

# Yoga and Meditation for Enhanced Mood and Well-Being

Counseling & Psychological Services  
University of California, Santa Cruz  
**831-459-2628**

## What is Yoga?

Yoga literally means "union" and refers to the union of mind and body. Yoga is a holistic practice which emphasizes mind-body connectedness and involves postures, breathing, and meditation.

Yoga is a 5,000 year old practice that began in ancient India. It is receiving growing recognition by Western science and health professionals as a powerful tool for promoting mental and physical well-being. Essentially, yoga is a preventative and cost-effective approach to overall well-being.

Yoga is not a religion. Although yoga sometimes interweaves philosophies such as Hinduism or Buddhism, it is not necessary to practice those philosophies in order to practice yoga. It is also not necessary to surrender your own religious beliefs to practice yoga.

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## Yoga and Psychological Well-Being

By now, it's no secret that the regular practice of yoga results in many physical benefits such as improved flexibility, strength, and posture. However, the many psychological benefits of yoga are often overlooked.

### Psychological benefits of a regular yoga practice:

- Stress reduction
- Increased self-awareness
- Less anxiety and depression
- Improved concentration
- Inner peace and calm
- More positive view of self/others
- Increased body awareness and acceptance
- Increased energy and vitality
- Heightened sense of control of one's body and mind
- Decline in self-destructive patterns
- Improved self-confidence
- Increased mental clarity
- Improved reaction time
- Improved learning ability and memory
- Increased ability to be present in the moment
- Greater creativity
- Improved sleep
- Increased emotional stability

***The benefits of yoga are intensely interwoven. "Change your posture and you change the way you breathe. Change your breathing and you change your nervous system. This is one of the great lessons of yoga: Everything is connected..."***

~Timothy McCall, M.D., author of *Yoga as Medicine*

Yoga Practice Basics: Their Effects on Mood and Well-Being



While there are many forms of yoga, the most popular form of yoga in Western culture is Hatha yoga which involves “the three basics of yoga” : *postures* (called “*asanas*” in Sanskrit), *breathing techniques*, and *meditation*.

### Postures (Asanas)

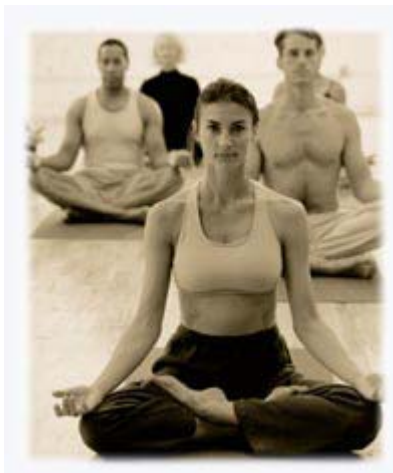
In yoga, the body is viewed as the outer manifestation of the mind, and the mind can be influenced by altering body posture. The way we carry ourselves influences the way we feel. If a person walks around with his chest collapsed, head down, eyes half open, it likely impossible for this person to feel good about himself. Your perspective on your body, your thoughts, and your whole sense of self can change when you adopt different postures.

Yoga postures strengthen, purify, and balance the endocrine, nervous, and circulatory systems. For example, inverted postures are useful for altering blood flow. Increased blood flow to the brain results in increased availability of oxygen and glucose. This leads to increased production of certain neurotransmitters, which in turn enhances one’s mood and state of well-being.

Yoga postures are a form of meditation in motion, calming the mind and cultivating a state of relaxed but alert concentration. The postures help to release built-up tension and emotional stress, which burrow into the muscles of the body. As the body relaxes, the breath naturally becomes balanced. When the breath comes into balance, the mind relaxes and becomes quiet.

### Breathing

Shallow breathing can create a state of nervous system, which can lead to breathing exercises decrease arousal, focuses the mind, relaxes the body, soothes anxiety and stress, and intense concentration and body control exercises help free the mind from and fatigue.



arousal in the sympathetic anxiety, panic, and fear. Yoga which in turn calms and oxygenates the blood, promotes clear thinking. The involved in breathing mental distractions, worries,

### Meditation

Meditation is a type of inward to focus on your senses, step back feelings, and perceive each moment as develop greater calmness, clarity, and insight in facing and embracing life experiences.

concentration that allows you from your thoughts and a unique event. It helps us to

Two types of meditation techniques:

- *Concentrative meditation* uses a word (mantra), object (e.g., candle flame) or a sensation (e.g., breathing) to focus the mind. If your mind begins to drift, you refocus your attention on the word, object, or sensation.
- *Mindfulness meditation* involves allowing your thoughts, feelings, and images to float through your mind without reacting. In mindfulness, you are simply observing the thoughts and feelings in a detached perspective as "mental events" rather than as aspects of yourself or as necessarily accurate reflections of reality. Through practice, you become more skilled at stepping back and observing without reacting. Mindfulness meditation helps to cultivate a nonjudging self-acceptance, and helps us to recognize that we are not defined by our emotions.

