yoga for emotional balance

simple practices to help relieve anxiety and depression

bo forbes, PsyD
Five Ways to Transform Your Emotional Patterns

In the mid-1980s, I began a doctoral program in biopsychology at the University of Chicago. My primary interest was the relationship between the mind and body. At about the same time, a pioneer psychologist at Harvard University was risking his reputation to explore the benefits of meditation on the mind and brain. Decades later, we crossed paths. By this point, Daniel Goleman’s reputation was not only intact, it had flourished. Now a world-renowned author, he’d just published his latest book, Social Intelligence. Its topic was emotional contagion, our wired-in tendency to catch other people’s positive and negative emotions. This interested me deeply, because I’d seen firsthand how Restorative Yoga helped people with one aspect of emotional balance: the ability to weather the emotional storms of loved ones without getting blown off course.

When we spoke, with great anticipation, I asked Daniel to name his top-three practices for emotional immunity. He immediately mentioned meditation, and cited many promising MRI studies on brain changes in long-term meditators. The passion in his voice stemmed both from the research and from his own long-standing meditation practice. But yoga, to my surprise, didn’t even make his list. When I asked Daniel’s opinion on yoga for emotional well-being, his answer caught me off guard: “Yoga is really just a
form of physical exercise,” he said. “Yoga in the East—now that’s a different story.” Daniel was referring to classical yoga, which is centered on the practice of meditation. Its principle text, and one of yoga’s most widely read and respected works, is the Yoga Sutras, which mention the physical postures of yoga only three times. “The physical practice of yoga,” Daniel said, “has one purpose: to get the body ready to sit in meditation.” I asked what he thought about Restorative Yoga as a meditative practice. Yet at that point, Restorative Yoga had garnered very little attention here in the West compared with physically challenging forms of yoga. So, like many others in both the meditation and yoga communities, Dan hadn’t yet heard of it. I described Restorative Yoga and talked about its ability to quiet the mind, balance the nervous system, and relax the body. “This sounds amazing,” he said. “Why don’t more people know about it?” Dan’s question would ring in my ears for many months. Why didn’t more people know about Restorative Yoga?

Since that conversation, I’ve heard many others in the Buddhist and meditation traditions express similar reservations about yoga. They feel that yoga bears little resemblance to a meditative practice. And in part, yoga deserves its poor stature in these communities. Here in the West, its reputation as a physical practice far eclipses its standing as a mental or contemplative one. Yoga has become a strength- and flexibility-building activity similar to exercise, and approximately sixteen million Americans practice it.1

Certainly, we can celebrate the physical practice of yoga on its own merit. It has a positive influence on nearly all the major systems of the body, including cardiovascular, circulatory, nervous, lymphatic, immune, muscular, skeletal, and endocrine. But yoga as a physical practice also increases brain levels of GABA (gamma-aminobutyric acid), an inhibitory neurotransmitter involved in anxiety and depression.2 This is partly why it relieves stress and makes us feel less anxious and less depressed. The physical practice of yoga is also just enjoyable. It just feels good to move, to connect with our body, to become more conscious of our breath.

Although we can practice “physical yoga” and see emotional benefits, we can also use yoga’s therapeutic elements mindfully to
create emotional well-being. We can infuse the physical practice with therapeutic elements (such as slow transitions, mindful attention to alignment, and deeper breath). We can also supplement the physical practice with more meditative ones (regulated breathing, restorative postures, focused awareness of direct experience, and meditation). To do so successfully, however, we may need to adjust our tendency to overlook these subtle, meditative, and therapeutic aspects of yoga in favor of the more physical ones. From the time I first started teaching Restorative Yoga, I encouraged my students to embrace it as a stand-alone practice. Most, however, would only do it under one of two conditions: after a vigorous active practice (in which case they’d done their “workout” and could rationalize that they deserved it) or in response to an injury, illness, or stressful period (when they needed help or couldn’t do an active practice).

Yet no matter the catalyst, I’ve seen remarkable things happen to people when they try Restorative Yoga. Those who did so after an active Vinyasa class experienced increased flexibility and energy. One man reported that his hips were more flexible than they were after attempting for years to open them through his active yoga practice. Those who tried it after an injury healed more quickly. A college student even repaired a foot fracture that her doctors said would need surgery. Those who tried Restorative Yoga for anxiety and depression felt emotionally stronger and more resilient. And several people told me that practicing late in the evening caused their sleeping to improve significantly. Some people have even brought restorative postures into their psychotherapy sessions and reported more transformative insight and change. One woman said that bringing restorative postures into her therapy helped her become aware of the endless stream of mental chatter and stories with which she’d hid her deeper issues. Once my students experienced Restorative Yoga’s remarkable effects on the mind, body, and emotions, most made it a regular part of their practice.

There’s a reason why I didn’t choose active yoga postures for this book. The yoga tools featured here combine mental and contemplative practices with body-based ones. These tools (breathing exercises, focused awareness, and Restorative Yoga) have a stronger
therapeutic influence on emotional healing than either mental or physical practices alone. They also impact the body directly, while most traditional meditative practices do so more indirectly. These tools become especially powerful because the nervous system is in the body. The breath is in the body. The present moment is in the body. The mind is in the body. We even filter emotional experience through the body. Combining yoga’s meditative practices with the native wisdom of the body makes our mental and physical work more integrative, and amplifies its benefits.

Someday, the practice of yoga in the West will emphasize yoga’s meditative elements as strongly as its physical ones. The mindfulness and meditation communities may then perceive more common ground with yoga. These fields could even collaborate to bring more evolution to the mind and body together. Until then, yoga therapy can point the way toward an exploration of yoga as a valid form of body-based meditation.

We’ve examined the roots of emotional imbalance in the mind, body, and nervous system. We’ve looked at how practicing old behaviors prevents change. We’ve also explored how the careful sequencing of therapeutic tools helps emotional healing happen in a more progressive, integrated way. Now we’re ready to take an intimate look at the five building blocks for lasting healing:

1. Balancing the nervous system
2. Regulating the breath
3. Cultivating direct experience
4. Quieting the mind
5. Changing our personal narratives

Notice that none of these elements involves a vigorous physical yoga practice—not even a Downward Dog pose. Each of these elements draws from the more meditative and therapeutic aspects of yoga. If you’re used to a purely physical practice, or on the other hand to not doing much with your body at all, this may necessitate a shift in the way you approach yoga and emotional health. Yet once you embrace these subtle healing practices and witness how well they create change, you’ll be able to re-create this change in other areas of your life.
These five elements build beautifully in a progressive sequence; each one becomes a foundation for the next. These elements help reduce our emotional reactivity. They restabilize us after strong emotional reactions. They build on one another well. They lend themselves well to repetition (or neuroplasticity) and thus to permanent positive changes in the mind and body. And once we’ve begun to internalize them, we can use them in any active yoga practice, psychotherapy session, or life situation to become more centered and emotionally healthy.

