



Yoga Teacher Training

Teaching and Practicing Restorative Yoga and Savasana

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Teaching and Practicing Restorative Yoga and Savasana

Introduction:

Stress is a part of modern life. But fortunately, yoga provides us with the tools to use our breath and body to relax. Yoga in all its aspects – postures, breathing exercises, meditation and so on – can effectively prevent and reduce stress. However, there are certain breathing exercises and yoga postures (including savasana) that are specifically used to relax the mind and body and relief stress.

Relaxation practices in yoga have the utmost value today, when the pace and stresses of living can make the ability to let go more difficult and when the number of stress related diseases are on the rise. Many people who take up yoga find relaxation to be its greatest benefit.

In this part of the yoga teacher training course, we will discuss the effects of stress and how restorative yoga and relaxation can be used to reduce stress. Sometimes people interchange the terms relaxation and meditation, but relaxation and meditation each have a different emphasis. Relaxation means lying down, usually in Savasana, to quiet the mind and body, relaxing the entire body. Meditation takes a person more deeply into a focused state of mind, seated comfortably, but upright, and focused on one point. In relaxation, relaxing the muscles of the body is the primary focus. In meditation, stilling the mind is the primary focus.

Physiology of Stress

Over time, people often adapt to the gradually changing states of the body and mind, unaware of the increasing burden of physical and mental tension. Signs of increasing stress can be mental or physical and can include: anxiety, depression, nervous mannerism (i.e. biting nails, repetitively tapping a foot), or back or neck strain. Yoga is a tremendous help in this type of situation, since regular yoga practice leads to heightened awareness of self, which helps people more clearly discriminate between tension and relaxation states. Recognition of the actual state of the body is the first step towards being able to do something about it.

The word “stress” conjures up a variety of unpleasant images: fatigue, short temper, insomnia and muscle pain come to mind. But stress itself isn’t bad; it’s normal. Life is full of positive and negative stressors, or events that place physical or emotional pressure on us. The good news is that our bodies are well-equipped to handle stressors, the bad news is that in many cases we have retrained our bodies not to handle everyday stressor situations well.

In a perfect world, we gear up emotionally and physically to deal with an event, and once that even passes we return to business as usual. That’s how it’s supposed to work, but today, stressors have often become long-term, subtle and subjective. Many of our stressors today have no clear resolution and no apparent conclusion, which keeps the mind and body in a tense, edgy “fight or flight” mode.

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Although, how we process stress depends on a variety of factors, the biology of stress is the same for all of us. When you're frightened or alarmed, the stress response instantly kicks in. The stress hormones of epinephrine (also known as adrenaline) and cortisol are released. These two stress hormone help rev up your body in the following ways:

- The pupils dilate
- The palms sweat
- Breathing becomes shallow and fast
- The hair rises
- The heart beats faster and harder
- Blood pressure shoots up
- Digestion shuts down (so more blood can be redirected to the extremities)
- Insulin surges into the bloodstream
- Blood flow is redirected to the large skeletal muscles of the body

This process is managed by the autonomic nervous system (ANS), which in turn is controlled by the hypothalamus – a central area on the underside of the brain that regulates the body's involuntary functions. The ANS controls the functions of the body's organs and acts as a control system, maintaining homeostasis in the body. It affects heart rate, digestion, respiration rate, perspiration and diameter of the pupils among other things. The ANS has two branches: sympathetic and parasympathetic. The sympathetic branch is what speeds you up; the parasympathetic branch slows you down. The sympathetic branch kicks in when you're threatened; the parasympathetic branch returns you to normal after the threat passes.

Sympathetic and parasympathetic divisions typically function in opposition to each other. But this opposition is better termed complementary in nature rather than antagonistic. For an analogy, you can think of the sympathetic division as the accelerator and the parasympathetic division as the brake. The sympathetic division typically functions in actions requiring quick responses. The parasympathetic division functions with actions that do not require immediate reaction. Consider sympathetic as "fight or flight" and parasympathetic as "rest and digest."

Functions of the sympathetic branch of the ANS:_____.

_____.

Functions of the parasympathetic branch of the ANS:_____.

_____.

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The problem is that your brain's hypothalamus can't distinguish between a real threat and an imagined one. It bases its unconscious response on the perception of threat or danger. For example, if you're afraid of heights, the hypothalamus will jump-start your stress response whenever you're looking out the window of a tall building or standing near the edge of a cliff. Someone who has no fear of heights will have a different response. The hypothalamus can be triggered by social fears as easily as by genuine physical threat. This unconscious triggering can expand into seemingly benign situations, such as a business meeting or a family gathering.

The triggering of the "fight or flight" response is useful if we are dealing with a physically dangerous situation. A hormonal rush of strength prepares us to do battle or to run away quickly. Either choice will exhaust our body, allowing the body to return to its natural state. If however, the rush comes from a non-threatening situation – such as the business meeting mentioned earlier, then there's nowhere to run and we're forced to suppress what we're feeling. The body is in hyper-arousal state, but since we're not doing anything about it, our muscular, skeletal, nervous and gastrointestinal systems absorb the tension. The more often our stress response is triggered, the more our insides take the hit and our feelings of anxiety remain. Eventually our bodies become habituated to living with stress. We grow accustomed to living with back pain, anger, insomnia and indigestion, and stress slowly begins to break down our physical and emotional health. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, 75 to 90 percent of all doctor visits are prompted by stress-related concerns.

One of the worst sources of stress is our tendency to constantly worry. You can exhaust yourself by worrying about something all day, never taking any real action to solve the problem. The more helpless you feel, the greater the stress can become. Because worry is based in fear, the body registers it as a threat and the hypothalamus triggers the stress response. In the case of ongoing worry, the adrenal glands keep on secreting varying levels of epinephrine and cortisol in preparation for a battle that never happens. Muscles live in contraction and blood pressure goes up and stays up.

Benefits of Practicing Relaxation and Restorative Yoga

Effects of Relaxation on the Nervous System

Dr. Herbert Benson, MD, has done extensive research on meditation and is the author of the Relaxation Response. He has found that regular practice of relaxation and meditation and deep relaxation techniques quiet the sympathetic nervous system, resulting in the following benefits:

- Reduction or elimination of feelings of stress
- Improved emotional stability
- Decrease in depression and anxiety
- Improved concentration

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- Stronger immune system
- Decrease in muscular tension
- Improved sleep
- Increased alertness
- Increased serotonin levels
- Decreased heart rate and blood pressure
- Decreased cortisol levels
- Increase in salivation and digestion

Research has indicated that stimulating the hypothalamus gland in the brain by practicing relaxation helps to turn off the stress response and causes a wide variety of beneficial physiological and biochemical changes that restore the body's homeostatic balance and improve disease resistance.

