- Yoga / Anxiety



YOGA FOR ANXIETY

Millions around the world suffer from anxiety every day. Yoga might just be the answer for our stressful modern times, offering a simple way to relax, get in touch with our bodies and manage our fears and worries.

WORDS BY MAIDA PINEDA



According to the World Health Organization, anxiety disorders are the world's most common mental disorders. An estimated 4% of the global population currently experience anxiety disorders.

While it is normal to feel anxious from time to time, people with anxiety disorders experience intense and excessive fear and worry. These anxious feelings manifest in physical, cognitive and behavioural symptoms. There are many effective treatments for anxiety disorders such as psychological intervention, medications, and learning stress management skills.

Many people also turn to yoga to learn relaxation and mindfulness skills to reduce their symptoms of anxiety. Yoga is often associated with poses like backbends and headstands. Yet apart from these 'asanas' or poses, 'pranayama' (breath control) brings awareness to the breath and mind.

Chris Wilson, founder of Yoke Yoga, and a yoga teacher since 2007, readily imparts his wealth of knowledge and experience to help those who struggle with anxiety. He says: "I too have had anxiety in the past, and I have leaned into the practice."

Anxiety has different symptoms. There are the physical symptoms related to our nervous system and how our brain is operating such as feelings of fatigue, restlessness and insomnia. Then there's the endocrine system, which releases stress hormones that can cause symptoms like a racing heart, shortness of breath and hot and cold flushes. There's the mental and emotional side of things: how we feel strong emotions in our body or have a recursive thinking loop in the brain which keeps feeding this feeling of anxiety in the body.

Wilson says, "If we have chronic anxiety, something relatively minor may more readily trigger someone into that fight or flight response of the sympathetic nervous system. When it gets kicked into fight or flight, the endocrine system releases stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline and we can feel a heightened tenseness in our bodies. We can use breath to reduce the likelihood of going to the sympathetic [nervous system] zone."

To help cope with feelings of anxiety, Wilson recommends four exercises:

1 Inhale for 2 counts, exhale for 4 counts

When you inhale, the heart rate speeds up slightly. When you exhale, the heart rate slows down. When we inhale there's more sympathetic tone (or activity level); when we exhale, there's more parasympathetic tone. By integrating a breath practice, we simply increase the exhale. When we inhale for a count of 2 and exhale for a count of 4, it gets us out of the fight or flight and into the more calming part of the nervous system.

2 Welcoming opposites

Be aware of the feeling of your left hand for a second ... now focus on the feelings of your right hand. Now see if you can feel both hands at the same time. It is tricky to do initially. The thinking mind will focus on one and then try to focus on another. Over time, as we strengthen that part of the brain, it become easier to shift the focus. We become present, attentive, and open.

3 Don't take a deep breath

If someone is experiencing anxiety, Wilson doesn't recommend taking a deep breath. "I recommend to slow down, calm the breath down and make the breath more subtle. It is important to bring the breath down more into the belly, rather than chest breathing," he says. Anxious people tend to breathe using the chest. Breathe down toward the belly, let the belly swell out with the inhale and pull back with the exhale. This is more parasympathetic breathing. Then when it feels comfortable, start reducing the breath to make it more subtle. That's going to build more carbon dioxide in the bloodstream, which will have a calming effect.

4 Welcome your strong emotions

When you feel a strong emotion in your body, do not push your feelings away.

When anxiety is present, ask yourself where you feel it in your body. Is it a sharp sensation in your chest? In yoga, we ask, 'What is the opposite of this feeling?' You might say, 'A warmth in my feet'. We learn to

disidentify from the feeling. It's no longer: 'I'm anxious'. It's just: 'This anxiety is here'. We can have the feeling now, but it doesn't have a grip on us like it used to.

Wilson leaves us with some hopeful words. "I've experienced a lot of anxiety in my early 20s. Having practised for a long time, I just wanted to put it out there that I very rarely experience strong anxiety these days. I attribute that to having practised these for a long period of time. These practices do work and with consistency over time. The strong feelings of anxiety just don't have a hold on me anymore."

