



a return to wholeness

Yoga techniques for
people experiencing
anxiety and depression
By Alex Ivetic

Depression is one of the leading causes of disability worldwide. According to beyondblue, 45 per cent of Australians will experience a mental health condition in their lifetime. In any one year, around one million Aussie adults have depression, while over 2 million have anxiety.

Anxiety and depression do not discriminate - they affect men, women, the young, the old, the frail and the physically healthy. Medication has been a lifesaver for many people, but there are also a variety of complementary therapies that can make a huge difference. Yoga, in particular, has proven to alleviate symptoms in people who have experienced depression or anxiety for both long- and short-term periods. Here are two 10-15 minute personal home practices for people experiencing anxiety or depression.



BEFORE YOU BEGIN

GET SETTLED

Your 10-15 minute yoga practice is a sacred routine that will help bring you into wholeness. You can begin your transition into relaxation simply by creating a sacred space for your practice that is free from everyday stressors and triggers. If space is an issue, another symbolic gesture can be useful to subconsciously tell your senses that your yoga practice is beginning and that now is the time for your mind and body to unwind. This could involve playing specific music, lighting a candle or burning incense.

You'll notice that the images over the page supporting the asana sequence have been photographed outdoors. Connecting to nature – whether it's the sun, the ocean, the grass – or practising outdoors has an incredible effect on our energy. When possible, I encourage you to place your yoga mat outside and feel the immediate nourishing effect of the natural environment.

Your practice begins by being mindful in setting up your space and getting comfortable in your seated position on the floor or in a chair. This means being present and focusing on each action you're taking, as though each moment is a precious gift to be grateful for. And it is. This time is just for you. Mindfulness will begin to silence the thoughts passing through your mind and allow you to sink deeply into feeling the inner parts of your being.

INVOCATION, INTENTION OR MANTRA

I now recommend starting your session with an invocation or an intention (*sankalpa* – the word “kalpa” directly translates as “a vow”) for what you'd like to get out of your session. For example – “I will practise meditation as part of my daily living as it helps me feel connected and calm”.

A mantra, which you can take with you through your day, may also be helpful. Mantras are like medicine for the soul. When we select a word or series of words to repeat in the form of a mantra, we're affirming it to ourselves and allowing its meaning to seep below the surface, into our subconscious, helping to shift our negative habits and patterns into positive ones. Mantras can also be used during or after your yoga practice, but they're useful whenever you find your mind is being unruly. There are many potent Sanskrit mantras, however I recommend that beginners start with a positive affirmation that resonates for them.

PRATICE FOR

releasing nervousness, stress and anxiety

This 10-15 minute home practice has been chosen in this sequence to relax, ground and settle the central nervous system.

1. Child's Pose

Hold for one minute. Holding Child's Pose relaxes the spine and softens the thoughts in the mind.

2. Cat/Cow

Start with a neutral spine. Inhale, look up, drop belly. Exhale, curl spine upwards and tuck chin into chest. Repeat for two minutes.

3. Spinal rolls

Do six full inhales and exhales up. Chin to chest, curling spine vertebrae by vertebrae, shoulders relaxed, holding opposite elbows. Hold for five to seven full breaths. Allow the head to be soft, mouth and brow relaxed. Spinal rolls assist in connecting to the parasympathetic part of the body (the non-flight self).

You'll experience a calming effect

which prepares the body to rest efficiently.

4. Tree pose

Do two poses on each side, holding for five breaths, grounding and balancing mind and body.

5. Warrior I to Warrior II

Arms wide, holding for four to eight breaths on each side. Repeat. Warrior I and Warrior II improve focus, balance and stability, and encourage good circulation and respiration.

6. Seated forward bend

Extend your torso forward over the legs, and catch the feet or ankles with your hands. Rest your forehead on the blanket and your abdomen on the bolster for three minutes.

7. Bridge Pose and Shoulderstand

Do three easy backbends, peeling the spine off the floor, holding for three to five breaths. Repeat three times. Follow with Shoulderstand. Allow the posture to be steady and comfortable. Hold eight to 15 breaths.

8. Relaxation

Lie on the floor with a supported neck. Relax by tensing and relaxing muscle groups. Start with tensing the face for five seconds then letting go. Follow with the arms, hands, legs and toes. Lastly, hold the whole body tense then let go. Come into Corpse Pose.

**TO FINISH
Legs up the wall**

Feeling grounded into the earth for complete support and surrender.