How Yoga Relieves the Mental Components of Stress

Yoga relieves the physical tension in our bodies through postures and breath work, but yoga also relieves the mental components of stress by giving us a new way to look at things. Yoga encourages people to:

- Focus on the now. It's hard to feel stressed when you live in the present moment. Most mental problems are either projections into the future (something we are worried about happening) or regrets about the past. Yoga teaches us to focus on the present moment by focusing on our breath and on the sensations in our bodies. Only in the present moment can you truly deal with any problem.
- Learn to let go of judgment and attachment. Yoga teaches you to accept yourself and your body as they are and to honor and respect what you *can* do. This attitude spills over into our interactions with other people and events in our lives. We learn to respect people for who they are, letting go of the need to control the actions of others, which in turn helps reduce our level of stress. When we no longer have so many things and people to fight against, our stress levels drop.
- Stand open and proud. Yoga also teaches us how to stand open and proud, not only in our yoga postures, but in our daily lives. Through the practice of yoga, you learn to accept yourself more fully, which allows you to be more open and honest about who you are. When you don't have to spend valuable energy hiding who you truly are, you automatically feel less stressed and more alive.
- Take a breath before you do anything. Yoga teaches you to take a breath before beginning anything. When you apply this to your daily life, it dramatically relieves stress. Learning to take a breath before saying something that will turn into an argument with a family member, or taking a breath before eating something unhealthy, gives you the time to think before acting and results in much fewer regrets, and thereby much less stress in the long run.
- Attitude follows body mechanics. When your body and muscles relax, your mind can then become more relaxed and at peace.

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Restorative Yoga

Taking time out of each day to relax is essential for healthy living. The antidote to stress is relaxation. To relax is to rest deeply. This rest is different from sleep. Deep states of sleep include periods of dreaming, which may increase muscular tension. Relaxation is a state in which there is no movement, no effort, and the brain is quiet, yet awake. Common to all relaxation is putting the body in a comfortable position, with gentle attention directed towards the body, consciously relaxing the muscles of the body. Relaxing the muscles of the body, helps people also mentally relax.

Traditionally, a yoga practice begins with active postures followed by a brief restorative pose (Savasana). In restorative yoga, we start with a brief series of gentle warm-ups, then spend the majority of the practice on the restorative poses. Restorative yoga postures can be thought of as active relaxation. By gently stretching or supporting the body with props as we relax, we alternately stimulate and relax the body to move toward balance. In restorative yoga, each posture is held for longer periods of time than in traditional hatha yoga. This allows the body to completely relax into the restorative posture.

It is best to use props for support during a restorative practice. However, props are sometimes not available during a class, so this manual will show you restorative postures without the use of props, while also explaining how to use props. The use of props helps to create a completely supportive environment for total relaxation. In a restorative class, each restorative sequence should be designed to move the spine in all directions – flexing, extending and rotating the spine. Restorative classes should also include some types of gentle inversions. Because we stand or sit most of the day, blood and lymph fluid accumulate in the lower extremities. By changing the relationship of the legs to gravity, fluids are returned to the upper body and heart function is increased.

Finally, restorative yoga should alternatively stimulate and soothe the organs. For example, by flexing the spine in a forward bend and then extending it in a back bend, the abdominal organs are squeezed, forcing the blood out, and then opened, so that fresh blood returns to soak the organs.

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Teaching a Restorative Yoga Practice

Even in a restorative yoga practice, it is important to start with a gentle warm-up. Since students will typically be spending more time staying in each gentle stretching posture, make sure that you give them a chance to gently warm-up their muscles first. One of the main areas where tension accumulates is in the middle of the shoulders and at the nape of the neck, so it is helpful to include easy warm-ups that contract and stretch these areas to release tension throughout the whole body. Below are some gentle warm-ups that would be appropriate for a restorative yoga class.

Warm-Ups for a Restorative Class

Stretching Breaths



Warms Up:

- Shoulders
- Arms
- Ankles
- Torso

Steps:

- Start lying on back (supine position) with legs extended
- Place hands on floor next to sides with palms down
- Inhale, reach arms overhead (palms up) and flex feet
- Exhale, press hands back down next to sides (palms down) and point toes
- Continue moving arms and feet back and forth, moving with your breath
- Repeat 6-9 times

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Teaching Points:

Remind students to keep their abdominal muscles engaged, so the back doesn't become overly arched as the arms are stretched overhead. Encourage students to focus on stretching long, stretching as far as they can in two opposite directions. Have students flex their feet as their arms come overhead, then point their toes as their arms come back to their sides. This helps to warm-up the ankles and legs as well as the arms and shoulders.

Instruct students to move slowly so they may connect their breath with their movement by inhaling until their arms are all the way overhead and exhaling until their arms are at their sides. Encourage them to focus completely on their breath and the movement, letting go of any other thoughts.

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Bridge Flow



Warms Up:

- Thighs
- Hips
- Back
- Shoulders

Steps:

- Begin lying on back with hands at sides, palms down, and knees bent, feet on the floor about hip width apart and parallel.
- Inhale, press down with arms and feet and lift hips up towards the ceiling
- Exhale, slowly roll back down, bringing hips back to the floor.
- Repeat 5-8 times, moving with the breath

Variation:

As you inhale, raise your arms overhead as you lift your hips up

Exhale, bring your arms back to your sides as you roll your hips back to the floor

Teaching Points:

Have students to slightly tuck their tailbone as they lift their hips, so they can better feel each vertebrae press down and lift up from the floor as they roll up and down. Remind students to connect their breath with the movement (inhaling on lift and exhaling as they roll down). This helps to slow down the movement and helps students to move with more body awareness, bringing their focus to what they are doing.

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Easy Leg Pumps



Warms Up:

- Hips
- Hamstring Muscles
- Abdominal Muscles

Steps:

- Lie on back
- Bring right knee to chest and extend left leg on floor (head is relaxed on the floor)
- Inhale, extend arms overhead and right leg straight back to floor
- Exhale, switch legs, bringing left knee to chest and extending right leg on floor
- Inhale, extend arms overhead on the floor and both legs straight on the floor.
- Repeat 6-10 times
- Students should keep head and shoulders on floor in a restorative class to maintain a gentle warm-up

Teaching Points:

Encourage students to keep head and neck relaxed. Remind students to connect their breath with their movement (inhale, right knee in to chest, exhale, switching sides). This helps students move with more awareness, as they must focus on what they are doing to connect breath with movement.

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Knees side to side



Warms Up:

- Spine
- Back
- Hips
- Abdomen

Steps:

- Start lying on back
- Bring knees to chest
- Place arms out in T position with palms down
- Drop knees to right, back to center, then to the left and back to center

Teaching Points:

Encourage students to keep both shoulder blades on the floor, rather than rolling onto their side as they drop their knees to the side. This helps to warm up many of the deep spinal muscles and some of the anterior torso muscles (especially obliques).

If students have difficulty controlling the movement of their knees, they can keep their knees apart or place their feet on the floor before dropping their knees from side to side. This requires less abdominal strength and still provides a nice warm-up for the low back and spine.

