



BRIDGING PSYCHOLOGY & YOGA

Enhancing Emotional Resiliency

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Hello and Welcome.

I'm Betsy, a licensed psychologist, certified yoga and meditation teacher, author, and momma of 3. My life's work is to bridge the disciplines of psychology and yoga as a way to enhance mental resiliency and well-being.



Life is hard. We are in unprecedented times, and nearly everyone experiences the anxiety, stress, worry, and overwhelm of modern living. Yet perhaps life has always been complicated and hard. The Buddha, 2400 years ago, gave a very wise teaching. He said that life contains 10,000 joys and 10,000 sufferings. Essentially, there will be contrast! It is a rollercoaster!

To work with this contrast, we need ways to enhance our mental resiliency to protect against the unpredictable nature that is life. A person with a resilient personality has key traits according to research by Dr. Barbara Fredrickson:

- They recover quickly from negative life events
- They worry less and rebound quickly
- They have emotional agility by responding to what is happening in the NOW
- They don't overgeneralize or overreact
- They practice positivity and openness



Resiliency has become even more relevant since the pandemic as we have entered into what some have termed “a mental health crisis”. One in four American adults have a diagnosable mental health disorder. Antidepressant use has increased 400% in the last decade, showing our culture’s desperate need to heal our overwhelmed minds, bodies, and souls.

I don’t believe we need a better drug to treat this “mental health crisis”, rather we need a better way of comprehensively understanding why people get to this place. We need to bolster our resiliency and learn tools that help our nervous systems recover more quickly from stress. This is why I believe...

Yoga needs psychology. And psychology needs yoga.

Yoga Needs Psychology

In the yoga practice, emotional issues rise up. There may be patterns of trauma that arise, as well as psychological challenges to address. With the creation of space in the body, and the clearing of unbalanced energy patterns, inevitably old emotional and reactive patterns emerge (sometimes with a vengeance).

After the first weekend of a yoga teacher training I co-taught, at least 1/3 of our group was having physical and/or emotional breakdowns. We had not only done deep physical practice but also discussed yoga philosophy, all with the purpose of pushing trainees to engage in deep self study. By the 3rd day of the training, one woman had a sore throat. Another person’s back had gone out. Someone else couldn’t



stop crying. A fourth person was dealing with hip pain that seemingly “came out of the blue”. And yet another person had insomnia the night before.

My co-teacher and I were not concerned about what was befalling our group because we both understood that as the yoga practices starts to unravel the holding patterns and stress people have been carrying for sometimes years, a necessary step is the arising of physical and emotional pain. Yoga is a purifying practice, and the purging of emotional and physical pain is part of the path.

If yoga is essentially the opportunity to move toward higher states of spiritual development, psychological issues that are not addressed will cause distortions or prevent growth. There are certainly times when a body or emotional release occurs during yoga and no further processing is every required as the shift has already happened. However, when certain entrenched patterns keep appearing, pursuing psychological inquiry and sometimes psychotherapy can be extremely cathartic.

Psychology Needs Yoga

Psychology helps us recognize, work with, and grow out of unconscious patterns. It helps us reduce distress and increase self awareness. But with psychotherapy, we get easily get caught up in our heads analyzing, re-capitalizing, re-experiencing, and intellectualizing.

Psychology needs yoga to help us more fully inhabit the body, which is where our feelings and emotions lie. It is established that trauma is literally stored in the tissues of the body, and simply “talking” about



things is not enough to release these physical holding patterns. Depression, anxiety, and PTSD are more than just “mental” or mind disorders.

Talk therapy, while helping us adjust our thoughts and behaviors, often cannot get into the energy of the mental health disorder, or where it is residing in the body. The practices of yoga allow us to go several steps deeper into creating energy shifts, establishing more space in the body, and altering our body habitus away from patterns that maintain depression and anxiety.

As a bonus, when we get out of our head and into the body, we often come in contact with a wiser part of self and the healing and solutions we need naturally emerge.

What creates emotional imbalance?

Both psychology and yoga recognize that emotional imbalance is a given in the human experience.

However, each wisdom tradition has a slightly different take on why these states occur.

Western Psychology suggests imbalanced mood states are due to:

- Nature (genetics, brain chemicals)
- Nurture (Environmental factors including head injury, nutrition, exposure to toxins. Social factors such as parental discord, death of a family member, economic hardship, abuse, neglect, exposure to violence, stress.)



