

# Yoga Therapy

For women in shelters

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## **Yoga Therapy for women in shelters**

Every year 28.000 Danish women are the victims of a violent and abusive partner, most commonly their husband. More than 2000 of these women seek help in a shelter. They arrive at the shelters, which are for women only, with emotional traumas and often with physical injuries too. At the shelters they are offered medical help, legal advice and a place to stay. But first of all they are offered security and protection against their violators.

### **The Women & their Health<sup>1</sup>**

The shelters receive women from all parts of society, rich and poor, young and old, Danish and foreign. But they are all victims of abuse. One third of the women seeking help have been the victim of violence on a daily or weekly basis for more than five years. They have been threatened, beaten and humiliated verbally. Many of them have also been raped.

Besides their actual injuries the women experience aches and pains in various parts of the body. According to interviews conducted in 2008 more than half of the women suffer from pain or discomfort in their back, shoulders, neck, arms, legs and joints. The research does not go into the causes of these aches and pains, but it is possibly a result of unhealthy posture, which is common in people with depression and anxiety. Stress has a tendency to lead to tension in neck and shoulders as well as in other muscles creating pain and aches.

Other typical issues are addictions, headaches and insomnia.

### **Living in Fear**

Stress and anxiety are also very common issues when the women arrive at the shelters. In fact most of them have been living with these conditions for a long time before they found their way to the shelter. 75 % of the women tell us that they feel nervous, anxious or fearful. This is creating tremendous physical and emotional stress.

One specific kind of anxiety present in the shelters is post-traumatic stress disorder. The symptoms based on a research paper published in 2008 involving all shelters in Denmark of posttraumatic stress disorder include nightmares and flash backs creating feelings of anxiety, muscular tension and lack of sleep. It is also common to be constantly alert, to have difficulty concentrating, poor memory and change in personality and maybe even less capability of feeling love, not caring about one self and others. This might also be a sign of depression.

Most of the women affected by PTSD suffer from these symptoms for days or weeks, but for some it can become a chronic state affecting the rest of their lives.

Besides the conditions already mentioned, there is one thing that almost all the women have in common: Depression.

When women are the victims of this kind of violence, living in fear for long periods of time, their risk of becoming depressed is significantly higher. Not only the physical violence but also and maybe especially the mental and emotional abuse affect their feeling of self acceptance and self image. It is not surprising that 74 % of the women in shelters in 2008 reports feelings of depression, sadness and unhappiness. About 80 % suffers from fatigue, which is one possible indication of depression.

It has to be taking in to consideration that feelings of anxiety and depression can be a natural state of mind as a reaction to traumatic events. But many of the women have already suffered from depression for a long period of time. Those women are offered help to deal with their depression – most often in form of medication.

Since depression is the most common condition requiring treatment in the shelters, the first part of this paper concerns depression in general, how it is diagnosed and treated and how yoga therapy might help.

The second part specifically focuses in on the women in the shelters and how to work therapeutically with people suffering from anxiety and fear as well as depression – looking at how yoga therapy can aid these women in their physical and emotional recovery.

## **Depression in a Western View**

Depression is very common in many parts of the world. One could almost call it an epidemic. People suffering from depression might be crying a lot feeling constantly sad and miserable while others feel almost nothing at all, a kind of emotional numbness. Often they feel very fatigued and “heavy” or very anxious and incapable of relaxing. Even little everyday tasks become impossible challenges. For some the symptoms become unbearable and the depression result in suicide. About 10-15 % of severely depressed people commit suicide if not treated. Depression is said to generally last in six to twelve months.

Denmark is following the definitions of World Health Organization when diagnosing depression. You are diagnosed with depression if you have:

### **Two or more of the following symptoms:**

- Feeling of sadness
- Lack of desires and interests
- Lack of energy, fatigue

### **AND two or more of the following symptoms:**

- Low self-esteem
- Feelings of guilt and blame
- Thinking about death and suicide
- Finding it difficult to think and focus
- Severe internal unrest or the opposite - inhibition
- Lack of sleep, insomnia
- Changes in weight or appetite

The more of those symptoms you have, the more severe the depression. The feeling must be more or less permanent for more than two weeks. If you are feeling any of the above mentioned emotions for less than two weeks it is considered to be normal mood swing.

