



CHAPTER 8 ANXIETY AND PANIC ATTACKS

Mccall, Timothy; Yoga Journal. Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing (Kindle Locations 2682-2683). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

ROLF SOVIK began studying yoga with Swami Rama in the early 1970s. At his guru's suggestion, he pursued a doctorate in clinical psychology, writing a master's thesis comparing cognitive therapy to yoga, and completing a research project on the use of breathing in the treatment of anxiety. Rolf practices as a psychotherapist, teaches yoga, and with his wife, Mary Gail, is codirector of the Himalayan Institute of Buffalo, New York. He is the coauthor with Sandra Anderson of the book Yoga:

Mastering the Basics, and author of Moving Inward: The Journey to Meditation.

Mccall, Timothy; Yoga Journal. Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing (Kindle Locations 2683-2688). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Just over ten years ago, Graciella Rodriguez (not her real name) turned up in Rolf Sovik's class at the Himalayan Institute in search of relief from panic attacks and "a lot of anxiety." At that time, she was having panic attacks every couple of days, for no apparent reason. "I would feel a terrible sense of doom. I would break into a sweat, and I would think I was going to die because my heart would really hurt. I had terrible chest pain. It felt like a building was on me." At one point, Graciella thought she was having a heart attack. She underwent a series of tests including a cardiac angiogram, in which a catheter is threaded into the small coronary arteries to check for blockages. Once the test showed her heart was fine, Graciella says, "I sort of thought to myself, this could be because I overthink." It was then that she decided to find out what yoga could offer. Overview of Anxiety

Mccall, Timothy; Yoga Journal. Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing (Kindle Locations 2689-2696). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Anxiety is a pervasive emotional problem. There is no one who doesn't have the feeling of anxiety at some point in their life. Says Rolf, "There is a 100 percent incidence." As inevitable as anxiety is for most of us, some people experience it with an intensity that can seriously undermine their health. Rolf alludes to stress management guru Robert Eliot's take on anger: "He used to say, 'Why become enraged when a little irritability will do?' You could say the same thing about anxiety: why become terrified when a little nervousness will do?" When anxiety spirals out of control and becomes more than "a little nervousness," it can cause debilitating symptoms, including obsessive thinking, insomnia, migraines, intestinal problems, dizziness, nausea, shortness of breath, and heart palpitations. Full-fledged panic attacks like Graciella's are an extreme form of anxiety. As you can see, anxiety experienced with that much intensity can drastically undermine your quality of life—

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life— and your health and well-being. For example, excessive worry appears to undermine the ability to heal. A recent study showed that people suffering from the autoimmune skin condition psoriasis, which causes large scaly red plaques on the skin, took twice as long— an additional nineteen days— to respond to ultraviolet light therapy if they worried a lot. Conversely, another study found that when psoriasis patients listened to guided meditation tapes while undergoing UV treatments they improved much more quickly. Another problem, according to Rolf, is that anxiety can be so consuming that you focus only on the symptoms of anxiety but lose sight of the root cause. If you lose track of what's causing your anxiety, it becomes much more difficult to take action to alleviate it. Of course, there are some sources of anxiety over which you have no control. So yes, an asteroid could indeed strike the planet and wipe out

Mccall, Timothy; Yoga Journal. *Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing* (Kindle Locations 2704-2711). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

humankind— but worrying about the possibility can only make you miserable, and there is absolutely nothing you can do about it. Other times, anxiety can actually serve a function. If there is a genuine danger, then thinking about it and how you might either avoid it or respond to it could save your life. Anxiety is a useful emotion insofar as it helps you make better choices for how to live. Thinking obsessively about the same problem when it doesn't bring any further insight and makes you more miserable serves no purpose. How Yoga Fits In Yoga can help with anxiety in a number of ways. It offers specific techniques that can reduce symptoms, both in the short and longer term. Because of its focus on tuning in to inward states, yoga can also help you get beneath the surface of anxiety to figure out what might be triggering it, such as unresolved conflicts

Mccall, Timothy; Yoga Journal. Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing (Kindle Locations 2711-2719). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

or habitual thought patterns. One of the key yogic techniques used to counter anxiety is to focus on the breath. Perhaps nowhere is the connection between the mind and the breath more obvious than in anxiety. During anxious or fearful moments, breathing is disturbed in a wide variety of ways. It may become quick and choppy, rigid and constricted, or even stop altogether for periods of time. When you are calm, on the other hand, breathing tends to be smooth and rhythmic. Some people who are anxious or depressed have the sense that they can't take a full breath. Yoga teaches that one way to improve the inhalation is to focus on the exhalation. By learning to engage the abdominal muscles to gently squeeze a little more air out with each exhalation, you will be able to take in a deeper, more satisfying

