

Don't Worry, Be Happy: How Yoga Helps Combat Depression

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Depression affects 121 million people worldwide. In the U.S. alone, as much as 10 percent of the population is being treated with antidepressants during any given year, and antidepressant use in this country has more than doubled since 1996.

But are we getting any better? As many as 30 percent of depressed patients don't get the benefits from antidepressants that they had hoped for, and the reports of side effects are widespread.

There are many ways to boost mood and combat depression naturally, including exercise, getting enough sleep, getting the right nutrients and so on. (And of course, anyone suffering from serious depression should always seek the help of a medical professional.)

Increasingly, both anecdotal reports and a growing body of research chart the benefits of yoga as yet another way to get natural relief from depression. One of the leading proponents of yoga for depression has long been Amy Weintraub, founder of LifeForce Yoga® and author of "Yoga for Depression." I recently caught up with Amy and talked to her about her work.

Me: Amy, you literally wrote the book on yoga for depression, and you continue to be one of the leading yoga teachers, both in the U.S. and internationally, focusing on yoga for depression and anxiety. How did you get started with this work?

Amy Weintraub: I suffered from severe depression for years myself, and it really was yoga that helped me overcome depression and get off antidepressants. This was back in 1989. I was so passionate about it that I wanted to share what had changed my life with others. So I began writing about my experiences and teaching yoga in the early '90s. And the more I wrote about it, the more people became interested, and I discovered that many, many people experienced the same benefits as I did.

Me: It's well-known that exercise in general is effective in both relieving and preventing depression. Nevertheless, there have been studies indicating that yoga might offer more relief from depression than, for example, walking. What makes yoga different from regular exercise?

Amy Weintraub: Yes, it's true that one recent study by researchers at Boston University School of Medicine and Harvard Medical School found that yoga was superior to walking in terms of lifting mood.

In general, there are several elements that make yoga different from exercise. There's the Pranayama breathing. There are the cues to really be attentive to the sensations in your body. When you're running or walking, for example, you're not necessarily paying attention to all the sensations in your body. But if you're paying attention to the sensations in your body when you're moving in yoga, it becomes like a meditation. You're cultivating the witness, the observing mind.

The more you can cultivate that meditative, observing mind as you practice yoga postures, the more you will be cultivating it for off the mat, as well. You become less reactive, less prone to jump off the handle or to be extremely emotional when life hits. Life will always hit. There are always going to be challenges. We're always going to have losses,

disappointments and betrayals. There are sad moments in our lives. But we don't have to be rocked off balance.

What yoga teaches us, which walking or running doesn't, is that we can observe without reacting. We can feel emotions and sensations. We can clear the space. We can respond. But we don't have to react to it. So it creates that more meditative state.

Me: There seems to be increasing recognition that yoga is effective not just for helping people respond better to stressful life situations, but also for releasing the long-term mental and emotional scars of stress and trauma.

Amy Weintraub: Yes, absolutely. In fact, Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, the Medical Director at the Trauma Center at JRI in Brookline, Mass. has pioneered the use of yoga as a therapy for helping traumatized individuals. He is one of the world's leading experts on post-traumatic stress disorder. He feels that yoga offers an essential technique for releasing the trauma that is held in the physical body and for reintegrating mind and body.

Me: One of my favorite yoga quotes relates exactly to that point: "We hold the past in our bodies as well as in our mind." It's a beautiful recognition that the imprint of experience stored in the body is just as significant as the imprint stored in our conscious or subconscious memories.

Amy Weintraub: Yes. The yogis believe we hold the traumas and the losses in our psychic (mental-emotional) body and our physical body. What's unique about yoga is that when practicing, we begin to release all that past trauma held in our body, but without a story attached.

Most everybody who practices yoga has had an experience of crying on their yoga mat. And mostly, when we cry on the yoga mat, it's not because there's a story. It's simply a release. There's a flood, sometimes of tears, sometimes it's just a trickle of tears. But it's a sweet release without the story attached. We are releasing, at a deep level, the emotional scars and trauma we have accrued in our physical body and our psychic body.

If you can create sacred space when you're practicing yoga, you don't even have to know what's being released; you're going to feel refreshed and better.

Me: Most people feel a difference even after just one yoga class, but when it comes to relieving depression, we're looking at a long-term process, correct? The whole body has to change in order to support that more stable, balanced emotional state -- is that how you see it?

Amy Weintraub: Yes, and there are more and more studies on the biochemical effects of a yoga practice, which are beginning to show exactly this: A regular yoga practice over time alters the fundamental biochemistry of the body. Yoga helps raise levels of oxytocin, a hormone that reduces blood pressure and cortisol levels and relaxes the whole body. With regular practice, yoga also improves the levels of GABA, a neurotransmitter that tends to be low in people who suffer from depression and anxiety.

Now it's important to understand that people experience numerous biochemical changes just from one yoga class, but they aren't going to sustain these changes and transform their biochemistry unless they're practicing daily over a sustained period of time. How long that takes will be different for each practitioner. Many people feel great after doing one weekend workshop, with a lot of focus on breathing, yoga, and kriyas (specifically targeted yoga practices). And they presume that they can just stop taking their medication.

And that's really an error because it's very important to move very slowly and to work with a prescribing physician who knows you to slowly begin to make changes. People can change their hormones in one yoga session, but for most people struggling with depression and anxiety, it takes months of daily practice before they can work with their physician to lower medication usage.

So I always recommend for people to go slowly. And, some people will always need a low dose of a medication to simply get them to begin to roll out the yoga mat. And I say, if that's you, bless that medication. Let it be a blessing because it's bringing you to those practices that are going to balance your life and begin to allow you to see who you really are beneath that mood and whatever is arising in that moment.

Me: What would you recommend for people struggling with depression, who would like to try yoga?

Amy Weintraub: I would say before you just go to a regular yoga class, talk. Talk to people who are practicing yoga already and who can give you a recommendation. You want a yoga teacher who's compassionate. Make sure you don't go to a class where you end up feeling ashamed of your body. That's not yoga. That's some kind of physical culture. That's exercise that's got a yoga name on it.

You want to make sure that you find a teacher who can create an environment that's safe, where you feel accepted just as you are without having to prove yourself in any way. I've trained a lot of people as LifeForce Yoga® teachers, so you might go to the "Yoga for Depression" website to see if there's someone in your area.

But basically, it can be any style of yoga, but look for a style that includes breathing practices, because if you have depression, the breath is going to be really important. It's also important to make sure that the yoga practice you choose meets you where you are and brings you to a different place, brings you back to balance.

You can practice yoga in a driven, compulsive way and it'll still be good for you. But if you can pay attention to sensations and you can pay attention to the breath, you are creating a window into the present moment. And in that present moment, there's no grief. There's no shame. There's no depression. There's just what is.

Go here to learn more about Amy's recommendations for [best yoga techniques for depression](#) and the second half of the interview.