How to Use Meditation and Yoga for Anxiety Management

by EMILY JASON

Have You Tried Yoga for Anxiety?

If you are reading this, you probably suffer from anxiety. You may be looking for tools to manage your anxiety without medications, or tools to use as an adjunct to your medications.

As someone who has suffered from anxiety for several years, I have found that I need several tools to manage my anxiety. I am unashamed to say that I require medication and at times, therapy**,** to manage my anxiety. However, one of the most powerful tools in my repertoire is yoga for my anxiety.

As a woman in my 30s, I started doing yoga when I was in high school because of the urging of my mother when I was 15; I had begun to have debilitating migraines several years earlier. She had read that yoga could help with migraines, so I started to attend classes with her. The yoga, unfortunately, didn't help my migraines but I did love how the *asanas* (the postures) made my body feel, so I continued my practice.

I began having anxiety after my son was born. At the urging of my therapist, I started a more frequent yoga practice. I thought yoga for anxiety could cure my anxiousness, but I learned that once you have a mental illness, there is no cure – there are good days and bad days. However, yoga gives me an outlet for my anxiety.

It turns out I am not alone.

The Research on Yoga for Anxiety

There are hundreds of studies that evaluate the effectiveness of yoga, meditation, and mindfulness for reduction of anxiety and depression symptoms.

Researchers at Johns Hopkins University performed a literature review of 47 studies; their literature review found that meditation reduced anxiety symptoms in all of the studies, at least to some degree. Because of the findings, one of the researchers, Dr. Goyal, now prescribes mediation to not just patients with anxiety but to depression and chronic pain patients as well.

A single study performed by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Nursing, "confirmed in April this year that, for the 10 percent of pregnant women who suffer from anxiety, yoga can be an effective balm." This study was also a literature review where 13 studies were assessed – all pregnant participants had a significant reduction in anxiety and depressions symptoms, regardless of the type of yoga performed.

What Is Yoga?

The term yoga means "unite." The yoga practice is originated in India and is more than 5,000 years old.

In practice, yoga is a combination of meditation, breathing, exercises and relaxation techniques. The purpose is to

increase your inner strength, rest your mind and accomplish a balance between your body, mind, and spirit.

Three Ways Yoga Can Help Your Anxiety

Train Your Body

In most of the cases anxiety brings with it not only psychological symptoms but also numerous physical symptoms. This can involve dizziness, tightness, muscle tension, shivering and many others.

When practicing yoga, you will have to put your body in different postures (known as asanas) which will help you balance your overall physical condition through powerful exercises.

Breathe Properly

Yoga breathing, also known as pranayama, is a key component of yoga. If you are suffering from anxiety, you may have noticed that you often feel shortness of breath when you are anxious. Yoga breathing can help you cope with this.

Proper breathing is a crucial component for managing a panic attack and dealing with anxiety. There are many different types of pranayama you can do both during yoga exercises or in the event of an anxiety attack.

Rest Your Mind with Meditation

Meditation is the third component of yoga practice that is especially important for your mind. Besides working on the relaxation of your body, you will also have to pay attention to the relaxation of your mind.

Meditation can help you to focus on the things that are surrounding you and stop worrying about all the things that might happen. Through meditation, you can accomplish balance and take a look at yourself from a distance, and grow to be thankful for the things you have rather than worried about those you may lose.

The Asanas

Asanas is the Sanskrit term for *postures.* Depending on the type of yoga you are practicing, there could be hundreds of the kinds of asanas. However, several asanas are known to be beneficial for anxiety.

Utilize these asanas when you are feeling anxious or put them into your daily yoga practice.

1. ***Balasana* (Child's pose):** this pose is used to rest between difficult postures. It can also be used as a posture to rest and regroup during times of stress and regroup. It helps to release tension in the back, neck, and shoulders. To perform this posture, begin on your hands and knees. Keep your hands directly underneath the shoulders and the knees directly underneath the hips. Bring the sits bones back towards the heels, stretching the forehead to the mat, the hands forward and the torso towards the mat. Hold this posture for as long as needed.
2. ***Vrikasana* (tree pose):** this asana is a classic balance pose. Because your focus is on balancing the body, it is difficult to concentrate on much else besides balance. To perform this posture, stand in a mountain posture, with both feet planted firmly on the mat. Lift the right foot, keeping the left foot grounded. Bring the right foot to the inside of the left ankle and the hands to the heart center. Keep the eyes at a focal point somewhere a couple of feet in front of the feet so as not to lose balance. Hold for several breaths. Variations include bringing the right foot to the inner calf or inner thigh. Repeat on the other side.
3. ***Viparita karani* (legs up the wall):** this asana is very basic. While sitting next to the wall, swing the legs up against the wall. Lie back. Relax. This asana is thought to have many health benefits aside from anxiety reduction – pain reduction, lowering of blood pressure and decrease in insomnia symptoms, to name a few.
4. ***Savasana* (corpse pose, final relaxation):** the Grand-daddy of all anxiety-reducing yoga asanas! If

you've been to any yoga classes, you've done this posture. It closes *every* class and is great for a reduction in anxiety and quieting the mind. If you're closing a yoga practice, whether it is a 10-minute flow or a 90-minute class, I strongly recommend savasana. To do savasana, just lie on your mat in a comfortable position (or even with legs up the wall) and lie completely still. Try to quiet the mind – and if that isn't possible, be comfortable with your thoughts. Reflect on your practice.