Mccall, Timothy; Yoga Journal. Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing (Kindle Locations 2719-2725). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

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Anxious breathing occurs disproportionately in the upper chest, and doesn't fully engage the diaphragm, the large sheet of muscle separating the chest cavity from the abdominal organs. When the diaphragm contracts, it descends, creating more space in the chest and lowering the pressure in the lungs so that they can draw in more air (see Chapter 3). Yogis sometimes use the shorthand "chest breathing" to describe rapid, shallow breaths and "abdominal breathing" to indicate the slower, deeper breaths in which the diaphragm moves more freely. If you have been predominantly a chest breather, you will benefit from yoga's emphasis on breathing in a deeper, slower, more relaxed manner, although it may prove challenging at first. Rolf believes that in most cases, including Graciella's, people with anxiety have developed a chronic form of muscle restriction affecting the abdominal muscles that encircle the belly. When these muscles tighten from tension (or from the habit of

Mccall, Timothy; Yoga Journal. Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing (Kindle Locations 2726-2733). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

holding in the belly to look thinner), the belly can't move freely and breathing is impaired. Another area of chronic tightness in people with anxiety that restricts breathing is in the intercostal

muscles, which lie between the ribs. Whatever the cause of muscular tension, it may take a while to learn to release it and enjoy the benefits of fuller breath, but the practices designed by Rolf for Graciella show how that can be done. From a yogic point of view, optimal breathing is deep, smooth, quiet, and even, without significant pauses. The diaphragm should be engaged, while so-called accessory muscles of respiration, such as those in the neck and chest, should remain quiet, except when you bring in a larger-than-usual volume of air. In general, both the inhalation and exhalation should be through the nose. The breath is the one automatic function of the body that you can readily take over with conscious effort. And

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controlling the breath turns out to be the entry point to calming down an overactive stress response system. By breathing through the nose on exhalation, the exhalation is lengthened and the respiratory rate is slowed (because the nasal passages are narrower than the mouth and offer more resistance to airflow), both actions that tend to promote calmness of mind. Rapid, anxious breathing, on the other hand, serves to further activate the sympathetic nervous system, causing the release of stress hormones, increasing agitation (see Chapter 3). When you

breathe quickly, you expel more carbon dioxide from the system, and this, too, tends to put you more on edge, thus contributing to the vicious cycle of agitation, rapid breathing, and more agitation. One of the major fruits of sustained yoga practice is a spontaneous reduction in the breathing rate, even during periods where you are making no conscious effort to control the breath. While twelve to twenty breaths

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per minute is considered normal, experienced yoga practitioners often breathe at half that rate. The longer you practice, the more ingrained yogic breathing becomes and the calmer your mind. If you have trouble breathing through your nose due to nasal congestion, try using a neti pot once or twice per day to rinse your nasal passages with warm salt water. While the idea may be anxiety provoking at first, once mastered, the technique (see Chapter 4) becomes pleasant and soothing. Beyond awareness of your breath, yoga also teaches awareness of thought patterns. You may, for example, be able to recognize the first glimmers of anxiety that could turn into a full-fledged panic attack, and detect them early enough that you could intervene with a relaxing breathing technique. Another useful technique when troubling thoughts crop

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up, recommended by Patanjali in the Yoga Sutras, is to cultivate the opposite thought. This might mean turning your focus from your anxieties to what you are grateful for or what you can do for others. But yoga, like cognitive therapy, also asks you to acknowledge such negative thoughts and look honestly at what is, so that you can understand whether you are contributing to a bad situation through your behavior or thought patterns. This kind of reality testing is what differentiates yoga from mere “positive thinking.” Part of what yoga can do for anxiety has to do with slowing down the rush of thoughts, the so-called monkey mind we discussed in chapter 3. When you do yogic relaxation—which uses a variety of tools including asana, breathing, and heightened awareness of internal and external states—it facilitates detaching from those thoughts long enough to begin to see them more clearly. Your mind becomes relaxed but not dull, tuned in yet