1. Balancing the Nervous System

The nervous system excels at neuroplasticity, at building experience. It acts as a foundation for the development of the other four therapeutic elements of yoga. The nervous system is an emotional intermediary; it filters all of our emotional experiences. Nervous system balance requires a kind of emotional elasticity: the ability to react when necessary, but not overreact, and the ability to return fluidly to a healthy emotional baseline. So nervous system balance, then, is a prerequisite for emotional balance.

Your Own Inner Calming System

As I’ve described, your nervous system responds in much the same way to strong emotions as it does to acute stress: by going into overdrive. In anxiety and depression, the fight-flight-freeze branch of the nervous system speeds up with very little prompting. Normally, the relaxation branch of the nervous system puts the brakes on this response. But in both anxiety and depression, it doesn’t slow things down quickly or efficiently enough. This creates a chronic fight-flight-freeze or stress response.

Imagine that your emergency response system turns on all the lights in your house (your nervous system). From half a block away, you can see the lights blazing. While you wouldn’t want to waste energy by constantly leaving all the lights on all the time, you wouldn’t want to turn them all completely off, either. To interact with others and respond to daily life, you need to be a little reactive; you need some lights on. But are you activated and anxious
Five Ways to Transform Your Emotional Patterns

or depressed most of the time? To conserve energy and preserve your health, you need a “dimmer switch.” Then you can control the lighting.

 Luckily, your brain has a built-in dimmer switch: the parasympathetic (rest-and-digest) system. While the sympathetic nervous system gets you agitated, the parasympathetic system calms you. It lowers heart rate, blood pressure, respiration rate, and stress hormones. It increases digestion and strengthens immune function. In contrast to the fight-flight-freeze response, the rest-and-digest system conserves rather than expends your energy, and revitalizes rather than depletes you. When the lights (your sympathetic system’s arousal levels) are too intense, your parasympathetic branch dims them and calms you down. It acts as “mood lighting.”

 While it might sound as though these two systems work against each other, that’s not the case; the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems actually function in synergy. When the sympathetic is in charge, you react quickly to things and feel more anxious or depressed. When the parasympathetic system dominates, you overreact less and feel more calm and emotionally grounded. When these two systems are working together, they’re like partners: they create a state of dynamic equilibrium and exchange.

 At a workshop not long ago, a young man raised his hand to announce that he didn’t have a parasympathetic nervous system. Although his fellow participants responded with good-natured laughter, he had a point: sometimes it can feel as though, like missing an arm or a leg, you were born without a rest-and-digest system, without the capacity to relax. But no matter how long you’ve felt anxious or depressed, you were born with your rest-and-digest system, or dimmer switch, intact. This means that you have an innate capacity for relaxation, which is the foundation of emotional balance. You just may not have used your dimmer switch—your parasympathetic system’s relaxation response—enough to wire its pattern in more strongly than your habitual anxiety or depression one.

 To become more emotionally balanced, you first need to learn how to access your parasympathetic system in nonstressful situations. This is important; it strengthens neural pathways to relaxation and calm when you’re not emotionally stirred up. With
repetition, these new pathways become stronger, more mature. Then they’re able to compete with the less healthy, more reactive ones. With practice, you learn the trick of accessing and using your dimmer switch when you experience an emotional reaction. Then you become like Hansel and Gretel: you can leave a trail of “emotional bread crumbs” to help you use these pathways in emotionally charged situations such as a knock-down, drag-out family fight or a difficult breakup. This will help you find your way out of the woods and back to emotional balance in nearly any intense situation. Eventually you’ll become proficient at it: you’ll be able to increase arousal levels (when you want more response) and decrease them (when you need more calm).

You might be wondering how to do this. How do you engage your emotional dimmer switch? The key is relaxation, an inherent part of breathing exercises and Restorative Yoga.

**Relaxation**

For many people, the term *relaxation* connotes “chilling out,” taking time to do nothing. The command “Relax!” is now a trendy way to tell someone to give you a break or to “chill out.” But chilling out doesn’t necessarily mean that you’re relaxed. While you’re watching TV, for example, your body can be at ease while your mind and nervous system remain highly engaged. This combination—relaxed body, amped-up mind—echoes mixed anxiety and depression. It actually discourages relaxation and healing.

True relaxation is deeply therapeutic, and involves muscular relaxation in the body and quieting, or lowered emotional reactivity, in the mind. Your brain waves, a measure of your brain’s activity level, are slower during relaxation than during active wakefulness, yet more active than in sleep. This state helps you focus your awareness on an element of the breath, a part of the body, or a pattern of thought or emotion. Restorative Yoga is an ideal way to create true relaxation.

**Restorative Yoga**

Here’s how Restorative Yoga works: While muscular tension activates the sympathetic nervous system, Restorative Yoga uses props
in each pose to minimize muscle tension and maximize physical comfort and relaxation. While sensory stimulation (light, sound, touch, and so forth) activates the fight-flight-freeze response, Restorative Yoga is done in a reasonably warm, dimly lit, and quiet room to reduce sensory stimulation and keep the nervous system calm. While sitting and standing postures elevate heart rate and blood pressure (which can heighten nervous system arousal), Restorative Yoga postures keep the head at or below the level of the heart to reduce heart rate and blood pressure and quiet the nervous system. While a longer inhalation and breathing through the mouth can trigger hyperventilation (which increases heart rate and mental activity), Restorative Yoga incorporates nasal breathing (and in particular, a longer exhalation) to lower heart rate and nervous system activity.

Years ago, I participated in a television series on alternative health. The show focused on Restorative Yoga for insomnia. The producer asked me an interesting question, one I’ve heard many times since: “What’s the difference between Restorative Yoga and sleep? Why can’t you just take a nap with a pillow under your head to balance your emotions?” If it were this easy, I sometimes tell people, we’d all be emotionally balanced.

