

Benefits of Yoga for Stress Relief & Mental Health

Toned limbs, increased flexibility, and muscle strength — a weekly yoga session works wonders for the body. But, it doesn't stop there. Over recent decades, people around the world have turned to yoga for stress relief and to ease mental health issues.

In our frantic modern lives, we are subject to many factors that can stimulate our stress levels. Pressure at work, relationships, family commitments, global events, bereavement. Even spending too much time scrolling on social media can take its toll on our mental health. Nowadays, 264 million people¹ around the world suffer from a mental health condition of some kind. 1 in 5 people in the US² live with a mental health disorder, with roughly 6.8 million Americans experiencing generalised anxiety disorder.

Meanwhile, a quarter of the European population³ suffer from depression or anxiety each year. As scientists research ways to tackle endemic mental health concerns, the value of yoga for stress management has come under the spotlight.

In this article, we will share the mental health benefits of yoga as well as some of the most effective yoga poses for stress relief.

¹ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/depression>

² <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/mental-illness.shtml>

³ <https://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/noncommunicable-diseases/mental-health/news/news/2012/10/depression-in-europe/depression-in-europe-facts-and-figures>

Can yoga reduce stress?

What is stress and what does it do to the body? While a small amount of stress⁴ may be good for us in a motivational sense, chronic stress and 'distress' can have a detrimental impact. It suppresses the immune system, disrupts the digestive system, hinders the reproductive system, and heightens the risk of cardiovascular problems. At the same time, it upsets your brain and increases your vulnerability to more advanced mental health issues.

If you trace the origins of yoga back to its ancient Sanskrit roots, the practice stood for the union of the mind, body and soul. Much more than just a workout, the practice of yoga brings a balance to your body which reduces stress.

Before we understand the function of yoga for stress relief it's worth considering its benefits on our physical health too. Because in some cases the two strands are intrinsically linked. A low impact yoga workout offers the following benefits.

- Stretching, holding poses, and practising balance strengthens and tones the muscles while at the same time increases flexibility.
- Yoga increases the flow of blood to the joints and can provide pain relief and reduce the symptoms of inflammatory conditions.

⁴ <https://time.com/5434826/stress-good-health/>

- Yoga supports the nervous and endocrine systems. This leads into one of the mental health benefits of yoga, as we'll come onto below.
- Although not considered an aerobic sport, regular yoga practice aids athletic performance.
- Yoga boosts cardiovascular health, supports the respiratory system, and lowers blood pressure. Again, this also has a positive effect on your mental health and stress management.
- Certain poses such as twists and backbends can give the [digestive tract a helping hand](#)⁵ by eliminating bloating and constipation.

Benefits of yoga for stress relief & mental health

Over the past decade or so, a bounty of studies has explored the positive effects of yoga. Nowadays, some psychologists⁶ even incorporate the practice into their therapeutic techniques in tandem with other relevant treatment or medication. And that's based on some of these mental benefits of yoga practice.

Yoga instils regular breathing

As an Eastern creation, the foundations of yoga are inherently spiritual and interwoven with meditation. While a typical yoga class

⁵ https://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/2016/12/20/bloated-here-are-10-yoga-poses-to-help-digestion_a_21630479/

⁶ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/green-psychiatry/201912/why-more-psychiatrists-are-recommending-yoga>

in the West focuses on the workout, all good instructors will inform their patrons about breathing hygiene.

It is this breath work, or pranayama, which supports yoga for stress management. That's because when you breathe deeply in quick succession - often triggered by stress, anxiety or panic - this can lead to hyperventilation. Besides, you also build up too much oxygen into your blood system which disrupts the pH of your blood.

Every movement we make in yoga corresponds to an inhale or exhale and we focus on longer exhalations. These ring your heart rate down while soothing your nervous system into slowing down. Studies have also shown that yogic breath reduces the amount of cortisol⁷ (the stress hormone) in saliva. If you suffer from anxiety, stress or panic disorder you may already rely on breathing exercises to manage your symptoms.

