



The Yoga Prescription

The ancient practice goes from gym class to doctor's orders. *By Laura Hilgers*



IN 2011, JACQUELYN JACKSON HAD the most traumatizing year of her life. On a beautiful morning in Tucson, she was just 25 feet away when her former boss, Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, and 18 others were shot in a grocery store parking lot. In the weeks that followed, as Jackson began suffering symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (including chronic anxiety and difficulty sleeping), she turned to a psychotherapist. The sessions helped “tremendously,” she says but 11 months later, when her seemingly healthy younger brother died suddenly from a brain tumor. “the trauma was so great I felt like I needed something more.”

Desperate, Jackson looked online for support and stumbled upon yoga therapy, an emerging treatment for people struggling with anxiety, grief, and trauma. Long practiced in India, yoga therapy was introduced in the United States some three decades ago but has begun gaining popularity only in the past five years or so. (Membership in the International Association of Yoga Therapists [IAYT] has quadrupled since 2004, to about 3,200, and next year the IAYT plans to begin accrediting yoga schools to offer a standardized certification program.)

“It’s not just postures,” says yoga therapist Janice Gates. “We use all the tools of yoga—breath work, sound, visualization, and meditation—and tailor them to a client’s

specific health condition.” One of Gates’s clients was a woman in her 40s who was experiencing serious depression and anxiety but couldn’t tolerate psychiatric medication. While a doctor oversaw the medical issues, Gates worked with the client weekly to manage her moods. On days when she was anxious, Gates led her through exercises like standing poses and forward bends (to help her feel more grounded) and exhalation breath work (to calm her down). When the woman was depressed, she did back bends and inhalation exercises, designed to give her energy. Six months later, the woman’s crippling dark moods, once a thrice-weekly occurrence, now overtake her only a few times each month. With her newfound energy—and time—she’s teaching art classes to children.

Though research on the efficacy of yoga therapy is ongoing, traditional doctors are taking notice—and finding it, in some cases, to be a valuable complement to the work they’re already doing. “Yoga therapy can be extremely helpful for people who need a way to work through what they’re experiencing, not just in their minds but in their bodies,” says psychotherapist Jack Obedzinski, MD, of Corte Madera, California. “Often, it allows my patients to experience a feeling of calm in a way they couldn’t in talk therapy.” And, he says, this calmness can bring more clarity and awareness to their traditional sessions.

For Jackson, one-on-one yoga appointments with Amy Weintraub, a pioneer in the field and author of *Yoga for Depression*, proved transformative. In their first session, Jackson “was practically hyperventilating with anxiety,” says Weintraub, who created a program that included “stair-step” breathing, building up to deeper and deeper breaths. “What the yoga did was provide a slow, gradual path to help her manage her moods and not immediately react when grief arose.” After just a few sessions, Jackson no longer used medication to help her sleep at night. “Working with Amy was like doing emotional Roto-Rootering,” she says. “I had so much stress in my body, and she was able to help dislodge it—and clear it out.”