Restorative Yoga is different from sleep. Psychologist and sleep researcher Roger Cole also teaches yoga in California. As he points out, during ordinary (non–rapid eye movement) sleep, brain waves slow to unconsciousness while the body relaxes. Yet the body’s relaxation can be less profound when you’re asleep than when you’re in a state of true relaxation. Restorative Yoga allows your nervous system to balance and your body to relax while your brain remains in a state of alert observation. This state is helpful; it allows you to react less intensely to your thoughts and emotions and to regain your balance more
quickly after they pass. Because Restorative Yoga involves the body as well as the mind, its meditative and relaxing benefits can be embodied rather than just mentally understood. As an example, Suzanne, a yoga therapy client, utilized Restorative Yoga to move out of her constant “fight mode” and into a calmer place in her relationship with her mind and body, and with her boyfriend.

Suzanne frequently found herself enraged at her boyfriend. Something he’d do, which she’d later admit was minor, always prompted it. Coming home a little later than he promised, going out with the guys, or talking with his mouth full inspired in Suzanne a full-blown case of what a friend calls “Sudden Repulsion Syndrome.” Without warning, she’d become sickened by everything he did, and she’d lash out in rage. Inevitably, her anger would shadow her to work, the gym, and home again. Each time her nervous system would begin to relax, she’d kick it back into high gear, inventing arguments with him in her head until she was trembling with fury. While this took its toll on both of them, Suzanne paid the higher price. Her boyfriend usually let go of the conflict within a couple of hours; it left his mind and body. But Suzanne couldn’t put the brakes on. She would spend the next two days marinating in anger. These episodes produced stomach pain significant enough on occasion to bring her to the emergency room.

Although Suzanne recognized that her constant anger and anxiety were making her sick and ruining her relationship with her boyfriend, this insight hadn’t changed a thing. But in yoga therapy, Suzanne learned to bring awareness to the sequence of events in her anxiety cycle, starting with the trigger (her boyfriend acting in a way she couldn’t control). She noted the hyperactive and worried thoughts that indicate mental anxiety: Why does he have to do that? I’ve asked him not to a thousand times. He’ll probably leave the house without saying good-bye, which he knows I hate. . . . She also observed the strong sense of internal pressure (a racing heart, fidgeting, pacing back and forth, and shortness of breath) that signaled agitation in her body. She didn’t try to “think” her way out of this pattern by using positive thoughts. Instead, she added therapeutic yoga techniques to interrupt this cycle as early as pos-
sible. She addressed the agitation in her mind and nervous system through breathing: When her thoughts would begin to accelerate, she’d practice 1:2 Breathing (page 72) to calm her mind. Then she’d choose a pose from the anxiety-balancing sequence (see chapter 8) to relax and slow down her body. With practice, Suzanne experienced only a mild irritation with her boyfriend and was able to manage it better.

2. Regulating the Breath

The second way to balance our emotions is to breathe fully and deeply. When we regulate our breathing and make it slower and deeper, the rest-and-digest system becomes more dominant. Conversely, when we don’t regulate our breathing, and breathe shallowly, the nervous system moves into hyperarousal mode—just what we don’t want.

Conscious breathing is essential to emotional balance. Rapid and shallow breathing, which most people do, hinders the body’s response to emotion and stress. It slows the circulation of oxygen in the brain, muscles, and tissue. It constricts blood vessels and reduces blood to the brain and muscles; over time, this can lead to heart disease, stroke, and other illnesses. Rapid, shallow breathers usually breathe through their mouths; this stimulates hyperventilation and activates the nervous system. Even when someone feels emotionally balanced, rapid and shallow breathing can trigger a bout of anxiety and stress. Rapid and shallow breathing contributes to the elevated nervous system arousal we see in both anxiety and depression.

In contrast, slow and deep breathing improves the body’s response to emotional stress. It increases the circulation of oxygen in the brain, muscles, and tissue. Slow, deep breathing dilates blood vessels and improves digestion. Slow and deep breathers breathe through their nose; this helps deepen the breath and reduce hyperventilation which, in turn, helps the nervous system to relax. Even when someone feels emotionally off center, just breathing slowly and deeply can stimulate the relaxation response, reducing anxiety
and stress. Slow, deep, regulated breathing balances the nervous system and quiets the mind, which helps develop healthier emotional patterns.

William, one of my students, found breathing to be a big challenge. He’d spent most of his adult life battling depression and anxiety. Each morning he’d awaken to find himself covered by a blanket of lethargy so intense that he could barely get out of bed. His mind, however, constantly worried. Like many people, William breathed in and out through his mouth, quite shallowly. It took two months of twice-weekly sessions to train William to breathe through his nose. When he got the hang of it, he experienced a dramatic increase in mental calm, and yet the restorative poses energized his body. He felt a sense of hope and possibility that he hadn’t felt in twenty-five years.

One of the best and easiest ways to regulate your breathing is to breathe in and out through your nose. Nasal breathing is deeper than mouth breathing. In nasal breathing, the exhale is naturally longer than the inhale. This lowers heart rate, which in turn calms the nervous system. Surprising as it may sound, deep nasal breathing helps you worry less. If nasal breathing alone, which makes the exhale slightly longer, helps the mind and nervous system so much, imagine what happens when you make the exhale considerably longer, which you do during 1:2 Breathing.

In a recent teacher-training session, I had my students experiment directly with the breath’s influence on the mind and nervous system. I instructed them to choose a partner and discuss something stressful for five minutes. Soon, they began to fidget. Their eyes grew more activated, approximating the “Olive Oyl” alertness of anxiety. Each student rated his or her level of anxiety, which rose dramatically during the five-minute discussions. I then guided them through several rounds of 1:2 Breathing, with the exhale twice as long as the inhale. After several minutes, everyone reported a dramatic drop in anxiety. This made sense, but I wanted to know more. If slow, deep breathing could reverse an episode of anxiety already in progress, would those calming benefits continue if anxiety were reintroduced?
To explore this further, I had my students return to their 1:2 breathing pattern and revisit their stressful thoughts. Most reported that although their breathing remained steady and they exhaled twice as long as they inhaled, something strange happened: they simply couldn’t muster up the same level of anxiety they’d had before. The few who said they had gotten worried suddenly realized that they’d lost the 1:2 breathing ratio. In other words, 1:2 breathing creates a mental state largely incompatible with anxiety. The next time you feel deeply anxious or stressed out, try 1:2 Breathing, or let your exhale be longer than your inhale. You’ll find yourself calmer within minutes.