Taking control of your breath means that you will gradually feel more calm in your day to day. And, at times of acute stress (such as chest pain, palpitations, or panic attack), you have a tool to use against its onset.

Yoga balances the endocrine system

Remember those pesky chemicals that caused havoc during your adolescent years? Hormones don't simply go away as we mature and they can cause disruption at any stage in your life. When your hormones are unbalanced, you can encounter a myriad of side effects. These range from fatigue, insomnia, low sex drive, mood swings, anger, stress and anxiety.

⁷ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5654398/>

Diet, lifestyle and environmental factors can impact your hormones and cause an imbalance. Yoga instructor and therapist Lynn Jensen, E-RYT, RPYT, MBA recommends regular yoga to reduce stress, anger, and other negative feelings.

‘Doing a calming daily yoga practice with a focus on stress reduction is a good start on helping to balance the adrenal glands which can affect many other glands if they are overworked,’ says Jensen⁸.

However, if you are turning to yoga to calm down and regulate your hormones then you need to choose the right type of class. A fast-flowing yoga practice will more likely boost your adrenaline, which at this point you don’t want to do. You need a gentle form of exercise which instead encourages the flow of serotonin — your happiness hormone.

Opt for some of the yoga poses to reduce stress and anger we’ve listed below instead.

Mindfulness and yoga

There’s a reason why yoga and mindfulness⁹ are often fused together within the umbrella of complementary therapy. Mindfulness invites you to be fully present in the moment and not overwhelmed by the events taking place around you or in your life.

⁸ <https://seattleyoganews.com/yoga-for-healthy-hormones/>

⁹ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/20350028/>

Both yoga and mindfulness essentially teach you to maintain awareness of the current moment and learn how to process your emotions. While summoning more awareness to your body and the 'now' yoga can lift you out of symptoms of stress and anxiety. That's because once you're on the mat, worries are out aside while you focus on the sensations in your body. This urges you to cultivate a deeper understanding of how things are and to understand your own feelings. If you're prone to over-thinking or a wandering mind, the mindfulness aspect tugs you back to the now.

How can this help manage stress and anxiety?

The areas above play a large part in the handling of anxiety, stress, panic and depression. By taking control of your bodily responses to stress, you can help manage chronic and acute mental health conditions. This can also help you manage common symptoms such as lethargy and decreased concentration.

In a recent study by the NYU Grossman School of Medicine, 54% of those who practiced kundalini yoga saw their generalised anxiety disorder symptoms improve¹⁰. By comparison, 33% who were treated by stress-management education noted an improvement.

Naomi M. Simon, MD, a professor in the Department of Psychiatry, said: "*Our findings demonstrate that yoga, which is safe and widely available, can improve symptoms for some people with this disorder and could be a valuable tool in an overall treatment plan.*"

¹⁰ <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2020/08/200812144124.htm>

Yoga and sleep disorders

A final benefit of yoga is its impact on sleep hygiene. One clinical trial suggests that daily yoga practice can help alleviate chronic insomnia¹¹. Additionally, in a study by the NCIH 55% of those surveyed reported that yoga improved their sleep quality¹².

Do note that while you can incorporate yoga for mental health into your management, you shouldn't rely on it solely. Do talk to your doctor about other treatment such as psychotherapy and medication.

What is the best yoga for mental health?

Now that you understand what the mental benefits of yoga are and how practice can help you, let's get practical. When it comes to instigating your own yoga practice you may want to attend a class or practice in your own home. For a rejuvenating holiday, you can even whisk yourself away on a yoga vacation and immerse yourself in daily practice, meditation and mindfulness.

You may see specific classes advertised, such as 'yoga for stress relief' and 'yoga for mental health'. You can use such search terms online to find digital yoga tutorials and classes. Alternatively, search for the following styles of yoga. These are geared more towards mindfulness than the likes of vinyasa, ashtanga and bikram.

