

Quick and Easy Yoga Poses for Stress Relief

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So you've been curious about yoga, but haven't yet found time to really explore it. Or perhaps you think it sounds kind of weird and "New Age-y". Yoga is an ancient Indian practice involving many components, including physical postures, meditation, breathing exercises, and much more, but you can take or leave as much as you like. The majority of people who get into yoga in the U.S. like it either because it helps them relax and relieve stress, or gives them a great workout, or both. I am going to lead you through a few simple, easy, relaxing poses here. It's pretty hard to do yoga while you're reading, so go ahead and read through this first, then try it, so you only have to refer to it now and again.

Deep breathing in a cross-legged position

To try some simple relaxation, pull up a comfortable piece of floor or carpet (you can always sit on a big pillow), and sit in a cross-legged position that is comfortable for you. Place your hands gently on your knees and sit up tall, imagining a string pulling through the center of the top of your head up to the ceiling. If you can see yourself in a mirror, make sure you are not leaning forward. Now, squeeze your shoulders up by your ears, then roll them back and down. Finally, tuck your chin ever so slightly in toward your chest. From here, take some nice deep breaths. Once you've read through this and are familiar, you can close your eyes. With each inhale your stomach should puff out a little, and with each exhale it should contract in. Your shoulders should not be moving up and down (this leads to shallow breathing and tends to increase anxiety). Take at least 5 slow, deep breaths – try to inhale for a count of 3, then exhale for a count of 3. Try to quiet your mind, focusing only on the sound of your breath. If other, distracting thoughts enter your mind, don't get upset – just gently blow them away with your next exhale.

Cross-legged side and forward bends

Once you've established your breath, try to maintain it for the next few poses. On your next inhale, lift your arms out to your sides, then up over your head, stretching your fingers wide and reaching toward the sky. Make sure your shoulders don't creep up toward your ears. Take a few deep breaths here, then on an exhale, reach both arms to your right side. When you can't comfortably reach any further without your bottom coming up off the floor, set your right hand down by your behind, and stretch your left arm across, over your head toward the right side of the room. Stay here for 5 breaths, feeling a nice, deep stretch on the left side of the body. Repeat on the other side, stretching the right side of the body. When you've spent 5 breaths on each side,

bring both arms back up overhead, and then slowly, with a nice, flat back, reach them in front of you, keeping your bottom on the floor. When you've reached as far out in front of you as you can, set your hands on the floor as far out as you can reach. You should feel a nice, deep stretch in your mid- and upper back and shoulders. After 5 breaths, sit back up and set your hands back on your knees.

Seated twist

Staying in that same cross-legged position, sitting nice and tall, take your right hand and set it down behind your back, as close to your behind as possible. Take your left hand and reach across your body, placing your left hand on your right knee. Using your left hand as leverage, gently turn you're your stomach, then your chest, then your head to the right toward the back of the room as far as you comfortably can. You should feel a nice, deep stretch all along your spine, especially in the mid- and lower back. Stay here for 5 slow breaths, then repeat on the other side. Twists are wonderful for your spine, and are also said to massage your inner organs, *but* they should be *avoided* if you are *pregnant*.

Seated forward bend and backward stretch

Stretch your legs out in front of you, again, being sure to sit up straight and tall. Roll your shoulders back and down again, and tuck your chin in just slightly toward your chest. Flex your feet, and set your hands down by your sides very close to your hips. Stay here for 5 deep breaths. On your next inhale, stretch your arms up overhead. On your next exhale, reach forward with a flat back as far as you comfortably can toward your feet. When you can no longer maintain a flat back, let your hands fall wherever they can reach – shins, ankles, feet (if very flexible, you can wrap your hands around your feet). Be sure your legs are straight. Stay here for 5 breaths for a deep stretch in the calf muscles (and a little in the upper back and shoulders as well). When you release the stretch, set your hands a little further back than your hips, roll your shoulders back, think about lifting your chest toward the sky and lift your chin, raising your eyes toward the ceiling. This is a nice counter stretch for your chest, and usually feels very invigorating as well.

Gentle core exercise and stretch (Cow/Cat poses)

Come onto your hands and knees. To check your position, be sure that your knees are about hip distance apart, and your shoulders are directly in line with your wrists. On your next inhale, arch your back down, dropping your shoulders and lifting your head and behind up toward the ceiling (cow pose). On the exhale, curl your back up, dropping your head down and lifting your shoulders (cat). Repeat with the breath at least 5 times, slowly. This exercise is wonderful for increasing back flexibility and core strength, and ideally should be practiced every day.

Relaxation pose

This is *the* way to end your yoga practice, whether its 10 minutes long or 2 hours. It is meant to serve as an integration, sort of a bridge from your yoga practice to your daily life, to quiet your mind and reconnect with your breath. Lie on your back somewhere comfortable (but on the floor, not on a bed). Stretch your arms down by your sides a little away from your body. Bring your feet about 1-2 feet apart from each other, letting your heels come toward each other and your toes rolling away to the sides. This seems very simple, of course, but the goal is to have your arms and legs stretched out nice and long, and to take at least 20 deep breaths here (you don't have to count, but stay in the pose for at least 2 minutes), trying to focus completely on your breath in a relaxed way. Truly relaxing is not an easy thing for most of us to do, but it does get easier with practice.

To expand your yoga practice, I encourage you to visit a yoga studio, purchase a yoga video, or make an appointment for a yoga therapy session. I hope you enjoy your practice!

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