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LISTENING TO THE INNER TEACHER

Daniel Groom faced his fears with yoga, after a lifelong battle with anxiety and coming out as gay. Now a qualified teacher he's helping others do the same, offering Yoga for Anxiety courses and encouraging students to listen to the voice within. Here he tells his story



The transition we all face going from adolescence to adulthood is a well-documented challenge. Research also frequently highlights that for men this transition often dictates that we leave emotion and internal wellbeing behind, as these are feminine pursuits that men need to avoid. The result of this is often that when we reach male-hood, many men are left without the skills or abilities to address their emotional needs. For myself, growing up created a huge amount of fear and self-loathing, which manifested itself as anxiety. I remember my anxiety starting when I was about 16: the feeling that I did not fit in, getting called names by school bullies; it reinforced in me the idea that I was not okay.

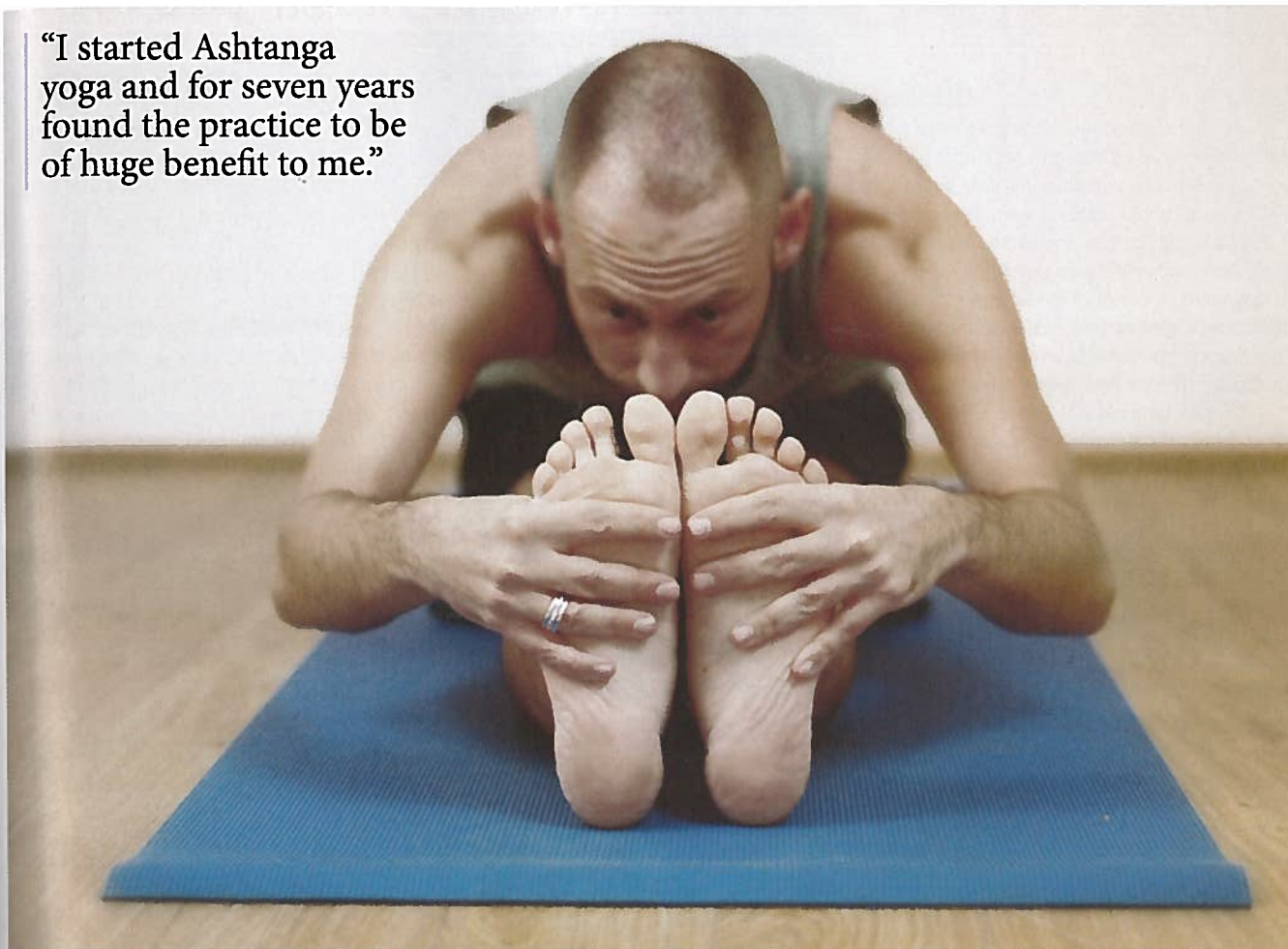
Finding yoga

Instead of talking to anyone I internalised my emotions and let it eat away at my wellbeing, slowly, for years. To others, I imagine I appeared okay on the surface, but my internal dialogue was telling me "I am not good enough"... "I am letting everyone down". As it does, life progressed; I found myself flitting from relationship to relationship, fuelled by the party scene of 90's Manchester and London which conveniently provided me with the perfect opportunity to remove myself from any real emotions and feelings I had. I learnt as many do to keep family and friends at arms-length while I embraced my chaotic life.

Then reality hit home, I found myself living in London with no money, no prospects and hating my life. My party was over! I went home to my wonderful supportive parents who thankfully could see past all the barriers I had built around me and saw that their son was in need of solace and support. My mum and I went to a yoga class. This was something we had chatted about a few times but had never managed to do - and when we did something wonderful happened. For the first time ever I felt settled. I experienced how life could feel without anxiety. I felt at peace.

