



Working: People Talk About Their Jobs Joy Bennett, Joyful Breath Yoga Therapy

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Joy Bennett, Joyful Breath Yoga Therapy

There's a direct connection between depression and anxiety. Eighty percent of all people who suffer from depression also suffer from anxiety. They're two sides of the same coin. LifeForce yoga is intentionally designed to treat both.



Journal photo / Connie Grosch

Joy Bennett practices LifeForce yoga for anxiety and depression. "Some people worry that I'm going to expect them to turn into a pretzel. The postures are easy. Every posture becomes a statement of where we are right now," she says.

With life in the fast lane, we're often just living from the neck up. We don't even realize how we're feeling. With yoga, there's a lot of white space, an opportunity to become aware of a sensation and where you're feeling it.

I am 55, and no stranger to depression. Back in 1998, I was in a deep depression. I was a children's librarian, and it took a lot of energy to get animated for story hours. I heard about a yoga class on Thursday mornings. After the third class, I realized that Thursday was the only day in the whole week that I didn't cry. Not crying on Thursday became feeling pretty good on Friday too, because yoga is the gift that keeps on giving.

I wanted to be a Kripalu yoga teacher, became certified in 2004 and have been teaching in some capacity since then. I found Amy Weintraub's book *Yoga for Depression*. I feel

like I've really landed. It's a compassionate approach to depression and anxiety and the compassionate part is so necessary.

People who are in that place tend to be very hard on themselves. The last thing they need to hear is, "Why are you depressed? You have everything: a great job, a beautiful home, you take vacations, you have a wonderful spouse and loving children."

When someone walks in the door, I want them to understand this is a lifeline for them. It's not about doing the perfect posture. It's more about undoing — undoing all those places in the body where loss and trauma are stored. Everything that has ever happened to us is recorded somewhere in the body. The body is like a gigantic hard drive. Prana is the first Sanskrit word I introduce to my clients. It means life force — the vitality in the body. This is your birthright. The ancient yogis understood that depression is the absence of prana.



Journal photo / Connie Grosch

The first thing we do is breathe: breathing that nourishes the body. I invite them to breathe slow, deep, regular breaths until they start to drop into the space, start to slow down. We're creating free space in the mind, and when we do that, the truth inevitably will bubble up as to what it is I need at this time. And that's where prana begins to flow. The breathing is a thousand times more important than the postures.

Some people worry that I'm going to expect them to turn into a pretzel. The postures are easy. Every posture becomes a statement of where we are right now. If someone tells me, "I wish to cultivate fearlessness in my life," I'm going to give her a warrior type of posture. It's a posture of courage, and courage is about being scared to death but willing to hang in there one minute longer. Hold that warrior pose, breathing. What is the sensation you have in your feet right now? What are you feeling in your shoulders, in your fingertips? Many people who are depressed are so tamped down that you have to give them cues to feel — give them a place to focus.

Lastly, we do some guided meditation and visualization. "Allow yourself to stay in the present moment, realize how it is with you right now." Devise a mantra, an affirmation. Using their own words is more empowering than if I suggest something to them.

A little yoga goes a long way. Doing 10 minutes a day is better than two hours on the weekend because you're establishing and maintaining a sense of equanimity in your body, a sense of constancy. I tell them, this is your prescription for mental health. If someone is on Welbutrin for depression I tell them, "You don't take your Welbutrin just

once a week and expect it to work — it's something you take every day. So this is your yoga prescription.”

I do support that people use all the resources available to them. People worry that yoga means that I will tell them to get off their prescription medication. Yoga dovetails so beautifully with all of the other resources.

I tell my clients to stay connected. They know I'm not more than a phone call or a mouse click away. When we are in a place of depression or anxiety there's this sense of being alone, a sense of separation. The language and philosophy of yoga is that there is no separation. Each person is very much a part of the world.

I've seen improvement in all kinds of people whose lives are compromised in some way. People yearning for something they can't even name. The desire to discover something else other than what I'm doing now. Maybe it's conscious, maybe intuitive. When you can be still while living in this river of churning whitewater, let all the debris and residue settle, you can finally see deeply and clearly and make reasonable choices.

I love the Sanskrit word maitri: self-compassion. Knowing that you have this unconditional friendliness with yourself. Knowing that whatever comes up on any given day, you are worth it, life is manageable, there are answers.