Breathwork, the practice of regulating your breath, is a powerful tool. It isn’t just one of those things you’d do in a formal yoga practice or on those rare occasions when you have some extra time on your hands. Like Restorative Yoga, breathwork is immediately and directly helpful in lowering your emotional reactivity. B.K.S. Iyengar, who founded the Iyengar style of yoga, practiced several hours of breathwork daily, well into his nineties, because he experienced its benefits firsthand and witnessed them in his students. You can practice breathing exercises at work to help manage your stress. You can use breathwork at home to help you be a less emotionally reactive parent or partner. Or try 1:2 Breathing (see page 72) if you have insomnia and want to fall asleep more quickly. You can even do breathwork in the middle of a fight, when it can calm you down and help you generate more empathy for a potential “emotional enemy.” Focusing on the breath also has a fringe benefit: it helps you reside in the present moment, and not the past or future.

3. Cultivating Direct Experience

The third way to change emotional patterns is to cultivate direct experience of the present moment and of your body. You might be wondering what not being in the moment (or in your body) could possibly have to do with anxiety and depression. Or how being in the moment (or in the body) can contribute to emotional balance. As a client once commented testily, “I don’t have the time or luxury to
get all ‘Zen’ about my depression.” But because of its close relationship to anxiety and depression, present-moment awareness isn’t, as my client implied, a New Age concept. Emotional balance has a lot to do with how centered we are in the body and how closely we pay attention to what’s happening right now, in the moment.

**Becoming Present in the Body**

Both types of awareness, body awareness and present-moment awareness, are intimately connected. The body is our best teacher on the subject of present-moment awareness. It doesn’t worry about the future or fixate on the past. It doesn’t concern itself with how it looks or question whether it is loved. The body just is. When we’re out of our body, we’re also often “out of time,” or not in the present moment—since being in the body and being connected to the present go hand in hand.

Think for a moment how easy it is to go through an entire day not really feeling your body or being aware of it. Usually, when you’re not in your body, you’re in your head or mind instead. But here’s the thing: anxiety and depression have roots in the body. So when you don’t inhabit the body, it’s hard to change these patterns.

For Cameron, one of my students, yoga was a revelation. A music professor in his midsixties, Cameron had difficulty being in his body. He was extremely intelligent, and lived much more in his mind. As a result, Cameron had trouble identifying physical sensations such as fatigue, pain, or relaxation. He often mixed up the right and left sides of his body, or had trouble moving an arm or a leg as instructed in yoga class. Sometimes, Cameron had minor accidents while writing symphonies in his head, and crashed into furniture or broke things. He gamely endured his physical awkwardness and occasional falls in class. Within a year, he began to see rewards from his persistence. He started to experience his body in a different way: not as something that was aging or betraying him, but as an instrument of ease and grace. Every month or so, during an active practice, his eyes would open wide and he’d look at me with a huge grin, astonished to see himself doing something new. As hard as it was for him to grow older, his blossoming friendship with his body seemed to ease the process of aging. Cameron stayed
centered in his body more often, whether he was having a grace-
ful experience or a clumsy one, a contented day or a difficult one.
This direct presence in his body also helped his mental outlook. He
softened his tendency to beat himself up for nearly everything. His
bouts of melancholy and artist’s block grew much less frequent.
Cameron learned that just connecting to direct experience—even
in a not-so-very-young, not-so-very-graceful, not-so-very-comfort-
able body—built a foundation for emotional health.

Nervous system imbalance and stress create tension and pain in
the body, which makes the body more likely to hold on to difficult
emotional patterns. The chronic nervous system imbalance and
stress we experience in anxiety and depression can make the body
feel like a battleground. Naturally, we don’t want to inhabit the
battleground of the anxious or depressed body fully. This starts out
as a protective mechanism: the body feels pain, discomfort. Focus-
ing on direct experience can temporarily amplify this discomfort.
So to escape, we try to “leave” the body, to dissociate. We draw
our awareness right out of the body and focus it elsewhere. When
people have a serious accident or endure tremendous physical pain,
you might hear them say afterward that they floated outside their
body or went “somewhere else.”

In anxiety and depression, dissociation is a common strategy de-
dsigned to protect us from difficult feelings. Yet this strategy doesn’t
work so well. It ceases to be a self-protective, short-term emergency
reaction and can become a self-abandoning, long-term one. Disso-
ciating from the body has major consequences. Not being in the
body prevents us from actually feeling, which is the first step in de-
veloping emotional balance. And not being in the body means that
we miss the feeling of victory, the sense of strength and belief in
ourselves that come from being present with and working through
painful emotions. What’s more, not being in the body keeps us from
having and repeating new, positive experiences. So if we’re not in
the body when we practice yoga, we won’t integrate the energy and
expansiveness we’d find in a depression-lifting practice, or the calm
and grounding we’d encounter in an anxiety-balancing one. What
happens then? These new sensations leak away, replaced by the
very discomfort we hoped to avoid. Even though it starts out as
a protective mechanism, dissociation usually makes things worse by alienating us from ourselves. At the same time, suffering from anxiety, depression, or trauma can cause people to get used to not being in their body. If this sounds like you, or you haven’t been able to be present in your body for a long time, you may find it at first uncomfortable to reconnect. For this reason, the exercises in each chapter of part 1 of this book guide you through that process in a gradual, yet progressive way.

If we’re not present in our body, we can’t lay down the building blocks for emotional change. Radha, a student who endured painful war trauma and suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, recently approached me after class to ask for a referral. Thinking she meant for psychotherapy, I began to tell her of the psychotherapists I know who work well with trauma. “Oh no,” she told me. “Been there, done that. It helped. But I don’t want to talk about my experiences anymore. I just want to work with my body.” Since practicing yoga, she told me, she’d begun to feel a hint of peace, and wanted to continue her internal “cease-fire.” She knew it would be painful, but she felt that the road to healing actually wound into and through her body.

Whether our pain is physical or mental, acute or chronic, we can learn to anchor ourselves in direct experience of the body. Doing so rewards us. From direct experience, we learn to listen to the body and hear what it needs. For example, the constant tension we feel in the company of people we care about may signal a need for time alone. The abdominal tension we have every time we enter our office may signal the need for a new job. The contagious effects of our fights with loved ones may tell us that we really desire less combative relationships, or more compassion. The body may even crave a few minutes of deep breathing or time spent relaxing in a restorative pose. Through our direct experience, we begin to pay attention, and we learn. What would happen if you inhabited and listened to your body? What do you think it would say to you?