ANCHOR YOUR FOCUS

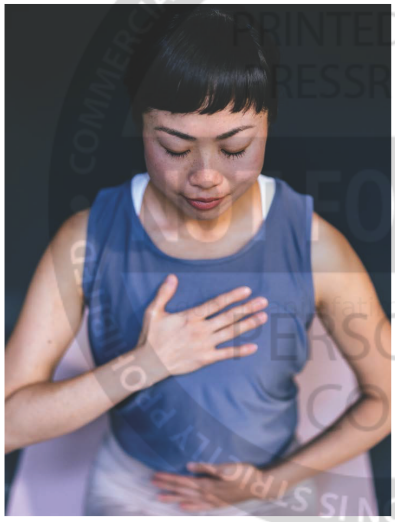
Emma Strembickyj, a yoga teacher of over 20 years, knows the power of anchoring your focus on your breath. "From someone who came from serious eating disorders, addiction and severe anxiety, the primary thing I needed to do was to breathe," she says. She suggests, "Simply bring your focus to your breath. Anxiety is ultimately a fear of the future that's coming. We don't know what happening, but we're scared of it anyway. We're all caught up in our own head."

When you're feeling anxious, she recommends these three techniques:

Box Breathing

Sama Vritti Pranayama, also known as Box Breathing, involves breathing in through your nose while slowly counting to 4. Hold your breath here and slowly count to 4 again, and then gently let your breath out for the count of four. Then pause at the end for four. By taking a gap in between the inhale and exhale, you send information to the body that you are safe.





Hand to Heart, Hand to Belly

Place one hand on your heart and one hand on your belly, shoulders relaxed. Make that physical contact with yourself to remind yourself of the present moment. Take a breath in, and out. Just starting that alone releases all the chemicals bound up in the physical body. Have a conversation with your body to take a breath and watch what your breath does. It is a way to self-soothe. Simply breathe in and slowly let it go.

Practise Alternate Nostril Breathing or Nadi Shodhana

Alternate nostril breathing helps calm the body and mind. Studies have shown it is also good for reducing blood pressure, improving lung function and memory. The left nostril connects to the right side of the brain and the right nostril connects to the left, so the practice of alternate nostril breathing helps bring equilibrium to both sides of the brain and activates the body's relaxation response.

Sit in a comfortable position. Rest your left hand in your lap. Traditionally, the practice is done with a hand mudra (position) with your right index and middle finger folded in to meet the base of your thumb and the other fingers extended. But to simplify, you can close your right nostril with your finger or thumb.

Breathe in through your left nostril, hold your breath briefly, then breathe out through your right nostril, alternating the hands. Next, keep the right nostril open, inhale, then close it, and open and exhale slowly through the left. This is one cycle. Repeat three to five times.

Five Asanas to Help Ease Anxiety



Child's Pose

Kneel on the floor. Touch your big toes together and sit on your heel, then separate your knees about as wide as your hips. Lay your torso down between your thighs and either reach your hands back toward your feet and rest the arms on the floor or stretch the arms forward for extended child's pose.



Happy Baby

Lie on your back, bend your knees into your belly, and grip the outsides of your feet with your hands. Position each ankle directly over the knee, so your shins are perpendicular to the floor. Flex your feet and keep your head on the floor. You can hold still for several breaths, or rock from side-to-side.



Downward Dog

Start on your hands and knees, placing your hands slightly in front of your shoulders. Spread your fingers wide and tuck your toes under. Lift your knees off the mat and reach your sit bones toward the ceiling. Keep your knees slightly bent. Relax your neck and keep your head between your upper arms.



Lying Spinal Twist

In this asana, while lying on your back, bring your arms out to the sides with the palms facing down in a T-position. Drop the right knee over to the left side of your body, twisting the spine and low back. Keep your shoulders flat to the floor. Repeat on opposite side.



Savasana

Also known as Corpse Pose, Savasana is a pose of total relaxation. Lie down flat on your back. Stretch your arms and legs out and away from your body, rest the back of your hands on the floor and rest your shoulder blades evenly on the floor. Keep your eyes gently closed. Stay in the pose for at least five minutes.



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