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yogajournal.com.au
for illustrated pose
instructions



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EXAMPLES COULD BE:

Mantra for releasing nervousness, stress and anxiety:

"I am centred, calm and grounded"

"My body and mind are relaxed, clear and present"

"I feel excess energy flow through me"
(visualisation of energy leaving my body and blessing the earth)

Mantra for lifting low moods:

"I feel positive, uplifted and fulfilled"

"My life has purpose, value and connection"

"I feel vibrant energy filling me up"
(visualisation of energy coming inwards)

OPENING PRANAYAMA

Your practice starts with conscious breathing, or pranayama. When we re-learn how to breathe we can transform unconscious shallow breathing (which is widespread among people experiencing anxiety and depression) into a healthier and fuller nourishing breath. Regulation of our breathing gives us direct access to our central nervous system, so we can reverse the accumulated effects of stress on our whole system.

One of the most powerful and appropriate breathing techniques for both depression and anxiety is alternate nostril breathing, otherwise known as *nadi shodhana* (nadi = subtle energy channel; shodhan = cleaning, purification). Nadi shodhana helps balance and clear out blocked energy channels in the body. This in turn calms the central nervous system and the mind. After only a few minutes you'll likely notice your mind become quieter, calmer and clearer. You may also feel a peaceful harmonious state of relaxation and perhaps a "nothingness" in your thoughts.

A few minutes of nadi shodhana pranayama each day is a great way to de-stress the mind and release accumulated tension and fatigue. I recommend you practise this

PRACTICE FOR

lifting low moods

These postures have been chosen in this sequence to open the body, energise it and bring new blood flow to the sluggish and stagnant areas.

1. Woodchopper technique with lion's tongue and exhale sound

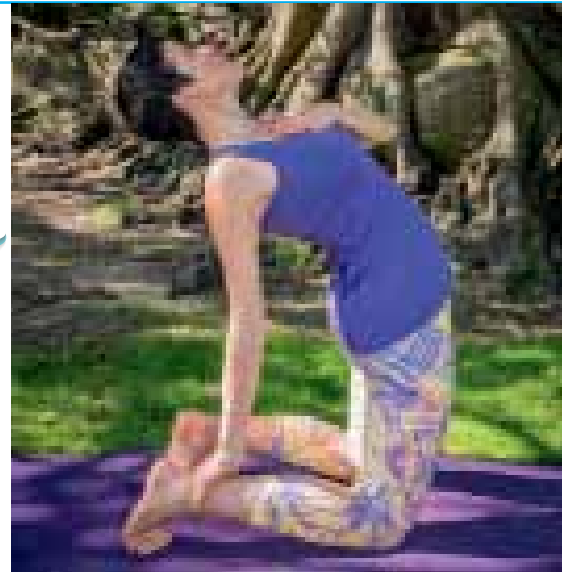
Inhale, clasp hands together, poke tongue out. Exhale (lion's breath sound) fold forward and sweep hands through thighs. This posture brings fresh energy into the throat area and the respiratory system, and boosts vitality.

2. Spinal rolls

Do six full inhales and exhales up. Chin to chest, curling spine vertebrae by vertebrae, shoulders relaxed, holding opposite elbows. Hold for five to seven full breaths. Allow the head to be soft, mouth and brow relaxed. Spinal rolls assist in connecting to the parasympathetic part of the body (the non-flight self). You'll experience a calming effect which prepares the body to rest.

3. Squatting

Stand feet width to hips. Allow the knees to be soft and gradually inhale the arms up, lengthen knees and exhale hands down. Bend knees. Squatting brings energy up through the body to feel vibrancy and clarity.



4. Sun Salutation A

Start in Mountain Pose. Inhale, arms up, exhale, hands to floor. Inhale, look up, exhale to plank position then drop knees, chest, chin to floor. Inhale, look up, exhale into Downward Dog. Hold for five long soft breaths, gazing at the navel. Inhale, bend knees and step forward to standing. Exhale, head to knees. Inhale, come to standing, arms wide. Exhale back to Mountain Pose. Repeat twice more. Sun Salutation brings life to the cells while the body is moved through a sequence generating heat and vitality.

5. Warrior I to Warrior II

Arms wide, holding for four to eight breaths on each side. Repeat. Warrior I and Warrior II improve focus, balance and stability. Encourages good circulation and respiration.

6. Camel Pose

Keep hands on lower back for support. Look forward or up. Hold for four to seven breaths. Camel pose is good for

lifting moods as the pose connects to the heart space.