The exercises in the first part of this book are a great opportunity to experience the instructive nature of direct body experience. As you do these exercises, you’ll encounter sensations, both pleasant and unpleasant. Try to stay present with them. You can focus on the
breath, which is neither positive nor negative. You can focus on a part of your body, which is also neither good nor bad. You can even use your breath to channel difficult emotional experiences through your body. You don’t need to process or mentally understand what happens in the body or why. All your body requires of you is presence, and allowing. When you cultivate direct experience of your body no matter what’s happening, you develop friendliness toward it. Then, when things get really tough, such as in situations of extreme emotional pain, your body becomes an ally.

**Becoming Rooted in the Moment**

Staying rooted in direct experience of the moment can be a challenge. We tend to treat time as an adversary; we can never get enough of it. We race against it, and try to bend it to our will. And the way we relate to time affects our emotional well-being. In an anxiety pattern, awareness typically hooks on to the future and not the here and now. We’re likely to spend considerable energy worrying about things that haven’t happened yet: *If I don’t come home on time, is she going to freak out again? What if I can’t fall asleep tonight? Where should I go for lunch today—and do I have time to get there and back?* We may also interpret ordinary events as signs of impending danger. When we dwell on the future in a negative way, we “rehearse” anxiety. We create more of it.

In depression, awareness gets stuck in the quicksand of the past more often than it stays centered in the present. We tend to revisit and replay, over and over, painful things that have already happened. *Why did he leave me? What’s wrong with me? Why did I have to say such a stupid thing? I’m sure I just drove him away.* We may filter our experiences with negativity and pessimism. The tendency to obsess about the past and focus on the negative repeats our depression pattern. It also brings more negativity, more suffering, into the future.

How can yoga help? Sure, it’s possible to practice yoga and still fixate on the future or obsess about the past. Yet *being present* is a central focus of yoga. Yoga invites us to be present in several ways. It brings us right into our mind and emotions, just as they are this very moment. It links us with our breath, just as it is now.
It connects us with our body, no matter what shape or form it takes at present.

Not long ago Willa, a regular Restorative Yoga student, approached me at the beginning of class to say she wasn’t sure if she should be there at all. Breathlessly, she told me that she’d just had a breast biopsy earlier that day. She was filled with apprehension. Should she just come back, Willa wondered, after she got the results? I encouraged her to stay, and alerted my assistants to have a box of Kleenex on hand in case she needed them. But after ten minutes of restless settling in, she “dropped in” to her body and appeared to be at peace. Willa moved very little, staying in one pose for most of her practice. After class she came up, flushed with excitement. “I never realized before,” she said, “how quickly Restorative Yoga helps me let go of what’s going on in the outside world!” Willa practiced restorative poses every day throughout her ordeal, which included another minor procedure. She did this not to forget what was happening in her life, but to stay centered. She wanted to build a sense of inner calm that would remain steady, no matter what the rest of her life held.

Yoga gives you a task—focusing—that’s all-consuming. So all-consuming that it can interrupt, as it did for Willa, your preoccupation with the past or future. When you root yourself in the moment, and in your body, something else happens: you uproot your focus from anxiety and depression. You have an embodied experience of . . . being not anxious or not depressed! The body and mind remember this sensation; each time it occurs, you strengthen the healthier (not anxious and not depressed) pattern.

When I first began to do yoga therapy, I wondered if this direct experience of the moment and the body would be accessible to everyone. Could people with chronic anxiety and depression practice it and benefit? Could older people, who tend to dwell more in the past? I watched my father, who began yoga at the age of eighty, to see how the “direct experience” part of the practice impacted him. For my dad, the phrase being in the moment wouldn’t have entered a conversation. He thought it was New Age jargon, and definitely not the kind of thing that could help him. After he started
yoga, though, I noted how his relationship with time changed. Dad became happier, even more engaged with life than before. He found enjoyment in the moment: monitoring the daily arguments and flight patterns of sparrows outside his window, supervising the browning of his sourdough bread in the toaster oven, watching clouds trek across the sky, or scanning, with a magnifying glass, baby pictures of his daughter and his grandson for similarities. The more connected to the moment he was, the more upbeat and positive he became. Being in the moment also helped Dad to be more present in his body. He could describe physical sensations more clearly, and access parts of his body through yoga that he couldn’t before, such as his hamstrings. More importantly, connecting with his direct experience helped Dad navigate his physical challenges with grace.

Dad’s ability to be in the present taught me about myself. Often, I’d budget a certain amount of time for his yoga sessions or for spending time together. I’d try to fit these visits into a part of my day, rushing to get to him and rushing out to get to someplace else. But there was no way to hurry him: a yoga class or a visit sitting outside together, sharing the *New York Times* and eating ice cream, took as long it took. Dad so immersed himself in his present moment experience that he lost track of time. Some days, this made me anxious. I’d think: *How will I get my work done on time? How far behind will this put me?* Almost every visit, I overextended my “allotted time” with him. Yet each time, I’d return to work to find myself more at peace, more able to accomplish what I needed. This gave me unexpected emotional benefits: for one thing, a greater sense of well-being. For another, a more relaxed and deeper connection to myself. Spending time with older people, young children, or in nature has this same effect: it yokes us to the present, which is really where it’s at.

Balancing the nervous system, deepening the breath, and cultivating awareness of our direct body-centered and present-moment experience all build emotional balance. Surprisingly, they can also help quiet the mind. How does this work, and what’s the mechanism by which it happens?
4. Quieting the Mind

The fourth way to change emotional patterns is to quiet the mind. In breathing and restorative practices, we don’t have the “blessing” of movement to distract the mind like we do in an active physical practice. I’ve experienced the challenge of this stillness myself. Years ago, when sensory deprivation tanks were popular, I signed up for a few sessions. I’d change into a bathing suit, put on my goggles, and climb into the slightly-larger-than-coffin-sized saltwater tank. At first the warm water, complete lack of sound, and utter darkness would feel comforting, even luxurious. Not too long into the session, though, my mind would find the utter quiet unsettling. Without the distractions of light and sound, thoughts weren’t enough. I’d begin to have the most vivid, lifelike hallucinations. At the time, it unnerved me a little. Later, I learned that because the mind has such a hard time doing nothing, hallucinations are a common side effect of sensory deprivation.

In Restorative Yoga, the body is still. We reduce sensory stimulation (such as light, sound, even touch). For the mind, this is when the hard part can begin. Just as the mind doesn’t trust the body to do things “right” in our daily lives, it may not trust the body in Restorative Yoga, either. It can keep up an incessant barrage of concerns: What’s going on! Why isn’t something happening? I don’t feel any better. This stuff is not working. Without something to anchor to, the mind becomes incredibly inventive and can conjure things out of thin air. The yoga tradition affectionately calls this tendency “monkey mind.”

