

Yoga unwinds body and mind

By Gretel Hakanson

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Introduced by a yogic sage in the 15th Century in India, Hatha Yoga uses postures (asanas), breathing techniques (Pranayama), and meditation to develop balance between body and mind. Stretching, strength building, and weight loss are some of the physical benefits of Hatha yoga, but many people are turning to yoga to improve their mood. Yoga can be helpful for managing stress, anxiety, and depression.

Researchers are interested in the anecdotal evidence and have recently started to study yoga's influence on mood. For example, a recent study at McGill University in Canada found that a brief yoga practice improved the overall health, reduced perceived stress and depression symptoms among medical students.

In another study, women who described themselves as "emotionally distressed" took two 90-minute yoga classes a week for three months. At the end of three months, their depression scores improved 50 percent, anxiety scores improved 30 percent, and overall well-being scores increased 65 percent, compared to the control group that did not do yoga.

Bridget Lawler started yoga on the recommendation of a friend. As an athletic person by nature, she needed a physical outlet after she got laid off last May and couldn't continue her daily hikes due to an injury. "Yoga has prevented me from spiraling into depression," she says. "I do yoga for my spirit, mind, and body."

Lawler practices Bikram Yoga, a style that consists of a series of 26 poses and is done in a heated room. "What I like about yoga is that you walk in the room and they tell you every breath to take and every step to take. I don't have to think at all for myself, so I get to give up being in control and having to do. I just get to be in life."

How Yoga Works: The Physiological Response

Amy Weintraub, Tucsonan and author of *Yoga for Depression*, teaches LifeForce Yoga, a practice she developed and designed to work with and manage the mood. "Yoga works to improve mood in many different ways," she says. "When someone is depressed, for example, there's not enough oxygenated blood going to the brain. What yoga does is begin to reverse that."

Postures that open the chest – such as backbends – encourage deep, diaphragmatic breathing and that provides more oxygen to the cells and more glucose to the brain. The increased oxygen, in turn, increases the building blocks of the neurotransmitters such as dopamine and serotonin, which are needed to sustain a balanced mood, Weintraub explains.

People who experience high levels of stress or past trauma typically have increased levels of cortisol, the fight-or-flight stress hormone. According to Weintraub, there's scientific evidence that practicing yoga reduces cortisol levels. "Biochemically we are also raising prolactin and oxytocin levels. Those are the feel-good hormones released



PHOTO: James Patrick

Yoga instructor and author Amy Weintraub developed LifeForce Yoga to help people manage their moods and improve their health.

when mothers cuddle their babies," she says. Additionally, the emphasis on deep breathing and relaxation helps activate the

parasympathetic nervous system, which lowers heart rate and blood pressure. Typically, the parasympathetic nervous system is acti-

vated when the threat or stress has passed, but it can also be consciously switched on by deep breathing and by relaxing the muscles.

Weintraub says there's also evidence that yoga creates a higher heart rate variability (HRV), which allows the body to move more easily between the parasympathetic and sympathetic nervous systems. With a higher HRV, the heart rate can increase in a natural way and it can decrease in a natural way, appropriate to the situation. Additionally, Weintraub says yogic breathing techniques can stimulate the vagus nerve, which is a known treatment for depression.

Peace of Mind Through Breathing and Body Awareness

"The postures themselves are not magic positions; it is your breathing that gives them the power to heal," Weintraub writes in *Yoga for Depression*. When entering, holding, and releasing poses, the author recommends breathing deeply and slowly through the nose.

Along with increased oxygen to the blood and brain, correct breathing helps cultivate awareness, which can positively effect mood and create peace of mind.

"The body is always present. The mind is a time traveler. So when we're practicing in a way that pays attention to sensations and

