

# LifeForce Yoga® for Anxiety, Depression, Grief & Trauma

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We live in a fast paced culture where the demands on us are increasing at an alarming rate. The neuronal pathways and stress hormones that trigger the “flight-fight-freeze” response used to serve us well when we were hunting sabre tooth tigers. Today, a near miss for a car accident triggers the same flow of alarm responses. A misinterpreted email can set off alarms. Worrying about what can happen later or tomorrow, illness, pain, family dynamics, work competition, our social roles and life demands seem to provide an endless set of alarms to our central Nervous System (CNS), specifically the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) causing the secretion of neurotransmitters and stress hormones that perpetuate a heightened sense of alarm and hypervigilance. Over time, this increase in cortisol (stress hormone) and strengthened neural pathways of negative or anxious behavior deplete our energy levels, causing problems such as compromised immune system, fatigue, depression and anxiety. Today, we have to work hard to stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) which relaxes the body, restoring a sense of well being and equilibrium.

Yoga means the “union of body and mind (and breath).” Scientific studies and thousands of years of experience have demonstrated profound physiological improvements of a regular Yoga practice. Though there are different schools of yoga, basic elements are the movement of body, mind and breath. In Sanskrit, “prana” means life force, energy and breath. While pranayama describes specific forms of breathing practices, “prana” is the life force that comes from the universe and moves the energy in all things, living and non-living. The purpose of this paper is to focus on one school of Yoga, LifeForce Yoga®, developed by Amy Weinbraub, a master Kripalu teacher, who has written the book “Yoga for Depression” ([www.yogafordepression.com](http://www.yogafordepression.com)) and has developed a curriculum and scientific supported practices related to mood and trauma management (International Journal of Yoga Therapy, No 18, Fall 2008).

Approximately 17 million people in the US suffer from depression each year. Depression is characterized by low self esteem, low mood, loss of pleasure, fatigue, disrupted sleeping and eating patterns, difficulty concentrating feelings of hopelessness and guilt and often thoughts of suicide and death. Over 40 million people are diagnosed with anxiety disorders. Anxiety and depression occur together 80% of the time, are debilitating and can significantly impair cognitive, social, emotional and occupational functioning. Many people have experienced trauma either by witnessing violence, being a victim of violence, medical trauma through illness and changes in health or life circumstance. Together these disorders take an economic toll of \$72 billion, nearly half



the country's total mental health bill. Traditionally, psychotherapy (cognitive behavioral therapy and insight therapy) and medication management have been used to treat these disorders. They are more effective if used together than separately. More recent approaches have recognized mindfulness based stress reduction (Jon Kabat-Zinn), yoga, exercise as effective ways to improve mood disorders. The practice of Yoga incorporates elements of physical movement and exercise while developing mindfulness present moment awareness through the connection of body and breath. Yoga also encourages self-acceptance and love, slows the racing thoughts of the mind and teaches deep breathing in conjunction with asana (the physical practice of yoga). Yoga is helpful for anxiety and depression on multiple levels: thoughts, emotions and nervous system functioning (see this author's paper on Yoga for Chronic Pain).

LifeForce Yoga<sup>®</sup> is a practice that includes Yogic breathing exercises (pranayama and kriya), visualization (bhavana), intention (sankalpa), hand gestures (mudra), chanting (mantra) and seed sounds during postures (asanas) and relaxation (Yoga Nidra and/or Meditation). A recent study showed that posture and practice frequency incorporating all of the elements of LifeForce Yoga<sup>®</sup> lead to a decrease in depressive symptomatology (note: this study did not specifically test for anxiety). Yoga in the forms of asana, pranayama and relaxation techniques has been shown to reduce both situational and chronic anxiety within 10 days (Gupta, et.al. "Indian Journal of Physiology and Pharmacology, 2006 Jan – Mar; 50(1): 41-47). Yoga Nidra is a form of guided meditation (body scan) that deeply relaxes the mind and body. In yogic terms, yoga nidra releases samskaras, the karmic knots that have formed as a result of years of conditioned responses to our bodies and our relationships. From a brain science perspective, all of the practices associated with LifeForce Yoga<sup>®</sup> create new neuronal pathways, allowing the mind and body to have new responses to situations creating anger, stress, depression and anxiety. Yoga Nidra has been researched recently with war veterans from Vietnam and Iraq suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. In fact, the father of PTSD, Bessel van der Kolk, believes that movement and active breathing strategies are one of the first and foremost treatment tools to getting people who are in the "freeze" mode of trauma to re-engage with reality.