Mccall, Timothy; Yoga Journal. *Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing* (Kindle Locations 2754-2761). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

disengaged from your normal relationship to the outer world. Rolf finds that achieving this kind of relaxation is far from easy at first, but that over time it becomes “the insulator that changes the character of anxiety altogether.” Yoga’s inherently holistic approach teaches that a multitude of factors can affect anxiety levels. To summarize very briefly: Poor breathing is both a cause and a result of stress, and there are many breathing practices within yoga that can deepen and improve the breath. If poor breathing is partly the result of a slouching posture or tension in the lower abdominal muscles then, of course, various yoga postures can help correct those problems. Gratitude, a quality that tends to arise spontaneously with the regular practice of yoga, helps diminish anxiety. The yogic principle of Ishvara pranidhana, surrendering to the universe or, as I like to think of it, giving up the illusion of control, another byproduct of yoga practice, is also calming. The

Mccall, Timothy; Yoga Journal. Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing (Kindle Locations 2761-2768). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

heightened awareness your body gains through yoga may allow you to make connections between your emotional state and the foods you eat, the music you listen to, the books you read, and the people with whom you share your life. Yoga helps you learn to trust the messages from the body and mind, and fuels the tapas (discipline, fire) to act on them when necessary. Finally,

engaging in a yoga practice can also provide a sense of hope, according to Rolf, because you discover that there is a technology you can employ to change your situation. The hope created by your practice can grow over time as you continue the practice, because just as anxious thoughts can dig deep grooves (samskaras), a steady practice and the change in attitude that accompany it can also deepen with repetition. This ancient yogic idea of samskaras is now finding confirmation in the latest findings of neuroscience, but instead of expressing this idea in terms of grooves, scientists

Mccall, Timothy; Yoga Journal. Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing (Kindle Locations 2768-2774). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

talk about how repeated firings of neurons change the wiring of the brain. Change your wiring and you change your mind. The Scientific Evidence Rolf Sovik points to a number of studies to show that yogic breathing is an effective method of combating anxiety. Voluntarily slowing the breathing during a period of stress counters a number of physiological components of stress while reducing feelings of anxiety. Increasing the length of exhalation relative to inhalation has similar effects. Training in relaxed, diaphragmatic breathing reduces the frequency of panic attacks. A 1973 double-blind controlled study, published in the American Journal of Psychotherapy, was conducted by N. Vahia and colleagues on twenty-seven psychiatric patients aged fifteen

to fifty years old who suffered anxiety and who had not responded to earlier treatments.

Mccall, Timothy; Yoga Journal. Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing (Kindle Locations 2775-2782). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

The results showed that a combination of asana, pranayama, and meditation significantly reduced anxiety as measured by the Taylor Manifest Anxiety Scale. Of note, the combination of asana and pranayama was even more effective when concentration exercises and meditation were also included. Another small study by the same authors found that yoga was significantly more effective in relieving anxiety than tranquilizers. In a 1991 study done as part of a doctoral dissertation for Penn State University, J. M. Harrigan compared yoga postures with and without diaphragmatic breathing exercises to breathing exercises alone. The subjects took a thirty-minute class twice a week for six weeks and were asked to practice half an hour per day on their own. When the postures were done without attention to the breath (which many yogis consider essential), there was no significant reduction in anxiety as compared to a control group which only heard lectures. The group who only did

Mccall, Timothy; Yoga Journal. Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing (Kindle Locations 2782-2789). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

diaphragmatic breathing had a significant reduction in anxiety. The best response was seen in the group that did the postures combined with diaphragmatic breathing. As in the study cited above, this points out the synergistic effects of different aspects of yoga practice. In a study of forty children and adolescents hospitalized in psychiatric wards, researchers from the University of Miami and Duke University Medical Schools found that a single hour-long session of relaxation therapy reduced anxiety. The intervention, which included asana and guided meditation, resulted in significant reductions in self-reported anxiety as well as in such anxious behavior as fidgeting. Reductions in cortisol levels in the saliva were also noted in most subjects. No reduction in anxiety was seen among a control group of twenty subjects who watched a relaxing video. In Germany, Dr. Andreas Michalsen of

