

Beating the **Holiday Blues** with **Yoga**

BY ANGELA AMBROSE

If you're suffering from depression, the demands of the holiday season can be overwhelming – from fighting the crowds at the shopping malls to attending obligatory work parties and big family gatherings.

Whether you've lost a loved one, a job or are struggling with a serious health condition, the holidays can stir up feelings of deep sadness that make it tough to get out of bed in the morning.

"If we're grieving or we're just out and out depressed, and we don't acknowledge it, it's only going to get worse," says Amy Weintraub, founder of LifeForce Yoga Healing Institute and author of *Yoga for Depression*. "Yoga helps you let go and clear the space through the focused breathing and through the movements, so that your muscles move and you're getting oxygenated blood throughout the body. It's about releasing what you no longer need."

What makes yoga so powerful is the attention to the breath and sensations in the body. It helps release bottled up emotions and opens up constrictions in your muscles, giving you a feeling of lightness and renewed energy. "You can allow the tears to flow, roll up your mat and get on with your day," explains Weintraub.

A large number of scientific studies have proven the effectiveness of yoga in managing moods, especially depression and anxiety. According to Weintraub, practicing yoga can help elevate "feel-good" hormones including dopamine, oxytocin, prolactin and GABA levels, which help cultivate a feeling of well-being and relaxation. When practiced regularly, yoga can also create healthy restructuring of the brain and increased lung capacity.

"People with depressed mood tend to have slumped shoulders and may be upper chest breathers," says Weintraub. "Yoga helps to deepen the breath, so that you're breathing more fully into your lungs diaphragmatically. It also helps

release chronic tension in the muscles."

Although yoga can help fight depression, don't throw away your antidepressants. Yoga is considered a complement to medical treatment, not a replacement. If you practice regularly, you may be able to slowly decrease your level of medication under the close supervision of your health care provider.

To reap the most benefits from yoga, Weintraub recommends practicing daily, but that doesn't mean you have to roll out your mat for an hour every day. Even a few minutes of focused yogic breathing or a short moving sequence can invigorate your body and boost your mood.

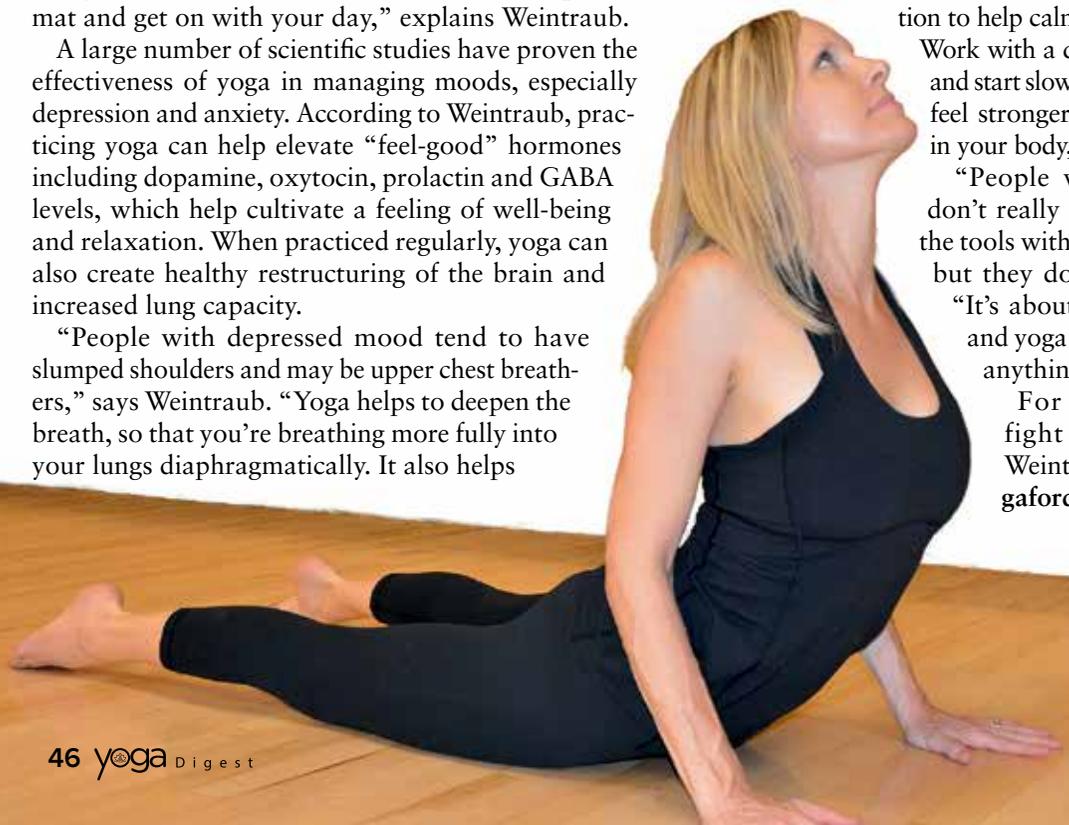
Backbends are energizing so try to incorporate them into your longer practices. Be sure to warm up your body first, stretching the spine in all directions. Start with gentle backbends such as sphinx, cobra or bridge pose before moving into more advanced heart-opening poses like camel and upward-facing bow.