No matter what the body is doing, the mind is agile and can jump from one branch of thought to the next. My student Mia found this out when she discovered meditation halfway through her second year of practicing yoga. She threw herself into it wholeheartedly, signing up for a two-week silent yoga and meditation retreat just before Labor Day. The first day of the retreat, after a vigorous physical practice, she sat quietly. For six hours, as she tried to focus her mind, she mentally redecorated her house. She felt happy, excited to see the wonderful things she’d done to beautify her living space. In the back of her mind, though, she felt slightly guilty for not
quieting her mind more. On the second day, Mia’s mind occupied the first three hours by cataloguing her boyfriend’s flaws, and then moved on to all the things that were wrong in their relationship. With clarity, she realized that she had to break up with him as soon as the retreat was over. She felt sad and hopeless. Would she ever find someone to love, who loved her back the way she deserved? The third day, Mia’s mind returned to her newly decorated home and made a few changes: *How could I have chosen salmon for the living room?* she wondered. In the afternoon, her thoughts returned to her relationship. She was surprised to discover a sense of understanding, even tenderness, toward her boyfriend. Why hadn’t she realized before how caring and loyal he was? She felt happy and resolved to appreciate him more. *We should get married,* she decided, and the wedding planning lasted into the night and part-way through the next morning’s meditation. Over the remainder of the retreat, Mia’s mind followed its busy schedule. In the midst of one of several imaginary breakups with her boyfriend, she even fell deeply in love with the long-haired guy on the meditation cushion in front of her (she couldn’t see his face, but he just “radiated attractiveness!”). When she returned home after her ten-day retreat, having finally achieved some measure of mental quiet, she’d been married three times (to two different men), divorced twice, and had redecorated no less than five times. Mia marveled at the tenacity of the human mind, at its inventiveness in creating such vivid mental and emotional experiences. She learned firsthand how the mind fluctuates constantly, especially when the body is still. But she also learned to observe these fluctuations as both a natural occurrence and as a prelude to quiet. Yoga philosophy discusses the fluctuations of the mind at great length, even stating that stilling these fluctuations is the definitive goal of yoga.4

The meditative and therapeutic elements of yoga can help with these fluctuations. In Restorative Yoga, the body remains fairly still, except when changing postures. At first, our mind may pick up speed, grasping at everything it can. Yet when we focus on direct experience, we see how experience changes from moment to moment. The mind witnesses these fluctuations in direct experience. It watches physical pain come and go. It sees sadness arrive and de-
part. It feels pride wax and wane. It senses worry course through us and then pass. Then it settles down and quiets. The next time we practice, we go through the same cycle: the mind accelerates and then quiets. We begin to sense the rhythm of the mind. We see its fluctuations as a natural tendency, and they become less alluring, less convincing. The quiet starts to gain ground; we begin to integrate it, to access it even in the midst of troubling situations. When we do, we change the way we filter and react to these situations. Even our personal narratives begin to change.

5. Changing Our Personal Narratives

The fifth way to change emotional patterns is to observe, and eventually shift, the way we filter our direct experience. This filter can reveal itself clearly in the narratives we tell ourselves and others. Changing these narratives may be difficult; sometimes, they act as a mechanism for social bonding. Have you ever stood in a long line at the post office, say, on April fifteenth, with someone whose loud sighs and muttered comments invited you to join in complaint about the long wait or the evils of government? Or gotten into a “whose circumstances are more challenging” contest with a friend to see who deserves the most sympathy? We tell stories to connect with others. We use them to give and receive support. We share them to let people know that we suffer, too. We may hope that, in exchange, they won’t be intimidated by us.

Though they emphasize storytelling, psychotherapy, support groups, and retreat centers offer tremendous value. Part of their value lies in catharsis: the release that comes when we voice our past and share our feelings about it. When we reveal something we’ve been unable to express, we feel empowered. The process of revelation—of being heard, seen, and validated by others—is deeply affirming. For the first several dozen times we tell it, our story has value. And then something happens to the story. It gets rehearsed. And rehearsed . . . and rehearsed . . . until it becomes a powerful samskara of its own.

When the story is a positive one, it helps the mind, body, and nervous system. Yet when it’s negative, pessimistic, suspicious, or
self-critical, it can engrave anxiety and depression more deeply into us. Recently Lisa, a yoga therapy client, came to me for fertility issues. She told me she’d gone to a support group once and never returned. The name of the group was the “Infertility Group,” she said, which made her think about her “problem body.” Not surprisingly, the stories shared by her fellow group members revolved around themes of damaged bodies and broken dreams. They focused on difficult medical and emotional experiences. These stories were in some ways accurate; nonetheless, they caused Lisa’s mood to dip considerably. She left the first session so down that she had difficulty getting out of bed for two days afterward.

We can give our power away to our stories. We can let them become our personal myths. They can gain so much momentum that they become incredibly hard to change. And unfortunately, our stories have an unintended effect of spreading to the rest of the mind-body network. Once there, they cause a cascade of neurobiological [brain- and body-related] events that amplify nervous system activation and through it, anxiety and depression. This means that, as we learned in chapters 1 and 2, telling stories about our pain can actually cause us to practice pain, and to increase it.

To observe our stories with detachment is difficult; to release our stories, even more so. Yet in this as well, Restorative Yoga offers a solution. Restorative Yoga turns on your dimmer switch. It balances your nervous system. It quiets the mind. Through breathwork, focused awareness, and relaxation, it brings you deep into direct experience. These benefits help you see your stories from a new perspective. You observe them as mental and emotional fluctuations. Restorative Yoga makes you more reflective about your experiences, as I learned with Rachael, one of my early clients.

When Rachael first came to see me for yoga therapy, her well-entrenched bouts of anxiety and anger interfered with her work and personal life. These episodes came with a side order of insomnia and low self-esteem. Rachael already practiced yoga and felt that it helped her with her emotions. She wanted to manage her anxiety the “natural way” rather than take the Xanax her doctor had prescribed. Our weekly sessions began with a brief update on her life. Then we moved to active yoga [mainly Sun Salutations] and ended
with an anxiety-balancing restorative practice. Rachael quickly learned the sequence of postures and practiced on her own. I expected Restorative Yoga to help with her nervous system balance, and it did: within weeks, her anxiety dissipated and she could sleep better. Perhaps most remarkable, however, was something I never anticipated. In the beginning of her sessions, while she was sitting upright and giving me an update on her life, Rachael’s stories were flavored with judgment and blame. Her boyfriend Geoff was really a jerk in disguise “just like all the guys” she dated. Her “less intelligent” colleagues bugged her (no one was as special, as uniquely talented, as she was). Her sister Sara was jealous of her. I’d heard these kinds of stories from clients for years. For the most part, their telling and retelling didn’t seem to relieve anxiety or depression.