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the University of Duisburg-Essen and colleagues studied twenty-four women with anxiety, comparing a three-month

program of Iyengar yoga to a control group placed on a waiting list. The two weekly ninety-minute classes emphasized backbends, forward bends, standing poses, and inversions. Compared to the eight controls, the sixteen women in the yoga group demonstrated “pronounced and significant improvements” in perceived stress, anxiety, well-being, vigor, fatigue, and depression. Of note, those in the yoga group who reported headaches or back pain noted “marked pain relief.” Salivary cortisol decreased significantly after taking a yoga class. A study by Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, and colleagues found that an eight-week mindfulness meditation-based stress-reduction program that included yoga asanas significantly reduced feelings of anxiety, depression, and panic in

Mccall, Timothy; Yoga Journal. Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing (Kindle Locations 2795-2802). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

of anxiety, depression, and panic in twenty of twenty-two patients diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder and panic disorder. These results were maintained in the eighteen patients the researchers were able to recheck three years after completion of the program, the majority of whom were still practicing on their own. It’s worth noting that another study by Kabat-Zinn found that patients whose anxiety manifested mainly in mental symptoms like constant worrying tended to find hatha yoga

preferable to mindfulness meditation, whereas those whose symptoms of anxiety tended to manifest mainly in the body preferred the less body-oriented meditation. As Jon says, “people need different doors to come into the room, so to speak, of self-awareness and self-knowing. Some people just can’t go through the mind door. They get the body door instantly.” For others the opposite is true.

Mccall, Timothy; Yoga Journal. *Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing* (Kindle Locations 2802-2809). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Rolf Sovik’s Approach While the practice described below was developed specifically for Graciella, many of its elements have proved useful to other students who have come to Rolf with anxiety and other stress-related health conditions. When Graciella first began classes it was apparent to Rolf that she was having difficulty with breath awareness and relaxation. She was restless during the relaxation, and her breathing was not smooth. More important, restrictions in her breathing seemed to remain outside her awareness. Although she was not particularly symptomatic at that time, Graciella also had a long history of asthma, which was another reason she had sought out yoga instruction. Rolf felt that good breathing was key to dealing with Graciella’s anxiety problem. But during her initial exposure to the breathing practices that Rolf gave her, she

Mccall, Timothy; Yoga Journal. Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing (Kindle Locations 2809-2816). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

told him that trying to shift attention to her breathing frustrated her and made her even more anxious. So Rolf created an approach designed to take the emphasis off the mechanics of breathing and instead teach her to undo the muscle tensions that block a smooth respiratory rhythm. He also wanted to strengthen her diaphragm which, he believes, the first exercise below is particularly good at doing. Here is the sequence of the practices and instructions that Rolf provided for Graciella: **EXERCISE #1. SANDBAG BREATHING**, five to ten minutes. Set up for Deep Relaxation pose (Savasana) by placing a blanket or cushion under your head so that it supports the arch of your neck more than the back of your head



(figure 8.1).

When you are settled, begin to focus

Mccall, Timothy; Yoga Journal. Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing (Kindle Locations 2816-2823). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

on your breathing. Soften your abdomen, and feel it rise with your inhalation and descend with your exhalation. Then, when the flow of your breath is well established, place a ten-pound sandbag or another item (such as bag of rice or beans) of the same weight on your upper abdomen. This provides what Rolf calls “weight training for the abdomen.” As you breathe in, gently lift the bag using your diaphragm, not by pushing your abdominal muscles out. As you exhale, the weight of the sandbag will tend to push the air quickly out of your lungs. So consciously slow down your exhalation, trying to make it equal in length to your inhalation. After completing the exercise, remove the sandbag but remain where you are for another minute or two, observing any differences in your

Mccall, Timothy; Yoga Journal. Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing (Kindle Locations 2823-2828). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Rolf asked Graciella to practice sandbag breathing for five minutes and gradually increase the time to ten minutes. He recommends practicing it for three days on, one day off, for one month, and then stopping for good. Once you've done this exercise for a month, according to Rolf, you can maintain the strength gains simply by including twists and mild inversions, such as the ones below, in your regular yoga practice.

EXERCISE #2. CROCODILE BREATHING (Makrasana), six to ten minutes. Lie on your belly with your legs a comfortable distance apart. Turn your toes either in or out, whichever is more comfortable. Fold your arms, placing each hand on the opposite elbow, and rest your forehead on your forearms



(figure 8.2).