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Neck Stretch Warm-Ups



Warms Up:

- Neck
- Upper Back

Steps:

- Start in seated position (cross legged)
- Sit up tall, reaching up through the top of the head
- Draw shoulders back
- Exhale, drop chin towards chest, keeping elbows and shoulders pulled back
- Inhale, raise the head back to center
- Do this five times, then on the last exhale, drop the chin and stay in this position for three breaths, breathing through the nose
- Inhale, raise head back to center
- Exhale, slowly drop right ear towards right shoulder
- Inhale, raise head back to center
- Do this five times, then on the last exhale, drop the ear towards the right shoulder and stay in this position for 3 breaths
- Inhale, raise head back to center
- Repeat on left side

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Teaching Points:

Never have students do neck circles (neck rolls). The neck is not a ball and socket joint and is not meant to move around in circles. Movements to the front and each side can be done instead. To do this, drop the chin to the chest then move the chin towards the right shoulder, then back to the chest, then move the chin towards the left shoulder and back towards the chest. Repeat this movement three to five times.

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Seated arms side to side



Warms Up:

- Sides of body/torso
- Shoulders and upper back
- Arms

Steps:

- Start sitting in a cross legged position with hands on knees
- Inhale, reach both arms overhead
- Exhale, drop your left hand to the floor, as you reach up and to the left with right hand
- Inhale, reach both arms overhead
- Exhale, drop right hand to the floor, as you reach up and to the right with your left hand
- Inhale, come back to center, reaching both arms overhead
- Continue moving from the center to one side then back to center and to the other side
- Repeat 4-5 times on each side

Teaching Points:

Remind students to stretch both arms up overhead as they inhale before dropping to the other side and not to simply move back and forth from one side to the other.

Some students with limited hip flexibility may find it uncomfortable sitting in a cross legged position. Have these students sit on a block or rolled blanket, with their sitting bones on the block/rolled blanket and their legs on the floor. Raising the hips while the legs remain crossed on the floor requires less hip flexibility than sitting on the floor with legs crossed. Eventually students can reduce the height of the prop (block/rolled blanket) and then eliminate it completely.

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Chest and Shoulder Stretch



Warms Up:

- Muscles of the shoulder girdle (shoulder joints, shoulder blades)
- Chest
- Upper back
- Arms
- Neck

Steps:

- Start sitting cross legged or with legs out in front of you
- Inhale, bring arms back, keeping arms lower than shoulder height and look up
- Exhale, clasp hands in front of chest at shoulder height and tuck chin to chest
- Continue bringing arms forward and back (horizontal adduction and horizontal abduction)
- Repeat 6-9 times

Teaching Points:

Instruct students to drop their head and round their back as much as possible as they clasp their hands in front of their chest, and to look up, letting their head fall back, as they bring their arms back. This helps to warm up the neck and upper back.

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Spinal Flexes



Warms Up:

- Back
- Abdomen
- Entire Spinal Column

Steps:

- Start on all fours with knees about hip width apart and hands about shoulder width apart
- Check that wrists are placed directly under shoulders and knees are directly under hips
- On exhale, round your back, lifting up through abdomen and tuck chin to chest
- Inhale, drop belly, look up and draw shoulders back
- Repeat 6-8 times

Variation:

Students can also do this warm-up by creating the movement from the head to the tail and then from the tail to the head. To do this, as students exhale, have them first drop their head, then round the upper back, then bring that rounding motion through the entire back, and finally tuck and squeeze in their tailbone. As they inhale, have them first release their tailbone and drop their hips, then drop their belly, lift their chest, draw their shoulders back and finally raise their head. This creates a wave of motion and a flow to the warm-up.

Teaching Points:

Encourage students to really stretch through their back by having them imagine they are trying to reach the ceiling with their back as they round it. As students look up and arch their backs, remind them to draw their shoulders back and squeeze their shoulder blades together, so they can better warm up the muscles of their chest and upper back.

Students should do their best to slow down their breath and move with their breath. This helps to bring their focus to the movement and to bring the movement to every part of their back.

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Easy Spinal Balance Flow



Warms Up:

- Back and Spine
- Hips and Legs
- Arms and Shoulders

Steps:

- Start on all fours with wrists directly under shoulders and knees about hip width apart
- Look towards floor, keeping neck long
- Inhale, extend right arm and left leg out
- Exhale, back to all fours
- Inhale, extend left arm and right leg out
- Exhale, back to all fours
- Continue extending opposite arm and leg, 4-7 times on each side
- Keep extended arm and leg parallel to the floor, lengthening through the spine (not arching)
- After completing the flowing spinal balance, students can also hold the pose, breathing softly for 3-4 breaths while extending opposite arm and leg.

Teaching Points:

Students often raise their leg too high when extending it and arch their back. Remind students to stretch long and lengthen the spine, rather than kicking up. Also encourage students to breathe slowly and really move with their breath, so they can fully feel the extension of their spine and notice if they begin to arch through their back.

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Hip Hinges



Warms Up:

- Back
- Hips
- Shoulders
- Knees
- Wrists

Steps:

- From extended child's pose, lift head looking forward
- Inhale, bring hips forward, then drop them down as you bring chest forward and shoulders back
- Exhale, press hips back, as you bend knees, coming back into extended child's pose
- Continue moving back and forth, flowing with breath
- Repeat 6-8 times

Teaching Points:

Remind students to keep their elbows straight throughout the movement. This will help to better warm up their shoulders. Also, many students may find it difficult to drop their hips to the floor, while keeping their arms straight. Encourage them to drop their hips only as much as is comfortable, while keeping their arms straight.

Students should move slowly, connecting their movement with their slow, deep breath. This helps students become more mindful of their movement and notice when they may feel some tension. Paying attention to the signals of their body helps students avoid injury.

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Quieting Postures (Practice these postures prior to restorative postures)

These postures are good to practice just after the warm-up to quiet and focus the mind before moving into the more relaxing and restful restorative postures.

Extended Child's Pose



Benefits:

- Stretches the shoulders, hips, knees and back
- Relieves tension and headache
- Quiets the body, increases mindfulness

Steps:

- From all fours, sit back on heels, drop belly towards thighs and head towards mat
- Place forehead on floor
- Keep arms extended, stretching hands forward
- Breathe into back, feeling back stretch and expand on inhale and relax on exhale

Teaching Points:

Some students, especially heavier students, may find it becomes more difficult to breathe with their belly pressed against their thighs. Have these students spread their knees apart, making more room for their belly.

Variation:

Tuck chin to chest more, bringing top of head towards floor. This will help to better stretch the neck and upper back.

Instead of breathing into the back, breathe into your belly, feeling it press against your thighs as you inhale, and relax on exhale. This helps to exercise the diaphragm and gently massage the internal organs.

Students can also fold a blanket under their shins to make this position more comfortable.

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Thread the Needle



Benefits:

- Stretches shoulders and upper back
- Gently stretches the spine
- Provides a gentle inversion

Steps:

- Start on all fours
- Inhale, lift your right hand off the floor
- Exhale, sweep your right hand between your left hand and your knees
- Place your right arm on the floor with your palm up
- Rest your right cheek on the floor
- Gently press down with the left hand to go more deeply into the posture
- Stay in this position for about 1 minute, breathing deeply into your upper back
- Come back to all fours
- Repeat on the other side

Teaching Points:

Encourage your students to relax fully and allow the floor to fully support the weight of their upper body.

