



# yoga for emotional balance

simple practices to  
help relieve anxiety and depression

bo forbes, PsyD

ADDITIONAL PRAISE FOR

## Yoga for Emotional Balance

"Bo Forbes brilliantly illuminates the fact that your body can be depressed or anxious as well as your mind. This is good news, because the habitual postures and movements of anxiety and depression can be corrected through the practices she describes, leading to dramatically improved mood states. Highly recommended!"

—ANDREW WEIL, MD

"*Yoga for Emotional Balance* reveals, with humor and delightful examples, the enormous potential of restorative yoga for creating a rich and bright emotional world."

—RICHARD FREEMAN, author of *The Mirror of Yoga*

"I am very pleased to give my highest recommendation to *Yoga for Emotional Balance*. What shines through most clearly on every page is Bo Forbes' voice—down-to-earth, knowledgeable, and above all—compassionate."

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"*Yoga for Emotional Balance* unpacks the complexity of the mind-body relationship in an accessible and practical way, illustrating the power of yoga to create physiological and psych-emotional change. Bo Forbes' book is full of stories, processes, and insight—leaving the reader with a roadmap to emotional balance."

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"Bo Forbes' voice throughout this book is consistently inviting and gracious, deeply and confidently knowledgeable. Readers will feel hopeful as soon as they start to read this book, even before beginning to practice the remarkably accessible exercises."

—SYLVIA BOORSTEIN, author of *Happiness Is an Inside Job*

"This is precisely this kind of clear, accessible instruction that will catalyze both the lay and scientific communities to take these practices more seriously and explore their impact."

—RICHARD J. DAVIDSON, professor of Psychology and Psychiatry, and director of The Center for Investigating Healthy Minds, University of Wisconsin–Madison

"Bo Forbes has shown us a path to emotional balance that is located right here inside our bodies! I noticed more trust in my inner capacity for healing after reading this book."

—DAVID RICHO PHD, author of *When the Past Is Present*

"After reading Bo Forbes' book, I was eager to practice deep relaxation immediately! Highly recommended for all levels of yoga students."

—JUDITH HANSON LASATER, PHD, PT, author of *Yogabody: Anatomy, Kinesiology, and Asana*

"Written with insight, elegance, and wit, this book is a must-read for yoga teachers, therapists, students, laypeople, and anyone looking for alternatives to modern methods of healing."

—EDWIN BRYANT, professor of Hindu Religion and Philosophy, Rutgers University



# YOGA *for* Emotional Balance

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*Simple Practices to Help Relieve  
Anxiety and Depression*



Bo Forbes, PsyD

*Photographs by*  
Thibaut Fagonde



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*To all my past, present, and future students,  
who are also my wise and generous teachers.*

Suffering is the breaking of the shell that  
Encloses our understanding.

— Kahlil Gibran



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## PREFACE

MY JOURNEY TO UNDERSTANDING YOGA'S CONNECTION with emotional balance has been a lifelong one. I grew up with a natural desire to heal others, and the subject of emotional health and healing captivated my attention. For my eighteenth birthday, my father gave me a copy of *Light on Yoga* by B. K. S. Iyengar. I set the book aside, and it would be another ten years before I cracked it open. I was on another path, one with a single-pointed focus on psychology. One year later, at the University of Chicago, I took graduate classes in social work and dove into the world of the mind and emotions. My peers and I examined our family histories and studied the emotional climate of college life around us. What *is* emotional health? I wondered. Why do some people have it without seeming to try, while others seek it fruitlessly all their lives? My investigations showed me that a difficult childhood doesn't necessarily condemn us to future pain and suffering. Some people find emotional well-being despite childhood abuse; others can fall apart even with family stability on their side. What qualities make up emotional balance, I wanted to know, and how can I help people develop them? I earned a doctorate in clinical psychology and, in my postgraduate work, continued to investigate the mysteries of emotional health.