Yoga suggests imbalanced mood states are due to:

- Disconnection from something larger which prevents us from living up to our full potential.
- Disregard for the body (poor food, lack of movement, impaired sleep).
- Congested energy in the body (typically the hips, belly, and throat) due to events from the past that were not fully processed.

How to heal emotional imbalance?

Western Psychology works to heal imbalanced mood states using:

- Medication
- Psychotherapy
- Combination of the above 2

Yoga works to heal imbalanced mood states using:

- The 8 limbs of yoga which include a commitment to right living (Yamas & Niyamas), physical postures (Asana), breath work (Pranayama), moving awareness inward (Pratyahara), concentration (Dharana), meditation (Dhyana), stillness and the joining of all aspects of your being (Samadhi).

Yoga For Anxiety



The yoga tradition approaches mental imbalance by focusing on the body, the mind, and our energy. In the case of anxiety, what is most important is to nourish and stabilize the nervous system.

Body Focus: If the body is more sedentary, an increase in movement is helpful to release anxiety and pent up energy followed by restorative poses. If the body is amped up, moving directly into restorative poses may be more helpful.

Mind Focus: Yoga nidra and turning toward curiosity is key as a way to overcome feelings of powerlessness.

Energy Focus: Breath work to quickly shift energy includes deep diaphragmatic breath (Dirga pranayama), ocean sounding breath (Ujjayi pranayama) and a 1:2 Ratio Breathing (where the exhale is twice as long as the inhale).

Yoga For Depression

With depression, practices that enhance activity, purification, and movement can help boost mood.

Body Focus: It is essential to lift the energy of the system by focusing awareness at the heart center, energizing the system with sun salutes, and moving at a more moderate pace. Backbends, twists, and a Vinyasa style class with focus on the breath can be helpful.

Mind Focus: To overcome feelings of unworthiness that typically accompany depression, turning toward connection with others, as well as heart centered meditations are useful. Loving kindness meditation, a 2000-year-old meditation technique where 4 phrases are repeated, is often a balm for the self-flagellation that can accompany depression.



May I be filled with loving kindness.

May I be well.

May I be peaceful and at ease.

May I be happy.

Energy Focus: Breath techniques like breath of joy, alternative nostril breathing (breathing up the right nostril first), and a 1:1 ratio of breathing would all be energizing techniques to break up the lethargy of depression.

Yoga For Anger/Irritability/Stress

General stress, irritability and anger needs a cooling focus to decrease overall intensity.

Body Focus: The type-A behaviors that often go hand in hand with anger, irritability, and stress tend to lead people to overwork, push through, and focus on a hard and intense yoga practice. Because of this, the focus of the yoga asana should be on ease and softening. Keeping a soft gaze when flowing through poses is ideal, as well as remembering that yoga is not about competition but rather settling into oneself. Heart opening poses, side body opening poses, and restorative poses are all helpful.

Mind Focus: When in stress and overwork, our internal perception is often on pressing through, competition, and high need for control, so practicing acceptance and non-judgment provides necessary counterbalance.

Energy Focus: Alternative nostril breathing (breathing up the left side first), lion's breath, and sitali breathing are all cooling and purifying practices.



Yoga For Trauma

The focus for people who have a trauma history includes not only calming the nervous system but also enhancing emotional self regulation.

Body Focus: Because trauma is stored in the body, a slow and mindful practice is essential. Go slow and be aware of flooding. If a person's system is hyper-aroused (darting eyes, high anxiety, hyper-vigilance), working with restorative poses with an invitation to keep the eyes open may be helpful. If there is a lot of dissociation present, a more active physical practice can be helpful to land people in their body in a more concrete way.

Mind Focus: With trauma, bringing awareness back to the present moment by tracking sensation in the body, the flow of the breath, or the feelings and thoughts that are arising is a good way to create grounding and reality testing.

Energy Focus: Diaphragmatic breath (Dirga pranayama), 1:2 ratio breath, bee breath (Brahmari pranayama), and alternative nostril breathing (starting up the left side) are all recommended.

Conclusion

This e-book is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of understanding mental health from both a western psychological and eastern yogic perspective. This is an exciting time when the possibility of integrating two powerful wisdom traditions is a reality.



For more information on Dr. Betsy's signature 8-week course called REMIND (how to build mental resiliency with yoga and psychology) or her certification training called YOGA FOR THE MIND for mental health professionals and/or yoga teachers, visit www.dryogamomma.com.

Visit her yoga studio or catch on online yoga class with her by visiting www.heartlandyoga.com.

Listen to her podcast TEND HER WILD for conversations about women returning to their natural essence: www.tendherwild.com.

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