Yet as soon as Rachael moved into the active, body-centered part of the session, something shifted. During Sun Salutations, she became focused on integrating her movement and breath. She seemed visibly calmer and less angry. The biggest change, however, came within minutes of moving into Restorative Yoga: Rachael’s talking slowed down considerably. She stopped processing her interactions with others in a negative, cyclical way. She viewed the people in her life (the loser boyfriend, incompetent radiologist, ignorant coworkers, and annoying sister) with less reactivity and more compassion. Her thinking grew more conducive to finding creative solutions. Rachael astounded me when, twenty minutes into her third restorative session, she came up with a wise insight: by pressuring her boyfriend to stay in and not go out with friends, she was smothering him. In response, he naturally wanted to “burst out” of his confinement. “If I’d just give him a little space,” she mused, “he’d probably be more demonstrative.”

Initially, I suspected that this was a onetime transformation, an example of “instant healing” that would disappear as suddenly as it had come. Yet each time Rachael dropped into a restorative pose, these insightful moments recurred. They weren’t just mental insights but embodied ones, and they began to change how Rachael viewed and related to her world. She started to soften toward others. She generated more empathy when Geoff or her friends didn’t comply with her demands. Soon, she began to connect her harsh judg-
ment of others with her lack of compassion toward herself: not in an “insight-in-the-mind” kind of way but in a more embodied, lasting way. Even then, I wondered whether this transformation might be unique to Rachael. I thought it could be a fortuitous blossoming of spirit or a happy therapeutic “accident.” Since then, however, I’ve seen this with hundreds of clients.

Restorative Yoga and How You Think

Restorative Yoga benefits you on an intrapersonal (internal) level. It doesn’t just help you rest and digest physically; it helps you do so emotionally as well. It makes it easier to digest your emotions, learn from them, and then let them go. In an active yoga practice, the body is so engaged that the mind has less space for reflection. In Restorative Yoga, the body is relaxed. The nervous system is quieter and the mind is more reflective, all while you’re feeling your emotions. Because the body is relaxed, you can experience feelings of anger, sadness, or worry more fully and with less reactivity than you might in either a meditation or an active yoga practice. What’s more, your body integrates these experiences. In these ways, the parasympathetic system is like a “reflect-and-redirect” system. It helps you reflect on your experiences. It redirects your thoughts and emotions. It promotes embodied insight.

Restorative Yoga benefits you interpersonally, as well. The restorative practice has an amazing effect on the way you think. How does it do this? It turns on your dimmer switch and calms your nervous system. This allows you to observe your intense emotional reactions and negative thought patterns while you’re in a state of deep relaxation. Because you’re relaxed, it’s hard for you to get worried or caught up in what’s bothering you. How can you? Your nervous system and body are at ease. So you begin to look at emotionally charged issues with greater perspective. You come to understand better why people do the things they do (as Rachael did with her boyfriend). Instead of beating yourself up, you may gain more self-compassion. You may become more mindful and reflective. You may see your old stories as less interesting, even less compelling. You start to see the ways in which they are inaccurate or
The path to emotional balance

self-limiting. Sooner or later, you stop telling them as often. When your old stories lose their pull, new stories—new ways of processing interactions and experiences—can emerge.

Recently, a teacher-training student asked whether the benefits of Restorative Yoga [increased understanding, compassion, capacity for reflection, and nonjudgment] translate into our everyday interactions. The answer is yes. The embodied insight in Restorative Yoga doesn’t need a teacher or yoga therapist to keep it going. It grows and develops in its own rhythm, practice after practice. This embodied insight lasts longer than mental insight and also spreads into your life beyond the practice.

Restorative Yoga helps you develop many of the characteristics of emotional balance, such as the ability to experience emotions without overreacting to them, and the capacity to recover from strong emotions when they occur. It supports the qualities that psychotherapy seeks to instill: greater resourcefulness, enhanced problem-solving skills, and a deeper connection with your innate wisdom. It helps you develop the mindfulness, discernment, and reflection that lead to healthier relationships.

Sometimes it can feel as if the struggle for emotional balance is an uphill one. We can compare ourselves to people who seem more evolved than we are. On top of this, we are besieged by glossy magazine images of seemingly effortless equanimity and calm. We may feel like Sisyphus, the mythical king punished with the task of rolling a boulder uphill, only to have it roll down again and repeat the process throughout eternity. We may fear that like Sisyphus, we’ll always be dragging the burden of our emotions up a giant mountain, only to have them lose control and make us begin all over again. Somehow, in Restorative Yoga, we give ourselves permission to feel this burden, and even to face it. This doesn’t mean that we’ve wasted all the time spent carrying our burden. We may come to realize that our burden is not so shameful or so different from anyone else’s. We may develop a sense of humor about how much we demand of ourselves and how we blame ourselves when we backslide. This helps us build perseverance and strength of character. It also helps us start to know ourselves better. We begin to experience our emotions in a way that promotes awareness and growth.
When these things happen, we can give ourselves credit for all our hard work. Yet we may also wonder: Is this the end point of our evolution? Or is there something else waiting for us on the other side of our growth?

Breath Exercise: Worrying and 1:2 Breathing

In the preceding breath exercises (at the end of chapters 1–3), you experienced three types of breath regulation. First, you observed your breath and noted its patterns. Then, you adjusted your breath to an equal inhale-to-exhale ratio. Third, you regulated your breath further by making your exhale longer than—or twice as long as—your inhale. In this exercise, you’ll combine a mind-calming breathwork technique (1:2 ratio or longer exhale) with something that stimulates your mental anxiety (worrying). This exercise is more challenging than the previous three because it involves creating an anxiety pattern in the mind while you’re using 1:2 Breathing. Balancing these two techniques can be difficult. Please make sure that you’ve become comfortable with the other three breathing exercises first before trying this one. If you haven’t practiced them, do so first to make sure you have a stable foundation of awareness.