For the first five years, I found fulfillment in my psychotherapy practice. My clients got better: they reported a drop in anxiety, fewer instances of deep depression, and less conflict in their primary relationships. And yet, I couldn't shake the feeling that

psychotherapy was missing something. To complement my clinical practice, I investigated body-centered and spiritual approaches to emotional health. I tried everything from acupuncture to hands-on healing to see if they held promise for my clients.

I'd exercised most of my life and felt its stress-relieving benefits. But nothing, it turns out, spoke to me as powerfully as the well-being I felt after my first yoga class. The teacher, a ninety-seven-year-old woman on the South Side of Chicago named Becky Love (she drove a black Cadillac whose license plate read "YOGA"), had *exuberance*. She delighted in both movement and stillness. She really *felt* her body. She called us "Dear Ones" and exulted when one of her students went deeper into a pose ("Look at Tanya!" she'd exclaim. Or, "Look at Edward!"). When class ended, she offered us a sample of whatever wild new superfood she'd brought that day (kombucha mushroom tea or spirulina powder, long before they were in vogue) and then motored off to Whole Foods for brunch. Becky radiated well-being; it was contagious. But my interest went beyond that. Yoga calmed my mind. It felt like a deeper way of coming into my body than exercise. It also gave me a strong sense of inner connection. If yoga could make *me* feel this good, I wondered, what might it do for people with anxiety and depression? Could yoga—with its influence on mind, body, *and* spirit—be the missing piece I'd sought all this time?

At first, yoga seemed impossible to reconcile with psychotherapy. The main obstacle in my path was that in the early 1990s, when I began my postdoctoral employment, the body was forbidden territory for most psychologists. But this prohibition couldn't stand up to my personal experience of yoga's emotional benefits. I began to study yoga alongside my clinical work, and became the butt of many tiresome "granola" and "incense-burning" jokes among the board members at my group psychotherapy practice. At the time, it seemed necessary to choose one career over the other, and I thought about leaving psychotherapy to train as a yoga teacher.

The more I practiced yoga, however, the more I realized that psychotherapy and yoga are a natural fit. Psychotherapy features a rich collaborative relationship between client and therapist, and is eloquent in addressing the mind and emotions. Yoga is fluent in the

language of the physical body, yet also affects the mind. Therapy (which comes from the Greek *therapeia*, “to heal”) is integrative and truly healing when it involves the mind *and* body.

The next several years of clinical work convinced me that the body holds an essential key to healing anxiety and depression. It might even play an integral role in closing the gap between intellectual insight—the understanding of *why* we sometimes make destructive choices—and lasting change, the practice of *how* to make healthier ones. When we don’t involve the body in treatment, we keep psychotherapy mind-based, and leave out an important part of the healing process.

Many people tell me excitedly how much yoga helps them, not just physically but emotionally. Some are wedded to fast-paced, physically demanding classes such as Ashtanga or Vinyasa Yoga. Others swear by “hot yoga” practices like Bikram or Power Yoga. Still others are devoted to Iyengar Yoga or to slower forms of physical practice. No matter the style of yoga, people report feeling mentally calmer, more physically energized, and happier after practicing. They also say that when they don’t practice yoga for a while, their emotional challenges resume in full force. Even a regular yoga class has a healing impact, so I wondered what would happen if I chose the most therapeutic elements of yoga and used them with deliberate intention to heal emotional issues such as anxiety and depression.

Despite the fears of family and friends that I was “throwing away my doctorate,” I incorporated yoga into my psychotherapy practice. For several years, I worked with clients referred by local alternative health centers who were more open to yoga-influenced psychotherapy. I watched clients carefully to see which elements of yoga were most helpful for anxiety, depression, insomnia, and other issues. I noted how certain practices increased energy for people with depression, and how others grounded and calmed individuals with anxiety. The results were hard to dismiss: people got better more fully and rapidly when I integrated yoga postures and breathing exercises into psychotherapy than they did with traditional psychotherapy alone. Despite these encouraging results, I remained a “closet yogi” in the world of psychology, where yoga

was considered a fringe activity. And in the yoga world, where psychology was extraneous and a little uncool, I rarely told anyone what I did for a living.

