Looking after your mental health has never been more important. For many of us, the global pandemic and Covid has created previously inconceivable stress and disruption. Whether for you this presented itself as health concerns, loneliness, new home-schooling duties or financial insecurity, it’s a rare person who hasn’t been affected. Faced with an avalanche of anxieties, developing robust coping strategies has become essential, and this is where yoga can play a crucial role.

What’s so special about yoga for mental health?

For hundreds, even thousands, of years, practitioners have used yoga to understand themselves and their minds, finding greater acceptance, compassion and wisdom in the process.

Improving your mental health is not a side effect of yoga practice; it is at the heart of what yoga is all about. Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras tell us “yoga citta vritti nirodhah,” which can be translated from Sanskrit as, “Yoga is the ending of disturbances of the mind.”

If this sounds like an appealing aim, read on. In this article, we will explore the benefits of yoga from a number of angles.
Yoga as a physical practice

As counter intuitive as it sounds, one of the best ways to boost your mental health is to focus on your physical body. Our mind and body are not as separate as we sometimes believe, and moving your body has a profound impact on your mental health.

Dynamic Yoga

If your go-to yoga practice is strong and sweaty, it can benefit your mental health in the following ways, though this is not an exhaustive list!

- **Experiencing the mood-boosting effects of exercise.**
  Think about the sweet relief of savasana at the end of a vigorous yoga class. When you work hard, your body releases endorphins which trigger positive feelings and can even reduce pain. It’s why many people love strenuous activities like running, as well as more dynamic forms of yoga.

- **Enjoying a sense of achievement.**
  Building strength and flexibility through yoga is a great confidence boost. It’s also fantastic to learn something new. Many people practise challenging postures such as arm balances to overcome fears or self-imposed limitations.

- **Feeling the empowerment of rehabilitation from injury.**
  The low-impact yet strengthening nature of a dynamic yoga practice can allow you to get moving again after injury.

Restorative Yoga

The benefits of yoga are not restricted to high-energy practices. Rest assured that if your yoga practice is more yin than yang, restorative practices provide a whole host of their own mental health benefits:

- **Strengthening the mind-body connection.**
  As humans, we are prone to getting lost in thought and we risk feeling disconnected from our bodies and our own physicality. When we are living “in our heads” we may not notice our breathing or the tension accumulating in our shoulders. Yoga offers an invitation to come back home to our bodies, which can be incredibly grounding. **Finding focus and mental clarity.**
  When we are in our bodies, or ‘embodied,’ we can feel more fully present in the moment and are less vulnerable to getting distracted by our wandering minds.

- **Letting ourselves rest.**
  We know that rest is important but making space in our lives for it can be hard. This is especially true when the boundaries between work and home life become blurred. A restorative yoga session offers a rare invitation to relax and recuperate.
A note on breathing

We shouldn’t go any further without acknowledging something that differentiates yoga from other forms of exercise: the breath. In yoga, the breath is the anchor we use to unite the mind with the body. Rather than allowing our mind to drift, as we might while on a bike ride or in the gym, in yoga, we keep bringing our focus back to the breath. By connecting to the breath and the movements of the breath, we are of course also connecting with the body.

“When the breath wanders the mind also is unsteady. But when the breath is calmed the mind too will be still…Therefore, one should learn to control the breath.” ~ Hatha Yoga Pradipika

Although following the breath is a powerful practice in itself, yoga teaches a wide range of specific breathing practices or pranayama, which bring different mental health benefits. For example, nadi shodhana or alternate nostril breathing is very calming, while kapalbhati, or “breath of fire” can be energising when you feel sluggish or tired. You can practise them on their own or as part of a physical asana practice.

Delving deeper: the philosophy of yoga and mental health

There is more to yoga though than movement and breathwork. Yogic philosophy seeks to explain how we can live in a way which is more peaceful, content and free from suffering. It teaches that the route to this is through looking inwards and understanding our true nature. In this section, we will review three key yogic concepts which can be particularly beneficial for nurturing good mental health: svadhyaya, santosha, and isvara pranidhana. All three of these belong to a set of teachings called the niyamas, which describe ways to Svadhyaya– self-study develop a better relationship with yourself and your mind

• Svadhyaya– self-study
  “Part of being awake is slowing down enough to notice what we say or do. The more we witness our emotional chain reactions and understand how they work, the easier it is to refrain [from harm]. It becomes a way of life to stay awake, slow down, and notice.” ~ Pema Chodron

  Svadhyaya or self-study is about turning our attention inwards, and onto ourselves. We are often tempted to look outside for solutions to our problems, thinking perhaps that we will feel better once we earn more money, or fall in love. Instead, svadhyaya encourages a non-judgemental quality of observance. It asks us to step back and notice our thoughts, rather than getting caught up in their drama. Through studying ourselves, we can learn to respond rather than react, and become better equipped to deal with whatever life throws at us.