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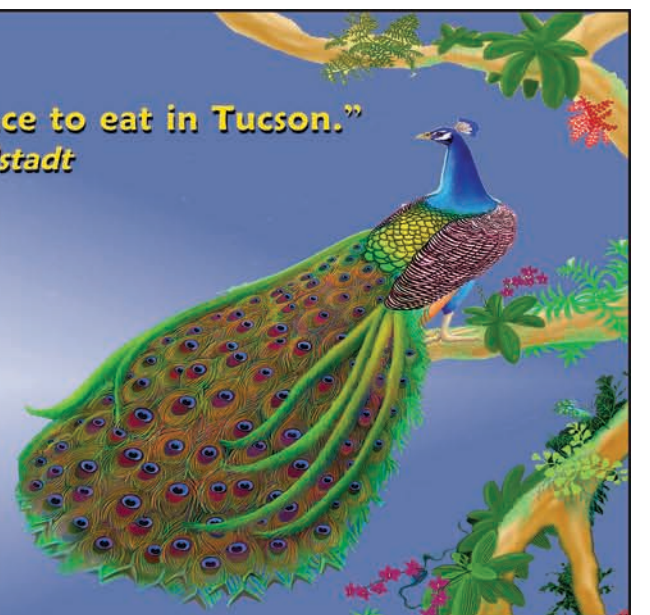
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breath, we're cultivating that present moment awareness," says Weintraub. "In the present awareness, there is no sadness, grief, or trauma in that moment. In that moment, we are whole and yoga gives us a cumulative experience of moments of wholeness, moments of contentment, and moments of peace."

Sometimes defined as "breath control," Pranayama is an important component of Hatha yoga. The ancient sages taught that prana, the vital energy force circulating through us, can be cultivated and channeled through breathing exercises. Through the practice of Pranayama or breathing exercises, the mind is calmed, rejuvenated, and uplifted. Many yoga practitioners believe that Pranayama is an important bridge between the physical practices of yoga and the internal, surrendering practices that lead us into deeper states of awareness.

Lily Cann has experienced the mood-improving benefits of yoga first-hand. "Yoga makes you aware of your body, the sensations in your body, your emotions, and your thoughts," she says.

After experiencing a series of stressful life events, Cann read Weintraub's book and has since become a certified LifeForce teacher. Through yoga, she says, "You become the

observer where you no longer identify with emotion, you just observe it. It's funny, when you observe it, it has its own way of dissolving because it doesn't belong to you. Yoga is the tool for how to get to that place."

Yoga and the Mind/Body Connection

Bruce Bowditch teaches at Yoga Oasis in Tucson, is author of two books about yoga, and works as a yoga therapist. He says, "Your mind and your body are really inseparable. One affects the other profoundly and there really isn't any separation."

Have you ever wondered why your back aches when you're stressed? Or maybe why you get a headache when you're feeling overwhelmed? "Think of it this way," Bowditch says, "every experience you've ever had is stored in your mental memory and you can feel the emotions you felt around a particular experience that happened years ago. When you think about it again, you can evoke a similar emotional experience. Inevitably, if you pay attention, any emotional experience you have also has a sensation in the body."

The limitations we experience in our body - such as chronic holding, chronic pain, chronic tightness - often have to do with how we chronically or habitually feel emotionally, explains Bowditch. The yoga asanas are

designed to move prana in a certain way and each has a different energetic feel to it. For example, forward bends are calming and handstands are energizing. By moving the body into the different forms, you are essentially creating different patterns of movement and energy. During the course of a yoga class, a well-combined series of poses can actually take your mental state into a different place and start to change the patterns in the body that create an imbalanced mood.

"Your state of mind affects how your body responds. Yoga works the other way, as well, where by working through the body, you can start to unwind the mind," Bowditch says. "That's the cool thing about yoga - it goes back and forth between unwinding your mind and unwinding your body, and back and forth."

Starting A Yoga Practice

Living in Tucson, we are incredibly fortunate when it comes to yoga; there are so many talented and experienced yoga teachers who offer regular classes - along with teachers who travel to Tucson for workshops, a variety of styles to choose from, and an array of surprisingly affordable sessions.

To find a class that's right for you, Bowditch advises: "Know the level of class that you're getting into and know your

teacher." Most teachers would welcome a phone call in advance to discuss the class and explain their teaching style. Bowditch suggests auditing a class first. "I would be more than happy to have anyone observe one of my classes and I would encourage someone new to yoga to do that. There are different approaches and styles to teaching and one is going to suit your personality better than another. You're going to resonate with one teacher better than another, even within the same style of yoga."

If mood management is your goal, Weintraub recommends finding a teacher who is comfortable working with the breath and encourages various breathing methods throughout the class.

"Yoga will show you that you are so much more than the challenges life brings you," Weintraub says. "You are so much more than the negative beliefs you may have about yourself or the world. You are so much more than your mood. Yes, a negative mood or stress may visit but what yoga teaches is we're so much more than that."

For a list of local yoga studios and teachers, the Arizona Yoga Association has a directory posted online at: www.azyoga.com.

Author: Gretel Hakanson is a local freelance writer.

