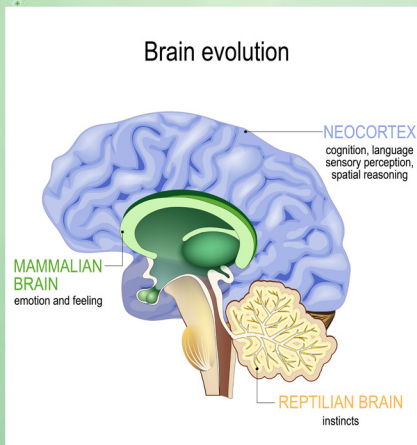


Mental Health Awareness Week takes place in May, and every year it gains more traction. Increasingly, workplaces, schools and communities are shining a light on mental health, and mental ill health, encouraging open conversations and practical support. Alongside this growing awareness, many people are searching for sustainable ways to manage anxiety in everyday life.

According to Mental Health UK, eight million people in the UK are experiencing an anxiety disorder at any given time. Anxiety is a state of mind characterised by feelings of fear, worry, or unease. While it is normal for all of us to feel anxious from time to time, for some people it becomes a constant companion that severely affects daily life.

The most common anxiety disorder is Generalised Anxiety Disorder or GAD, where excessive worry about everyday events is accompanied by symptoms such as restlessness, poor sleep, exhaustion, irritability, sweating and trembling.



Treatment often involves medication and talking therapies. People are also encouraged to try lifestyle strategies such as walking in nature, journalling, or “taking a deep breath.” While helpful, these suggestions can sometimes feel insufficient when anxiety is persistent and overwhelming.



This is where yoga can offer a valuable complementary approach.

Research suggests that yoga may help regulate the nervous system, reduce overactivity in brain areas linked with threat and emotion, and support emotional regulation. While yoga does not replace medical treatment, it can offer practical tools for self-regulation, a greater sense of agency and a feeling of connection with oneself and others. I was recently invited to teach on a British Wheel of Yoga Qualifications (BWYQ) pilot yoga programme for GAD (YOGAD), a ten-week course designed for people living with this condition and funded by a grant from The Community Fund.

When I mentioned the trial to one of my weekly yoga classes, a regular student said that they had learned about it in a half-day workplace wellbeing training, where the main takeaway was to lengthen the exhale.

Well-meaning as that advice is, there is no quick fix for GAD; most people need a layered, compassionate and sustained approach – something yoga is well placed to offer.

Feedback from the recent pilot course reflected this, and was overwhelmingly positive. Participants particularly valued the breathing practices, relaxation techniques and home practice sheets, saying they gave them tools they could “weave into the working day” and integrate into everyday life.

They also highlighted the emotional and social impact of coming together weekly: time for themselves, being with people who “understand and are like me”, feeling less alone and more able to cope, and having space to relax and switch off. The ambience of the class, the simple act of leaving home, and the presence of a compassionate, attentive teacher all contributed to the positive experience.

Taken together, these responses underline an important message: that while quick techniques have their place, for people living with GAD it is often the ongoing, relational nature of yoga practice – shared, supported and repeated over time – that makes the real difference.

## Five Yoga Practices to Support Generalised Anxiety Disorder

These five practices form the foundation of the YOGAD programme, now a recognised yoga qualification regulated by Ofqual, the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation for England.


### 1. Regulating the Nervous System Through Movement (Asana)

In a GAD-focused class, postures are less about physical achievement and more about soothing the central nervous system. Gentle, simple movements help you come back into your body, grounding attention in the present moment instead of being pulled into future-focused worry. Some examples of joint-freeing practices are shown in diagram 1 (neck, shoulder, wrist and ankle circles).


The invitation is always to move within your “window of tolerance” — a place where sensation is noticeable but not overwhelming. Within this space, you can choose how far you go, when to pause and when to rest. You stay in charge of your experience, rather than trying to force your body into a particular shape.

This approach gradually builds confidence and resilience. By safely experiencing sensations in the body, you gradually learn to stay present with a little discomfort without it overwhelming you. Over time, this cultivates anti-fragility — the ability to adapt and respond rather than react.

The principle is simple: shift the body, shift the mind. Gentle movement signals safety to the nervous system, reducing the constant state of alert that many people with GAD experience.