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Chest and Chin to Floor



Benefits:

- Stretches shoulders and chest
- Relieves headache
- Quiets the mind

Steps:

- Start on all fours
- Walk hands forward, bringing chest and forehead towards the floor, while keeping the hips raised (thighs stay vertical to the floor)
- Stay in this position for a minute or two, breathing into your back
- Slowly come back up to all fours

Teaching Points

Remind students to drop their chest towards the floor. This will help open the chest and stretch the shoulders. Have students bring their focus to their breath and to relax their shoulders more with each exhalation.

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Sphinx



Benefits:

- Stretches shoulders and chest
- Relieves back tension
- Improves flexibility of the spine

Steps:

- Start lying on your belly
- Bring hands forward and come up onto your forearms
- Engage your belly slightly and draw your shoulders down and back
- Stay in this position for 4-6 breaths
- Slowly lower back onto your belly
- Repeat 1-2 more times
- Press back into child's pose to counter this posture

Teaching Points

Remind students to press their chest forward and to drop their shoulders away from their ears. There is a tendency for students to hunch their shoulders in this position, so remind them to relax them down. Have students bring their focus to their breath and to relax their shoulders more with each exhalation.

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Prone Twist



Benefits:

- Relieves tension in upper back and shoulders
- Improves flexibility of the chest and shoulders
- Improves spinal flexibility

Steps:

- Start lying in prone (belly down) position on mat
- Bring arms out to T position with palms down
- Roll onto left side, keeping left arm straight out behind you and bringing right hand next to chest
- Relax head and neck to floor and press down with right hand to twist more
- To go further into the twist, bend right knee, placing right foot on floor just behind left leg
- Let belly go soft and breathe fully, breathing into the twist
- Stay in this position for 3-4 slow deep breaths
- Slowly roll back onto belly, bringing both arms back to T position
- Repeat on other side

Teaching Points:

Many students drop their back arm to their sides. Remind students to keep their back arm straight out behind them and roll less if needed. Keeping their arm straight out behind them, helps alleviate tension in the upper back.

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Lunge



Benefits:

- Stretches hip flexors and quadriceps
- Stretches and relaxes low back

Steps:

- Start on all fours (on hands and knees - shoulders over wrists and hips over knees) or start in down dog
- Bring right foot forward, placing right foot between your hands, or to the right of both hands (to create more space)
- Check that right knee is directly over right ankle
- Scoot left foot back until gentle stretch is felt
- Relax shoulders and hips, sink into the posture
- Focus on one point in front of you or on the front of your mat
- Stay in this position for 6-8 breaths

Note: To make this posture more quieting, give students the option to bring both hands to the inside of the bent leg and drop onto their forearms. Allow the head to drop down.

Teaching Points:

Have students move slowly and only drop hips or press leg back until they feel a gentle stretch. Have students move slowly into this position, only going to the point where they feel a gentle stretch.

Make sure that while in the lunge position, students keep their knee over their ankle or slightly behind (not in front). Bringing the knee in front of (or past the point of) the ankle can strain the ligaments in the ankle.

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Squat



Benefits:

- Opens the hips (stretches the gracilis, vastus lateralis, vastus intermedialis, vastus medialis)
- Relieves sciatica
- Improves balance
- Strengthens the arches of the feet and the ankles, stretches the ankle joint
- Alleviates low back pain
- Helps relieve constipation

Steps:

- Start standing with feet a little wider than hip width apart and turned out
- With hands on your hips or out in front of you, squat down keeping your hips off the floor
- Bring hands to heart and use elbows to press knees farther apart
- Keep heels pressing into or towards the floor
- Drop head and press thumbs against forehead to encourage relaxation
- Stay in this position for 5-6 long, slow breaths
- Sit down when done and shake legs out

Modification:

For students who have difficulty squatting fully, they can practice Cobbler's Pose instead (see later in this section) to open the hips without having to bend the knees as far.

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Resting Pigeon (Eka Pada Rajakapotasana)



Benefits:

- Opens the hips, thighs, chest and shoulders
- Stimulates digestion

Steps:

- Start on all fours
- Bring right knee forward, placing right knee close to right wrist
- Move right foot forward towards left wrist
- Press left foot back, dropping hips as close to floor as possible
- Draw finger tips back and lift chest
- Exhale, walk hands forward and drop chest and forehead towards the floor
- Drop forehead to the floor
- Relax elbows to the floor and relax shoulders
- Stay in this position for about 8-10 slow breaths.

Modification:

For students who have knee problems, have them practiced “reclined hip opener” (see later in this section) instead of pigeon. It will still stretch the hip rotator muscles, but without placing pressure on the knee.

Reclined Hip Opener

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Easy Seated Twist



Benefits:

- Opens the chest and shoulders
- Stretches the muscles surrounding the hips
- Improves spinal flexibility
- Stimulates digestion

Steps:

- Start sitting
- Bend right knee, placing right foot to the outside of the left knee
- Place right hand just behind right hip
- Wrap left arm around right knee, hugging right thigh in close to body
- Make sure that the sitting bones on both sides are still pressing down into the floor.
- Inhale, sit up tall
- Exhale, twist to the right and look over the right shoulder
- On every inhale, sit a little taller. On every exhale, twist a little deeper
- Work into this position for 6-8 breaths
- Turn back to center and release left arm
- Extend both legs out
- Repeat on the other side

Teaching Points:

Encourage students to work into this position by continually stretching up as they inhale and twisting more as they exhale. Also, remind students to hug their top leg close to their chest and to keep both sitting bones on the floor. This will help increase the stretch to the hip rotator muscles. Find one point to focus on, becoming more quiet in this position.

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Sun Worshipper



Benefits:

- Opens chest
- Improves breathing, brings awareness to breath
- Stretches shoulders and wrists

Steps:

- From easy seated position, bring hands behind back with fingers pointing back
- Inhale, lift up through chest and squeeze shoulder blades together
- Exhale, allow head to fall back
- Continue breathing deeply through nose and drawing shoulders back
- Stay in this position for 8-10 deep breaths

Teaching Points:

For people who have trouble with their neck, instruct them to look forward, but to keep lifting up through their chest and squeeze their shoulder blades together.

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Seated Staff Pose (Dandasana)



Benefits:

- Tones abdominal muscles
- Opens the chest
- Stretches and strengthens the legs
- Strengthens the torso, arms and spine

Steps:

- Sit with your legs extended
- Sit up tall and scoot your sitting bones back, so you are sitting on the top of your sitting bones
- Bring your feet together and turn your legs, so your knees are facing directly up (not turned out to the sides)
- Press your hands into the floor as you reach up through the top of your head to lengthen your spine
- Flex your feet as much as possible, until you feel a stretch in your calves
- Breathe fully through your nose, staying in this position for 4-5 breaths

Modification:

Some students may find it places strain on their low back when sitting on the floor like this, due to tight hamstrings. Have those students place the edge of a blanket or rolled towel under their sitting bones. Raising the hips requires less hamstring flexibility than sitting all the way down on the floor. Eventually students can reduce the height of the blanket or towel and then eliminate it completely.

