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Nicole Walsh

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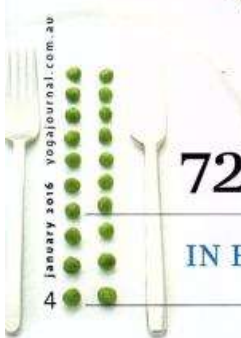
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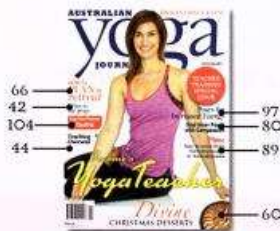
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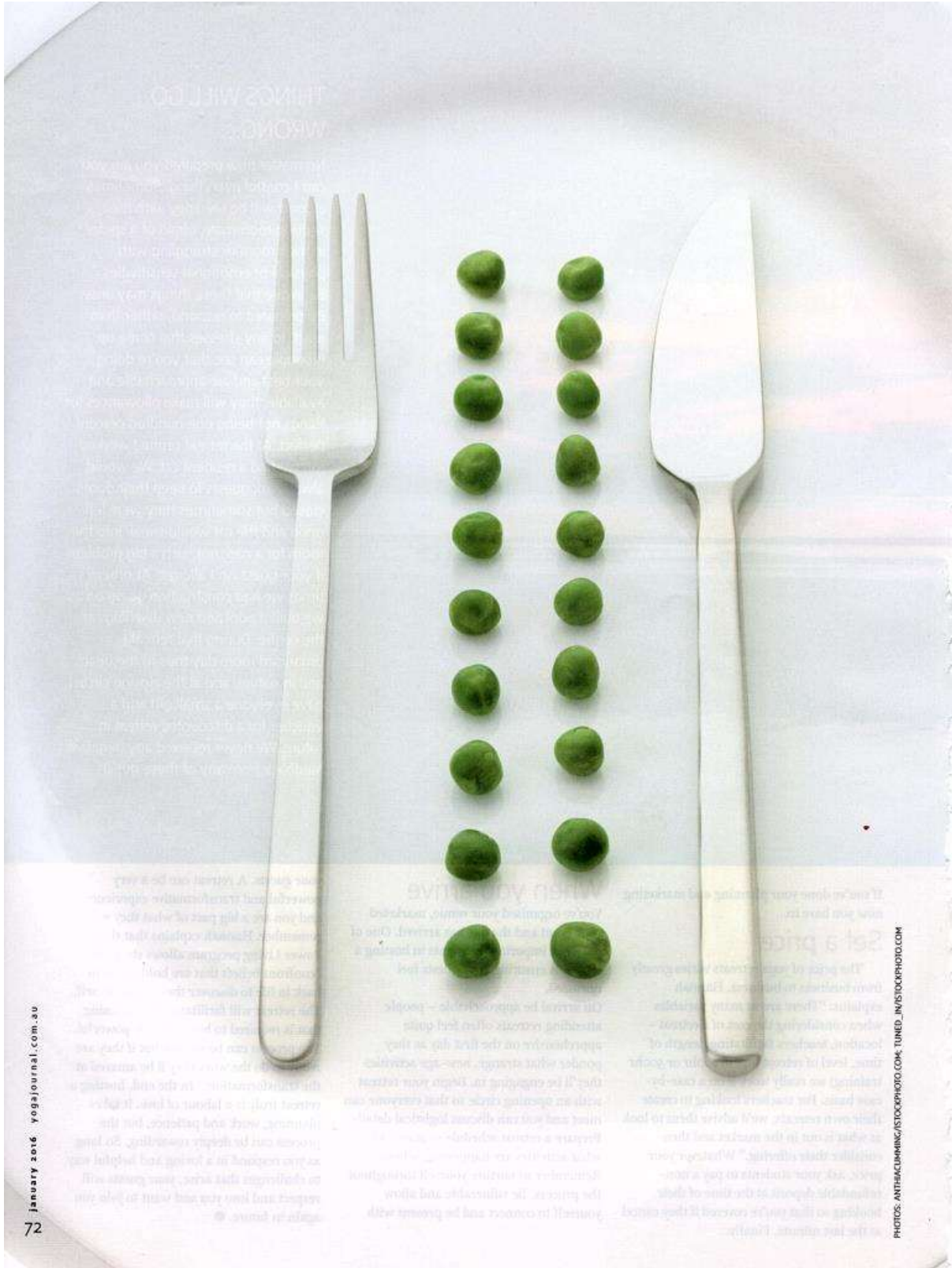


