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flow yoga: calmings

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It is important to be able to relax, to successfully cope with the stresses of life. Calming ourselves is necessary for reducing tension, anxiety and internal strain, and is crucial for maintaining wellness, good health and happiness. The combination of relaxing the body and calming the mind can be achieved by practicing yoga.

For thousands of years, people have employed deep breathing, yoga asana (poses), and meditation techniques to achieve deep states of calm and relaxation. Intuitively, these individuals realized the benefits of allowing the mind and body to work together. Recent research has concluded there is, in fact, scientific validity to those Eastern practices.

Dr Herbert Benson, a Harvard cardiologist and scientist, studied the body's reaction to certain stressors. He discovered that while the fight-or-flight response is part of the body's natural, biochemical response to stress, there is also an opposite response that occurs during deliberate, mindful stress release. That is, the relaxation response (also known as "rest-and-digest"). During the relaxation response, he found that metabolism, heart rate, blood pressure, breathing rate and muscle tension all decrease. More importantly, Dr Benson also discovered that the relaxation response can be elicited by a number of techniques including diaphragmatic breathing, meditation, mindfulness, repetitive exercise, progressive muscle relaxation and yoga stretching.

Similarly, Dr John Harvey, a researcher and psychologist, has concluded that yoga stretching, diaphragmatic breathing, visualization and certain types of meditation can counteract tensions at the muscular level, as well as at the autonomic level. Achieving calm or relaxation at this level allows the parasympathetic nervous system to work more efficiently (rest and digest versus fight or flight). In other studies, conducted at Thomas Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia and the Yoga Research Society, it has been found that yoga can significantly reduce the levels of the stress hormone, cortisol. The studies found that practicing yoga asana 'brings the body to balance' physically, as well as chemically.

Many individuals have difficulty finding balance between over-scheduled, busy lifestyles and the ability to relax, sleep well and/or wind down. Most people, at some time or another, find their lives filled with tension and stress and as a result, the rate of high blood pressure, depression, anxiety and sleep deprivation continue to rise, thus creating an ongoing cycle of stress. To put an end to this, individuals would benefit from using relaxation or calming techniques to induce periods of mind body control throughout (and certainly at the end of) the day. While progressive muscle relaxation and meditation might be easier to perform prior to retiring for the night, they may also be practiced for short periods of time during the day. Other techniques, such as practicing yoga asana, diaphragmatic breathing and visualization may be performed at any time to counteract the stress and tension of busy lifestyles.

As many studies have shown, the correlation between stresses and sleep deprivation is high. Additionally, the lack of sleep experienced by many adds to the downward spiral effect, in that individuals must then function throughout the day with a 'foggy mind' and with a delay in the ability to make decisions, increased irritability and increased tension.

Individuals may benefit from inducing periods of calmness into their days, or prior to going to sleep, if they wish to create days that are more productive, mindful and relaxed.

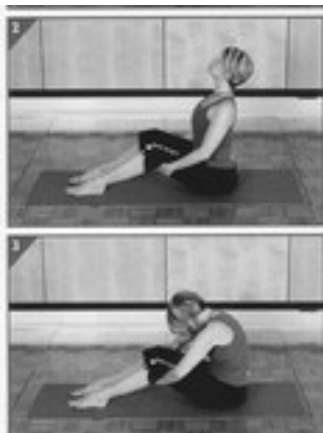
The following poses may be performed to calm you, once you get into bed at night, or anytime calming is needed, such as while at your desk, in your car (make sure you pull over first!), before undertaking a stressful task, etc.

Enjoy the following calming routine, and the new, stress-free you!



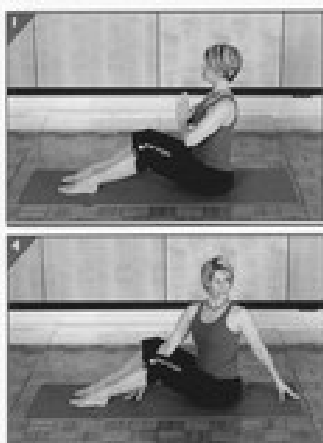
1 – Seated Breathing

Sitting upright in bed (or on a chair, etc.), bring the spine into a neutral position and begin doing some deep, slow breathing. Breathe in and out through the nose only, to increase the heat and concentration. Remain for 5 to 50 breaths.



2, 3 – Seated Upward/Downward Facing Cat

Sitting upright, place one hand behind each thigh. Inhale and look up slightly, while moving the spine into extension (arching), keeping the neck aligned with the spine. Draw the shoulder blades down and toward each other, holding for 2 to 5 breaths. On the next exhale, look down and move the back into flexion (rounding) while the shoulder blades move away from one another. Hold there for 2 to 5 breaths and repeat 5 to 10 times.



1, 4 – Seated Spiral

From an upright sitting position with the spine in neutral, draw both arms up and overhead on an inhale. On the exhale, let the arms float down to the sides while rotating the spine as far as possible to the left and looking back over the left shoulder. Allow the right hand to come to rest between the knees on the bed (or chair, etc.) and the left hand to move behind the body, to assist in twisting the spine gently. Hold for 2 to 5 breaths. When inhaling, move back to the centre with the arms overhead and repeat on the other side. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

6, 7 – Seated Bent Reed

While in an upright seated position with a neutral spine, inhale and bring the arms up and overhead. Upon exhalation, allow the left arm to move down onto the bed (or chair), placing it on the outside of the left thigh, while the right arm reaches upwards. Allow the spine to flex laterally, offering support for the spine by leaning on the left hand. Look down toward the supporting hand and hold there for 2 to 5 breaths. On the next inhale, move back to the starting point, and repeat to the other side. Repeat 5 to 10 times.



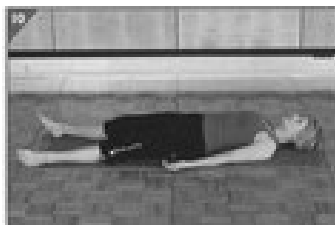
8 – Seated Single Leg Forward Fold



While in an upright seated position with a neutral spine, bend the left knee so the left foot is placed against the right thigh, and the left knee rests as close to the floor as possible. With the right leg straight, bring one hand on each side and hinge forward at the hips, until a tolerable stretch sensation is felt in the back of the straightened leg. Once there, using the exhalations that follow, allow the head, neck and shoulders to relax so the spine can move into slight flexion. Remain for 10 to 20 breaths and repeat on the other leg.

9 – Seated Butterfly

While in an upright seated position with a neutral spine, bend the knees and let them fall out to the sides, allowing the soles of the feet to come together. The heels should remain a few inches away from the body. With support from the hands on the bed (or chair, etc.), hinge forward at the hips, until a tolerable stretch sensation is felt throughout the hip joints. Once there, during the exhalation portion of the breath, allow the head, neck and shoulders to relax so the spine can move into slight flexion. Remain for 10 to 20 breaths.



10 – Resting Pose

In a reclining (supine) position, allow the body to sink into the bed (floor, yoga mat, etc.). Turn the palms of the hands and insides of elbows up toward the ceiling and let the legs relax so the toes turn outward. Close the eyes and allow all tension to leave the body. Encourage the mind follow the body into a quiet, still place. Relax and let the breath become natural and unforced. Cover up with a blanket or warmer clothes, if needed. If you are not going to sleep

for the night, use a gentle alarm set for no more than 15 minutes from the time you begin this resting pose.