Mccall, Timothy; Yoga Journal. Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing (Kindle Locations 2829-2835). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Rolf's five-step approach to Crocodile Breathing is: Step 1: Bring your awareness to your breath as it flows out and in. As your breath flows out, feel how your breath empties, how the exhalation cleanses and releases tension. As your breath flows in, feel how your breath fills you, how the inhalation nourishes you and restores fresh energy. Continue watching the flow of your breath, feeling it empty and then fill you again. Step 2: While you're feeling the flow of your breath, gently soften your navel region, allowing your abdomen to relax. Step 3: Notice that as you inhale, your abdomen gently expands, and as you exhale, your abdomen slowly contracts.

Mccall, Timothy; Yoga Journal. Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing (Kindle Locations 2836-2842). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Step 4: When you come to the end of your inhalation, simply relax and exhale. In the same way, when you come to the end of your exhalation, simply relax and inhale. Let each breath flow slowly and smoothly into the next, without a conscious pause.

Step 5: Observe the smooth and unbroken flow of your breathing. Like a wheel turning over and over, the breath flows out and in, and you are the witness of your own breath. **OTHER YOGIC IDEAS** A number of breathing practices, taught in a variety of yogic traditions, can help calm the mind. Among the simplest and most useful is a 1: 2 ratio of inhalation to exhalation. If you normally inhale for three seconds, for example, see if you can slow the exhale to six seconds while inhaling at your usual pace. As with all yogic breathing exercises, you should never feel any shortness of breath or

Mccall, Timothy; Yoga Journal. Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing (Kindle Locations 2843-2850). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

discomfort while prolonging the exhalation. If you do, immediately return to your normal rate of breathing. **EXERCISE #3. SIDE STRETCHES.** For the first stage, stand with your feet a little wider than hips' width apart, hands on your hips, and gently tip the pelvis from side to side. See if you can feel the stretch down through the inner thigh muscles (the adductors). For the second stage, try to deepen the stretch through the torso as you bend more deeply to each side. If you are bending to the right, the right hand will end up somewhere near the right knee. In the third stage, lengthen the opposite arm and bring it up and alongside the head, allowing the weight of the arm to increase the stretch a bit more



(figure 8.3).

Inhale as you lift and exhale as you lower, moving from side to side and coordinating the movement with the feeling of breathing. This stretches the sides of the torso, including the intercostal muscles between the ribs, which need to

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open for the fullest expression of the breath. After moving side to side, stay on one side for four to ten breaths, then repeat on the other side. **EXERCISE #4. CROSS-LEGGED TWIST (Parsvasukhasana).** Start by sitting in a simple cross-legged posture, with a cushion or folded blanket underneath your hips to lift your pelvis off the floor. Exhale and twist to the left, taking your right hand to the left knee and your left arm behind



(see figure 8.4).

Inhale and return to center. Repeat on the other side, and go back and forth several times, moving with your breath. Keep your spine erect and your breath flowing smoothly

Mccall, Timothy; Yoga Journal. Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing (Kindle Locations 2857-2863). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Twisting asana restrict the movement of the breath into the abdomen and make it a little more difficult to breathe, which can increase feelings of anxiety. However, if you can learn to do these poses with equanimity, an example of what Rolf calls “breathing in a tight spot,” it can be part of the remedy for anxious feelings in other situations. After warming up the spine with this exercise, hold the pose for four to eight breaths on each side. Rolf suggests placing a block under the back hand to help your arm relax. Use your arms to help stabilize the pose and encourage spinal lengthening, not to artificially pull you deeper into the twist (which could cause

Mccall, Timothy; Yoga Journal. Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing (Kindle Locations 2864-2869). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

injury). EXERCISE #5. HALF SPINAL TWIST (Ardha Matsyendrasana), six to twelve breaths. Start by sitting in a simple cross-legged posture. Bend your right leg over the left thigh and place the right heel alongside the left hip. Wrap your left arm around the bent knee and rest your right hand on the floor or a block behind you. Before twisting, Rolf believes that it's helpful to inhale and contract the pelvic floor then exhale and relax it, getting a sense that these muscles are going to be involved in the twist and helping to create stability at the base of the pelvis. As you move into the pose, imagine that the twisting movement starts from the pelvic floor. After twisting the abdomen, rib cage, and shoulders, in that order, gently turn the neck and head. Hold the pose on each side for six to twelve breaths, softening your gaze and trying to relax into the pose



(figure 8.5).