If you're feeling anxious and depressed, try to include forward bends with an extended exhalation to help calm the nervous system.

Work with a qualified yoga teacher and start slowly. With time, you will feel stronger and more balanced in your body, mind and emotions.

"People who are depressed don't really trust that they have the tools within them to get better, but they do," says Weintraub. "It's about clearing the space, and yoga does that better than anything else I know."

For more ways to fight depression, visit Weintraub's website at yogafordepression.com



Four Surefire Ways to Boost Your Energy

Weintraub offers a few quick tips for boosting your energy level when the holiday doldrums are bringing you down. Rest for a minute after each set of exercises and notice the sensations throughout your body.

Focused Breathing in Bed

If you're having a hard time dragging yourself out of bed in the morning, practice a couple breathing exercises when you first wake up.

Stair-step Up the Mountain: Take little steps of breath through the nose until the lungs feel full as though you're climbing a mountain. When you get to the top, bring to mind something beautiful. Then slide down the mountain as you exhale the breath smoothly through the nose. Repeat two times.

Elevator Ride Up the Mountain: This exercise reverses the above breathing technique and is more energizing. Take an elevator ride to the top of the mountain, breathing slowly in through the

nose and imagine something beautiful at the top of the mountain. Exhale through the nose taking little steps of breath as you go down the mountain. This creates a gentle pumping action in the belly that cultivates higher energy. Repeat two times.

Pulling Prana

This short sequence links breath with movement and is a simple but powerful way to generate more prana, also known as energy or life force. Stand with your feet about hip-distance apart. Inhale deeply through your nose as you reach your arms overhead with your palms facing toward your body and fingers spread wide. On the exhale, make two fists and forcefully pull the hands back to your waist as you bend your knees. Repeat 10 times.



Visual imagery

Sit up tall in a chair with your feet flat on the floor. Close your eyes and imagine a time when you felt completely at ease and strong with a clear mind. Inhale your arms out in front of your heart and see that image in your heart's mind. On the exhale, draw your hands to your heart and say out loud "So Ham," which means "I am that." Repeat three times.



Power Hara

Stand with your feet wider than hip distance and place your hands on your shoulders with elbows pointed out. Fill your lungs half way as you twist to the left. Inhale deeper as you twist to the right. Extend your arms out to the sides and forcefully twist to the left as you exhale out the mouth with a "ha" sound. Forcefully twist to the right, once again exhaling out the mouth with a "ha" sound. Repeat 10 times.



Angela Ambrose is a Phoenix-based writer with 28 years in magazine, corporate and video script-writing. As an ACE-certified group fitness instructor and certified yoga teacher, she combines her writing expertise with her passion for healthy living. Angela's yoga classes are infused with heart-centered themes that take her students beyond the physical poses to help them connect with their true nature of peace and love.

Contact her at AngelaAmbrose.com or on Twitter [@AAHealthFitness](https://twitter.com/AAHealthFitness).