• Santosha – contentment
  “Contentment makes poor men rich, discontent makes rich men poor.” ~ Benjamin Franklin

  As a practice, santosha reminds us that we have choices about how we judge our situation. We can choose constant striving, desire and discontentment, or we can choose to be content with the present moment. This is not an attitude we should reserve for the ‘good times’, but one we can practise cultivating all the time. It is about more than acceptance. If you merely accept something it implies you only tolerate it, but santosha means embracing the moment and trusting that it is already perfect. You are exactly where you need to be, and you already have all you need.

• Isvara pranidhana – surrender to the divine
  “Don’t be too quick to interpret the moment. Just keep quiet. My encouragement would always be:
"Never think anything is against you, everything is blessing. Why should it be different? Just be quiet. Let it all work itself out.” ~ Mooji

Isvara pranidhana is a concept that some yoga students struggle with. The idea of surrendering to “the divine” can bring up uncomfortable feelings about religion or ideas of God. Yet according to yogic philosophy, universal consciousness is something we are all part of, and the separate sense of self is the illusion. Isvara pranidhana invites us to surrender to something bigger than our individual selves and trust that life is playing out exactly as it should.

Mindfulness

Although mindfulness has its roots in ancient meditative practice, it has gained popularity in recent years. Its wellbeing benefits have attracted the attention of everyone from mental health specialists to corporate organisations. There is now a growing body of evidence that a mindfulness practice can have a positive effect on mental health.¹

But what exactly is mindfulness? Mindfulness practitioner and teacher, Jon Kabat-Zinn, defines it as:

“*The awareness that arises from paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally.*”

This tells us that when we practise mindfulness, we choose to focus on the present rather than let our minds wander. Mindfulness practice tends to use two 'anchors' to help us refocus on the present moment - our breath and sensations we feel in the body. Thoughts will arise and the mind will get distracted, that's unavoidable. But with a gentle, non-judgemental attitude, we can guide our attention back to the breath and the body.

In theory, you can practise mindfulness in any situation, from brushing your teeth to walking the dog. However, staying focused is a skill that takes practice. While you hone that skill, it may be useful to practise it during deliberate activities such as yoga or meditation. As you get used to being mindful, you will find it easier to apply the same principles in everyday life.

Mindfulness can be particularly useful if you experience anxiety, because anxiety is future-focused. When we are anxious, we project our minds forward, conjuring up multiple disaster scenarios. Our brains are trying to help. They want to anticipate and thus prepare for potential dangers ahead. But left unchecked, this way of thinking can quickly descend into overwhelm or panic. Even on a milder scale, anxiety can mean we forget to enjoy and appreciate the present because we are too worried about the future. Although mindfulness won't instantly cure anxiety, it can be a valuable tool in our mental health ‘toolkit'.

¹ American Psychological Association
Yoga in times of stress

When life is stressful, it might not be possible to carve out much time for a yoga or meditation practice. However, it is at these times that even a little bit of yoga can make a big difference.

If you are struggling to find the time or the inclination, these few points may be helpful for motivating you to get back on your yoga mat:

- **It doesn't have to be perfect.**
  If you can't manage a candlelit hour of deep yoga practice, can you close your door, sit on a cushion and listen to a guided meditation for five minutes? Can you do two of your favourite yin yoga postures before you get into bed?

- **You don't need to feel ready.**
  The great thing about yoga is you do not need to be in a “spiritual mood” to start. Let the yoga work its magic – it will meet you where you are, but it will not leave you where it finds you. Beginning is enough.

- **Put on your own oxygen mask first.**
  If your stress comes from supporting others, don’t forget to make sure you are ok. This isn’t selfish, it’s essential. By prioritising your own wellbeing, you will be able to help others from much better, healthier place.

When yoga does more harm than good: a health warning

Hopefully by this stage in the article, you are as convinced as we are that yoga is one of the best things
you can do to look after your mental health. However, looking at the way yoga is portrayed, you’d be forgiven for thinking otherwise. Scroll through #yoga on social media, and you’ll be bombarded by beautiful images of bendy bodies on sunlit beaches. These “highlight reels” of yogic practice might be inspiring but they can also provoke feelings of inadequacy or envy. Not what you need when you feel stressed or low.

However, this is where the teachings of yogic philosophy can help. If you notice yourself getting caught in 'comparison traps,' you can observe this reaction (svadhyaya), slow down and choose to respond in a way that brings you closer to contentment (santosha). You might opt to switch off your phone, roll out your yoga mat and tune into your body, exactly as you are. Or you might write in your journal, go for a walk or run yourself a hot bath. This kind of inner work is far more valuable for cultivating a peaceful mind than fixating on what your yoga practice looks like.

