It has been estimated that approximately 40% of depressed individuals who seek traditional forms of treatment for depression are not experiencing significant improvements in their symptoms. Clinical Psychology PhD student Cherie La Rocque believes there is a responsibility for researchers to investigate nontraditional treatment options, such as exercise and yoga.

La Rocque has been practicing yoga for 7 years and her love of yoga has inspired her to expand her interest to researching possible antidepressant effects of yoga. Through her study, The Nontraditional Approaches to the Treatment of Depression Project, La Rocque is investigating two complementary or alternative treatment options for depression – Bikram yoga and aerobic exercise – and their effects on women between the ages of 18 and 65, who are experiencing clinical levels of depression.

“Yoga is very in vogue right now and interest in yoga is increasing not only in the general population, but also among researchers and treatment providers”, La Rocque explains. “We often hear anecdotal accounts of yoga’s psychological benefits. However there are only a handful of studies providing promising support for the antidepressant effects of yoga, and these studies lack in methodological rigor. So although these accounts help garner interest in yoga, they do little to validate yoga’s potential as an antidepressant approach to mental health. In order to better understand how effective yoga could be at alleviating depression, more scientifically rigorous studies like ours are needed.”

Not only is La Rocque interested in determining how well these approaches work in improving depression symptoms, she is also investigating underlying psychological and physiological mechanisms that may help understand their antidepressant effects. “Our collaboration with Dr. Kyra Pyke’s Cardiovascular Stress Response Lab has provided us the means to look at physiological mechanisms, such as vascular and cortisol reactivity in response to stress and changes in cardiorespiratory fitness”, says La Rocque.

La Rocque’s participants are asked to attend 2 classes of yoga or exercise per week at one of our partner facilities in Kingston, over an 8 week period. Participants are able to access these classes free of charge and can choose from more than 20 class times per week. In addition, participants are asked to attend in-person appointments immediately prior to and following their trial of yoga or exercise, which take place in either the
Mood Research Lab or the Cardiovascular Stress Response Lab at Queen’s. At these appointments, La Rocque and her team assess depression symptoms, physical health, and cardiovascular and cortisol response to stress.

“We know that antidepressant medication and psychotherapy will likely remain at the forefront of depression treatment for many years”, says La Rocque. “But I’m hopeful that scientific studies like The Nontraditional Approaches to the Treatment of Depression Project will help non-traditional approaches such as yoga and physical exercise to play a more prominent role in individuals’ treatment plans and everyday life.”