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Breathing Your Way To Mental Health

Yoga as a Tool for Sufferers Of Eating Disorders

By Indra Singh

Suffering from an eating disorder is not only stressful for the individual but also for the close family and friends involved.

Eating disorders – especially in children – are quite often not taken as seriously as they should be and can be brushed aside as a fad or an attention seeking issue that the sufferer will eventually grow out of. However, this may not be the case and, with the pressures on young children today, both boys and girls as young as eight can fall victim to such psychological distress.

I was a sufferer from anorexia and, from that perspective, let me squash the fallacy that eating disorders are about food and anything that may hold calorific value. Food is what becomes the anchor to hold onto, something that is used to help control the sufferer's everyday existence, until eventually the food becomes the obsession.

Whether the sufferer has anorexia or bulimia, the attachment to food is the same. Either starvation or bingeing becomes the obsession, brought on by mental anguish, and lack of control and harmony within daily life.

Seeking Advice and Getting Help

There are various ways of dealing with eating disorders that are natural and drug-free, and these include the following:

- Finding someone to talk to that you can trust. From my own personal experience, a professional psychologist or therapist was important, as they were disconnected from my personal situation with no emotional attachment and a neutral perspective.
- Allowing yourself space and time to connect with the things you really enjoy. If these do not include social activities, then activities such as reading, walking in Nature, taking a hot bath, and doing yoga can all help to give immediate relief.

Yoga as a Major Part of Self-Healing

I came to yoga at the age of seventeen not only because I connected with the roots of the ancient practice due to my ancestry but because I needed something to help me move through a period in my life which was causing me physical and mental trauma.

My body had become depleted and exhausted, my mind nervous and constantly fearful of all situations. This was because I

had few nutrients inside my four-and-a-half stone (sixty-three pounds or twenty-eight kilograms) body to help balance and sustain me. I had lost all control of my life.

Yoga became my answer and support. With various pranayama techniques, meditations, and relaxation skills, I was steadily on the road to recovery. I want to share some of these practices with others. When used on a daily basis, these skills help transform the mind and allow you to gain back your own personal power.

Basic Breath Awareness

By allowing yourself to become attuned to your breath, you are giving yourself permission to live, to relax, to let go and allow yourself to just be. The basis of any relaxation or meditation is to be able to acknowledge your breath.

Here is a kundalini yoga set as taught by Yogi Bhan to help open the Pranic channels and balance the left and right sides of the body. This technique is extremely calming and will bring immediate relaxation to the body, mind, and spirit.

- Sit in easy pose (cross legged, see above). Block the right nostril with the thumb or finger (see opposite) and begin long, slow, deep breathing through the left nostril for three minutes. Inhale and hold the breath for ten seconds. (If you suffer from breathing or heart difficulties, do not hold.)
- Repeat the process on the left side, using the left thumb to block the left nostril. Continue for three minutes, inhaling and hold for ten seconds if appropriate.
- Inhale through the left nostril then exhale through the right using long slow deep breathing. Use the thumb and little finger to close alternate nostrils. Continue for three minutes. Then reverse the alternate nostril breath for three minutes, inhaling through the right and exhaling through the left.
- Sit in easy pose or a position that is comfortable for you and place the hands in Gyan Mudra (see opposite). Breathe long, slow, deep breaths and focus your attention at the brow point. Continue this for seven minutes then inhale deeply and if possible hold the breath, suspending it and allowing yourself to feel the breath circulating around the whole body. Exhale and relax, allowing yourself to meditate for five minutes.

Beginners Exercise 1

The main purpose of this practice is to release tension in the body and mind that has built up during the day. Each position stimulates the lungs and the navel centre. This is achieved by the effect of the breath as it opens the lungs and the diaphragm, helping to promote deep relaxation.

- Sit in easy pose and bring the hands into prayer pose at the heart centre (see right). Close the eyelids and focus on the brow point. As you focus, create a positive flow of thought. Project being healthy and happy, and see yourself as you wish to be. Continue this for seven minutes.
- Lie on your back, pointing the toes forward and begin long, slow, deep breathing for five minutes. When you have completed that, relax for two minutes.
- While resting on your back, inhale and hold for fifteen seconds (if appropriate to your health condition), then exhale. Repeat this breath pattern for eight full breaths, continuing for three repetitions of the sequence.
- Relax for two minutes.
- Lying on the back, point the toes forward. Lift both feet six inches off the ground as you inhale deeply. Hold the position for fifteen seconds, then lower the legs. Repeat five times.
- Deeply relax the body, limb by limb, organ by organ, cell by cell for ten minutes.



Heart Beat Meditation in the Triple Lock

When someone suffers from an eating disorder, the nervous system becomes seriously depleted due to lack of nutrition. This meditation will help to balance the brain and the nervous system, and if practiced with a lengthened spine, it will help to expand the self, allowing you to view yourself more positively.

- Sit in a comfortable seated position – if possible, lotus or easy pose with the hands resting on the knees with the palms in Gyan Mudra. Apply just enough pressure in the fingers so that you clearly feel your pulse in the tips of your thumbs. The essence of this meditation is to form the triple lock in a relaxed, stable, and attentive attitude. The triple lock is:
 - 1) Gyan mudra feeling your pulse;
 - 2) Front teeth locked on top of each other, tip to tip, lower jaw moving forward slightly from its natural position;
 - 3) Tongue turned backward as much as possible to touch the upper palate.
- Meditate at the brow point on a constant rhythm of the heart. Keep the spine completely straight. Continue for eleven minutes.

Indra Singh has been studying yoga for over twenty years and trained to be a yoga teacher in the UK, USA, and Brazil. Her main practice is kundalini yoga as taught by Yohi Bhajan. She specializes in teaching children's yoga and yoga for children with special needs, as well as the benefits of yoga for the pregnant mother and her unborn baby. She writes articles on healthy living and natural lifestyles for a variety of magazines. She lives with her two daughters in the UK Visit her website at indrasinghyoga.com.

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Gyan Mudra