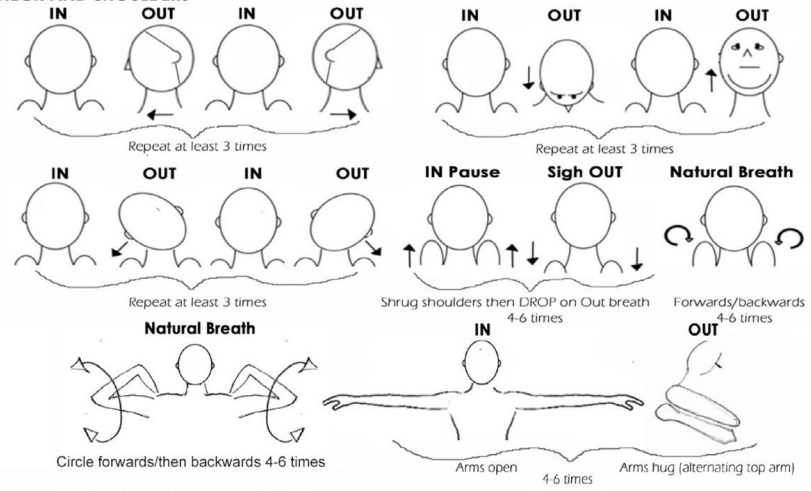
Yoga for Generalised Anxiety Disorder (YOGAD)



### JOINT-FREEING EXERCISES

These joint-freeing exercises can be done sitting or standing with some lying down, starting with the head working down OR from the feet working upwards. Slow the movement to match the IN and OUT breaths.

**NECK AND SHOULDERS**



Repeat at least 3 times

Repeat at least 3 times

Repeat at least 3 times

Shrug shoulders then DROP on Out breath 4-6 times

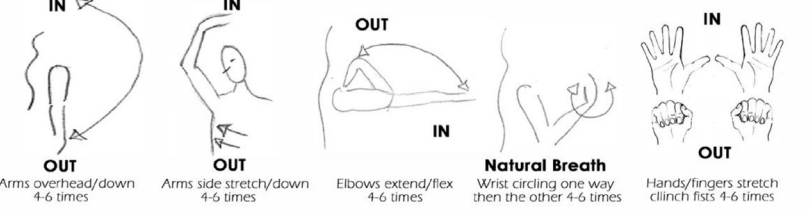
Forwards/backwards 4-6 times

Circle forwards/then backwards 4-6 times

Arms open 4-6 times

Arms hug (alternating top arm)

**ARMS, ELBOWS, WRISTS, HANDS, FINGERS**



Arms overhead/down 4-6 times

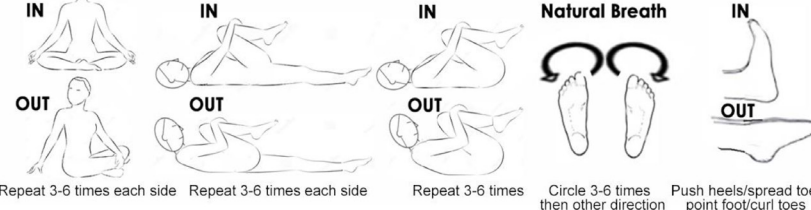
Arms side stretch/down 4-6 times

Elbows extend/flex 4-6 times

Wrist circling one way then the other 4-6 times

Hands/fingers stretch clench fists 4-6 times

**SPINE, KNEES, ANKLES, FEET**



Repeat 3-6 times each side

Repeat 3-6 times each side

Repeat 3-6 times

Circle 3-6 times then other direction

Push heels/spread toes point foot/curl toes

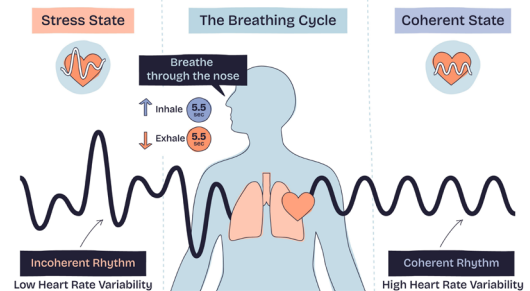
(Diagram 1)

### 2. Breathwork Beyond “Just Lengthen the Exhale” (Pranayama)

It is now widely accepted that extending the exhale can stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system. While this is helpful, it is not a universal solution. If it were, anxiety would not visit at 3am. Human responses are complex, and breathing practices must be offered thoughtfully.

In the YOGAD programme, participants explore a variety of breathing techniques, including moving with the breath, counted

### Coherent Breathing A Simple Guide to Balance Your Nervous System



breathing, and sensory-based awareness of breathing. See coherent breathing practice diagram 2

Some breathing practices may actually increase anxiety, particularly if they involve breath retention, strong control, or internal focus.

When breathwork is approached gently, it becomes a powerful tool. Participants reported using breathing techniques during stressful situations at work, before meetings and when feeling overwhelmed. The breath becomes portable and something that can be accessed anywhere.

### 3. Sound, Mantra and Positive Mental Focus

For many people with GAD, the mind can feel relentless. Thoughts loop, analyse, anticipate and worry. Introducing sound, mantra and affirmations provides the mind with a different focal point.