Mccall, Timothy; Yoga Journal. Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing (Kindle Locations 2869-2876). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

EXERCISE #6. SUPPORTED LEGS-UP-THE-WALL POSE (Viparita Karani), thirty to ninety seconds. Set up for the pose by placing a bolster, a cushion, or a stack of two folded blankets about six inches away from a wall. To come into the pose, sit toward one end of the bolster with your side facing the wall, press your hands down onto the bolster to hold it in place (a folded sticky mat placed underneath the bolster will also help keep it from moving), and swing your legs up and onto the wall. Once you're up, scoot your pelvis into place on the bolster so that just the bottom of your tailbone is hanging off the bolster (your pelvis will be in a slight backbend). Make sure that your weight is on your shoulders and your hips, and that your head and neck are soft and

Mccall, Timothy; Yoga Journal. Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing (Kindle Locations 2877-2882). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

relaxed



(figure 8.6).

Rolf says that because this pose is a mild inversion, it allows you to get used to the idea of being upside down, and to the resulting changes in blood pressure and breath dynamics. It normally takes a little more effort to breathe in inversions. Rolf asked Graciella to start out holding this pose for thirty seconds and over time slowly work up to ninety seconds. **EXERCISE #7. ROCKING CHAIR POSE**, ten to twenty repetitions. Start by sitting up straight, with your knees bent and your hands underneath your thighs. On an inhalation, round your lower back, rock back onto your shoulders (not onto your neck), and straighten your legs (figure 8.7a).

On your exhalation, keeping your lower back rounded, rock forward and

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bend your knees



(figure 8.7A-and-b)

repeat ten to twenty times, maintaining the roundness of your lower back while using your legs to bring you backward and forward. Rolf says that this pose helps you to invert your body without any support, and is a good massage for your spine.

EXERCISE #8. SUPPORTED SHOULDERSTAND (Salamba Sarvangasana), with feet on the wall, thirty to ninety seconds. Set up for the pose by placing a folded blanket near the wall for your shoulders to rest on. To

Mccall, Timothy; Yoga Journal. *Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing* (Kindle Locations 2888-2894). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

come into the pose, sit on the floor, facing the wall, and move your hips close to the wall. Raise your legs onto the wall, bend your knees, and place the soles of your feet on the wall. Using your feet to bear your weight, press down into your back, rock your pelvis, and come up onto your shoulders, with your feet on the wall and your weight resting on your feet and the backs of your shoulders. Your head and neck should be soft and bearing no weight. Release your arms underneath your torso. In this version of Shoulderstand, your torso is not completely vertical; it's tilted fifteen to twenty degrees



(figure 8.8).

Start by holding this pose for thirty seconds and over time slowly work up to ninety seconds.

Mccall, Timothy; Yoga Journal. Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing (Kindle Locations 2894-2898). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

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(figure 8.8) OR 8.9).



figS figure 8.8) OR 8.9). SS

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that you are likely to lose your balance. If you do, come right back into the pose so that you can practice coming down in a more controlled fashion. Repeat on the other side. EXERCISE #10. TREE POSE (Vrksasana). Start by standing with your right side near a wall and one of the fingers of your right hand touching the wall. Next bend your left leg and press your left foot against the inside of your right thigh (and your right thigh against your left foot). If you can't press your right foot against your thigh, try pressing it against your shin, just above the ankle (it's hard to hold the leg up halfway). As soon as you feel balanced and confident, try taking your

Mccall, Timothy; Yoga Journal. Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing (Kindle Locations 2904-2910). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

finger away from the wall, knowing you can put it back at any moment. As much as possible, keep your hips square to the front, allowing your hips and knees to open



(figure 8.10).

Repeat on the other side. **EXERCISE #11. DEEP RELAXATION POSE (Savasana)**, five to ten minutes. Set up for the pose by placing a folded blanket or cushion underneath your head to support your head and neck



(figure 8.11).

Lie back with your head on the support, so your chin tilts toward your chest. Roll your legs open and turn your palms up, with your arms a comfortable distance from your body. If you like, you can cover yourself with a blanket to keep you warm while you relax. Some people who are anxious

Mccall, Timothy; Yoga Journal. *Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing* (Kindle Locations 2910-2916). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

may feel vulnerable and exposed in this pose, and being covered can be comforting. When you are comfortable, begin to observe your breath. (For an in-depth discussion of Savasana, see Chapter 3) “For someone experiencing anxiety, relaxation is like aspirin,” says Rolf, “a pill that you can take regularly.” He’s had people with panic attacks practice Deep Relaxation pose up to six times a day. Every two or three hours they lie down for five to ten minutes in Savasana, just observing the flow of the breath. After several months Rolf added a seated meditation practice to Graciella’s regimen. **EXERCISE #12. SITTING MEDITATION**, ten minutes. Sit in any comfortable seated

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position. If your legs, hips, or back are tight, use plenty of cushioning. For example, if you sit in a cross-legged position on the floor, place cushions or folded blankets under your hips as well as your legs



(figure 8.12).

