

# Yoga for Depression and Emotional Balance

*By Carolyn Reynolds*

Did you know that the energy of an ordinary light bulb, when focused into a narrow beam becomes a laser capable of cutting metal? In the same way that focused physical energy becomes awesome, so does focused human energy become awesome. Sustained focused attention is responsible for the creative marvels of our outer world and of our inner world.

Sustained focused attention. It is a very powerful tool. Always remember that energy follows attention. That's good for raising children, creating what you want in your life and what you don't want in your life. What you pay attention to you get more of. Pay attention to what irritates you and you get more irritation. Pay attention to behaviors you enjoy in your family and you'll get more of that too. And sure, maintaining focused attention can be hard to do. But the great part is that we can always correct. If you get off track simply bring your attention back, just like when you train your puppy to go on the paper. It's the bringing back that strengthens the quality. Be clear about what you want, focus your attention and there you go! Simple. Granted, simple and easy are not always synonymous.

The science of Yoga has within it the practices called pranayama, or breathing practices. Sometimes when something as simple as breathing is the topic, we disregard the information, thinking it is too simple to have any impact on our life's dramas. Big mistake.

The teachers of Yoga have, through the ages, implored their students to not disregard the teachings and at the same time to not accept them blindly. Instead, try them out. Do the practices. Find out the validity of the practices for yourself.

Depression is an affliction that has visited mankind throughout history, documented in the biographies of statesmen such as Winston Churchill, artists like Vincent Van Gogh, and the most mundane of us who live on the streets without joy and without a home. A mild form of depression is called anhedonia, the inability to feel joy in one's life and the experience of a pervasive feeling of malaise. These periods are common and cyclical for many people.

There is a genetic predisposition for depression in my family. Realizing that it was manifesting in me, I reminded myself that it was time to practice what I teach. When teaching pranayama, the first thing I stress is to be aware of the breath. When I focused on my breath I was amazed. I wasn't breathing. There was just a little in-breath once in awhile. I began diaphragmatic breathing and the two to one breath while walking (out-breath twice as long as the in-breath, measured by the steps while walking). There was a dramatic shift in mood the second day of sustained practice. Now these two days of sustained attention to the breath were very difficult. When one is depressed there is very little energy or even a reason to care. But if you will make the commitment, the payoff is huge. And if breath awareness becomes as regular as brushing your teeth, the mood

swings will not occur and depression will not manifest. No drugs, no therapy, no cost. It works!

You can practice strengthening your focusing muscles through hatha yoga also. The tree posture is a good place to start. This is a balance posture that requires focused attention to maintain stability. Focus on a spot at a distance from you and be aware of your breath. Begin in mountain posture with feet directly under the hips and shoulders aligned above the hips and lengthen to spine so you are tall and erect. Shift your weight over the left foot and this frees up the right foot to be placed on the inner left thigh (or anywhere else on the inner left leg that is comfortable). Reach the arms out like the branches of a tree and imagine roots growing out of your standing foot to anchor you in the ground. If you sway, just smile and imagine it to be the breeze then come back to center. Keep the breath full and even, without jerks or pauses, using the diaphragm to open the lungs for the in-breath and to empty the lungs at the end of the out-breath. What you learn on the mat you can take into your life. Yoga gives you the space and opportunity to practice, to quiet and focus and discipline a scattered mind. It teaches you to become focused in the present moment. The glorious present moment. It is your only point of power.