Determined to maintain this feeling mum and I went every Saturday to Hatha Yoga in Brentwood with a wonderful teacher who taught us asana, pranayama, meditation and relaxation. We

“I started Ashtanga yoga and for seven years found the practice to be of huge benefit to me.”



encouraged my dad to join us and as a family we enjoyed this experience. However, I knew I was hanging on to anxiety and though I had moments of calm and tranquillity, yoga was helping me to find peace with myself, and made me realise I needed to let them know I was a gay man.

Practicing yoga and having the joy of my parents being alongside me in this really did give me the confidence to have the conversation I had always feared. My yoga experience helped me to finally admit the truth to myself as well as my family. Yoga had given me a new unexpected ability to face my demons and to trust my heart (rather than the thoughts in my head). I had found the ability to listen to my inner teacher.

My secret was out and accepted and I felt a sense of relief. However, my anxiety was still there; it had been part of me for over half my life and I knew I needed to get it under control. I knew that yoga was the way I was going to be able to tame the beast. I started Ashtanga yoga and for seven years found the practice to be of huge benefit to me. The discipline of a daily practice calmed the pent up anxious energy in my body and gave my mind a feeling of freedom which was relief after my previous chaotic and scattered lifestyle. Through the practice I gained confidence, stability, and friendship and got my life back on track.

Fast forward to 2011

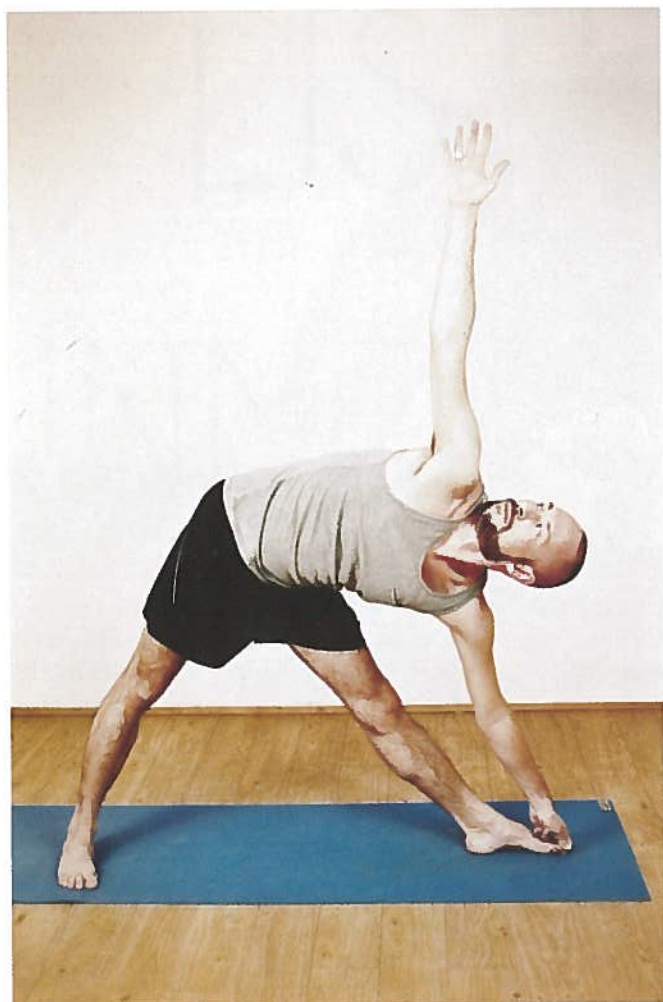
I was working very successfully in the City, a homeowner, and had gained a qualification as a 200-hour yoga teacher. I enjoyed sharing my knowledge with students but began to realise this life

