



Yoga for Anxiety and Panic Attacks

We all experience anxiety from time to time. While mild anxiety is totally normal, it can be harmful if it is extreme and persistent. Severe anxiety can cause nausea, hyperventilation, heart palpitations, fatigue, restlessness, and many pain syndromes.

Recent medical studies have shown that yoga soothes anxiety. The breath plays a major role in most cases of excess anxiety. Breathing practices, especially into the belly, slow breathing with lengthened exhalation is a very potent way to reduce anxiety.



During panic attacks the breath usually becomes shallow and rapid, which in turn feeds anxiety. When practicing Pranayama, yogic breathing exercises, the nervous system is calmed and soothed. With a regular practice we can learn how to consciously maintain a correct breathing pattern to prevent excessive anxiety and panic attacks.

Practices of Yoga postures (asanas) are helpful to soothe the nervous energy that drives anxiety. In addition to the calming effects of yoga practice, restorative poses, inversions and forward bends are especially calming.

Meditation and Yogic self study can get to the root of the anxiety. Through meditation one can see how busy your mind is and how unreliable a source of information it really is! Repetitive negative thoughts may be the root of anxious worries. By bringing awareness to this pattern it can be allowed to dissipate. Yoga and meditation give us control over our thoughts through mental detachment and acceptance and the ability to focus the mind on the present experience. Likewise, regular practice of breath work, asanas and meditation builds self-awareness. This self-awareness can help you notice the early signs of a panic attack and therefore avoid it.



Yogic Philosophy sees attachment as the cause of all suffering, including anxiety. It is obvious that attachment to money, sex and power cause great suffering. It may be less obvious that attachment to things being a certain way causes suffering too. By releasing our attachments we can dissolve anxiety.

Yogic philosophy, asana, pranayama and meditation are all powerful tools in the reduction and prevention of excess states of anxiety and panic attacks.

The mind, body and spirit are all connected and when a person suffers from mild depression or anxiety, the body is out of balance. Yoga is a series of stretches that helps bring balance to the body; not just focusing on the body's health, but also on the mind and spirit.

Below is a list of 10 yoga poses that will help fight your anxiety and panic attacks. Always consult a physician or counsellor if you are having ongoing feelings of depression or anxiety and before trying any new exercise program.

Begin with the **Lotus position**, sitting crossed legged with hands resting on the knees, palms up. The most important thing is to remember to breathe. To calm the rapid breathing often accompanying panic attacks, focus on your breathing at first, a five count in and a five count out, but let the breathing become natural. Let the breathing set the rhythm of the practice. Eyes should be closed, listening to the rhythm of the breathing. After five or ten minutes here, the body should feel calmer.

Viparita Karani is a great pose for either depression or anxiety as it has both a soothing and energising effect. Often called the fountain of youth pose, it can be done by beginners or experts. Lay flat on the back with the arms laying at the side and palms down or open the arms with palms up to open the heart even more. Rest the legs against the wall to hold this pose longer comfortably or for more advanced practices, lift up the lower back and rest the bottom on the hands.



Fish pose is a terrific pose for opening the heart. Opening the heart with back-bending yoga positions is believed to not only expand the ribcage to give the lungs more room to breathe, but to open the spiritual heart centre. Opening the heart, or stretching the chest, eases respiration, relieves stress by unclogging the tension in the tissue in the core. Laying on the back with the arms at the side, round the back and lean as far back on the crown of the head as is comfortable. Lay a bolster, yoga block or pillow under the back for support.

In the laying position **Setu Bandha Sarvangasana** or the **Bridge** pose is different from a bridge in gymnastics. With bent knees lift the core, arms should lay at the side, palms up or interlock the fingers behind the back. This pose calms the mind and energises the body. Place a bolster or pillow under the back to hold this pose longer and more comfortably.

The calming poses, **Cow** and **Cat**, should be used together. Position the knees under the hips and the hands under the shoulders, kneeling on all fours with a neutral spine. With the inhale, let the belly sink towards the floor, looking up for Cow and letting the head fall down, with the exhale, round the back up to the ceiling for Cat. Keep the eyes closed as much as possible. Try and round the back one vertebra at a time. This pose is terrific for stress in the back; it establishes ideal spinal alignment, strengthens and stretches back muscles in the back and develops coordination of spinal movement.

Salabhasana or the **Locust** pose is a yoga posture. Lying on the belly with the arms alongside the body, lift the legs and arms together and lift the chest as high as is comfortable. This pose opens the heart, helps poor posture, depression, low energy, digestion, gas, bladder and back pain. Move into Dhanurasana or Bow pose, relax, then bend the knees and take hold of the feet with the hands. Pull back with the legs to help open up the heart and chest.

Urdhva Mukha Svanasana or the **Upward Facing Dog** pose can be entered from Locust by coming to a neutral laying position, then planting the toe nails and the palms, directly under the shoulders, into the mat. Lift the body slowly off the mat so that only the tops of the feet and the palms of the hands are the only parts of the body firmly planted to the mat.

Child's pose or **Balāsana** is a resting position which can help calm the body and the mind when under stress. Return to Child's pose at any time during practice when feeling as though the body may have been pushed too far. On bended knees, lean forward with the forehead to the mat. Lay arms at the sides of the body with palms up next to the feet or palms down stretched over the head. Breathe deeply, focusing on the breath with eyes closed.

Every yoga practice should be completed with **Savasana** or the **Corpse** pose. This is the most important pose in any yoga practice and should never be skipped. The body processes the information received through practicing yoga during this pose.



Palms, middle of the back, and the back of the head should all be planted into the mat. The feet can fall loose and the eyes closed to help the body relax into the pose. With eyes closed and the focus on the breathing, hang out here for five or ten minutes.

Slowly wake up the body, wiggling the toes and fingers. Then roll gently on the side, laying the head on the arm and bending the knees. Gently and slowly lift the body. The body should feel revived and the mind calmed.

Focusing on breathing and practicing yoga poses can calm momentary anxiety and panic by giving the mind a peaceful focus and re-energising the body.