## **What causes Depression?**

In the western medicine the cause of depression is not yet entirely understood, but is considered to first and foremost be caused by the brain and is connected to the neurotransmitters. Some views depression as the result of the stress-response of the nervous system being too active or the serotonin and dopamine levels being too low. Some people are more predisposed to this biomedical imbalance than others and it tends to be more common in some families than others. Physical disease can look like and lead to depression. Certain types of medication, for example medication countering high blood pressure can lead to depression as well. The same is true for continuous use of alcohol and drugs. Even though stress for a shorter period of time can give you more energy, stress and worries over a longer period of time can lead to depression too.

## **Antidepressant Medicine**

The different kinds of medications available have a lot of the effect in common, but different side effects.

The positive effect of antidepressants can be:

- General mood is improved
- Countering inhibition
- The emotional numbness disappears
- Most of the medicines also have a calming effect, inducing better sleep
- Countering anxiety
- Countering some kinds of physical pain

## **The side effects**

Unfortunately there are side effects to the antidepressant. One of those being, strangely enough, depression. Most people go through more than one type of medication to find the one with the most effect and fewest side effects.

## **Side effects of *Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitor***

- Feeling nauseous, Lack of appetite
- Dizziness
- Lack of sexual energy

- Sleeping disorder
- Headache
- Tendency towards excess perspiration
- Feelings of anxiety
- Mania (Not common)

**Side effects of *Tricyclic Antidepressants***

- Feeling dizzy
- Dry mouth
- Blurry vision
- Constipation
- Lack of sexual energy
- Lethargy
- Confusion (especially in elderly people)
- Weight gaining
- Mania

**Side effects of *Serotonin & Noradrenaline Reuptake Inhibitor***

- Nausea
- Headache
- Dizziness
- Excessive transpiration
- Lethargy
- High blood pressure

**Side effects of *Nordarenergic & Specific Serotonic Antidepressants***

- Lethargy
- Dry mouth
- Weight gaining

It is not possible to get any benefits from misusing this type of medication. It doesn't make you high or happier if you are not depressed. You do get the side effects though.

But the body does get used to the medication and therefore it is important to decrease the amount of medication slowly and under supervision of a qualified therapist or doctor.

### **Other common Treatments for Depression**

Medication is by far the most common treatment offered in Denmark. One reason for this could be that it is much easier to get economical help with this kind of treatment - or electroshock in severe cases - than any other. But there are other treatments available. The most common therapy besides medication is talk therapy.

**Cognitive therapy** is a talk therapy between the patient and her therapist, usually for 45 minutes to an hour every week. This kind of therapy is focusing on how the patient thinks about herself and the things she is going through and working towards healthier patterns of thinking.

This is a short term therapy, usually lasting for less than three months. It is often combined with other treatments like antidepressant medication.

**Exercise is also recommended.** There has been some test in Denmark where depressed people have been prescribed exercise in a gym. This was quite successful and many doctors today tell their clients with mild or moderate depression to exercise regularly.

Exercising affect many bodily functions like the immune system, the cardiovascular system and the appetite. It is also proven to affect the level of hormones like serotonin and endorphins in the body. Another benefit from exercising is that it can counter the weight gaining that is a common side effect of the antidepressants.

One of the problems with exercise as a tool is that for many suffering from depression it is a challenge much bigger than just swallowing a pill, making medication the easy choice. People tend to try to exercise regularly, but very often they stop doing it. Studies suggest that in order to feel the benefits it is necessary to exercise 3-4 times a week.

Never the less, a little exercise is better than no exercise at all and might be very helpful – maybe especially in preventing depression.

## **Depression in a Yoga Therapy View**

Yoga therapy views depression as an imbalance. We look at two different categories of depression - Tamasic depression and Rajasic depression. Tamas and Rajas are *Gunas*. The Gunas are subtle energetic qualities. We all have – and need - elements of all the gunas, but each individual might have tendencies towards a specific Guna. This might make the individual more or less prone to depression.

### **Tamasic Depression**

Tamas qualities are - among others - darkness, heaviness and inertia. On the positive side tamas helps us to relax and sleep at night. But too much tamas can lead to a tamasic depression.