ON THE COVER

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YOGA

and OCD

Using Yoga to Overcome Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

By Diana Timmins

WHEN JO COWPER FOUND HERSELF CRYING

in desperation whilst behind the wheel of her moving vehicle, she knew it was time to seek help. It was 2009 and her first child, Joshua, was almost twelve months old. Joshua had been in intensive care following his birth, the family then relocated from Ireland to Yorkshire (United Kingdom), and her second baby was on the way; life-changing upheavals threw Cowper's anxious state into overdrive and she was soon diagnosed with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). The road to recovery presented a tumultuous journey, yet ultimately revealed her life purpose; to source healing and in turn heal others through the power of yoga.

"At my lowest point, terror and panic overwhelmed me and I couldn't leave the house. I had to be medicated after my daughter, Aisling, was born; if not for myself, for my family. It took two years of combined medication, counselling, cognitive behavioural therapy and yoga to get me out of the rut and into the upward spiral of recovery," Cowper recounts.

"Yoga was my lifeline. I studied Kundalini online and practised Hatha at home or a local group, which led to a breakthrough; obsessive thinking finally lost its power over me and I felt directed towards teaching. After completing a Success over Addiction and Relapse (S.O.A.R.) Yoga Certification course,

I developed specific classes aimed at supporting people with OCD (YOCD)," adds Cowper, who proudly teaches from her Yorkshire-based and online studio, Jojoba Yoga.

What is OCD?

Cowper says OCD remains relatively misunderstood in the United Kingdom. This applies to many countries; despite being one of the most prevalent psychiatric conditions worldwide. OCD affects approximately three percent of our nation's population; that's more than 500,000 Australians. Previously considered an anxiety disorder, the latest Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) now categorises OCD independently; identifying complex sub-groups which share common characteristics of obsessive preoccupation and repetitive behaviours.

"Anxiety and OCD are inextricable; whether OCD presents as repetitive obsessions of distressing thoughts or images, or compulsive urges or impulses to perform certain actions, behaviours or rituals. Common examples are thoughts of self-harm, re-checking if one locked the front door, and washing body parts repeatedly because of perceived dirtiness," explains Sydney-based yoga therapist, somatic psychotherapist and psychologist, Jayne Wells.

According to Anxiety Recovery Centre Victoria (ARCVic), other obsessions commonly surround symmetry and neatness, illness, religious or sexual concerns, and collecting or remembering things. Subsequent compulsions include excessive cleaning, hoarding, touching and tapping, counting and repeating words.

On the upside, Cowper and her YOCD students are living proof that OCD is a curable condition rather than fixed state – and yoga is rapidly gaining clinical credibility as a viable adjunctive treatment. After all, in the wise words of an ancient sage who authored the classic Yoga Sutras, Patanjali: 'yoga is the practice of quieting the mind'.

"Yoga helps calm the mind and occupy the body; reducing mental and physical symptoms of anxiety and need to respond to compulsions. OCD creates disconnection from the body and emotions, but yoga – meaning 'union' – enables reconnection with the whole self and greater universal power," says Cowper.

Therapeutic 'yoga glow'

Wells recalls one particular yoga therapy client diagnosed with OCD, who suffered intrusive thoughts around social disconnection and self-harm—including suicide. Throughout one-on-one consultations, Wells collaboratively designed a personalised program to address her ailments; one technique involving lateral arm raises in gradual steps (krama) upon inhalation, and lowering upon longer exhalation (inhale, exhale ratio of 1:2). This asana (posture) was accompanied by a personally meaningful bhavanam (visualisation) with uplifting felt qualities of a spark or flame signifying 'life and illumination'.

"From yoga therapy and psychotherapeutic work at the vijnanamaya level ('higher wisdom'), this client reported greater awareness of what triggered her OCD states, decreased intensity and frequency of their occurrence with more distance, objectivity and 'space' in contrast to feeling

"OCD creates disconnection from the body and emotions, but yoga – meaning 'union' – enables reconnection with the whole self."

all-consumed by OCD, and feelings of confidence and joy," relays Wells.

