



SAD YOGA

A Therapeutic Approach to Mental Health and Healing

BY: MOLLY MCMANUS

ART: LARA CORNELL

Addressing Stress, Anxiety and Depression within the context of Yoga's 8 Limbs.

In a world where everything is becoming more fragmented, electrified and high-paced, many people find themselves becoming distracted, overwhelmed and increasingly affected by diseases of stress.

I began teaching classes specifically designed for people suffering from stress, anxiety and depression (SAD) around 4 years ago. For some time, in every class and teacher training I offered, I was met with people suffering greatly from stress that was manifesting itself as anxiety, depression, PTSD, or chronic pain. These people are seeking a way out of suffering, and it reminds me again of my own journey through anxiety and depression. When I turned to yoga, I found it to be the best “anti-anxiety medication” I had ever taken. I was able to deal with my suffering from a multi-level plan, and I knew that it had to be part of my life's work to pass on this incredible gift of possibilities.

Yoga and Eastern philosophy have been used as a means for self-study (Svadyaya) for thousands of years. Yoga is a great tradition out of India with the specific purpose to help each individual find their own path to harmony and unity with their true Self. It provides a systematic approach to move away from suffering and toward the unity and harmony of the individual spirit. Yoga is an eight-limbed path toward self-realization. Asana is just one small portion of that system. The tools laid out in the yogic texts if practiced regularly, will move you toward a more resilient and joyful life.

The model of allopathic medicine for mental illness is just beginning to embrace some of what yoga has known for centuries — that everything is connected and we must look at the whole to create lasting change.

Even doctors and other care providers are beginning to include yoga in their prescription for stress related diseases. Mayo Clinic says, “yoga brings together physical and mental disciplines to achieve peacefulness of body and mind, helping you relax and manage stress and anxiety.”



Yogic perspective looks at the diseases of stress and what western medicine calls “mental illness” as a pattern of constriction. These constrictions are thought to take place in the five layers of the Koshas. The Koshas are aspects of each individual that range from the grossest layer that directly relates to the physical body, to the most subtle which relates to the layer most closely associated with soul or spirit. If there is a constriction at one layer, it will affect the whole system and cause suffering. Thus, the importance of working within a multi-layered approach.

To work with each layer of the five Koshas, a typical SAD class includes an emphasis on the Anamaya Kosha or physical body, working with the SomaYoga therapy understanding of the patterns of stress that manifest and get stuck in the

body. A portion of class uses specific practices designed to undo chronic contraction in the body, which can both be the result of stress and the continued cause of the chemical responses in the body that keep stress hormones flowing. Movements range from smaller movements, to increase both proprioception and interoception, as well as larger movements, or asana, that help to positively change brain chemistry.

Breath, and the ability to connect to our resilient life force, are crucial in wellness. One direct way to affect mood is by changing breath pattern. Think of the old prescription of breathing into a paper bag for an anxiety attack. While this technique itself may not be used, classes focus on finding a connection to diaphragmatic breath patterns. Diaphragmatic breath patterns

support the parasympathetic response. This encourages relaxation, digestion, and healing while simultaneously interrupting negative patterns such as breath holding or chest breathing. These negative patterns can cause the sympathetic nervous system to trigger and the fight or flight stress response to rule the brain and body. These breath patterns work at the layer of the Pranamaya Kosha.

Another aspect of suffering is what yoga refers to as avidya, or ignorance – ignorance of the truth of one's actual nature as complete, connected, and whole. SAD classes examine the yogic maps of the Mind and the Kleshas, which is the process of suffering or separation in which many of us find ourselves. These maps begin to help us understand that we are not our thoughts, and that we can train our minds just like we can train our muscles. Work at the Manamaya or Mind layer, and Vijnanamaya or Wisdom layer, is using your mind to heal your brain, and find a deeper connection to the true self that is always connected, ever-present and does not suffer.

Class sizes are kept small (10-14 students) and are usually registration classes or longer workshops where a safe space can be created and a group can establish themselves to help the healing environment. Classes I've taught are Making a Change for Good - A Guide to Compassionate Self Discipline, Yoga for SAD: Stress, Anxiety and Depression, Working with the Chemistry of Joy by Henry Emmons and Partners in Resilience, The Mind Study, The Kleshas — the path of separation.

A recent documentary at CallMeMental.com features the work of a SAD class. If you're interested in more information, including teacher training, contact YogaNorthDuluth.com or attend the workshop taking place at Tula Yoga and Wellness November 20–22, 2016.

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