When suffering from a tamasic depression the body and mind feels heavy and lacking energy. A person with tamasic depression might find it very difficult to get out of bed making the journey to the yoga mat a big challenge in it self. This is important to keep in mind.

Start the practice in a very gentle way; slowly working up to a stronger and more energizing practice. If possible, work towards things like sun salutations and back bends.

### **Rajasic Depression**

Rajas qualities are - among others - restlessness, anger and fear. Rajas is also the energy that is needed to create movements and actions and therefore we do need some rajas in our life.

When suffering from a rajasic depression there is too much nervous energy in the body and often too many thoughts to ever really relax. This might make it difficult to enjoy and relax into the practice. To make it easier, start with a practice that requires more effort and focus. This can help to still the mind and keep the attention from drifting away into negative thoughts and emotions. Start with sun salutations before moving to more calm poses which are held for a longer period of time, but make sure not to make the practice *too* invigorating as it might make their state even more rajasic.



## **Asanas for Depression**

When practicing asanas we are working with Prana, cleaning our body and clearing our mind, bringing our body back in to balance. Consciously choosing specific asanas can help us deal with the tamasic or rajasic depressive state. As you can see from the descriptions of different kinds of depression, you might choose many of the same poses and breathing techniques for both kinds of depression, but the sequencing will be different as well as the intensity and the amount of time you hold each pose. Working with tamasic depression you want to start slowly and easy, letting the practitioner ease in to the practice and finish stronger, leaving them with more energy for the rest of their day. Working with rajasic depression you need to start with poses which are more challenging and involves more movement and slowly progress to the more calming, soothing postures.

**Forward folds** have a calming effect on the nervous system, slowing the breathing and heart rate. For people with high levels of anxiety this is a very helpful type of poses. For people with tamasic depression it is a good idea not to keep them in forward folds for too long as they might sink deeper into their depressive emotions. In forward folds like child's pose, make them rest their forehead on their fist or on a prop in order to not close out the light.

**Hip openers** can be very therapeutic. Especially in women a lot of negative emotions can be stored in this area connected to our first 2 chakras. Hip openers help restore pranaflow in this area, clearing away emotional blockage.

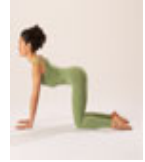
**Twisting postures** can help with detoxing the organs and boosting agni, the digestive fire. In Ayurveda the digestive system is considered extremely important to our health. Twisting is also very healing to the spine.

**Balancing** in a posture can be challenging. If your mind starts to wander of you might loose your focus and your balance. This makes balancing postures very beneficial to people with depression. Especially people with rajasic depression can have a hard time keeping their mind from wandering and getting caught up in worries and negative emotions. The challenge of a balancing posture forces them to stay present and focused.

**Back Bends** are very invigorating and energizing and therefore a great tool for people with depression. Start slowly with soft, supported back bends. When depressed, people tend to close the front of their body, shoulder sloping forward and head hanging down. Back bends counter this by stretching the front of their body, opening the heart chakra and letting prana flow.

For people with a lot of rajasic energy back bends might be too energizing. Be gentle.

**Inversion** can be very challenging, but they can also be very beneficial. Turning upside down gives an entirely new view of the world. On a physical level fresh blood runs to the head and the top of the brain, helping to restore the brains balance. Inversions might heighten the production and release of serotonin and thereby counter depression.



All these types of asanas can be practiced at different levels of difficulty and required effort. Use props and blankets for a more relaxing, soothing and restorative approach!

## Yoga Asana for Depression

### Cat - Cow

Warming up the spine, balancing all chakras. It is a gentle and easy way to begin a practice and energize the mind. It is suitable for people who might feel some initial resistance to moving.



### Cat - Cow side stretch

Warming up, stretching and creating more space to breathe.



### Warming up the neck and shoulders

Neck and shoulders are usually where muscle tension manifests first. Sit on your heels and add gentle movements of the neck and rotations of the shoulder joints to warm up this area, release stiffness and tensions and encourage prana flow. It also gently opens knee, hip and ankle joints.



### Downward facing dog

Keep the knees bend and move the hips to warm up. Energizes the body, stimulates the mind and is said to relieve insomnia.



### Sun salutations

Choose a gentle, warming sun salutation and perform it with focus on steady breathing.

