

YOGA FOR STRESS RELIEF

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Some of the oldest writings about the practice of yoga—thousands of years old—define the word “yoga” as “the calming of the fluctuations of the mind.” So yoga is a self awareness practice. We can learn to quiet our mind’s constant thoughts, anxieties and judgments, and cultivate a calm, peaceful awareness. Learning this skill helps us to navigate our lives with much more steadiness and ease.

Viewing yoga through the lens of modern medicine: Movement, stillness and breath are some of the tools we can use in a yoga practice, to move away from the anxiety and reactive behavior (“fight/flight/freeze” response) of our sympathetic nervous system, into the relaxation response of our parasympathetic nervous system. Most of us have had to adapt to new circumstances over the past seven months! Having a regular yoga practice can really help to relieve the stress we may feel from so much change.

Below is a simple sequence that can be practiced every day, using a yoga mat, towel, or carpet.

1. Seated 3-Part Breath

Find a comfortable seat (cross legged on the floor, or even sitting in a chair); make sure knees feel good. Rest your hands on your thighs, palms up or down. Begin with a few simple cycles of breath (full inhale/full exhale), just noticing where in your body you feel the breath: lower abdomen, ribs, chest. Then invite yourself to slow down and lengthen each breath. Inhale 1/3 of the way full, noticing the lower belly and just pausing for a moment, then inhale another 1/3, noticing the way your ribs gently expand, then finish your inhale by noticing the way the breath feels in your upper chest. Then exhale 1/3 empty, feeling the exhale in your chest, then exhale 1/3 more, letting ribs relax, and then finish your exhale noticing the way the belly relaxes at the finish of your exhale. Explore 5-10 cycles of breathing this way, pausing and noticing each of the three places as you inhale and exhale.

2. Simple Side and Neck Release

On an inhale, raise your arms out from your sides, then bring the right palm down to the floor, fingers pointing away from your body, and sweep the left arm over your head, aiming the left fingertips toward the right side. Explore the breath in the left ribs and waist, then extend the left arm out from your left shoulder, palm down, and allow your head to tilt over toward the right, finding an easy stretch along the left side of your neck. Linger, and breathe. Repeat on the opposite side.

3. Cow/Cat movement with breath

From seated, set your feet off to one side and come to hands and knees, spreading your palms into the mat and presses down each knuckle of your hands. Bring wrists under shoulders and knees under hips. (You can place a blanket under knees for comfort.) Inhale and gently arch your back, letting belly move closer to floor as you lift your chest. Then exhale and draw the navel in and up, rounding your back and allowing your chin to move closer to chest. Find complete, long and easy breaths, and let the breath lead the movement, slowing down and noticing how it feels.

4. Child's Pose

From hands and knees (also known as Table Pose), gently shift your hips back toward your heels, taking hands back toward your feet, with backs of the hands resting on the floor. Rest your forehead on the mat or on a blanket, letting your neck rest. If your knees are tender or you are healing a knee injury, roll a blanket or towel and place it behind your knees, to keep the knee joint slightly more open.

5. Puppy Pose

From hands and knees, walk your hands forward, lengthening your spine and allowing your forehead to rest on the mat.

Keep hips over knees, and gently press your hands into the floor to keep lengthening your spine. Find a few simple breaths here.

6. Downward Facing Dog

Walk hands back from Puppy Pose until they are slightly ahead of shoulders, then tuck your toes under and drawing the belly in, begin to lift your knees off of the mat, sending your hips up and back to lengthen your spine even more. Keep arms straight and strong, and explore bending your knees to find more length in your spine. Relax your neck. If you are healing a wrist injury, feel free to stay with Puppy Pose—both are good for lengthening your spine and finding space in the body.

7. Standing Forward Bend

Begin to walk your feet forward toward your hands, bending your knees for comfort in a standing forward fold. With feet hip distance apart, hold opposite elbows, sway a bit from side to side, letting your head hang and neck relax.

8. Mountain Pose

On an inhale, root down through your feet, and use strong legs to rise up to standing, sweeping your arms up overhead.