LifeForce Yoga<sup>®</sup> is based on the ancient yogic principle that everything we need is already present within us; that we are that which we seek, that we are Divine and perfect just the way we are. LifeForce Yoga<sup>®</sup> is a practice of compassion that creates a big enough "safe" container to embrace and accept all the dualities of mood and life: the joy and the sorrow, the anger and the calm, the grief and the delight, the pain and the pleasure. The practice is adapted to each student's mood after a thorough assessment of their anxiety, depression, pain, trauma and grief. The goals are to help the student move into a more balanced (satvic) state thus increasing a positive emotional, mental, and physical state equanimity and self-awareness.

The LifeForce practitioner must first clear away the obstructions in themselves. With each client, the intention is to create and maintain a safe and compassionate container



forming a relationship of love and acceptance between client and yoga therapist. Living mindfully in a state of self-acceptance (self-awareness) embracing where you are emotionally while contained in the “arms” of compassion, clears the space each day for healing energy to awaken and flow.

Numerous research studies in the US and India have shown increased psychological benefits of LifeForce Yoga®:

- after a 2 hour yoga class, alpha waves (relaxation) and theta waves (unconscious memory, dreams and emotions) increased by 40%
- Yoga and meditation alter the biochemistry of the brain more directly and efficiently than regular exercise
  - the “feel good” sensation after yoga rises from the balance of stimulation and relaxation you are providing your brain
- adrenaline and norepinephrine stimulates the brain and decreases depression
- cortisol levels (stress hormones) drop, increasing oxygen consumption and reducing muscle stiffness and tension
- decrease in the autonomic arousal system will decrease the respiration and heart rate
- increase of focus and alertness of the mind, clearing the fogginess of depression
- the *commitment* to practice diminishes depressive symptoms
- practicing shifts the locus of control from external to internal
- studies show that mantra repetition slows respiration and heart rate and boosts the immune system
- cultivates the “witness” of life’s circumstances and thoughts with a non-judgmental, calm equanimity
  - consistently demonstrated improvements on personality tests such as the MMPI, Rorschach and Taylor Manifest Anxiety Scale
  - restores diaphragmatic breathing improving oxygen absorption and carbon dioxide elimination, decreasing symptoms of depression

LifeForce Yoga® rests on the principles of Hatha Yoga: willful practice (tapas), self-study (svadhyaya) and surrender, or letting go (Ishvara-pranidhana). Active breathing strategies are essential depending on assessment of anxious or depressed mood. The language used by the LifeForce teacher is important. The use of Nada Yoga, ancient seed sounds and mantra, is woven throughout centering opening practices and asana. Since humans are about 80% water, sound causes vibrations that are soothing and/or energizing. Creating a “safe container” as an opening practice offers total permission to allow anything to arise, cueing for body sensations, emotions and even crying. In essence, the LifeForce Yoga® teacher holds loving space for whatever arises to help the client clear out that which no longer serves him/her, creating fertile ground for new patterns of interaction for thoughts and emotions from the present and the past. Similar to cognitive behavioral therapy, the brain develops new neuronal pathways, altering the “feel good” hormones of serotonin, oxytocin and prolactin, calming the hippocampus



and amygdala, increasing a sense of calm-strength, making the brain less reactive, balancing moods.

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