If you prefer to kneel on a bench, to sit up in a straight-backed chair, or even to lean back in a soft reclining chair, that's fine. What is important is that there is no anxiety or discomfort caused by your posture, so that your focus can remain internal. When you are comfortably seated, bring your awareness to the feeling of the breath touching inside your nostrils, and focus on this sensation. After some time, you can add the mantra "so ham" ("so" is said silently with the inhalation and "ham"—pronounced "hum"—is said silently with the exhalation). "The intent," Rolf says, "is not to drown other thoughts in a tumult of mantra repetitions, but to rest in the sound of the mantra while being aware of

Mccall, Timothy; Yoga Journal. *Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing* (Kindle Locations 2923-2930). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

other thoughts as they travel through your mind." He usually suggests starting with a six-to eight-minute relaxation lying down, followed by at least ten minutes of seated meditation. It's ideal to practice twice a day for eighteen to twenty minutes, he believes, but he also realizes not everyone can manage this. Some people quit meditation before giving it a real chance to work because they believe they aren't good at it. The biggest problem, Rolf says, is that people believe that the goal of meditation is to make the

Mccall, Timothy; Yoga Journal. Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing (Kindle Locations 2930-2936). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

mind empty. They have the impression that their minds should become blank in some way and that their worries should be replaced by that blankness. But, Rolf says, “It will never happen. The process of meditating is a process of replacing anxiety and distractions with a relaxed focus. Inevitably, distractions and anxiety coexist with that relaxed focus.” But relatively quickly, he says, the person who is meditating gains distance from the anxiety and distracted thoughts and will relax even more deeply. A Holistic Approach to Anxiety and Panic Attacks Depression, alcohol abuse, diabetes, and thyroid disease, among other conditions, can cause anxiety and should be ruled out or treated. If significant anger or a low level of self-esteem is part of your symptoms,

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you may have an underlying depression and may benefit from consulting with a physician or psychotherapist. Psychotherapy can be an important tool for anxiety. The combination of therapy and drugs or therapy and yoga is likely to be more effective than

either alone. Although tranquilizers in the Valium family are often prescribed for anxiety, due to side effects including drowsiness and addiction, when drugs are needed, most experts favor antidepressants such as Prozac (fluoxetine) or Zoloft (sertraline). News reports, particularly television news, can fuel anxiety. Instead of watching the news for half an hour a day, do yoga instead and see if you feel better. Rolf suggests cutting back on processed

Mccall, Timothy; Yoga Journal. Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing (Kindle Locations 2943-2951). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

foods, junk food, and chemicals that increase the activation of your nervous system. In particular, he advises reducing or eliminating caffeine, sugar, alcohol, and nicotine. Rolf also favors well-cooked as opposed to raw foods in people with anxiety, advice in line with Ayurvedic thinking (see Chapter 4). The omega-3 fatty acids found in some deepwater fish and in flaxseed oil appear to reduce anxiety. German chamomile, tincture of passion flower, supplemental B vitamins, and magnesium are safe remedies that appear to have antianxiety properties. Aromatherapy with such fragrances as lavender has been shown to be calming. Other measures to combat anxiety include acupuncture and regular

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Contraindications, Special Considerations, and Modifications
People who have been in prolonged states of anxiety can reach a state of vital exhaustion. These people may only become more depleted if they take on an overly strenuous yoga practice too soon. Vigorous Sun Salutations, intense standing poses with long holds, and working in a hot and humid room may all be inappropriate. The rule of thumb is first recharge your batteries, then ramp up the intensity of your practice. Standard restorative postures are not always appropriate at first either. “Someone who comes in who’s extremely anxious may not respond very well to rejuvenating and propped poses,” says Rolf. “They lie there wired with their eyes wide open, waiting for you to give them some sort of instruction.” Active relaxation, such as Yoga Nidra (see Chapter 3), where a teacher or a