I was living was not really fulfilling me. I still had anxiety and had a desperate fear of the future. I took some time out alone and realised again I was neglecting my inner teacher's voice.

This was trying to tell me to delve deeper into my yoga studies and start to really uncover my life's ambitions...my *dharma*. I enrolled to study yoga therapy with Yoga Campus and was honoured to be taught by some of the most respected and knowledgeable teachers in the industry. My gratitude to Lisa Kaley Isley and Uma Dinsmore Tuli who have been hugely supportive in their knowledge of yoga, meditation, yoga nidra, mental health, and for their heartfelt compassion.

My dharma

I realised my dharma was to work with others who have been through similar experiences to me, who are faced with anxiety/stress and to provide a space and community to help them through these dark, lonely and often bewildering times. I quit my job and set up time for 1:1 yoga therapy clients and made it my plan to offer small classes in Brentwood and Southend, which were open to anyone of any sex, sexuality, body size and with any physical or emotional condition. I wanted to offer a space for anyone to safely experience an honest and self-reflective yoga practice. A traditional mix of asana, *pranayama*, relaxation, meditation. During the classes I was allowing time for self-reflection, rejoicing in the good we find and working honestly through the difficult thoughts, emotions and feelings. With an intention of encouraging students to build compassion and knowledge of their own internal



dialogue with their inner teacher. Through movement, breath work, yoga nidra and meditation we sit and observe as a group, and as individuals, on our own life journeys.

More and more people came to class and for yoga therapy. People with anxiety, depression, the stressed, those with chronic illnesses and conditions, insomniacs, those with general aches and pains, the brave following life changing events. I noticed a theme in what they wanted: some techniques they could do at home to help with managing their personal pain, fear, worry and stress. Simple stuff they could fit into their lives.

I thought back to all those years ago and it made me realise that a course to help with general anxiety – which everyone experiences from time to time – would be a great experience to offer. I developed a 4 week course called 'Yoga for Anxiety' to do just this and to help others realise that it's okay to experience these feelings, and to enquire as to what their anxious thoughts may relate to. My aim is to ultimately support men and women to have a toolbox of movements, breath focus and ways to observe and reflect, which may change or build an understanding of their anxiety.

Forward focus

During the course we look at simple ways to make a difference, including a *pranayama* practice called diaphragmatic breathing (abdominal breath). Lying down, feet on the floor, knees bent, hands on the abdomen, observing the gentle rhythmic flow of the inhale and exhale experienced through the movement of the body.

As the mind drifts we just come back to the movement of the abdomen.

We develop simple and gentle moving asana sequences with focus on the breath, using this age old technique to help us to bring the scattered feeling of the mind back to the breath, as the student gets comfortable and the anxiety settles we start to slow down the movement finding moments of stillness. Starting in cat/cow, move to down dog, back to cat/cow then to swan. A simple and effective Vinyasa sequence.

Legs up the wall is a classic restorative posture which has a huge effect in calming the body and mind. Supporting the head and pelvis with a blanket or low pillow, use a wall/sofa or chair to raise the legs. Adopting this posture can be hugely supportive and relaxing for the autonomic nervous system. Coupled with the diaphragmatic breathing it is a sure way to calm an anxious or agitated mind.

At present my life is content and filled with compassion for myself, my family, and my husband-to-be. My teaching is from the heart, warts and all. My inner teacher is happy and for the time is enjoying the fruits of its hard work. However, I now understand that when the anxiety rises, to once more listen and to take action. I hope in the future boys are taught that it's okay to feel and have emotion and that all of us, both men and women, begin to listen to our inner teacher. ☯

For information on Daniel Groom and his Yoga for Anxiety courses visit: danielgroomyoga.com