### Tadasana

Standing firmly on the ground, feeling supported by the earth. Support under your feet gives you the freedom to move and stretch up. Focus on posture (shoulders back, chin up to neutral) countering the typical “depression-posture.”



### Low lunge

Warming up hips, which is a common place to store negative emotions. Keep hands on hips or front leg to find balance. Add arms high to work on shoulder. Open the heart, the 4. Chakra.



### Low lunge twist

Keep knee down for balance. Twisting action aids digestion and detoxification. This pose requires focus and “being here and now.”



### Forward fold

Soothing and calming to the nervous system, relieving anxiety, fatigue and depression. Stretching the entire back body. Relatively short hold of this posture for tamasic depression. You can hold it somewhat longer for rajasic depression.



### Extended triangle

This tridoshic posture is good for everyone, (but might need to be modified for people with low blood pressure, heart problems or knee/hip-injuries) balancing all doshas. Work on a strong foundation, drawing up energy through the legs, arms stretching equally away from the spine. Place hand on leg or block if needed. Be very mindful coming out of the pose.



### High lunge

As all standing postures, this posture balances the lower chakras and work on a strong foundation. Lift the back thigh high and stretch up out of your waist.



### Wide-legged forward fold

This pose is said to develop willpower, calm the mind and reduce stress and anxiety. It strengthens the lower part of the body, stretches the backside of the legs and might reduce headache.



### Goddess pose

Stand firmly on the ground. Empowering and grounding. Find your inner goddess. Weight evenly on all four corners of the feet. Add eagle arms to work on the shoulders and thoracic area.



### Wide-legged forward fold

Same as the former variation of this pose, but this variation work on the shoulders and thoracic spine as well. As with all inversions, be cautious with high blood pressure.



### Tree pose

Balance requires focus and presence. Focus on being supported by – not sinking into – the ground, stretching up from the sacrum towards the sky.



### Breath of joy

For people with tamasic depression it might be too much to start the practice with this very energizing breath. In stead it is done after the standing postures where the energy is already higher. In the case of rajasic depression it might be done earlier in the sequence if at all. Pause and feel the effect before continuing.



### Staff pose

Sit on a blanket to get spine straight. This pose tones the body and creates focus. Focus on strong legs and shoulders back, opening the heart. Engage abdominals.



### Gentle seated twist

This pose stimulates lymphatic and digestive system and is recommended for relieving depression and anxiety. Part of warm up for back bends.



### Forward fold

Soothes nervous system, reduces fatigue and improves kidney, liver and colon function. For people with severe depression it is recommended to use a prop to rest your head on in order to not “close in on yourself” shutting out the daylight.



### Sphinx

Cobra with forearms on the floor, gently warming up for the deeper backbends.



### Half frog

Stay on forearm. Stretching the front of the body, preparing for more backbends and countering a contracted posture.



### **Cobra**

Heart forward and shoulders back. As all backbends this is very energizing, opening the heart chakra, stretching the pectoralis muscle and strengthening the back. Engage the root lock.



### **Pigeon pose (modified)**

This pose energizes the body and opens the hip flexors. It is recommended to relieve anxiety and depression, stimulates the digestive system and improves circulation.



### **Bridge pose**

Support with props as needed depending on the strength of the class. Keep them longer in the pose if supported. Focus on breathing love into the heart. This pose energizes and reduces fatigue.



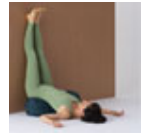
### **Wind relieving pose**

Massages the abdominal organs, improves digestion and is said to relieve stress. Especially good for tamasic depression.



### **Legs up the wall**

Soothes the nervous system, increases circulation and calms the mind. Recommended for relieving depression, anxiety and insomnia.



### **Reclining bound-angle**

Support with props and straps for a longer hold. It is okay to close your eyes in this pose. Breathe into the hip and groin area to release tension and emotional stress. This pose is also said to reduce fatigue, depression and anxiety.



### **Savasana**

Supported and with blankets. It is okay to keep the eyes open, if you don't feel ready to close them. Focus on breathing. For people suffering from depression, it might be easier for them to relax through a guided relaxation than in silence.