¹¹ <https://www.yoga-als-therapie.de/assets/Studien/Downloads/done/studie-satbir-khalsa-1.pdf>

¹² <https://www.nccih.nih.gov/research/wellness-related-use-of-common-complementary-health-approaches-among-adults-united-states-2012>

- Restorative yoga: a slower pace which invites you to hold poses for longer with the support of blankets. It is also suitable for people with injuries and chronic pain conditions providing you consult your doctor first.
- Yin yoga: targets your deepest connective tissues while giving you the space to focus on your breath work. Poses are held for a longer duration ranging from 45 seconds to 5 minutes.
- Hatha yoga: a more physically demanding practice that still allows time to hold the poses and focus on your breath. Hatha is one of the most typical forms of yoga available in the West.
- Yoga nidra: relaxes the mind and muscles and includes meditation exercise to prepare your body for sleep. This practice is recommended for insomnia sufferers.

One similarity we see across the various studies on yoga for stress relief is that frequency is key¹³. So rather seeing it as a one-off, you need to think about implementing a regular yoga practice.

What are the best yoga poses for stress relief?

You don't necessarily need to attend a full class to reap the mental health benefits of yoga. If you are prone to stress, anxiety, depression or mood disorders, then try to donate even 10 minutes a day to yoga poses.

¹³ <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/05/18/health/yoga-mental-health-wellness/index.html>

If you do not have enough time for a full workout but need a minute to catch your breath, then here are 4 yoga poses for mental health that most people can do safely at home.

If you suffer from any chronic health conditions, please do consult your physician before you adopt any of these into your routine.

Child's Pose (Balasana)

Child's pose is often referred to during yoga practice as 'resting' pose. During a vigorous yoga sequence a child's pose lets you reset. It releases tension in the whole body and creates a sense of comfort. It is also believed to increase circulation in your head - thus relieving the symptoms of a headache. Try it right before you go to bed.

1. Spread your knees about as wide as your mat and sit back on your heels.
2. Lean forward to bring your tummy to meet the mat and stretch your arms out long in front of you.
3. Rest your forehead on the mat.
4. Breathe deeply into your stomach.
5. Hold the pose for as long as it feels comfortable. To release any tension in your shoulders, you can also bring your arms down alongside your body.

Corpse Pose (Savasana)

There is a reason why every yoga routine ends with corpse pose. After a yoga sequence, hormones are pumping their way through your body — savasana calms your entire nervous system. By doing so, it can reduce anxious thoughts and stress.

Yoga practitioners often refer to corpse pose as one of the most challenging asanas as it invites you to empty your mind. Allowing yourself the time to truly engage with the moment does take some mental stamina - but is a valuable technique in stress and anxiety management.

1. Lie on your back on your mat and hug your knees into your chest.
2. Take a deep breath in. On the exhale, release your knees and let your legs extend along the mat.
3. Your feet should be hips-width apart and slightly turned out. Your arms should rest alongside your body with your palms facing upwards.
4. Close your eyes, relax your head and neck with your chin slightly tucked in and take long breaths in and out.
5. Hold the pose for 5 minutes per 30 minutes of yoga practice.

Waterfall Pose (Viparita Karani)

If you have spent a long day at work sitting behind a desk, this restorative inversion pose is the perfect antidote. As you stretch your legs upwards above your heart, you will boost the circulation of both your blood and lymphatic fluid. This slows your heart rate down and you can almost feel the build-up of anxiety as it drains out of you.

1. Lie on your mat with your back and feet flat against the mat and your knees bent.
2. Hug your knees into your chest while inhaling then on an exhale raise your legs towards the ceiling.
3. Ground your back against the mat and flex your feet so the bottoms of your feet face the sky. Bend your knees as much as you need to feel comfortable.
4. Either keep your arms flat by your side, or place your left hand on your heart and your right on your tummy so you can feel your breath.
5. For more stability and increased comfort, you can rest your legs against the wall - we call this the 'legs against the wall' pose.

In conclusion

Now that you understand the mental health benefits of yoga, we encourage you to instigate gentle practice into your daily or weekly routine.

Yoga should not be relied upon as the sole form of managing stress and depression. Always consult your physician about your intentions if you have a chronic condition.