Teaching Points:

Remind students to keep their knees facing directly up towards the ceiling. The powerful external rotator muscles of the hip tend to cause the feet to turn out automatically when we're not paying attention. Keeping the knee facing up will help strengthen the muscles that internally rotate the hip.

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Seated One-Leg Forward Fold (Janu Sirsasana)



Benefits:

- Stretches the calve, hamstrings and lower back muscles
- Improves digestion
- Strengthens low back
- Alleviates headache and stress

Steps:

- Start seated with legs extended
- Bend the left knee, placing the sole of the left foot next to the right thigh
- Scoot back, so you are on the front part of sitting bones
- Sit up tall
- Raise arms forward and up to shoulder height
- Exhale, reach forward, as belly drops toward thigh
- Keep reaching forward with head and chin, while pressing back through the hips
- Relax arms, shoulders and neck
- Breathe deeply through the nose, focusing on the exhalation, staying in this position for 6-8 breaths.
- Inhale, slowly come up to sitting
- Extend left leg next to right leg and shake out legs
- Repeat on the other side

Teaching Points:

Sitting forward bends with one foot tucked in are among the most useful hip flexibility stretches for beginning and intermediate students. They do not place as much stress on the lower back and sacroiliac joints as keeping both legs straight, and are helpful for working on right-left imbalances. However, many students are more concerned about getting their head to their leg, rather than maintaining proper alignment to create a more beneficial stretch. Remind students to keep their chin away from their chest and to press back through the hips. Keeping the chin away from the chest helps prevent the upper back from rounding too much. Pressing back through the hips helps tilt the pelvis, so

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students are bending from the hips rather than rounding from the back, which can strain the low back.

Cobbler's Pose



Benefits:

- Opens hips
- Stretches muscles of the back and hips
- Relieves stress
- Eliminates tension in neck and shoulders

Steps:

- From sitting, bring soles of feet together
- Press feet forward until legs make a diamond shape
- Hold onto shins or ankles and pull shoulders back
- Exhale, fold forward, bringing chest towards feet
- Relax head and neck, and drop elbows out to the sides
- Stay in this position for 8-10 long, slow breaths
- Slowly raise head and chest and come back to sitting

Teaching Points:

Many students familiar with butterfly position automatically bring their feet in close. Remind students to press their feet forward to bring the stretch into their thighs. Also remind students to fold forward from the hips by pressing back through their sitting bones and tipping the pelvis forward rather than only rounding the back. Encourage students to breathe into their backs, helping to stretch their upper backs and shoulders.

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Easy Bridge



Benefits

- Stretches hip flexors
- Stretches the front of the body

Steps

- Start lying on your back with knees bent and feet on the floor, about hip distance apart, and hands at your sides with palms down
- As you exhale, lift your hips up
- Unlike regular bridge, you don't need to press up too far, just to a comfortable level that takes little effort to maintain
- If you like, you can place a block or bolster under your low back to help keep your hips raised without requiring any effort.
- If you place a block under your back, place it directly under your sacrum
- Breathe deeply in this position, allowing your shoulders to relax into the floor
- Stay in this position for 6-10 breaths

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Counter with Knees to Chest



Teaching Points:

Remind students to breathe fully and relax through the neck and shoulders. Instruct students to keep their knees slightly apart and allow their hips to relax and open. As students rock side to side, guide them to pay attention to the sensation across their low back and sacrum.

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Reclined Hand to Foot (Supta Padangusthasana)



Benefits:

- Improves digestion
- Stretches hips, hamstrings and psoas muscles
- Relieves sciatica and low backache
- Relaxing – relieves stress

Steps:

- Start lying on back (supine position)
- Bend knees, placing both feet on the floor about hip width apart
- Bring right knee to chest
- Exhale, extend right leg, placing hands around right thigh, calf, ankle or foot
- Gently pull leg towards head
- Stay in this position for 4-5 slow breaths
- Release left hand, placing left hand on floor out to side in T position
- Still holding right leg with right hand, drop right leg to the right side
- Keep hips square to the ceiling and both shoulder blades on the floor – do not roll onto right side – to allow hips to open more
- Stay in this position for 4-5 deep breaths
- Bring both knees to chest and rock from side to side
- Repeat on the other side

Option: To make this posture more restorative, students can wrap a strap around the foot of their extended leg. This way, they don't need to stretch as far, while keeping their head and shoulders on the floor.

Teaching Points:

Stretching the hamstrings while in a supine position is both safe and effective because the hip joints are not bearing any weight of the body as a whole. Remind students to let gravity help them into the stretch and to simply relax their leg muscles while gently pulling their leg with their arms. Students often want to pull their leg closer to their head and, as they pull harder, their leg muscles tend to tighten in opposition to the stretch. Relaxing the leg muscles lends itself to a

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more effective stretch. Remind student to breathe slowly and deeply to help their muscles relax.

Legs in the Air



Benefits:

- Energizes legs
- Helps prevent varicose veins
- Relaxes back and shoulders
- Stretches the backs of the legs
- Stretches ankles and feet

Steps:

- Start lying on your back
- Bring knees to chest and place hands at sides with palms down
- Exhale, extend legs into the air
- Flex and point toes, rotate ankles
- Stay in this position for a minute or two
- Bring knees back to chest and lower feet to the floor

During a restorative practice, find postures, such as this one, in which you can spend time rotating the ankles or flexing/pointing the toes, bringing focus to the feet. We often spend little time noticing our feet. A restorative practice can give us the opportunity to focus on and gently stretch our feet and ankles.

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Happy Baby



Benefits

- Stretches hips and knees
- Relaxes the body
- Stretches shoulders

Steps

- Start by lying on your back
- Bring your knees to your chest
- Hold on to the soles of your feet (or you can hold onto your shins or behind your knees)
- Lift your feet towards the ceiling while keeping your knees bent so your shins are in a vertical position.
- Continue pulling your knees towards your armpits
- Breathe into your belly, so your belly presses against your thighs as you inhale
- Stay in this position for 6-8 breaths
- Slowly release your feet, bringing your knees back to your chest.

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Happy Baby (one leg)



Benefits:

- Stretches legs and hips
- Improves hip flexibility
- Relieves low back tension

Steps:

- Start lying on floor with knees bent and feet on floor
- Bring right knee towards chest
- Hold onto your right foot (or ankle), as you press the sole of your foot towards the ceiling (so the shin is in a vertical position)
- Bring right knee close to the right armpit
- You can keep the left knee bent or straighten the left leg on the floor

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Restorative Postures

After providing a gentle warm-up and practicing a few quieting postures, you can move into a fully restorative practice. There are a number of relaxation poses that are useful in helping the mind and body relax. It is best to practice many of the restorative postures with a bolster or blanket to more fully support the body. However, since many of your students or studios may not have bolsters, the following postures are shown without the use of bolsters. An explanation of how you could use bolsters is then included at the end of each.