## **Yoga Therapy for women in shelters**

The sequence mentioned here would work well with most people struggling with depression, but as always it is advisable to adjust the practice to suit the individual. Working with women in shelters you might need to take their specific situation into consideration.

First it is important to consider if the women suffer from a tamasic or rajasic depression as mentioned earlier. But there is other considerations too when planning a yoga therapeutic practice in a shelter.

Due to the fact that the women have left their home, the people they know and their former life behind it is quite sure that they will have at least Vata dosha – if not all doshas - out of balance. The doshas are described in Ayurveda as different body types defined by qualities and functions. We all have some qualities from each dosha – Vata, Pitta and Kapha – but often have one or two doshas dominating.

Vata dosha is always higher when we are going through times of change, even when it is for the better. If Vata is out of balance, the level of anxiety can easily be very high. Vata is the most unstable dosha and is usually the first to go out of balance, but pitta dosha and Kapha dosha easily follows. It might be expressed through a lot of anger (pitta) or lethargy (kapha) which both common in the shelters.

Focusing on the chakras, the vortices or wheels of energy in our body, we can say the same thing. Due to their life situations most of the women might have many if not all the chakras out of balance. But in the beginning, it is advisable to focus on muladhara chakra, the root chakra. This chakra is connected to being safe and healthy and is easily unbalanced when the basic physical safety needs are not fulfilled.

To balance Vata dosha and muladhara chakra, it is very beneficial to work with grounding, calming and soothing aspects of the asanas. Gentle forward folds, standing poses and balancing poses are recommended as well as a longer supported Savasana at the end of practice.

### **Addiction**

Due to the imbalances mentioned above and the life that they have been living, many of the women struggle with some kind of addiction when they arrive at the shelter. It might be alcohol, pills or other narcotics. In a yoga therapeutic view these addiction might be caused by an attempt to medicate oneself towards balance – in a very unhealthy way, that is. For example, alcohol might help a woman feel more grounded and less anxious. Using yoga therapy to create a true and healthy balance in the body and mind might make the drugs less attractive and help the women leave their addiction behind.

## **Yoga as exercise and more**

As mentioned earlier, exercise seems to have a positive impact on people suffering from depression. The effect on the hormones in the body might be part of the explanation. A feeling of success, having actually done something can also be part of it. Yoga is (not only but) also a physical exercise and can contribute with the same effects. But yoga also focus on community as an important part of a healthy lifestyle, countering isolation and feelings of separation – two very common emotions among women living in abusive relationships for a longer period of time. Coming together in a group to share energy and practice yoga, supporting each other in a process of healing is much stronger and much more encouraging than going alone to a gym and therefore has several benefits compared to the kind of exercise that is already recommended by western doctors.

Yoga therapy for women in shelters could include asana, easy pranayama and meditation techniques, but also include the benefits of community, helping each other and self study that are common to yoga.

But first of all, it is important to help the women feel safe!

## **Creating a safe Space**

As mentioned earlier, anxiety and fear is affecting the majority of these women. Anxiety is not only a bad thing. Living in an abusive relationship fear and anxiety might be a lifesaver, telling the woman when to be careful, when to run and when to hide. But due to the fact that these women have been living in fear for a long time, some of them for years, the anxiety has become a part of their system and is now a threat to their health and wellbeing.

To be able to work with this group of women it is important to focus on creating that safe space for them. I find it beneficial to think of creating this feeling of safety on several levels.

**First level of safe space** is the room wherein the practice takes place. It is an advantage if the room is located in the shelter, which is already considered safer than going outside. Some of the women are not allowed to leave the building without a bodyguard or an alarm.

The room needs to be quiet and should not have any windows facing the street. Keep the doors closed and be aware that some women might find it difficult to relax with their backs facing the door.

**Second level of safe space** is the mat. Give the women some time to get settled on their mats and do not step onto their mats without asking.

Because the women have been suffering from violence and abuse, it is even more important to be aware of their feelings about and reactions to touch. Being touched might be a basic human need and is a way of showing affection and love. But to enjoy being touched requires basic trust and women who have been the victims of continuous violence would easily associate touch with something negative and dangerous. For a therapist the physical adjustments can be very useful, but we need to take extra care before touching clients with this kind of past. One basic tool could be to give the women a piece of paper which is green on one side and red on the other. In the beginning of the session the women are told to keep the paper close to their mat. Red side up means “no touch.” They can turn the other side up at any time during the practice. This is a way of empowering the women, teaching them that *they* are the ones in charge of their bodies.

