



Gray skies got you down? Try restorative postures to rebalance your nervous system.

For years, winter brought serious mood changes for Natalie Engler. She craved carbohydrates, struggled with lethargy, and hated to get out of bed in the morning. The feelings lasted through April, when her mood brightened and her energy returned.

This cyclic form of depression, known as seasonal affective disorder, or SAD, is thought to be triggered by a lack of sunlight during the winter. SAD is often treated with light therapy, which gave Engler, now a restorative yoga teacher, little relief. "I just figured that winter blues was something I'd have to live with," she recalls. But during teacher training with

clinical psychologist and Integrative Yoga therapist Bo Forbes, Engler developed a practice to combat her winter depression. It included pranayama (breathwork) and meditation in front of her light box; vinyasa yoga; and at least 20 minutes a day of restorative yoga, which she describes as the single most powerful part of the practice.

"Restorative yoga may look passive from the outside, but it's very active internally on both subtle and dramatic levels," says Forbes, who is the founder and director of the Center for Integrative Yoga Therapeutics in Boston. "Our nervous systems are designed to respond to minute fluctuations in our environments. Restorative yoga, combined with breathwork, is a potent tool to recalibrate the nervous system."

Restorative yoga and breathwork form the heart of the therapeutic yoga practice Forbes developed for emotional balance. "Many people don't realize that SAD has three distinct phases," she says. "In the dead of winter [December through February], it looks like depression, with symptoms such as lethargy and carbohydrate craving. But in the fall and early spring, it is often characterized by hypomania, where people tend to have physical agitation, racing thoughts, and a decreased need for sleep and food. At these times, your practice should address that increased anxiety and activation."

Forbes advises people who are struggling with SAD, or think they might be, to first notice whether the body feels energized or tired, and whether the mind is agitated or lethargic. Then, practice the following sequence, choosing the breathwork that's appropriate for you. It may help to do some active postures first, particularly if you're feeling restless and anxious. "It's important to learn to practice to your nervous system and ride the waves of emotional fluctuations, not just when things get really bad," Forbes says, "but all year long, to strengthen and support your emotional health." CAROL KRUCOFF

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Bo Forbes says the breathwork in these restorative postures makes all the difference in their effect on the nervous system. If you're feeling anxious and restless in your mind and body, as is typical of SAD during the fall and early spring, exhale for twice the count of your inhalation as you practice these poses. (If you're still feeling agitated after that, take a supported Child's Pose.) If you're feeling lethargic in your mind and body, make your exhalations and inhalations of equal length. Hold each pose for 5 to 20 minutes.



Salamba Savasana
(Supported Corpse Pose)



Supta Baddha Konasana
(Reclining Bound Angle Pose)



Salamba Viparita Karani
(Supported Legs-up-the-Wall Pose)