When you attempt Worrying and 1:2 Breathing, it’s likely that your mind will worry far more if you lose your focus on the 1:2 breath ratio. If this happens to an uncomfortable degree, feel free to continue just with 1:2 Breathing, or stop the exercise and return to it later. If you’re practicing 1:2 Breathing (you can even make the exhale three times longer than the inhale), you will most likely not be able to worry as intensely as you did before. If you find that you can’t worry as much, that’s the point of the exercise! In many ways this exercise is impossible to do correctly, because 1:2 Breathing and worrying are typically unable to coexist. In fact, 1:2 Breathing (which slows your heart rate and calms your nervous system) and worrying (which increases your heart rate and stimulates your nervous system) are for the most part incompatible. You’re doing
this exercise, then, to refine your awareness of how 1:2 Breathing affects the mind and nervous system quickly and effectively.

Get Your Baseline

Once again, in this exercise, you’ll combine a calming (1:2 ratio) breathwork technique with something that stimulates your anxiety (worrying). First get your mental and emotional baseline: How do you feel now? Are you worried? Thinking about the future? Focused on past events? Feeling down? Take a moment to record your thoughts and feelings before you begin.

Do the Practice

Think of something that worries you or makes you angry. For this part of the exercise, keep your eyes open. Begin to think about the conflict or situation you’ve chosen. For the moment, don’t worry about how you’re breathing—it doesn’t matter. Just spend a couple of minutes immersed in the feeling. Let your thoughts run wild, even making the situation more dramatic in your mind’s eye. Now get another baseline; take your current mental and emotional “temperature.” If you choose, you can also take your pulse as you did in 1:2 Breathing [page 72].

Now you’re ready to begin the breathwork part. Slowly close your eyes. As you’ve done several times before, direct your neutral focus to your breath. Breathe in and out through your nose. Lengthen both your inhale and your exhale. See if you can increase them by a couple of counts, or seconds. Try neither to force the breath, nor to create a sense of constriction in your chest.

When your nasal breathing appears to be stable, experiment with lengthening your exhale; first let it be just one count longer than your inhale. If you breathe in for two counts, let your exhale be three counts. If you breathe in for three counts, let your exhale be four counts. See how the longer exhale feels.

If it feels comfortable, transition to an even longer exhale, letting it be double the length of your inhale. If you breathe in for two counts, exhale for four. If you breathe in for three counts, exhale
for six, and so on. You can even lengthen the exhale further. For example, if you breathe in for two counts, try exhaling for five or six counts. When three to five minutes have passed, slowly open your eyes. Take your new baseline: are you still as worried or emotional as before? Note how you feel in your journal or on a piece of paper. If you wish, you can take your pulse again for comparison. Has it decreased? This is your mid-exercise baseline.

Now slowly close your eyes and resume 1:2 Breathing. When you have spent another minute with this breath ratio, think about your troublesome situation again. See whether you can attain the same level of worry or anger that existed before your breathwork. As you’re doing 1:2 Breathing, if you’re not as worried or stimulated, this means that you’ve experienced the powerful impact of breath on your mood. If you remain as worried as you were before, or still a little worried, check in with your breath; chances are that without realizing it, you lost the 1:2 breath ratio.

Feel the Difference

If you didn’t attain your previous level of anxiety or anger while doing your breathwork, note that in your journal. You’ve just experienced firsthand the power of breath to adjust your mental state and mood. If you worried only a little bit while doing your breathing, note that as well.

If you find that you worried as much as before you started but can still practice 1:2 Breathing, be patient with the process—it’ll get easier. Have compassion for your developing ability to calm your nervous system, rather than becoming convinced that none of it is working. Sometimes it takes patience, and more practice, to feel the difference.

Body Exercise: Getting to Know Restorative Yoga

The first two body-centered exercises in this book, Distinguishing between Tension and Relaxation and the Five-Minute Body
Check-in, helped you refine your body awareness. They also deepened your perception of physical discomfort (which can activate your nervous system). These exercises are preludes to the Restorative Yoga practice. If either of them felt difficult or unnatural, consider spending more time with them before moving on to this one. To feel how your body and mind respond to Restorative Yoga, you will first try Relaxation Pose (page 191), a back-bending restorative posture.

Get Your Baseline

Before practicing this exercise, check in with your body. Is your physical energy level low, medium, or high? Now notice your mind: Are your thoughts flowing at a slow, medium, or fast rate? Record your physical and mental baselines.

Do the Practice

Approach this experience in an exploratory way, especially if this is your first time practicing Restorative Yoga. Find a space where you can relax, uninterrupted, for at least five minutes. In Restorative Yoga, we reduce sensory stimulation to calm the mind and nervous system. To help with this, turn off the lights or dim them to a low setting. Practice in a quiet area. If possible, place an eye pillow or a towel over your eyes to shut out the light.

Lie down on your back with a bolster, couch cushion, or pillows under your knees. It’s possible that your neck will hyperextend when you lie down on your back; if this is the case, your chin will rise into the air, and you may feel discomfort at the back of your neck. If this happens, place a folded blanket under your head for support. If you’d like more specific instructions on supporting this pose, see Relaxation Pose (page 192).

As you rest here, breathe in and out through your nose. Focus on bringing your breath to different parts of your body sequentially, as you did with the Distinguishing between Tension and Relaxation exercise (page 31). At first, try the breath ratio most natural to you. Then, if your mind feels balanced or slow, move into 1:1 Breathing.
If your mind is fast and your thoughts race, try a longer exhale or 1:2 Breathing instead. Keep directing your breath to your body, using your breath to release any tension or discomfort that you can. After five to ten minutes, slowly transition onto your side and come up to sitting.

**Feel the Difference**

With your eyes closed, notice the effects of this pose in your body. Does your body have more energy, but in a calm and balanced way, or is it too energized? If your body felt too energized during this exercise, don’t be concerned. You may simply have a lot of energy or activity in your body. If this is the case, the forward-bending or neutral restorative poses might work better for you.

As you practiced Relaxation Pose, what happened to your mind? If your thoughts raced during the pose, don’t be concerned. You may simply have anxiety in your body, and lying on your back may not be right for you. Or, you may have in your mind a dormant anxiety, which this posture simply awakened. If you notice this happening, you’ve taken an important step in growing your self-awareness. Mental or physical anxiety while in a back-bending posture may mean that it’s best to start off your practice with forward-bending or neutral restorative postures. Record these effects in your notes to help you determine which restorative poses will be most helpful for your body and mind. You will also find a detailed list of recommendations for what to do if your mind became anxious in chapter 8 (page 187).