A nose for mold

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Causes of Mold in the Home

J.P. Huestis, president of Global Prevention Services, specializes in mold remediation. He says, "Water is the key ingredient. How the water comes in the house happens in a bunch of different ways: You can have roof issues, plumbing issues, drain issues, windows that are faultily installed, or even grading issues."

With the onset of warmer weather, many of us will be switching on our evaporative coolers, but be aware that they are a common culprit in mold problems. "We see some of the most horrendous mold damage with the improper use of swamp coolers," says Huestis.

Proper use of a swamp cooler involves venting the house. To avoid excessive humidity, the house must be vented to allow dry air to enter and moist air to be expelled. Simply opening a window an inch or two will create a vent. Otherwise, the walls, furniture and other belongings can accumulate too much moisture, leading to mold-friendly humidity levels.

"We have seen entire homes blossom in mold - cabinetry, guitar cases, picture frames, couches, all sorts of clothing, shoes, speaker covers, just about everything," Huestis says.

Many people have run their swamp coolers for years without a problem, however, Huestis cautions, "Even the smallest interior leak, such as a tub or toilet overflow, if not dried up immediately, is enough to boost the humidity and moisture content of the house to the tipping point."

Huestis recommends checking with your insurance company - especially tenants with renter's insurance - to confirm that it covers damage and content loss due to water and mold.

In home inspections, Setford almost always finds mold in the bathroom. He calls this "maintenance mold" because it can typically be removed through proper cleaning. It can be found in the shower, tub, caulking, grout, ceiling, inside the toilet tank, and windows. It may be black, green, yellow, brown or light pink and it can grow on just about any material - wood, plastic, glass, metal, concrete. Cleaning the affected area with hydrogen peroxide will usually eliminate maintenance mold. But, Setford says, if the mold continues to reappear after using hydrogen peroxide, that means there's mold somewhere else in the house. A plumbing leak, roof leak, or grading problem may have caused mold growth inside the walls, ceiling, floor, underneath baseboards or behind wallpaper.

It's even possible to have mold in a brand new home. Setford cites an example where mold might be present in the building materials. "The wood used to build the home may have been contaminated with nonviable mold before the house was even built. If for some reason that wood gets wet - maybe there is a roof leak or a leak caused during the stucco installation - water will slowly saturate the wood. All of a sudden, the mold starts to grow again." The homeowner may be completely unaware of the leak.

Detecting Mold in the Home

Sometimes mold is visible, but if it hap-

pens to be odorless and invisible, how do we detect it? We can turn to the other half of the Arizona Mold Dog Detection Services team - Setford's canine partner, Rocky. Rocky is a six-year-old beagle (and a rescue dog) who spent a year in training learning the science of mold detection.

Rocky detects mold by scent. "If he detects mold, he sits, he stops and spends a second trying to figure out where it is," Setford says. "Then he points to it with his paw. He will show me if it is at a baseboard, a windowsill, or even up high. If it's up high, he gets up on his hind legs and points up with his paw."

Huestis is familiar with Rocky's work. "Rocky is actually very sensitive to mold. It is a good combination to have Rocky [in the detection process] because there may be areas you are completely unaware of that water may have affected in the past."

In each area where Rocky shows his paw "alerts," Setford takes an air sample. He sends the air samples to a lab to determine the type of molds and amount of spores in the air. The results are sent to the homeowner and it's up to homeowner to remove the mold. Setford recommends having a professional remediation company remove the mold to ensure the process is done properly. After remediation, Rocky and Setford will do a final analysis to confirm that the mold has indeed been removed.

Preventing Mold

The first and most obvious aspect to prevention is good housekeeping.

"Normally with a dry house and regular cleaning habits - vacuuming and dusting - the bulk of any dry spores that have moved around and settled on surfaces will be removed," Huestis says.

Fixing and drying water leaks as quickly as possible is crucial to preventing a mold outbreak. "After about two or three days you can see visible signs of mold colonization so you've got a very short window and that's why insurance companies will pay to dry out your house," says Huestis. "If you have an emergency water leak, call your insurance company. They'll put you in touch with a company like ours and we will dry out your structure, hopefully before it becomes a mold issue. Mold prevention starts with keeping a dry house."

Most of us desert-dwellers have a special appreciation for water. Hungarian biochemist Albert Szent-Gyorgyi summed it up well when he said: "Water is life's mater and matrix, mother and medium. There is no life without water."

There's no mold without water either. Keeping your home dry is essential for a healthy, mold-free home.

Author: Gretel Hakanson is a local freelance writer.

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