Sound-based practices let you actually experience vibration in your body. This sensory experience can help shift attention away from racing thoughts into embodied awareness. Chanting a word or sound, humming or silent repetition can all create this effect. Mantra and positive affirmations can also soften your internal dialogue.

Rather than forcing ‘positive thinking’, you choose words or phrases that feel believable and supportive, such as ‘In this moment, I am safe’. You can also rest your eyes on something that brings you comfort – a plant, a photo, a candle – and let that be your focus for a few breaths.

These practices are particularly useful during relaxation. Instead of being told to ‘switch off’, which can feel impossible with anxiety, you are offered something gentle to focus on. This helps quieten mental over-activity and makes it easier to rest.

### 4. Creating Safety Through the Yoga Philosophy (Yamas, Niyamas and the Kleshas)

Yoga philosophy offers a compassionate framework for understanding anxiety. The *Yamas* and *Niyamas* – simple guidelines for how we relate to others (*yamas*) and how we care for ourselves (*niyamas*) –

invite us to look kindly at our habits, expectations and self-talk, which can be especially powerful for people with GAD.

#### Questions emerge such as:

1. How do expectations of how we “should” behave create pressure?

2. How does self-discipline support us, and when does it become self-criticism?

3. Where can compassion be introduced?

The *Kleshas*, sometimes described as ‘obstacles to clarity’, also provide insight.

*Avidya* (misunderstanding) highlights the importance of education about anxiety and the nervous system.

*Asmita* (ego) challenges the idea that stress is a badge of honour.

*Raga* (attachment) explores grasping for certainty.

*Dvesha* (aversion) examines resistance to uncomfortable emotions.

*Abhinivesha* (fear of loss) reflects the deep survival response that drives anxiety.

Understanding these patterns allows you to recognise your experience without judgement. Anxiety becomes something to observe and work with, rather than something to fight.

### 5. Relaxation, Inner Resources and Connection

Relaxation can be one of the most challenging practices for people with GAD. Being still may initially increase anxiety. For this reason, relaxation is introduced gradually, often with guided imagery, sensory anchors or concentration on an object. You might start with simple anchors such as feeling the support of the floor, noticing sounds in the room, or resting your eyes on a familiar object. Over time, you can build an inner resource – a place, person, memory or image that brings a sense of ease (for example, a favourite spot in nature). As attention rests on this resource, mental chatter begins to soften.

Concentration practices can then be layered in, such as focusing on a chosen object, sound or sensation. This gentle training of attention can, over time, support emotional regulation and reduce reactivity.

Equally important is the group environment. Many people in the programme shared that simply being in a room with others who understood their experience reduced feelings of isolation. Anxiety can be lonely, and shared practice creates connection. Time once a week to pause, breathe and be supported becomes deeply meaningful. Many participants reported feeling more confident, better able to cope and less alone with their anxiety.

## Conclusion

GAD can feel relentless, affecting sleep, relationships, work and overall

wellbeing. While medical and therapeutic interventions remain essential, yoga offers a compassionate complementary approach that supports regulation, awareness and connection.

Through gentle movement, thoughtful breathwork, sound and mantra, philosophical reflection and guided relaxation, students learn practical tools to navigate anxiety. Just as importantly, they develop agency – the understanding that they can respond to their experience rather than be controlled by it.

The YOGAD pilot programme demonstrated that yoga is not about quick fixes, but about layered, sustained support. Participants reported feeling less alone, more confident, and better able to cope with daily challenges. Small, consistent practices created meaningful change.



As awareness of mental health continues to grow, yoga has an important role to play. When offered with sensitivity, knowledge and compassion, it becomes more than a class: it becomes a supportive space where individuals can begin to regulate, reconnect, and gradually find steadiness within uncertainty.

### Learn more

The first training course takes place in Autumn 2026 through Mindbody Wellness, a recognised centre member of the British Wheel of Yoga. Qualified yoga teachers (any other awarding body) can register interest in receiving information about the training on [www.mindbodywellness.org.uk/register-interest/](http://www.mindbodywellness.org.uk/register-interest/) and, upon enrolment, can automatically become a BWY Associate Teacher Member.

For further information please contact [Susie@Ilkleyyogacentre.uk](mailto:Susie@Ilkleyyogacentre.uk)



**Susie Dennis** is a BWY Diploma Course Tutor, a Yoga Alliance-registered teacher trained in Forrest Yoga with Ana Forrest, and a Yoga Therapist (Yoga Campus). She is currently undertaking the Integrative Yoga Psychotherapy training with The Minded Institute and has also studied with Uma Dinsmore-Tuli at Sitaram Yoga.

Susie co-owns Ilkley Yoga Centre with her daughter and is a founding partner of Mindbody Wellness Ltd.

