



Mood boosters

Fight the winter blues this winter with yoga

Use yoga to get through the long dark winter nights ahead, experts reckon.

According to a new scientific study, released in the Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine recently, researchers have proven that yoga may be superior to other forms of exercise in its positive effect on both mood and anxiety.

The study claims to be the first to demonstrate an association between yoga moves and increased brain gamma-aminobutyric (GABA) levels and decreased anxiety.

Low GABA levels are associated with depression and other widespread anxiety disorders.

Although all exercise is known to have a positive effect on health, wellbeing and mental alertness, the aim was to highlight the particular benefits of yoga.

The 12-week experiment behind the study pitched a yoga class against a peer group given just walking exercises.

The yoga group took part in three studio sessions a week, each lasting for one hour. The remaining subjects all walked for the same period of time.

The study addressed the question of whether changes in mood, anxiety, and GABA levels are specific to yoga or related to any physical activity.

And it seems that yoga has the edge.

The study used magnetic resonance spectroscopic imaging to monitor the participants' brains both before and after classes began.

During the final week, the researchers compared the GABA levels of both groups before and after their last 60-minute session.

Each subject was also asked to assess his or her psychological state at several points throughout the study. Those that practiced yoga reported a more significant decrease in anxiety and greater improvements in mood than those who just walked.

"Over time, positive changes in these reports were associated with climbing GABA levels," says lead author Chris Streeter.

He believes this promising research warrants further study of the relationship between yoga and mood. It suggests that the practice of yoga could be considered as a potential therapy for certain mental disorders.

In the results, the yoga group reported greater improvements in mood and greater decreases in anxiety than the peer group undertaking the walking exercises.

"There were positive correlations between improved mood and decreased anxiety and thalamic GABA levels," the study states. "The yoga group had positive correlations between changes in mood scales and changes in GABA levels."

Just an hour of yoga a week can make a difference in improving feelings of clear mindedness, composure, elation, energy and confidence.

The study – officially titled 'Effects of Yoga Versus Walking on Mood, Anxiety, and Brain GABA Levels: A Randomised Controlled MRS Study' – was undertaken by a group of US scientists from various universities, including Boston, Harvard and Utah.

"This is the first study to demonstrate that increased thalamic GABA levels are associated with improved mood and decreased anxiety," the study states in its conclusion.

"It is also the first time that a behavioral intervention – yoga postures – has been associated with a positive correlation between acute increases in thalamic GABA levels and improvements in mood and anxiety scales."

Stress busting yoga

It is not the first study to report back on the direct benefits of yoga. A few months ago, a study published in the Scandinavian Journal of Work, Environment & Health showed that a regular yoga practice at work can melt away some of the ordinary day-to-day stresses and strains of office life.

It stated that just an hour of yoga a week can make a difference in improving feelings of clear mindedness, composure, elation, energy and confidence.

For employers, it can also make workers more productive. Plenty of reasons then to invest in yoga this winter and chase the blues away.



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Let there be light

Say goodbye to the cold, dark mornings and embrace the light



Head towards the light: that seems the most sensible advice if you're struggling with the cold winter mornings and long dark nights this year.

Everyone's heard of Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), a type of winter depression, but coping with it can be quite another matter.

According to the Seasonal Affective Disorder Association (SADA) it blights an estimated 7% of the UK population every year between September and April, and in particular during December, January and February.

Among the symptoms, sufferers may experience any combination of depression, sleeping problems, lethargy, over eating, loss of concentration, social problems, anxiety, loss of libido and mood changes.

"It is caused by a biochemical imbalance in the hypothalamus due to the shortening of daylight hours and the lack of sunlight in winter," says a SADA spokesperson.

"For many people, SAD is a seriously disabling illness, preventing them from functioning normally without continuous medical treatment."

For others, it is a mild but debilitating condition causing discomfort but not severe suffering. This version is termed 'subsyndromal SAD' or

'winter blues.' SADA reckons a further 17% of the UK population have this milder form of the condition.

Shine a light

It may not be quite so simple but the main treatment is to shine a light onto the problem - literally.

According to SADA, light therapy has been shown to be effective in up to 85% of diagnosed cases. That is, exposure, for up to four hours per day (average 1-2 hours) to very bright light, at least 10 times the intensity of ordinary domestic lighting.

Treatment is usually effective within three or four days, it says, and the effect continues provided it is used every day. Tinted lenses, or any device that blocks the light to the retina of the eye, should not be worn.

But ordinary light bulbs and fittings are not strong enough.

Average domestic or office lighting emits an intensity of 200-500 lux but the minimum dose necessary to treat SAD is around 2,500 lux. By comparison, the intensity of a bright summer day can be as high as 100,000 lux.

The message has already hit home with health professionals.

Lighten up

What is SAD?

SAD is caused by a biochemical imbalance arising from the shortening of daylight hours and the lack of sunlight in winter

Do I have it?

Symptoms include depression, sleeping problems, lethargy, over eating, anxiety, loss of libido and mood changes

What can I do about it?

Consult a professional first but light therapy - also known as bright light therapy or phototherapy - is a common prescription

It is not necessary to stare at the light although it has been proved safe, it says.

SAD Lightbox Company (www.sad.uk.com) is the leading manufacturer of medical light boxes made in the UK. It makes light boxes and various other lighting products at its Oxfordshire base, sourcing components locally where possible.

Its products are now supplied to hospitals, sleep disorder clinics, and other specialist centres.

Its trendy-named LitePod, which belts out some 10,000 lux, costs around £115.

Innovation abounds in this area however after the world woke up to the issue of SAD.

A student in Scotland recently created a special 'happy chair' to provide much-needed light therapy to SAD sufferers.

Chuang Meng Jung decided to take action after noticing how the weather and natural light in Scotland differed from her home country of Taiwan.

Her 'Revive' chair has built-in lights to give users the recommended daily dose of light mimicking the effects of natural light.

Start early

Why it works is open to question. According to the May Clinic (www.mayoclinic.com) exposure to bright light from a light therapy box is thought to alter your circadian rhythms and suppress your body's natural release of melatonin.

Together, these cause biochemical changes in your brain that help reduce or control symptoms of SAD and other conditions.

But start your treatment early, before you wake up with your New Year hangover in January.

According to SADA, light treatment should be used daily in winter (and even during dull periods in summer) starting in early autumn when the first symptoms appear.

It just means sitting two to three feet away from a specially designed light box, usually on a table, allowing the light to shine directly through the eyes.

The 'patient' can carry out their normal business such as reading, working, eating and knitting (whatever you're into!) while stationary in front of the box.

It is not necessary to stare at the light although it has been proved safe, it says.

The solution is simple. The down side is that light boxes are not available on the NHS and have to be bought via specialist retailers. They can be costly but they are free of VAT, when used for medical purposes.

And if you do decide to invest in your own personal sunshine kit try before you buy.