7. Bridge Pose and Shoulderstand

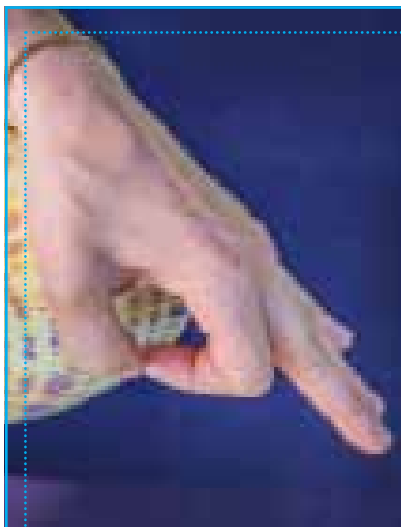
Do three easy backbends, peeling the spine off the floor, holding the posture for three to five breaths. Repeat three times. Follow with Shoulderstand. Allow the posture to be steady and comfortable. Hold eight to 15 breaths.

8. Meditation

Sit cross-legged. Have the thumb/index finger touching with palms facing downwards. Sit quietly with eyes closed and place your attention in your heart space. Create an inner smile to radiate your body. Sit for five minutes.

TO FINISH Corpse Pose

Do your Savasana with a bolster under knees. It's important to feel the earth supporting you. Allow the earth to take away all of your negative energy.



MEDITATION FOR

releasing stress and anxiety

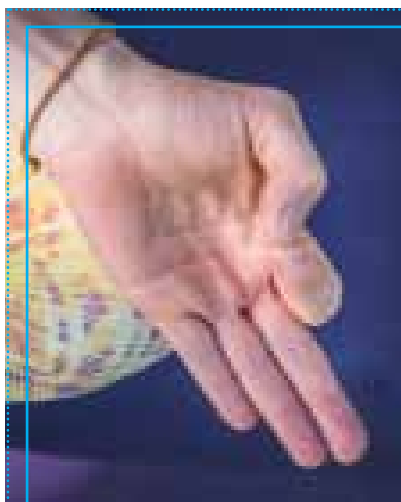
Brahmari (bee breath)

Bee breath creates a healing vibration within the body, aids sleep, promotes blood flow to the brain and calms anger and anxiety. It also boosts your energy without making you "hyper". You'll instantly relieve tension, anger and anxiety.

1. Sit up straight in a quiet space; keep a gentle smile on your face.
2. Place your index fingers on your ears. There's a cartilage between cheek and ear. Place index fingers on the cartilage.
3. Take a deep breath in and, as you breathe out, gently press the cartilage. You can keep the cartilage pressed or press it in and out with your fingers while making a loud humming sound like a bee.
4. Breathe in again and continue the same pattern for 6-7 times.
5. Keep your eyes closed and observe the sensations in the body and the quietness within. You can practise bee breath 3-4 times every day.



The mudra to the left is for stress and anxiety; the mudra below is for easing symptoms of depression



MEDITATION FOR

lifting low moods

Breathe out with three sounds of "AAA" in lower belly and rib cage. Breathe out with three sounds of "UUU" into the heart space and middle rib area. Breathe out with three sounds of "MMM" (mouth closed) into throat, brow and crown and upper ribs area. Breathe out with one AUM using all three sounds together. Feel the effect between each round. Allow the mouth, tongue and lips to be soft. When one really "listens" to this silent sound, this unstruck vibration, one comes inevitably to stillness, to pure and open existence.

technique each day, for four or five minutes to start with. It can be done first thing in the morning or before your 10-15 minute yoga practice. When you can sit comfortably for five minutes then slowly build up to 10 minutes.

Allow your body to be comfortable by sitting in a chair, lounge or the floor. Your spine is the most important part of your skeletal structure and is the central point of the nervous system. Notice if the spine is tall and active and that you are not slouching in your posture.

To begin, block your right nostril with your right thumb, inhale through the left nostril, pause for a moment, block off left nostril with pinkie finger and exhale through right, and so on. As you begin to familiarise yourself with this practice you can make a count of inhaling for four to five, holding for four to five and exhaling for four to five. Allow the pause to be comfortable and steady.

CLOSING MEDITATION AND MUDRA

Meditation is a wonderful tool to take the pressure off the thinking mind. It allows the body to still itself to a place of harmony, relaxation and clarity. Meditation can initially be very difficult for some people, but you should notice that it gets much easier after your asana practice. It also becomes easier and more enjoyable over a committed time period, with the positive effects becoming ever more noticeable. Choose your meditation from the options at left. While sitting in meditation you may also like to hold a mudra (see left), which is a specific position to place the hands and fingers in, to assist with changing the flow of energy in the body.

Alex Ivetic is a qualified yoga teacher and yoga therapist who has practised and studied yoga for 15 years, both in Australia and internationally. Her business, InnerSense Yoga, offers yoga and yoga therapy to both individuals and groups. innersenseyoga.com.au