**Third level of safe space** is the safety inside in the body and mind of each woman. In the beginning they might feel discomfort closing their eyes in relaxation and mediation. Let them keep their eyes open until they feel safe enough to close them. Yoga Nidra and visualization techniques can be a powerful tool to guide the women to an internal safe space, teaching them to return to their inner sanctuary whenever they feel anxiety.

### **Working with the Nervous System**

After creating a feeling of relative safety using the three levels of safe space, it is possible to work on relieving the feeling of anxiety. Yoga postures and breathing techniques can help to calm the nervous system, getting the body out of its anxious stress mode.

The autonomic nervous system is the part of the nervous system that we usually can not control ourselves. The automatic nervous system has two components: The sympathetic nervous system and the parasympathetic nervous system.

When you are in danger your sympathetic nervous system kicks in to protect you. Blood rushes to your arms, legs, lungs and heart, leaving the rest of your body less nourished. This gives you the ability to run away or to fight if you need to. This is why it is often referred to as “Fight and Flight.”

When the sympathetic nervous system is activated and the adrenal glands releases adrenalin one could experience:

**The heart is beating fast and hard and the blood pressure is too high.** This makes more blood and oxygen flow to the muscles, giving them more energy to perform.



**The breathing is very fast and might cause feelings of suffocation and dizziness.** This is due to the balance between carbon dioxide and oxygen in the blood. A high quantity of oxygen and less blood flow to the brain is common when anxiety hits, but this is not in itself dangerous, though very uncomfortable.

**Other symptoms could be** excessive sweating caused by the body's attempt to get rid of excess heat. The digestive system stops functioning and blood rushes away from this area. Muscles might be painful or shaking because of contraction, the eyes get bigger and the focus is on detecting any danger around you.

In our society in general - and for this group of women in particular - fight and flight becomes more or less a chronic state. The result is anxiety, stress, aches and pain, digestive problems, heart problems, high blood pressure and sleeping disorders. All of these are problems that are common in the shelters.

Yoga is a beautiful tool to switch of the sympathetic nervous system and access the parasympathetic nervous system.

### **The Parasympathetic Nervous System**

The parasympathetic system is responsible for healing the body, creating balance and reducing the amount of adrenalin being released. It happens when we sleep, meditate and relax – or practice yoga.

When the parasympathetic system is activated the body is calm, the heart rate slows down, the blood pressure is low and the brain activity is normal and calm. There is less blood flowing to the muscles, more blood flowing to the skin, the internal organs and intestines. Not only the physical aches and pains but also the mind can heal - as a result the anxiety is relieved.

### **Breathing towards Balance**

Since it is common for these women to shift quickly from feelings of depression to high levels of anxiety it is important to walk the edge between a gentle but energizing practice to get prana flowing and a more calming practice to access the parasympathetic nervous system, letting the mind and body heal.

One way to balance the body and the mind is working with the breath. Easy and gentle breathing exercises can in some cases be a valuable alternative to meditation. It can be very challenging to meditate when working through a depression. A person with a tamasic depression might fall even deeper in to a tamasic state if left alone to meditate, while a person with a rajasic depression might feel angry, frustrated and even more rajasic. Working with the breath can be easier to begin with, if the right breathing exercise is chosen.

**Nadi shodana** or alternate nostril breathing purifies the vital nadis and balances the two sides of the brain. It calms the mind and the nervous system. Nadi shodana can be practiced by anyone and might be especially helpful when struggling with insomnia.

**Surya Bhedana & Chandra Bhedana.** The first is very warming and energizing and recommended for tamasic depression and people suffering from fatigue. The second, the lunar breath, is soothing, calming and quieting the mind. It is recommended for rajasic depression and for anyone who can not sleep.

**Kapalabhati** is also called skull shining or cleaning breath. It is recommended for people who feel heaviness or foggy in the head and can be helpful for people suffering from tamasic depression. It can be too energizing for people with rajasic conditions and for people with high blood pressure.

