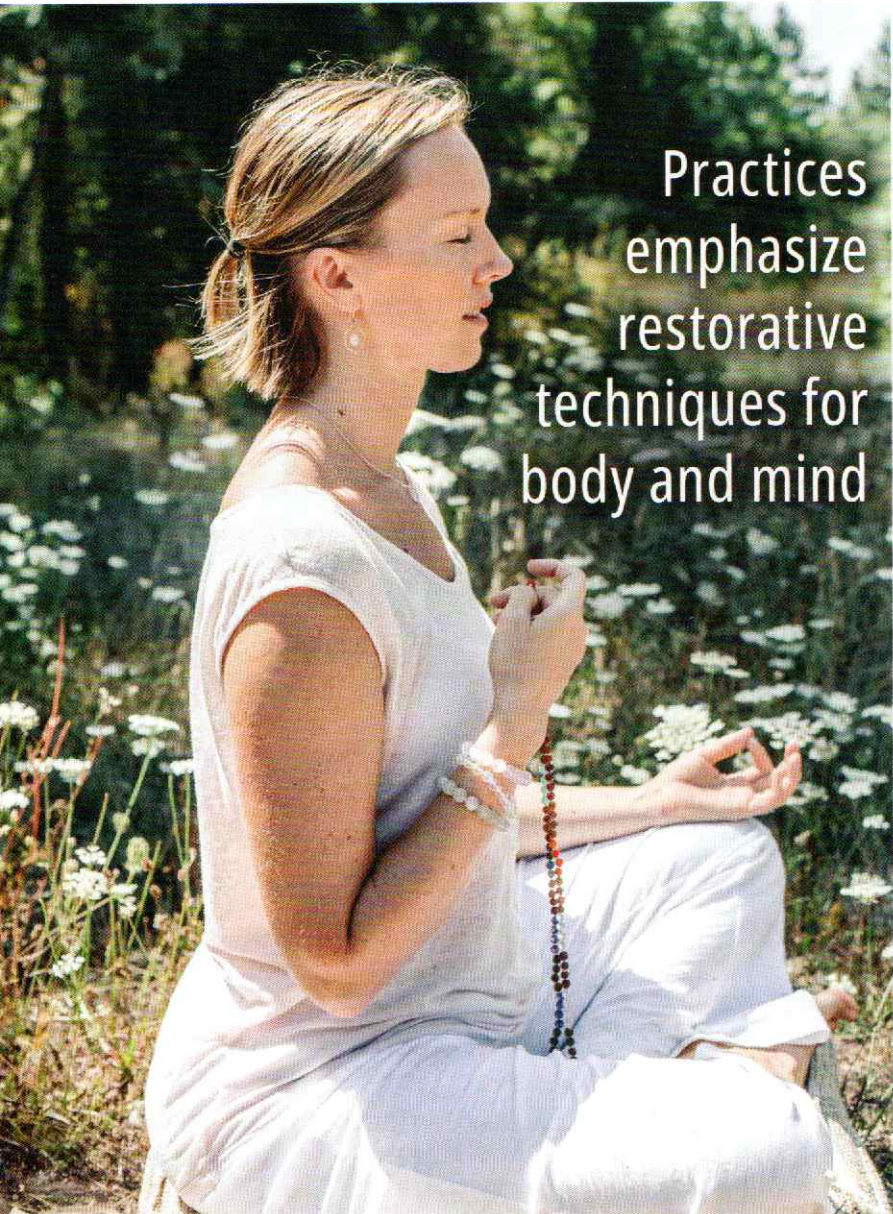


yoga for healing



Practices
emphasize
restorative
techniques for
body and mind

By Cris Cadiz

The COVID-19 pandemic will have a lasting impact on each of us. From those who became ill to heroes in personal protective equipment (PPE) on the front line and countless others who sheltered in place, we all have suffered emotional, mental, and physical trauma. How do we heal from this?

During social distancing, many found solace in nature and exercise. But outdoor activity and working out is not accessible or desirable for everyone. Yoga is another way to activate and integrate body and mind to reach a state of calm that we all want and need, both in trying times and in daily life.

Bessel van der Kolk, M.D. is a Boston-based psychiatrist, professor and author of New York Times bestseller *The Body Keeps the Score*. Dr. van der Kolk's programs at the Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health in Stockbridge, Mass., suggest that yoga can be a powerful element in healing trauma. In an interview on Kripalu.org, he states, "Our studies show that yoga is equally as beneficial — or more beneficial — than the best possible medications in alleviating traumatic stress symptoms. In the studies we did involving neuroimaging of the brain before and after regular yoga practice, we were able to show that the areas of the brain involving self-awareness get activated by doing yoga, and those are the areas that get locked out by trauma and that are needed in order to heal it."

