



## BANISH THE BLUES AND LET YOUR HEART SOAR

By Beth O'Brien, Ph.D.

Many events in life can cause us to feel down: being turned away from a job you thought was certain to come through, hearing a close friend is moving away, or discovering a family member is coping with an illness. I recently experienced an emotional upset when my husband took a month long trip outside the country. Because he was traveling in a wilderness area, contact by phone or email was sporadic. I realized I had taken for granted the ease with which I could reach out to him and share the day's events or seek his opinion on important matters. I found myself feeling sad and missing him, hoping he was safe.

People often describe the experience of sadness as a slow slide down the side of a bottomless cup. Sinking low, one wonders how to begin the climb out.

While there are numerous approaches to regaining happiness, research studies have demonstrated that yoga strengthens social attachments, reduces stress and relieves depression. The practice of yoga produces endorphins, the “feel good” chemicals that support a calm and happy mood.

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Yoga poses that may help to lift your spirits include Camel (Ustrasana), a back bending pose in which you kneel on the floor, rest your hands on your pelvis and then drop back, touching hands to feet; Bridge (Sarvangasana), where you lie on the floor with knees bent and lift your hips off the floor, clasping your hands below your pelvis; and Reclining Cobblers pose (Supta Boddha Konasana). Reclining Cobblers Pose is a restorative pose. You can create this pose by placing a folded blanket on top of a bolster. Place the bolster at the base of your lower back, then lie back on the bolster, with head resting on the blanket. Bend your legs, joining the soles of the feet together. Arms relax on the floor, with palms turned up. These poses increase blood flow to the heart and are often described as heart opening poses.

Pema Chodron, a Buddhist nun and author of several books on coping with life's twists and turns, states that life circumstances are “always changing, always changing.” Likewise, our emotional states can change. We don't have to define ourselves by the mood of the moment, whether that be anger, sadness or despair.

Keeping in mind Pema Chodron's words that these emotional states do shift, I decided to pull out my yoga mat to cope with the distress of my husband being away. At the beginning of my practice, I made an intention to open to what transformed as I moved through several yoga poses. I began with an invigorating series of sun salutations: forward bending, moving deeper into the forward bend, hopping back into High Plank, dropping to the mat via Four Limbed Staff Pose (Chaturanga Dandasana), sweeping into Upward Facing Dog (Urdhva Mukha Svanasana), and then catching my breath in Downward Facing Dog (Adho Mukha Svanasana). This pause gave me a feeling of arriving home. Next, I launched into warrior poses (Virabhadrasana I, II, and III), taking strong stances even though I felt shaky inside. Warrior I pose was completed with cactus arms, bringing shoulder blades towards one another to create an open heart. My breath was deeper, my skin damp as I shook out tension and released emotion.

Towards the end of the practice, I began incorporating backbends into my routine: Locust (Salambhasana), Camel, and Bridge Pose. To complete the series, I climbed aboard a fit ball and rolled backward, legs extended, arms dangling and chest lifted toward the sky. Continuing in the backbend, supported by the ball, I hung on. I caught my reflection in the glass cabinet behind me. Seeing my face and body hanging upside down made me laugh. Yes, the world had momentarily sent me topsy turvy. But I had survived the emotional shift, and yoga brought a new momentum as feelings of contentment and steadiness returned.

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At some unexpected moment of your life, you may find yourself feeling blue. Consider turning towards yoga. Feel free to dive into your practice, listen to your feelings, and let the sadness go. You may find your spirits dancing around the rim of that cup.

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Beth O'Brien, Ph.D., is a registered Hatha Yoga teacher and licensed Psychologist. She teaches vinyasa yoga classes in Fort Collins. Are there ways yoga has made an impact on your health or your personal life? Your comments are welcome!

Email: [beth@bethobrienphd.com](mailto:beth@bethobrienphd.com)

Website: <http://bethobrienyoga.com>