During my first five years of teaching yoga, my practice and teaching styles centered on the physically active Vinyasa and alignment-based Iyengar Yoga practices until I made a sudden discovery. I began to teach Restorative Yoga, a restful, rejuvenative “yogic relaxation” class directly after my Vinyasa class. The week following each class, my longtime students who’d stayed for Restorative Yoga would tell me excitedly that they’d suddenly slept better, had less anxiety, or felt more physically and emotionally energized than before. Some even experienced improvements in physical illness or pain levels. At first, I found it hard to believe; with such powerful active practices at our fingertips, why would a seemingly “passive” relaxation class produce such dramatic results in us? But it happened month after month and year after year: Restorative Yoga and breathing exercises, the techniques featured in this book, were the most effective of all styles of yoga.

The yoga community in the West, myself included, has become so engrossed in the beauty and power of active practices and difficult postures that we can overlook the therapeutic benefits of “quieter” yoga. We’ve created a paradigm of yoga that entails continual movement without much space for intentioned reflection. People who prefer a physically challenging practice may find this hard to accept: with as little as fifteen to thirty minutes of twice-weekly breathing exercises and Restorative Yoga, people’s thinking can become less emotionally reactive. They grow more able to tolerate challenging emotions. They become less anxious, less depressed. They begin to develop the qualities and skills that we psychotherapists work so hard to help instill. I’ve seen this time after time in my clients.

I’ve also noticed something else. When Restorative Yoga and simple breathing exercises helped people become more balanced, sometimes they’d try to describe their improvement to me or “analyze” why the practice worked so well. Inevitably, the analysis brought them back into their minds, where anxiety and depression were churning. Jeremy,<sup>1</sup> a young advertising executive, wanted

to mentally process every improvement he experienced in his sessions. The more he'd leap up from his mat to talk about the calmness in his mind and the lightness or freedom in his body, the more that new, hard-to-describe feeling receded like a mirage in the desert. In order to process the change, Jeremy had to abandon his direct experience of it. Yet when he simply stayed present in his body, he could surrender and truly experience the positive changes happening inside him. When Jeremy finally "got it," he was very excited. "One of these sessions," he said, "is like eight months of psychotherapy."

As a psychotherapist, I didn't expect to see the positive results increase so significantly when I took much of the psychotherapy—the verbal processing—out of the session. But they did. Observing this, I began to use less verbal processing and more yoga in my clinical practice. This made an immediate and noticeable difference to my clients: it improved their mood, increased their self-compassion, and gave them a stronger sense of connection with others. When I say this at national yoga workshops, the psychotherapists in the audience almost always agree: you don't need to understand or even process your thoughts or emotions in order to experience dramatic shifts in mood, behavior, and well-being.

Think for a moment: How many times have you known what your issues are, yet not been able to change them? In other words, the talking part of the session is not the only, or perhaps not even the primary, key to change. *Conceptual insight is not required for change; in some cases it actually interferes with it.* By working in a body-based realm, we can bypass this mental interference. We can *feel* rather than *think* the emotional experiences that heal us.

This discovery rocked my professional world. To be honest, I grieved over it almost as much as I celebrated it. For many psychotherapists, the ability to process is an almost-sacred gift. Language is the medium through which we share that gift with our clients. We spend years (and considerable resources) refining the art of listening, interpreting, and reflecting back what our clients tell us. Although the art of mindful listening is important, *words* breathe this art to life. Yet despite my mixed feelings about it, therapy

consistently yielded better results when clients *practiced* more than they *processed*.