Prone Twist with a Bolster



Steps:

- Place the bolster or blanket lengthwise (longways) down the middle of the mat
- Sit at one end of the bolster with your right hip next to the end of the bolster
- Bring your legs to the left, bending your knees and bringing your feet towards your left hip
- Turn to face the bolster, keeping your right hip next to the end of the bolster
- Place your hands on either side of the bolster and slowly lower your belly and chest onto the bolster and your forearms on either side of the bolster
- Place your left cheek on the bolster (looking to your right)
- Stay in this position for a few minutes, breathing into your belly
- Press down with your hands to come back to sitting
- Repeat on the other side

Teaching Points:

Remind your students to breathe into their bellies as they lie with their bellies on the bolsters. Breathing deeply against the pressure of the bolster will help stimulate the relaxation response. Also encourage them to scan their bodies and consciously relax any tight areas.

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Crocodile



Benefits:

- Relieves headache and anxiety
- Relaxes muscles of neck and upper back
- Relieves indigestion
- Strengthens diaphragm

Steps:

- Start lying on belly (prone) with feet turned out
- Bring arms in front and hold opposite elbows
- Press elbows away, so they are slightly in front of shoulders (not directly underneath)
- Drop forehead to forearms
- Check that neck and shoulders are relaxed and chest is off the floor, while bottom ribs still touch the floor
- Breathe deeply through the nose, breathing into the belly, so belly presses into the floor on inhale and relaxes on exhale
- Stay in this position for 1-2 minutes
- Lift head and chest, place hands under shoulders and press back to child's pose

Exploration:

As you exhale, imagine any tension exiting your body. First, allowing your neck and shoulders to relax more with each exhalation, then allowing the hips and legs to let go with each exhalation.

Teaching Points:

Give students time to find the right position for their forearms to help their neck relax most effectively. Remind students to breathe deeply into their belly.

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Child's Pose (Balasana)



Benefits:

- Relieves stress and anxiety
- Gently stretches the back
- Alleviates headache
- Stretches the ankles, knees and hips

Steps:

- Sit on heels
- Fold forward, bringing chest towards thighs and forehead towards floor
- Keep hands at sides with palms turned up
- Stay in this position for 4-5 breaths, breathing into back
- Raise head and chest to come back to sitting

Modification:

Some students may find it uncomfortable to fold forward in this position, finding it more difficult to breathe. Suggest that students spread their knees apart to make more room for their belly, making breathing easier. You can also have students place a bolster between their knees (folding forward onto the bolster).

Teaching Points:

Encourage students to breathe into the bottom part of their lungs, so that the belly presses against thighs on inhale, and belly relaxes on exhale. This provides a gentle massage to the internal organs and helps relax them more. You can also gently adjust students in this position by standing behind them and placing your hands on their low back (your hands on either side of the spine, fingers pointing out away from the spine). Gently press your hands down and away from either side of the spine.

Child's Pose with a Bolster

Child's pose can also be practiced with a bolster. Have students sit back on their heels and spread their knees apart. Then have them place a bolster between their legs and lower their torso, chest and forehead onto the bolster. This provides the body with more support and causes less pressure in the knee joints.

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Cobbler's Pose with a Bolster



You can practice cobbler's pose with a bolster by spreading your feet apart just a little ways and placing the bolster with the narrow way between the feet. Reach forward with the head and chest and rest your forehead on the bolster.

Benefits:

- Opens hips
- Stretches muscles of the back and hips
- Relieves stress
- Eliminates tension in neck and shoulders

Steps:

- From sitting, bring soles of feet to either side of the bolster
- Press feet forward until feet are further forward than knees by at least a few inches
- Place hands on either side of the bolster on the floor, and draw shoulders back
- Exhale, fold forward, bringing chest towards the bolster
- Relax head and neck, and drop elbows out towards the floor
- Stay in this position for a couple minutes
- Slowly raise head and chest and come back to sitting

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Reclined Cobbler's Pose (with or without a bolster)



Benefits:

- Stretches hips
- Relaxes the body
- Opens the chest

Steps:

- Start sitting, bringing the soles of feet together
- Place bolster behind you
- Bring hands behind you and slowly lower down onto your back, keeping your feet in the “cobbler’s pose” position
- You can lie on your back on the floor or, if you place a bolster behind you long ways you can lay back on the bolster to open the chest more.
- Bring hands to sides with your palms up
- Breathe deeply into the belly, allowing your hips to relax completely
- Stay in this position for about 1-2 minutes.
- If it’s uncomfortable, extend you legs onto the floor, or cross your ankles instead of bringing the soles of your feet together. This will reduce the stretch in the hips.
- Slowly bring your knees together, then come back up to sitting.

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Seated One-Leg Forward Fold (Janu Sirsasana) with Bolster



Benefits:

- Stretches the calve, hamstrings and lower back muscles
- Improves digestion
- Stretches the low back
- Alleviates headache and stress
- Brings awareness to mind and body

Steps:

- Start seated with legs extended
- Bend the left knee, placing the sole of the left foot next to the right thigh
- Scoot back, so you are on the front part of sitting bones
- Place bolster next to the right leg (extended leg)
- Sit up tall
- Raise arms forward and up to shoulder height
- Exhale, reach forward, as belly drops onto the bolster
- Keep reaching forward with head and chin, while pressing back through the hips
- Once you've come as far as comfortable, relax head and neck
- Relax arms, shoulders and neck
- Breathe deeply through the nose, focusing on the exhalation, staying in this position for 1-2 minutes.
- Inhale, slowly come up to sitting
- Extend left leg next to right leg and shake out legs
- Repeat on the other side

Teaching Points:

Many students are more concerned about getting their head to their leg, rather than maintaining proper alignment to create a more beneficial stretch. Remind students to keep their chin away from their chest and to press back through the hips. To keep this posture more restorative for students with less flexibility, place a bolster next to their extended leg, so they can relax more completely into this stretch.

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Seated Straddle (with or without a Bolster)



Benefits:

- Stretches the legs and inner thighs
- Opens shoulders and chest

Steps:

- Start sitting and spread legs apart into a straddle
- Bring hands on the floor behind you
- Draw shoulders back and lift up through the chest
- Students can stay in this position or bring their chest forward to stretch more through the legs
- Stay in this position for 8-10 deep breaths
- Slowly come back to sitting, bringing legs together
- Shake legs out

Straddle with a Bolster

To make this posture more restorative, have students place a bolster between their legs, placing one end of the bolster against their belly. Place hands on either side of the bolster and slowly lower down, placing forehead on the bolster. Rest forearms on the floor on either side of the bolster. Breathe deeply into your belly, feeling the belly press against the bolster on inhale and relax on exhale. Breathing against this pressure will help create more relaxation.