Yoga has become extremely popular as exercise, but this ancient Indian practice is much more than twisting your limbs into pretzel-like shapes or sweating heavily in an overheated room. A common misconception is that yoga is a physical activity that requires flexibility and aims to increase strength and stamina. In fact, there are many styles of yoga that are extremely gentle, including some that require hardly any movement at all. Whatever practice you choose, yoga can be tremendously healing for body and mind.

According to Brianne Beauregard, an Ayurvedic Practitioner and Nāda Yoga teacher in



Pomfret, the Sanskrit term “yoga” — commonly translated as “union” — is actually a state you can reach where mental and emotional fluctuations cease. “You achieve stillness in your mind, so you can touch into your true nature. Some feel this as a sense of tranquility, peace, contentment or stability, but those feelings are our true essence.”

“Some people think of yoga as an activity composed of physical postures and sometimes meditation,” she continues, “but asana [the physical poses] is just one of the eight limbs of yoga... one of many avenues to reach the state of yoga.”

Yoga Nidra is a Sanskrit term meaning “yogic sleep” and is sometimes called sleep yoga. Courtney Squire offers private and small group instruction in Yoga Nidra at Unbound Glory, her bucolic farmstead in Pomfret. She started practicing yoga more than 20 years ago for stress relief. “Yoga Nidra is a less fitness-based, more energy-based, super relaxing style of yoga,” says Squire. While she studied other yoga practices, she always came back to the silent relaxation at the end, called savasana or corpse pose.

“For me, learning about Yoga Nidra was like the juice of what yoga is all about,” says Squire. “The relaxation piece was always my favorite. Why? Because it’s really good to be still, to have my mind be in a quieter place where I could disassociate from my thoughts. It felt really rejuvenating. For me, yoga is not about holding a pose for as long as you can or looking good in your yoga pants. It’s about the deeply restorative feeling of being totally connected to yourself and the world around you.”

Yoga Nidra helps calm the nervous system. Most of us experience stress in daily life. In our fast-paced culture, our “fight or flight” reaction is always turned on. The pandemic has only made this worse. “I think it’s important for people to practice some type of restorative yoga for their general well-being,” says Squire. “We’re feeling a heightened sense of stress and anxiety because of the pandemic. The only way to calm stress is to create an equal and opposite reaction, which is relaxation.”

Squire says that relaxation techniques in Yoga Nidra can help balance the endocrine system by increasing beneficial hormones (like GABA, DHEA, melatonin), and help activate the restorative brainwave states associated with REM-dreaming and deep sleep (alpha, theta, and gamma). It can also help boost the immune system, according to scientific studies that show an increase in fighter T-cells in individuals with a regular meditation practice. “Yoga Nidra uses a unique combination of alert awareness, breathing techniques, sound vibrations, visualizations, affirmations and deep relaxation to guide you into sleep-like brainwave states that are extremely restorative for our nervous systems, immune function, and hormonal balance,” she says. “Forty-five minutes of Yoga Nidra is so deeply restorative it is the equivalent of three hours of deep sleep.”

Squire suggests Yoga Nidra may be an easier place to start with meditation because it is a guided practice. “You can’t do it wrong,” she says. To practice Yoga Nidra, you just get comfortable -sitting, reclining, even lying in bed. Then you stay as still as possible and listen to the instructor’s voice. “People often think they fall asleep, but they still come back to the sound of my voice. Even if you do fall asleep you still reap the benefits,” she says. “I think people get meditation wrong in thinking it’s quieting the mind. To me, meditation helps you observe the mind. You recognize your thoughts are separate from who you are and that you can disconnect from them.”

LEFT: Brienne Beauregard participated in a kirtan in Pune, India. Photo by Bobbi Jo Minor

ABOVE: Jessica Fontaine is the owner/instructor of Ananda Yoga Studio. Submitted photo



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Other resources:

Free mantra project & resources

MantrasforPeace.com

To find local Kirtan events (chanting & singing)

<https://www.facebook.com/CTkirtan/>

Mystic Yoga Shala, Mystic

Yoga Nidra, meditation

www.mysticyogashala.com/

Raven's Wing Yoga, Branford

Yoga Nidra, restorative yoga

ravenswingyoga.com

Niantic Yoga Studio, Niantic

"Blanket yoga" (aka Svaroopa®)

www.nianticyoga.com/

Tao Vitality Center for Optimal Health, Hebron

Steve Powers, Svaroopa® Yoga

www.taovitality.com/

Jess Fontaine is owner and instructor of Ananda Yoga studio in Woodstock Valley, where students can practice Svaroopa® Yoga and meditation. Jess uses yoga as a daily practice to stay flexible in her body and her mind and as a complement to other activities. "More physical practices, like the popular Vinyasa or flow yoga, can be really enjoyable but it's not the style that I teach," she says.