**Belly breathing** is often used as a preparation for 3-part-breathing, but is in itself valuable as a very relaxing and calming breath. Practice it lying on the back and feel the belly slowly rise and fall. This is especially good for people with rajasic depression and people suffering from anxiety, countering the habit of breathing only in the upper chest. This breath can be practiced as the first part of Savasana.

**Ujjayi breathing** is also known as victorious breath and is very common to many asana practices. To practice a gentle Ujjayi while sitting or during asana practice can help the practitioner to stay present and focused. It is energizing, reoxygenize the blood and purify the blood stream. It is important to not be forceful – especially if there is a tendency towards rajasic depression.

#### **A State of Sattva.**

The state we are trying to work towards in our yoga practice is the Sattvic state. To be in a state of Sattva requires a balance between rajas and tamas guna. In a yogic and ayurvedic perspective health is a state of balance. The asanas and breathing exercises mentioned are all guiding us towards this balanced state, where depression and anxiety are not even possible.

When sattvic qualities are predominating, the individual will be calm, caring, loving, happy and pure at heart. This enables us to act with awareness without being emotionally dependent on the outcome of the action. This ability to be in the present moment gives us a break from the depressive emotions which can arise from living in the past and the anxiety that can arise from living permanently in the future.

One way to balance the gunas, besides the ones already mentioned, is through diet. Eating fresh, healthy and easily digested food can be an important part to keep the depression away. Tamas food, which is heavy and difficult to digest, like processed food, overcooked foods and junkfood can make the individual more

depressed. Talking about food could be an important topic when the women are getting ready to leave the shelter and start a new life.

## **Out in to the World**

In general, in Denmark the patients are advised to stay on their anti depressive medicine for at least six to twelve months after the symptoms of depression are relieved. Even so, the risk of getting another depression is very high and something to be aware of in the future. If there is a tendency toward depression, it is common to experience four or five major depressions during a lifetime.

When the women leave the shelters and go back out into the world, they are about to start a new and hopefully better life. It is important to give them the tools to take care of themselves and avoid going back into a depressive state. For these women, depression is not the only thing they might experience again in the future. Many of the women end up going back to the violent partners and the abusive situation. In this matter, time is an issue as well. The longer the women stay at the shelters, the lesser the chance that they go back to the same partner and life circumstances.

Due to these facts, yoga therapy do not, and should not, only focus on relieving the symptoms of depression and anxiety but should also give the women tools to stay happy and healthy in the future, empowering them to take responsibility for their own wellbeing. Practicing yoga asana, mindfulness meditation and pranayama can be done everywhere, alone in their new homes, together in a group or with a qualified teacher in their area, but other tools might be helpful too.

One important part of taking care of oneself and avoiding getting back into the role of the victim is cultivation of a true self love. Due to low self esteem, this can seem like a challenge. Encouraging the women to make decisions and take actions, expressing themselves and their hopes for the future can help them feel proactive and in charge of their life.<sup>2</sup> Remind them that they have actually already proved their capacity to act out of self love. They have already made hard decisions and taken risks to make themselves a better future. They *did* escape a violent partner; seeking help at the shelter. Acting out of self love is more than just a vague possibility.

One way to keep this in mind is working with *intentions and affirmations*. To make an intention for their future life and how to live can help them to remember their own capability and the promises they make to them self in the process of recovery. Statements like “I am safe, I am healthy” or other affirmations to which the woman can relate, can be spoken out loud in meditation, before bedtime, in the beginning of the

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<sup>2</sup>This is based on the approach of Stephane Bensoussan. “Being at the source of vs being at the mercy of...”

day or whenever she feels the need to connect to her inner knowledge and strength. Creating affirmations and intentions with the women during their time in the shelter could be a valuable part of the process of healing and staying healthy.

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When researching for this paper I read a lot about the side effect of the antidepressant medicine. But many times I heard different versions of the words “everything that has a positive effect has side effects.” This is what makes Yoga Therapy such an amazing tool to recovery. The side effect of yoga is a healthier body and a clearer mind. Yoga can be used together with medicine if necessary, it can guide you in every aspect of your life and it can help prevent future depression too, revealing your natural sattvic state.

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[www.medicinhaandbogen.dk](http://www.medicinhaandbogen.dk)

[www.netdokter.dk](http://www.netdokter.dk)

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