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Seated Forward Fold (Paschimottanasana) with a Bolster



Benefits:

- Stretches the calves, hamstrings and lower back muscles
- Improves digestion
- Stretches the low back
- Alleviates headache and stress
- Brings awareness to mind and body

Steps:

- Start in seated staff pose
- Place bolster on top of legs
- Reach chest forward as pressing back through sitting bones
- Rest belly and chest against bolster
- Relax forehead on bolster
- Breathe into your belly, so your belly presses against the bolster on inhale
- Relax your shoulders on exhale
- Stay in this position for about 1 minute

Teaching Points

If a student's forehead doesn't reach the bolster, stack a block with a blanket over it on top of the bolster, so forehead can reach.

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Easy Bridge with a Bolster (or a block)



Benefits:

- Provides the benefits of a gentle inversion
- Stretches the front of the body
- Relieves back tension
- Relieves shoulder/neck tension

Steps:

- Place bolster in a horizontal position across your yoga mat
- Sit on the bolster and sit towards the front of the bolster
- Use your hands to help lower yourself to the floor
- Make sure that the bolster is supporting the hips and low back, but the shoulder blades are on the floor
- Place feet on floor almost as wide as your mat and let knees fall towards each other
- Relax your shoulders and breathe slowly
- Stay in this position for about 1 minute

Variation with a Block

You can also practice easy bridge by placing a block under the sacrum (rather than using a bolster for support).



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Side Bend with a Bolster



With the bolster in this position, you can also roll onto your side with your legs straight and arms overhead. The bolster supports your hips and provides a gentle stretch along the top side of your body.

Benefits:

- Provides a stretch to the shoulders
- Stretches the side of the body (lateral flexion)
- Relieves back tension
- Relieves shoulder/neck tension

Steps:

- Place bolster in a horizontal position across your yoga mat
- Sit on the bolster and with both legs to one side
- Use your hands to help lower yourself to the other side of the bolster
- Make sure that the bolster is supporting the hips, but the shoulders and legs are on the floor
- Bend your knees slightly and clasp your hands together overhead (next to your ears)
- Relax your shoulders and breathe slowly
- Stay in this position for about 1 minute
- Slowly come up, using your hands for support
- Repeat on the other side

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Knees Circles / Knees to Chest



Benefits

- Relaxes hips and low back
- Improves flexibility of hips
- Relaxes neck and shoulders

Steps:

- From knees to chest, place hands on knee caps (right hand on right knee cap and left hand on left knee cap)
- Begin making opposing circles with knees by drawing knees to chest, then apart, then pressing knees away and back together.
- Make 5-8 knee circles this way
- Then, make opposing knee circles in the opposite direction (starting with knees together at chest, then pressing knees away, then apart, then back towards chest and together)
- Make 5-8 knee circles this way

Variation:

Knee Circles with Knees Together:

Knee circles can also be practiced by keeping knees together. First create circles with knees in a clockwise direction, then in a counter clockwise direction.

Teaching Points:

Instruct students to keep the movement smooth and easy (not going to fast or jerky). Remind students to focus on their breath, keeping it long and relaxed.

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Reclined Knee to Chest



Benefits

- Stretches hips
- Relaxes neck and shoulders
- Stimulates digestion

Steps

- Start lying on your back, legs stretched out
- Bend your right knee, bring your knee towards your chest or right arm pit.
- Interlace your fingers, holding your right leg just below the knee
- Breathe deeply into the belly. This will help stimulate the colon as you breathe in and the belly presses against the bent leg
- Stay in this position for a minute or two
- Repeat on the other side

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Easy Reclined Hip Opener



Benefits:

- Stretches the rotator muscles of the hip
- Improves knee flexibility
- Relieves stress and tension

Steps:

- Start lying on back (supine position)
- Bend knees, placing feet on floor about hip width apart
- Place right ankle on left thigh (just above the left knee)
- Wrap hands around left thigh
- Exhale, gently pull left thigh towards chest
- Use right elbow to press right knee forward (away from body)
- Stay in this position for 5-6 long, slow breaths
- Place left foot back on floor, uncross legs and repeat on other side

Teaching Points:

Encourage students to relax into this position as much as possible. Remind them to relax their head/neck onto the floor and to focus on creating a deep and smooth breath, while relaxing the muscles in their legs. Relaxing the muscles will help make this stretch more effective.

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Legs Up the Wall



In a restorative class, it's best to practice legs up the wall (instead of legs in the air) if a wall is available.

Benefits:

- Calming to the nervous system
- Energizes legs
- Stretches the backs of the legs

Steps:

- Bring your mat to the wall, placing one end of the mat against the wall
- Sit next to the wall, with knees bent and your right hip pressed next to the wall (you should sit just in front of the side of your mat)
- Come down onto your back, keeping your right hip next to the wall
- Bring your knees to your chest
- Turn on your back, bringing your head towards the back of your mat and your legs up the wall
- Place the backs of your legs up the wall, while your back and head rest on your mat
- Place your hands at your sides
- Relax your body and breathe deeply, focusing on your breath
- Stay in this position for a couple minutes

Variation:

Instead of keeping your legs straight up the wall, you can also bring the soles of your feet together and bend your knees, bringing your feet towards you.

You can also place a sandbag on students feet for extra sense of grounding and support.

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Supported Reclined Back Bend



Benefits:

- Relieves tension in mid back and shoulders
- Gently stretches and opens the chest

Steps:

- Get a rolled blanket
- Place the blanket across your mat (about 2 feet from the back end)
- Sit in front of your blanket (a few inches in front of it)
- Using your hands as support, slowly recline down, bringing your back to the blanket
- Adjust the blanket as necessary, so it is just below your shoulder blades
- Drop your arms to either side of the blanket
- Let your feet relax and flop out to the sides
- Begin slow, abdominal breathing, feeling your belly gently rise as you inhale and relax as you exhale
- Focus on the sensations of your breath and your body
- Stay in this position for 2-4 minutes
- When you are ready to get up, roll onto your side, press the blanket away and come back up to sitting

Use bolster for deeper back bend. Shoulder blades will not be completely on floor.



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Reclined Twist



Benefits:

- Stretches the spine and shoulders
- Improves digestion and circulation
- Relieves lower backache and sciatica
- Opens the hips and chest

Steps:

- Start lying on back, arms out in T position with palms down
- Bend knees, placing feet on the floor about hip width apart
- Lift right leg and cross right leg over left leg
- Drop knees to the left and look towards the right hand
- Keep both shoulder blades down (may need to scoot to the side to keep shoulder blades down)
- Stay in this position, breathing deeply into the open space on the side of the body
- Let the weight of legs pull you deeper into the stretch
- Bring knees back to center and uncross legs
- Repeat on the other side

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Windshield Wiper Twist



Benefits:

- Stretches hips and quadriceps
- Rotates spine and stretches muscles in lower back
- Opens the front of the body

Steps:

- Start lying on back with knees bent and feet on floor, wider than hip width apart (almost as wide as the mat).
- Place arms out in T position with palms down
- Drop knees to the right
- To go deeper into the position, bring left hand to left ankle and pull your left heel towards your tailbone
- Stay in this position, keeping both shoulder blades down
- Close eyes and stay in this position for about 2 minutes
- Repeat on the other side

Teaching Points:

Remind students to keep their feet a little wider than hip width apart. This helps to better warm up the hip flexor muscles as well as the low back. Check that students are keeping their back flat on the floor, so that spinal rotation is achieved, rather than simply leaning onto one side of the body and then the other.