Time passed, and notwithstanding my own early skepticism and that of my colleagues, psychiatrists and health centers began to send me a steady stream of patients with anxiety, depression, and chronic pain. One psychiatrist confided that this “yoga therapy stuff” was helping him take his client where he’d wanted her to go for many years.

Over the last two decades, my work as a psychologist has taken me to psychiatric hospitals and outpatient clinics, group practice and private practice. My work as a yoga teacher and yoga therapist has brought me to athletic stadiums, yoga studios, retreat centers, national conferences, and living rooms. I’ve treated the “worried well,” people with moderate anxiety and depression, and individuals in severe emotional distress. Out of thirty years’ combined experience in practicing psychotherapy and teaching yoga, I’ve synthesized the healing philosophies and practices of yoga and psychology into a unique practice that I call “Integrative Yoga Therapeutics” because it treats the mind and body simultaneously. It also treats that ineffable part of us that exists beyond the mind and body: our spirit, or vital essence.

A person with mild to moderate anxiety or depression can practice the exercises outlined in this book *as a companion* to traditional psychotherapy or medication and see dramatic improvement. And while this may sound radical, the benefits can extend even further. I don’t mean to minimize the impact of psychotherapy or medication. They are often essential to survival and a positive quality of life. But when it’s not a matter of life, death, or significant disability, regular practice of therapeutic yoga enables many people (with a doctor’s and therapist’s supervision) to lower and sometimes discontinue medication. Let me emphasize: this doesn’t mean that you need to give up psychotherapy or medication in order to practice yoga. Nor do you have to give up the active style of yoga that you enjoy. Instead, you can use the practices in this book to complement the work you already do with your psychiatrist or psychologist. You can also integrate these practices directly into your psychotherapy sessions. You can continue to practice your preferred style of



active yoga, and add these practices to it. Just make sure to integrate yoga's therapeutic elements into your life as much as you can.

While I was bringing yoga into psychotherapy and discovering session after session how much it helped people emotionally, a new field of yoga therapy began to emerge in full force in the West. Such venerated teachers as B. K. S. Iyengar and T. K. V. Desikachar and their senior students were implementing yoga therapy with people who suffered from a wide array of physical and psychological ailments. An International Association of Yoga Therapists (IAYT) was formed in 1989 and now has nearly three thousand members.

Many yoga therapists in this country today either focus exclusively on yoga therapy for physical issues, or use the philosophy of yoga to address mental and emotional issues such as anxiety or depression. My background as a clinical psychologist helps me to integrate the body-based *and* philosophical methods of yoga with decades of experience treating emotional imbalances. This fusion of yoga and psychotherapy has a profound impact on mental, physical, and emotional well-being.

It's no secret: healing emotional pain is a difficult endeavor. The World Health Organization expects that by the year 2030, depression will be the biggest health problem on our planet. The practices in this book are designed to counter the epidemics of anxiety and depression. I have fine-tuned them through many years of careful clinical observation and calibration. We have used them in classes, in workshops on the road, and in our center. They are universally accessible, easy to learn, and transformative. And yet, their effectiveness doesn't depend on a clinical setting or on the presence of an expert therapist. Rather, Integrative Yoga Therapeutics awakens your own ability to heal yourself. With practice, *you* can become your own yoga therapist.

My career began with a childhood desire to heal people. It grew into an adult mission to help people learn the skills they need to *heal themselves* throughout their lives. The practices in this book, together with your own hard work and persistence, can help you achieve emotional balance as well as the gift that lies just beyond it: deep fulfillment and happiness. I've seen it happen to many others, and it can happen to you as well.

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Please consult a physician before beginning a Restorative Yoga practice if you are pregnant or have any of the following: a serious illness, eye pressure issues, back pain or a back injury, a detached retina, heart problems, serious skeletal injuries, lymphedema, or other illness. Although the postures in these sequences are gentle and safe by nature, it's still best to have medical approval before doing them. Bring this book to your doctor's office, as few physicians are likely to be familiar with Restorative Yoga.

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