Svaroopa® Yoga specifically focuses on releasing tension in the spine. "It's a practice that most people come to because they are in pain," says Fontaine. "This is often physical but it can also be mental, such as stress, depression, and anxiety. People often try it for an injury or back pain, but they find that over time it takes care of a lot of other things they didn't pay attention to or know they needed."

Svaroopa® Yoga does use physical postures but it is often described as restorative and gentle. The practice is aided by props such as blankets and blocks to assist with the poses. "We might stay on the floor for a while, so it does not move at a rapid pace, but we do eventually do more complicated and challenging postures," explains Fontaine. Svaroopa® Yoga incorporates asana (physical poses), breath practices (pranayama) and meditation. According to Fontaine, those three things all help stimulate your parasympathetic nervous system, which leads to improved sleep, clarity of mind, even better digestion. "You decompress your spine and your mind."

"The pandemic has triggered our fight or flight responses. There's so much happening every day. It's draining, even if you're not going anywhere," Fontaine says. Svaroopa® yoga can benefit anyone; you don't have to be in pain. She describes how after a year off of any type of cycling activity—just daily yoga—she returned to a spin class and found that her stamina and endurance were fine. "I was able to improve without ever training."

Fontaine can also teach modified forms for those with physical limitations. She recalls a client who could not get down on the floor when she first started. After just two private classes of breathing, guided relaxation, and one modified physical pose, her client burst into tears because she was able to get down and back up without assistance. "It was an incredible moment as a teacher to see a profound change in a very short amount of time," Fontaine recalls. "She



was able to overcome the fear—which was a very physical thing—and start moving in a way she didn't think was possible.”

As with many yoga instructors, the pandemic pushed Fontaine to try and reach more people to teach her style of yoga. She is now offering videos on her website for quick ways to reduce anxiety. “These are bite-size, 15-minute experiences for those who don't feel like they have the time to unwind.”

Brianne Beauregard in Pomfret teaches a subtle and esoteric form of yoga, recognized throughout the world but not well known in New England. Nāda Yoga can be translated as “union through sound” and is based on the idea that the cosmos and everything in it (including us) consists of sound vibrations, or *nadas*. “Music is the universal language,” Beauregard says.

Nāda Yoga uses musical and sound-based practices that help you experience a deeply meditative or peaceful state. These practices include vocal or meditative toning (repetition of extended vowel sounds), chanting (Sanskrit mantra repetition), *kīrtan* (call and response song or chant), *rāga* (Indian classical music), *sargam* (singing the notes), and more. According to Beauregard, “Nāda Yoga is the ancient spiritual art and science of inner transformation through sound and tone.”

She explains that creating internal vibrations, through sound (chanting/singing/toning) has many physiological benefits. These include stimulating the neurological and endocrine systems through organs such as the pituitary and hypothalamus, located near the roof of the mouth, the vagus nerve, and lymph nodes. Anyone who has performed music, no matter what the quality, knows that it releases endorphins and helps alleviate tension within minutes.

A mantra is a collection of sounds or words repeated over and over either out loud or silently as a form of meditation. “The repetition of Sanskrit mantra allows us to decondition our minds by breaking up unconscious thought patterns or deeply held beliefs about ourselves and



the world,” says Beauregard. Although all yoga practices (*asana*/physical poses, *pranayama*/breathwork, and meditation) benefit the nervous system, sound-based practices support the mental/emotional state in particular.

“I think the goal of all yoga practices, whether its meditation, *pranayama*, chanting, or *asana*, is to develop awareness of our thoughts, mind, body, actions,” says Beauregard. “Once we become aware, that's when change is possible and we become more compassionate humans. This is the greatest gift, that loving awareness, the ability to watch and consider before the knee-jerk reaction. These reflective practices help us understand who we are and how our beliefs have an impact on our current reality and the people around us.”

COVID-19 has deeply affected all of us, but it might have a silver lining. “Our normal patterns have been disrupted on many levels, from finances to daily routines, to missing the comfort of physical touch,” says Beauregard. “Change can be beautiful but all change is preceded by chaos. The pandemic might be more beneficial than we imagine.” It may show us that we can find peace in the most trying times. Any of the yoga practices help bring us into the present moment, to remove ourselves from the whirling thoughts of past and future. They help us create a routine and stability for chaotic times. And they can remain tools for healing and finding tranquility for the rest of our lives. ■

TOP LEFT: Brianne Beauregard chants a Sanskrit mantra. *Photo by Cassie Ballard*

BOTTOM LEFT: Courtney Squire is a practitioner of Yoga Nidra at Unbound Glory in Pomfret. *Submitted photo*

ABOVE: The Ananda Yoga Studio in Woodstock Valley is ready for devotees of Svaroopa® Yoga.