

YOGA



A Body at Rest

USE **RESTORATIVE YOGA** TO TRIGGER YOUR BODY'S RELAXATION RESPONSE AND BEAT MODERN STRESSORS.

I WAS HAVING coffee with an old friend when I found myself interrupted—repeatedly—by a series of “helpful” reminders and messages from my smartphone. With each *blrrpt*, *boop*, and *ping*, my breath caught, my neck muscles tightened, and my jaw clenched.

This unconscious gripping is the work of the autonomic nervous system, or “fight-or-flight” response. Though few of us will face an actual saber-toothed tiger, the body’s ancient physical reaction to attack remains a default setting in stress-filled modern times, says Judith Hanson Lasater, a teacher of restorative yoga.

But our intelligent human bodies also possess the ability to shut down an overactive stress response, she says. The *parasympathetic* nervous system triggers the “rest-and-digest” mode: the heart rate decreases, muscles relax, breathing slows, and blood pressure drops. *Ahhh* . . .

Fortunately, we can learn to activate the triggers that tell our bodies it’s time to slow down. And with a little practice, we can train ourselves to remain in that relaxed state long term, Lasater says. The practice uses props and long, mostly supine, holds to passively open the body.

“Deep relaxation is not a pill to take, it is a powerful choice to make,” she says. “We can change our mental state through our body and consciously choose a different way.”

Try these steps to get your body to “rest and digest”:

- Lying in child’s pose, rest the center of your forehead on a yoga block. Putting pressure on the “third eye” stimulates the vagus nerve, the body’s main messenger to the parasympathetic nervous system, regulating relaxation, heart rate, digestion, sleep, and well-being, Lasater says.
- Use an eye pillow. The body’s oculocardiac reflex, stimulated by gentle

pressure on the eyeballs, is another “rest-and-digest” trigger.

- Take slow, deep belly breaths. This movement in the diaphragm stimulates the relaxation response, allowing neuroreceptors to send your brain messages that it’s time for the body to relax.
- Chant a mantra, like *Om*. Mantra chanting vibrates the muscles in the ear, face, and throat, which stimulate the vagus nerve for relaxation.
- Practice *pratyahara*—closing off the senses (including all stimulation through the eyes, ears, nose, and mouth) to enjoy a deep internal state. Rest in child’s pose or simply lie on the floor with an eye pillow covering your eyes. Lasater says that specific poses don’t matter as much as duration—she recommends lying down in a still, quiet, dark, and warm place and resting for a minimum of 15–20 minutes a day.

—JACKIE ASHTON

Say Ahhh...

Take your relaxation practice deeper with these restorative yoga moves.

RESTORATIVE YOGA incorporates physical supports, to reduce stress on the body, notes San Francisco-based instructor Stephanie Snyder. "It helps slow us down enough to remember that we are all connected and supported."

She recommends five poses for relaxation; each should be held for at least five minutes of rest.

VIPARITA KARANI

Place a low bolster or block under the pelvis and lie back supine on the floor, eyes closed, with legs resting flat against a wall, making about a 90-degree angle with your body.

SUPTA BADDHA KONASANA

Sit at the top of the mat and place a bolster lengthwise behind you at the small of your back. Bring the soles of your feet together, knees opened out to the sides. Place a block under each knee for support. Slowly recline back over the bolster and close your eyes.

SUPPORTED RECLINING TWIST

Sit at a 90-degree angle to a bolster, left hip touching the bolster, legs straight. Fold left leg under right, and place a blanket between your thighs. With hips square, recline your torso straight down over the bolster, resting your arms on either side. Repeat on the opposite side.

UPAVISTHA KONASANA

From a seated position, open straight legs as wide as possible without strain. Elevate the pelvis by sitting on a blanket if feeling stiff. Place a bolster directly in front of you, narrow end forward. With a long, straight spine, slowly walk the hands forward to lie on the bolster.

SAVASANA

Tuck a bolster under the knees, and gently recline to lie flat on your back. Use an eye pillow; Rest here for 10 minutes or more.

Anoint Yourself

Try ayurvedic self oil massage to saturate your mind and body with love.

THE SANSKRIT WORD *sneha* means both "oil" and "love." Thus, to anoint your body with oil is to saturate yourself with love. The ayurvedic practice of *abhyanga*, self oil massage, is a deeply nourishing practice that's easy to incorporate into your daily or weekly routine. The benefits are tremendous: lubricated joints (less popping and crackling), reduced fine lines on the face, increased alertness, softer skin, improved elimination, deeper sleep, and an overall sense of calm. The skin is your largest organ, and abhyanga is a marvelous way to feed it.

Abhyanga differs from Western-style massage in technique and effect. To begin, purchase an organic, unrefined oil that's appropriate to your constitution. Banyan Botanicals (www.banyanbotanicals.com) offers oils with medicinal herbs, and Hale Pule (www.halepule.com) provides oils as part of a guided purification process. According to ayurveda, the body is composed of seven layers of tissue. To allow *sneha* to penetrate the deepest layers, where it loosens toxins at the cellular level, apply it very slowly and leave it on for at least 20 minutes.

Follow this sequence for best results:

- 1 Warm $\frac{3}{4}$ to 1 cup of oil in a stainless steel or copper pan.
- 2 Apply a generous amount of oil to your body with your palms, not fingers. Rub slowly, gently, and thoroughly—in circular motions on the joints and long strokes along the muscles. The entire body should take at least 15 minutes.
- 3 Start at your sacrum (low back).
- 4 Continue to the hip joints, in a circular motion.
- 5 Progress down the left leg to the sole of the foot, and then the right leg.
- 6 Spiral clockwise once from the navel, finishing down the left side.
- 7 Oil the left side of the chest, then the right. Follow with the left shoulder, arm, and hand, then the right shoulder, arm, and hand.
- 8 As much as you are able, oil your back, from your waist to your shoulders.
Finally, apply oil to your neck, face, and head. With your pinkie fingers, apply a few drops to your ear canal. Be sure to oil the crown of your head.
- 9 Absorb the love! Relax for 20–60 minutes before rinsing off—without soap—in a hot bath or shower.

—SHANNON WIANECKI