Building your own practice for mental health

Ok, so you can see that yoga can help you boost your mental health, but where should you start? Well one lovely idea is to build your own daily “yoga for mental health” ritual. The below is a suggested structure, but you can include anything that appeals to you. Make the asana practice as chilled or as vigorous as you like but keep reminding yourself why you are doing it. If it is helping you to be more present, calm and peaceful, keep going. If it’s bringing more agitation, that’s a reason to take a step back and check in with what’s going on. Mindfulness and compassion are your friends here.

A 20 minute ‘yoga for mental health’ ritual

1. Set up your space.
Roll out your yoga mat, close the door, tell your family or housemates to leave you alone and put your phone aside. Lighting a candle or playing soothing music may also help you to switch gears into your yoga practice.

2. Three part breath.
Find a comfortable position, either seated or lying down, close your eyes and focus on your breath for a few natural breaths. Then begin the three part breath by first inhaling into your lower belly, feeling the belly expand. Then as you continue to inhale, let the lower ribs expand. Finally take the breath all the way up into the upper chest, as if you could sip air right up to your collarbones. Allow for a natural pause at the top, then release the breath in the reverse order, softening the upper chest first, then the lower ribcage, then letting the lower belly draw back in. Repeat this cycle for 2-3 minutes, keeping the breath slow, calm and gentle.

3. Movement.
Allow yourself the next 10-15 minutes to move on your mat in a way which nourishes you. Some days this might be about finding repetitive, flowing movements where you match your movement to the breath. On other days you might adopt a set sequence of postures which you hold with steadiness and ease. One lovely option is to come to your mat with no preconceived ideas, set a timer, and commit to moving in ways that feel good until the timer goes off. If this feels too unstructured, use one of the many yoga videos online to guide your practice. Remember to choose this before you start though so you don’t interrupt your yoga ritual with too much scrolling.

4. Meditation.
Either lie in savasana or find a comfortable seated position. Take 3-5 minutes (set a timer so you don’t need to worry about overrunning) and rest your attention on your breath. Every time you find your mind wanders, gently bring it back to the breath. Once you have completed your yoga ritual, take your time and try not to jolt yourself back too quickly. Allow yourself a gentle transition into the rest of your day or evening.

Taking your practice off the mat
The ‘yoga for mental health’ ritual is a great start, but 20 minutes a day will only take you so far if the rest of your day is full of stress. How can you extend your yoga practice further without retreating to an ashram? Worry not. There are many ways you can weave the skills you practise on your yoga mat into all situations, from the nerve-wracking to the mundane:

- **Feeling overwhelmed?** Whenever you feel overwhelm bubbling up, practise grounding. Root both feet onto the ground and focus on the sensation of connection along the soles of your feet. If you are sitting down, do the same with the points of contact with your chair or the floor. Feel the pull of gravity holding you to the earth.
- **In a stressful situation?** Rather than reacting immediately, make yourself pause and take just one, mindful breath. Even in situations that demand quick responses, it is very rare that there is not time to follow your breath for one inhale and one exhale. Try it now – stop what you are doing and take one full complete breath. That one breath has the power to transform your state of being, and your actions afterwards are likely to be far more peaceful and harmonious.
- **Stuck at your desk?** This is a situation many of us are all too familiar with – far too much sitting, with tension accumulating in mind and body. Ideally, take a moment to stand up fully, step away from your desk (or kitchen table!), stamp your feet and stretch. If you’re in an environment where that’s not easy to do, take a few subtle but mindful chair-based movements. You could try rolling your shoulders back, taking seated cat-cow movements and circling your wrists and ankles.
- **Bored?** If you’re in a queue or having to wait for something, rather than whipping out your phone to distract yourself, try something a bit more mindful. Check in with the sensations in your body and your breathing. Challenge yourself to become fully present and absorbed by this moment. Get curious about it. See if you can make this a mini meditative moment in your day.

**And finally…**

Remember that yoga can be a valuable part of your mental health toolkit, but it shouldn’t be the only tool. Having a great support network, therapy, nutrition and countless other factors all play important roles in our mental health. Depending on the situation, they may need to take precedence. So don’t feel you need to “fix everything” with yoga, but know that it will always be there for you. Your yoga practice will adapt and evolve over time and that’s ok. If you continue to practise yoga as part of a deep commitment to yourself and your mental health, it will serve you well for many years to come.

_Namaste yogis._

original article can be seen here:
www.yogabliss.co.uk/Yoga-and-Mental-Health

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