## Campus Resources

### **Counseling & Psychological Services**

(CPS) offers individual, group, couples, and family counseling. In addition, CPS's Stress Reduction Clinic provides a supportive environment to learn stress reduction and relaxation techniques and to create an individualized plan to manage stress and promote enhanced mood and well-being.

If you wish to speak with a therapist about any personal issues, would like to join a group, or are interested in the *Stress Reduction Clinic*, call **459-2628** for more information. See CPS's website:

<http://www2.ucsc.edu/counsel/index.html>

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The **UCSC Wellness Center** offers a variety of yoga classes. For more information, call **459-2995** or view the Wellness Center's website:

<http://www2.ucsc.edu/opers/wellness/>

## Research on Yoga and Mental Health

- Studies by Richard Davidson, PhD at the University of Wisconsin have found that the prefrontal cortex shows heightened activity in meditators, a finding that has been correlated with greater levels of happiness and better immune function.
- A 2001 study in the Indian Journal of Physiology and Pharmacology showed that participants who practiced yoga consistently for 10 months were less anxious and depressed both during and after their months of yoga practice.
- By improving circulation in the endocrine glands, a consistent yoga practice enhances the functions of hormones that play a primary role in the physiology of depression. This results in a reduction in depression and improved overall mood.
- Controlled studies have demonstrated the beneficial effects of yoga on anxiety states. Regular yoga practice improves functioning of the parasympathetic nervous system that activates the relaxation response.
- Scandinavian researchers measured brain waves before and after a two-hour yoga class and found that alpha waves (relaxation) and theta waves (unconscious memory, dreams, emotions) increased significantly. These results indicate that the brain is deeply relaxed after yoga and that participants have better awareness of their subconscious and emotions.

***“When you practice yoga....your perspective on your body, your thoughts, and your whole sense of self can change...”***

*~ Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D., internationally known meditation teacher and founder of the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center*



## Community Resources

- *Yoga Center Santa Cruz*  
423-6719
- *Om Room School of Yoga*  
429-9642
- *Zen Center – Santa Cruz*  
457-0206
- *Dominican Hospital's Mindfulness Stress Reduction Program* offers Mindfulness Meditation classes (free introductory session!)  
462-7709

## Recommendations and Precautions

- Yoga is not a substitute for psychotherapy or medication. Rather, yoga is recommended as an adjunct to talk therapy or medication to facilitate the process of psychological healing.
- Consult your medical doctor or holistic health care professional (preferably one who is familiar with yoga) prior to performing yoga's physical postures or beginning any new exercise program.
- Beginners should consider working with a certified yoga instructor to ensure yoga is practiced safely and correctly.

## Other Resources

### Websites:

- <http://www.yogajournal.com> offers a variety of articles on yoga and meditation
- UCSC Online Wellness Center offers articles and wellness assessment: <http://owcucsc.wellsources.com/dh/default.asp>
- <http://www.gaiam.com> for yoga and meditation DVDs and Videotapes by Gaiam:
  - *Yoga Practice for Beginners Series*
  - *Stress Relief Yoga For Beginners Video*
  - *Yoga and Meditation Multimedia Collection*
  - *Meditation for Beginners Video*

### Books:

- *Yoga for Depression* by Amy Weintraub
- *Yoga Rx* by Larry Payne, PhD and Richard Usatine, MD
- *The Yoga of Breath: a Step-by-Step Guide* by Richard Rosen
- *Rest and Renew: Quiet Yoga Poses to Reduce Stress and Tension* by Judith Lasater, P.T., PhD
- *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life* by Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD
- *Minding the Body, Mending the Mind* by Joan Borysenko, PhD

## Take a Deep Breath to Get Started !

### **Abdominal Breathing** (*triggers the relaxation response to reduce stress and anxiety*):

- Place one hand on your abdomen, right beneath your rib cage.
- Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose into the bottom of your lungs, feeling your hand rise....pause for a moment... then exhale slowly and fully through your nose or your mouth.
- Do 5 to 10 slow, full deep breaths. With each exhale, allow your whole body to let go. Visualize your arms and legs going loose and limp like a rag doll.
- To help keep your breathing smooth and regular, slowly count to 5 on the inhale. 1...2...3...4...5..., pause, and then slowly count to 5 on the exhale.

### **Victorious Breath** (*helps to focus and calm the mind to promote clear thinking*):

- Sit comfortably with your spine upright.
- Open your mouth and slowly inhale.
- As you exhale, make a sound at the back of your throat like the ocean's tide.
- Now add the sound to your inhale as well.
- Close your mouth, breathe through the nose on both the inhale and exhale, and make the same sound, focusing on the throat and chest.

This fact sheet is provided as a service by **Counseling & Psychological Services at the University of California at Santa Cruz**. It was created by Jill Fuselier, Psy.D. Please contact our office at (831)459-2628 if you would like additional copies.