Many have sensed this enhanced well-being or 'yoga glow' from consistent practice; which numerous studies partially attribute to subsequent serotonin increase, a 'happiness hormone' often low among people with OCD. From another neurological perspective, one study published in *NeuroImage* journal (vol. 45, 2009) linked long-term meditation with increased volumes of vital grey matter in brain regions related to emotional regulation and response control. Such changes in brain structure allow new neural pathways to form; altering thoughts, feelings and behaviours.

From a yoga therapy perspective, there is no one-size-fits-all when treating OCD – or any disorder. Although, from extensive interviews Wells conducted with esteemed therapists at Chennai's Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram, a general consensus of techniques which may ease anxiety states like OCD emerged, including; conscious and abdominal breathing, emphasis or focus on exhalation, and sitali or sitkari pranayama (cooling breath). Restful and supportive asanas like savasana, more forward-bends than backbends, and movements upon exhale were considered most suitable, as well as palming (palms covering closed eyes) and nyasa (touching body parts with mantra repetition).

Kundalini Yoga OCD-specific Protocol

Kundalini Yoga expert and Director of the Research Group for Mind-Body Dynamics at University of California, San Diego's BioCircuits Institute, David Shannahoff-Khalsa, has led ground-breaking

research into the therapeutic potential of an OCD-specific protocol he devised from Kundalini Yoga as taught by Yogi Bhajan. Results from an open uncontrolled pilot study (1996) and in-depth randomised controlled trial (1999) revealed consistent practice has immense potential to cure OCD.

Shannahoff-Khalsa's protocol comprises eight primary techniques, and three adjunctive techniques to be used as desired; all performed while seated. Primary techniques commence with an essential practice of 'tuning in' that employs chanting Ong Namō Guru Dev Namō ('I bow to the divine teacher within'), and includes a left-nostril pranayama called the OCD-breath. These key practices evoke vitality, quiet the mind, reduce tension, and eliminate fears and OCD symptoms. The adjunctive techniques help meet mental challenges, treat anger and induce a positive mind.

"The severity of OCD symptoms are rated using the Yale-Brown Obsessive Compulsive Scale, with scores ranging from zero (no symptoms) to 40 (extreme). Clinical trials do not admit patients unless they score above or equal to 16. Experts define 'symptom remission' by a score of less than or equal to 14, and 'wellness' as below or equal to 12. My small uncontrolled trial finished with five patients and a mean group score of 8.8; including individuals scoring three, four, and six. My randomised trial finished with 11 patients and a mean score of 6.6; with three zeros, a one, two fives, a six, and an 11, 14, 15, and 16," reports Shannahoff-Khalsa.

Heavily influenced by Shannahoff-Khalsa's impressive findings, Cowper incorporates Kundalini techniques into her personal practice and YOCD. These, she testifies with gratitude, have been fundamental in switching off from relentless mind chatter and – ultimately – curing her and many Jobjoba Yoga students of OCD.

"Yoga is a complete healing system and survived ancient roots because it works. I witness transformation among my students daily – even from their first class – and that miracle is the healing power of yoga," she says. 🙏

**Know someone seeking support?
Phone ARCVic's OCD & Anxiety HelpLine on 03 9830 0533 or 1300 269 438.**

OCD- breath technique

"According to Yogi Bhanan, ancient yogic experiments claimed that implementing the OCD-breath for 30 minutes daily for 90 days – using the perfected rate and pattern of one breath per minute – will completely eliminate all obsessive compulsive disorders. Our research also demonstrated this," says David Shannahoff-Khalsa, who offers the following abbreviated description:

- Sit comfortably with a straight spine, closing your eyes and focusing on the third eye
- Block the end of your right nostril with your right thumb tip; other fingers pointing up straight
- Inhale slowly and deeply through left nostril; hold breath in
- Exhale slowly and completely through left nostril; hold breath out
- Focus on the sound of your breath, continuing this pattern; ideally one minute per cycle, with 15 seconds for each four phases
- Gradually lengthen overall duration with practice (31 minutes maximum)

For complete instruction and DVD of Shannahoff-Khalsa's OCD-specific protocol, visit www.theinternetyogi.com.