add value to all areas of my life and honor my true worth. I am ready to receive all the gifts from the universe that I deserve."


Travel Therapy

National Geographic’s Traveler magazine (Sept. 2005) reports that people are traveling for their mental health. In an exclusive poll, Traveler found that 93 percent of respondents believe leisure travel has therapeutic benefits and nearly 83 percent said they would consider taking a trip to deal with the death of a loved one, a relationship breakup or other similar circumstances. Some use it to leave behind their emotional baggage, while others find traveling helps them to have a stronger sense of self.

— Patricia Ritter

her. “I have had a patient do a backbend over a fitball (a plastic ball inflated to the size of a large beach ball), hold it for some time, and achieve a marked mood change within a session,” she says. “The change in mood continued for two days, before it started to slip. There is no pharmacological agent that can cause such a quick response and maintain it for twenty-four hours.”

According to Dharma Singh Khalsa, M.D., a board-certified anesthesiologist specializing in anti-aging medicine and co-author of the book, Meditation as Medicine, yoga and meditation can alter the very biochemistry of the brain more directly and efficiently than regular exercise. When you do yoga stretching you send a message through the spinal cord back to your brain and that causes your brain chemistry to change. The “feel-good” sensation after yoga practice arises from the balance of stimulation and relaxation you are providing your brain. “First of all, you are stimulating your pituitary gland to release endorphins. Your peripheral glandular system is producing adrenaline and norepinephrine type compounds that travel to the brain and give you that mild stimulating effect. On the other hand, you are also stimulating a relaxation response.”

You feel more relaxed because your cortisol level drops, you are increasing oxygen consumption and reducing muscle stiffness and tension. This is the balancing effect of the physical practice — the true union of energy and relaxation. That is why a patient may feel better, even after just one session.

Beneath the agony of depression, yoga says, you are whole and that it’s simply a matter of clearing out the debris we’ve accumulated in a lifetime of experiences to feel connected to that wholeness. And yoga does just that.

1. “A measurement of the mood of girls in juvenile detention before and after a single yoga class,” Amy Weintraub, RYT. George Goldman, Ph.D. Yoga Studies (Yoga Research and Education Center YREC, Jan, 2003).
3. Richard P. Brown, MD and Patricia L. Gerbag, MD, "Yogic breathing and meditation: when the thalamus quiets the cortex and rouses the limbic system" (March, 2002), unpublished.

Portions of this article were excerpted from Yoga for Depression: A Compassionate Guide to Relieve Suffering Through Yoga. (Broadway Books, 2004) by Amy Weintraub, MFA, RYT. She is the director of the LifeForce Yoga Healing Institute in Tucson, a senior Kripalu Yoga teacher, Mentor, an award-winning writer, and a consultant for the Mayo Clinic. For more information about her LifeForce Yoga retreats, workshops and trainings, please visit www.yogafordepression.com.