Mccall, Timothy; Yoga Journal. Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing (Kindle Locations 2960-2967). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

recording guides the student, may keep the roaming mind quieter and more focused than complete silence. Inversions can also play an important role in calming the mind, but there are

some special considerations for people with anxiety. Rolf says that when people first attempt inverted poses of almost any kind, they will experience a feeling of pressure in the head. Some people with anxiety, he says, don't respond well to that sensation. If that's the case, he suggests starting with less intense inversions like Bridge pose or Legs-Up-the-Wall which don't lift the body as high, and as a result generate less head pressure. He also tries to reassure anxious students that if they allow themselves to be in the pose for a little while, the pressure will turn into a feeling of fullness which they will find enjoyable. "But if you're resisting the pose out of anxiety," he says, "your fixation on the pressure may mean it won't change." Some asana and pranayama practices

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may not work well for those with anxiety. Backbends, which tend to be energizing, will sometimes make people with anxiety even more anxious. However, learning to do backbends with gentle breathing and a sattvic, or balanced and peaceful, state of mind can be an effective tool to combat anxiety. Including a number of quieting practices after backbends to calm the nervous system is also useful. Similarly, any practice which prolongs inhalation or which focuses on breathing through the right nostril may prompt agitation (see Chapter 3). Generally it's

better to focus on lengthening the exhalation or keeping inhalation and exhalation even. For people who tend to slip into an overly anxious or dark state when attempting pranayama, meditation, or even Savasana, one solution is to keep the eyes open throughout the entire practice. OTHER YOGIC IDEAS

Mccall, Timothy; Yoga Journal. Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing (Kindle Locations 2974-2980). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

throughout the entire practice. OTHER YOGIC IDEAS In Iyengar yoga, a number of poses are used as part of the treatment of anxiety. Postures in which the head is gently supported, such as Wide-Legged Standing Forward Bend (Prasarita Padottanasana), are considered particularly calming. If your head does not reach the ground when bending forward, use a block, blanket, bolster, or other prop to support the crown of your head or you may lose the “brain-quieting” effects. Yoga has proved to be tremendously helpful to Graciella. “If it wasn’t for yoga, for breath awareness, and being able to quell my anxieties,” she says, “I don’t know where I would be.” On medication, she assumes.

Mccall, Timothy; Yoga Journal. Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing (Kindle Locations 2979-2987). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

The practice also appears to have helped her asthma. Over the years, Graciella had needed various drugs for her asthma, including theophylline, albuterol, and steroid inhalers. In the time since she's been doing yoga regularly her asthma symptoms have all but disappeared and she currently takes no medication for it. Some of the benefits of yoga were less expected. After Graciella began to practice regularly, she says, her body felt more fluid. "In doing the asanas I felt that finally some sort of grace was coming my way." She also noted a major improvement in her posture. Now her family tells her that she's got a completely new body. It hasn't all been easy. At first she felt claustrophobic facedown in Makrasana. Meditation was a particular challenge but she now believes meditating has helped her more than anything to deal with the emotional issues that may have fueled her

Mccall, Timothy; Yoga Journal. *Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing* (Kindle Locations 2987-2994). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Graciella does about an hour a day of asana and another half hour of meditation and breathwork. Although she tries to practice every day, she is not always successful. When she misses even a single day, though, she notices a huge difference in her energy level and her mental clarity. Yoga has also given her the courage to tackle new challenges. In an attempt to make

the best of a climate far harsher than her native South America, just after beginning her yoga studies with Rolf, Graciella learned to ski. In the beginning, she would get mild panic attacks on the slopes. She was fortunate to have an instructor who recognized what was going on. Graciella laughs when she tells the story. “He would say to me, ‘Can we do some breathing, please?’ If it wasn’t for the yoga, I don’t think I would have been able to do it.”

Mccall, Timothy; Yoga Journal. Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing (Kindle Locations 2994-3001). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

CHAPTER 9 ARTHRITIS MARIAN GARFINKEL first met her teacher, B. K. S. Iyengar, in 1974, and has been traveling to India annually to study with him ever since. She was so impressed with the master’s work with people suffering from a variety of health conditions that she was inspired to conduct scientific studies of his approach. Marian is best known for her randomized controlled trial, published in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) in 1998, which showed the benefits of the specifically adapted program of Iyengar yoga that she created for people with

Mccall, Timothy; Yoga Journal. Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing (Kindle Locations 3001-3007). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.