Touch palms together as you bring hands down to the center of your chest, to your heart center. Draw your collar bones wide, relax your elbows, pause, feel and breathe.

9. Warrior 2

From Mountain Pose, step the left foot back. Bring your left heel down to the mat with left toes pointing slightly left and the outer edge of your left foot almost parallel to the back of the mat, and align your right heel in line with your back heel or arch of the back foot. Explore which position

feels best. Bend your right knee. Keep the front knee aligned over your front heel, and front shin perpendicular to the floor. Turn your torso to the left, aligning shoulders over hips, and raise your arms out from your shoulders. Soften your eyes, and take your gaze out over your right fingertips. Feel the strength of your legs, your arms, and invite yourself to stay for 5 breaths.

10. Triangle

From Warrior 2, straighten the right leg, and begin to reach your torso out over the front thigh, tilting the right hand down and resting your hand on your right shin, reaching your left arm up. Extend through your spine, drawing your front ribs toward each other to keep your core strong. Reach the top hand away from the bottom hand, root through both feet. Stay for a few breaths, then inhale and rise back up into Warrior 2. Bring your hands to your hips, gently turn your torso back toward the mat front as you lift the back heel and step the left foot forward to meet the right. From Mountain Pose, repeat Warrior 2 and Triangle Pose on the other side, by stepping the right foot back.

11. Tree Pose

Standing balance yoga postures keep us very focused in the present moment— It's almost impossible to let the mind wander when we are making all of the small adjustments required to balance. From Mountain Pose, stand strongly in your right foot, pressing your foot down, hugging your leg muscles in. From the hip, turn your left knee out to the left, behind the knee and lifting your left heel. Shift the weight to your right leg, and if you are feeling steady, begin to lift your left knee toward your left underarm, then use your left hand to help place your left foot either above or below the inside of your left knee. (Don't place your foot on your knee, choose either above or below.) Begin to reach your arms up, grow your tree taller, hugging your right hip in toward the midline to keep your tree steady. (You can always practice this posture near a wall and rest a hand on the wall to steady your balance). Then point your left knee back toward the front of the mat, and lower the left foot back to the mat. Repeat on the other side, ending in Mountain Pose.

12. Seated Twist

From Mountain Pose, inhale and raise arms up, then exhale and fold forward, walking feet back and lowering your knees to mat. Set your feet over to one side and come to a seat on the mat. Extend your left leg forward, and bending your right knee, bring your right foot to the outside of the left knee, pressing the sole of your right foot into the mat. Note: Seated postures often feel better to the body when we sit on a folded blanket or towel to slightly raise our hips, so that we can sit tall without tilting our pelvis back and compressing the spine. Reach your left heel forward and point left toes up toward the ceiling. Place your right palm on the floor near your right hip, turning fingertips away from the body. Then wrap your left elbow around the right knee, and on an exhale, gently twist to the right. Stay for 5-10 breaths, gently twisting into your exhale. Soften your eyes. Then gently unwind, straighten both legs, and repeat on the other side.

13. Seated Forward Bend

Sitting, reach both legs toward the mat front, and bend both knees, resting your body forward and resting your forearms on your knees, and your forehead on your arms, holding opposite elbows. Explore this forward bend for 5-10 breaths.

14. Waterfall Pose

Find some wall space, and place the short end of your mat or blanket at the wall. Sit about 4-6" from the wall with knees bent, and your right side facing the wall. Gently swing right leg, and then the left, up the wall. Adjust your distance from the wall so that the backs of your legs feel completely comfortable. You might place a blanket under your neck for comfort. You can rest your palms on your abdomen, or rest your arms out to the side, choosing what feels easy and comfortable. Finding an inversion like Waterfall Pose helps us to allow our legs and feet to feel lighter and refreshed, especially if we've been on our feet a lot. This posture also allows our heart to really rest, since there is no effort for our heart to pump blood from our feet back to the heart. Soften your forehead, eyes, mouth and jaw. Stay for 10-20 minutes, letting your belly relax with each exhale. Notice the slight pauses that may happen at the finish of each exhale, and if they happens, relax deeply into the spaces between the breaths.