To go deeper into the twist, bring foot back to hand.



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Create Your Own Restorative Practice

Create a restorative practice or portion of a practice by listing 5 restorative postures in the order in which you would practice them. Pay attention to moving the spine in all directions (flexing, extending and rotating the spine)

1)

2)

3)

4)

5)

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Savasana

The practice of relaxation in Savasana is one of the healthiest things you can do for yourself and your students. The focus in savasana is to completely relax the body. Learning to relax and breathe well will help you stay centered in the midst of days filled with multiple commitments – and will help you recover from nights when you had less sleep than you need.

Always leave time for savasana at the end of your practice and at the end of any class you teach. You can also practice savasana by itself to relieve fatigue and bring back your natural state of balance.

Benefits of Savasana:

- Removes fatigue
- Allows the mind to rest
- Decrease muscular tension
- Relieves mental stress and anxiety
- Improves sleep

Steps:

- Lie full length on your back on the floor (on your mat or thin blanket)
- Bring feet a little wider than hip width apart and let the feet drop out to the side (externally rotate)
- Bring your hands to your sides
- Draw your shoulder blades back slightly and turn your palms up to help open the chest
- Take a deep breath in through the nose and exhale through the mouth, saying “ahhh”
- Do this breath a couple more time, giving all your attention to releasing any tension with each exhalation
- Allow your breathing to become natural again
- Focus on each part of your body, feeling each part relax, starting with the feet and legs and working all the way up through the head
- Bring awareness back to the breath and with each gentle breath, bring your awareness more deeply inside your body, letting go of the outside world
- Rest here for 5 to 10 minutes
- When you are done resting, slowly begin moving your hands and feet first, then stretch your arms overhead. Roll onto your side and come back up to sitting.

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Below are some suggestions to give your students as they settle into savasana to help them focus on each part of the body and relax more completely:

- Let your feet relax and flop out to the sides
- Feel the muscles in your calves relax
- Feel the muscles in your thighs fall away from the bones
- Release your hips and feel them open
- Feel your belly become soft and round
- Let your shoulders relax
- Feel your arms and hands become heavy
- Let your mouth open slightly and your jaw become loose
- Feel your forehead become soft and the muscles in your face relax
- Let your breath be natural – with each breath allow yourself to go more deeply inside, finding that quiet place within you where no one else exists

Teaching Points:

To help your students deepen their experience in Savasana, have them pay attention to those muscles that feel especially tense or focus on a part of their body that is not functioning as well as it should. For example, focus on the neck, if neck strain is a source of discomfort. On every inhalation, have students imagine this area being filled with warm glowing light, and on every exhale, have students imagine all tension releasing from that area as it relaxes completely.

Teaching and Practicing Restorative Yoga and Savasana

Practices to prepare for relaxation

When practicing savasana or any relaxing or restorative pose in yoga, you can bring about a deeper sense of relaxation by trying some of the following:

- Tense and relax: lying on back, tense and relax different body parts, hands, feet, buttocks, abdomen, shoulders and face.
- Practice slow deep abdominal breath. On each inhalation, feel the belly gently rise. On each exhalation, feel the belly gently fall.
- Present moment awareness. Keep your attention on the present moment and on your breath. You will often find that everything is fine in this moment and that we are usually simply worrying about a future event or a past regret.
- Bringing awareness to specific body parts. Focusing on specific part of your body can help you let go of outside stressors.
- Dimming the lights, playing soft music
- Heat or light imagery. Close your eyes and imagine your body being filled with warmth or with light on each inhalation.
- Silently repeating a mantra. Choose a positive mantra, such as “good, calm, peace, let go” or whatever feels right for you, and silently say it to yourself on each breath.
- Aroma therapy: Bring a small bottle of lavender oil and, placing a few drops in your hand, rub both hands together, then place your hands over your face, deeply breathing in the relaxing scent.
- Eye pillow: Place an eye pillow over the eyes to block out any light or other visual disturbances.

Teaching and Practicing Restorative Yoga and Savasana

Relaxation Off the Mat

Relaxation is not just for yoga time. It's important to learn how to relax when any stressful situation arises. Why? Learning to become calm during a stressful situation will help you cope better with the situation, allowing you to think more clearly and rationally. But don't wait for a stressful situation. Take a minute or two as many times as you can throughout the day to practice wakeful relaxation. Whenever you can, stop briefly and bring your attention to your breath. When you are aware of your breath, you are more present and have a more open perspective about the task at hand.

There are three ways to practice breathing awareness during your daily activities:

- 1) Notice your breath at random times throughout the day. If you are relaxed, notice how little breath is needed. If you are tense, use your exhalation to release any physical tension in your jaw or shoulders and your inhalation to relax your belly. If you are exercising, notice your rapid even breath and try to move with your breath. If you are tired, let your long, deep breath refresh you.
- 2) Use your breath to change your response to a situation. When something upsets you or makes you nervous, make it a habit to bring your attention to your breath first. If you notice that you are holding your breath or breathing rapidly, take a few slow, deep breaths to calm down before reacting to the situation. Some of the following situations are good times to check in with your breath:
 - During an intense discussion
 - When your kids are fighting
 - When you are stuck in traffic
 - When someone cuts you off in traffic
 - When you feel you have too much to do and not enough time
 - Before giving a speech
- 3) Schedule specific times during the day to focus on your breath and take a few moments to relax and deepen your breath. This helps get you into the habit of focusing on your breath, so you're ready when stressful situations arise. Some examples of good times to focus on your breath include:
 - Just before getting out of bed in the morning
 - Before you begin a meal
 - After you get in your car, before you put the key in the ignition
 - After you turn off your car, just before getting out
 - Just before making a phone call
 - At the grocery store in the checkout line

List specific times during your day that you could spend a few minutes to focus on your breath and relax your body and mind.

Teaching and Practicing Restorative Yoga and Savasana

Review Questions for Relaxation and Savasana

(These questions are for your own practice – no need to submit)

Questions for your own review:

- 1) How do the stress hormones of epinephrine and cortisol help rev up the body?
- 2) What are the functions of the sympathetic and parasympathetic branches of the autonomic nervous system?
- 3) Name the benefits of a regular practice of relaxation and meditation.
- 4) How does yoga help relieve the mental components of stress?
- 5) What are quieting postures?
- 6) Why is a bolster or blanket useful when practicing restorative yoga?
- 7) Create your own restorative sequence by listing five restorative postures in the order in which you would practice them. Pay attention to moving the spine in all directions (flexing, extending, rotating the spine).
- 8) What are the benefits of savasana?
- 9) How can you help your students become more relaxed as they begin savasana?
- 10) What are some ways you can relax outside of yoga class – in your daily activities?