

# yoga for mental health

Yoga offers a myriad of physical and mental health benefits for individuals of all ages. Not only does it enhance strength, balance, and flexibility, but it also aids in pain relief and stress reduction. Moreover, regular practice can contribute to improved heart health, better sleep quality, and increased energy levels.

## *reducing stress*

Any time one's head goes below the waist the body goes into relaxation response. It is an inversion of the normal blood flow. Two easy poses that do this are Downward Facing dog and Ragdoll.

### **Downward Facing Dog**

Start on hands and knees, lift hips toward the ceiling, forming an inverted V shape. Press hands into the ground, engage core, and relax head between arms. This can be modified by doing what is called a "wall dog" or a "chair dog". Bend forward at the hips/waist and put your hands on either a chair back or the wall in front of you, then bend your head forward until it's lower than your heart.

### **Ragdoll**

Sitting in a chair, just flop the top half of your body down toward your feet. You can let your arms hang loose. You can modify the rag doll a bit and engage your arms more. You can hold onto each elbow with the opposite hand while holding the backs of your legs straight while you are bending all the way over. Alternately you can touch the ground if you are flexible enough.

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## *relaxing & energizing poses*

When lying on your back, if the spine is rocked side to side that is relaxing. If it is rocked from top to bottom, it is energizing. So, holding onto one's knees and rolling gently side to side would relax the nervous system. Rocking one's legs up over the head (lying down) will give more energy.

### **Happy Baby**

A pose that calms you just being in this position (not rocking in any direction). Lie on your back, bring legs up then bend the knees so you can hold onto the bottom of your feet with tailbone on the ground. If you are not flexible enough to grab onto the bottom of your feet, you can hold onto the ankles. That calms the body and mind.

### **Child's Pose**

Stretch your arms forward in front of you with the palms facing down towards the floor for a deeper stretch, or you can bring your arms back alongside your thighs with the palms facing upwards for a more relaxed variation.

### **Legs-up-the-Wall**

Lying with your legs and feet up the wall is a calming yoga pose known to aid sleep & reduce anxiety. By elevating the legs, this posture promotes relaxation and encourages a sense of calmness, making it an excellent choice for winding down before bedtime.

### **Sphinx Pose**

This pose helps reduce stress and is similar to cobra but keeps the hips down. Use a rolled-up towel for belly support if needed. Lie on your stomach, place elbows under shoulders, and lift the chest, relaxing shoulder blades downward. Lower the chin for added comfort.

### **Cat and Cow Poses**

To ease back and shoulder tightness from stress, alternate between Cat and Cow Poses. Start on hands and knees with a neutral spine. Arch your back in Cat Pose and lift your chest in Cow Pose. This sequence enhances spinal flexibility, releases tension, and promotes relaxation. Seated twists can also help loosen the back and enhance relaxation.

### **Savasana or Corpse Pose**

Lie flat on your back with arms at your sides and legs extended for deep relaxation. Close your eyes and focus on calming the mind, promoting profound relaxation and rejuvenation.

## helping to be grounded

When people are stressed, they also tend to be "off balance" or "ungrounded". Balance poses like the **tree or eagle pose** help create grounding and balance both. People can do tree pose in a circle where they hold onto the other person's shoulder for additional support.

## relieving aggression-type stress

**Elephant Stomp** Walk around the room (wide legs, arms out to the side, big movements lifting the leg and stomping down).

**Wood Chopper** Stand with legs/feet hip distance apart, intertwine fingers of both hands in front of you then raise arms over the head and bring down in a chopping motion with a deep "HA" sound coming from the belly.

## relaxing muscles

And last, doing a quick progressive muscle relaxation daily is extremely helpful. They can group muscles together to reduce time. Start at the head and work down. Every muscle held is for a count of 10. Rolling neck gently, then tighten jaw and open jaw wide. Then upper back and chest tightened and released.

Then biceps and shoulders tightened and released, then stomach and glutes tightened and released, then upper legs tightened and released, then hold legs out in front and tighten calves and feet and release. Then flex toes for 10 and point toes for 10. Then hold all the muscles of the body at once for a count of 10 and release.

## aiding good digestion

Stress also can impair good digestion. **Shoulder stand** is good for that as is the **bridge pose**. These may wake up a person more than relax them though, so not a good before bed routine. **Cat/cow** and **downward dog** are also good for digestion.

## What is the appropriate duration for poses?

- This varies with the type of pose. Relaxation poses like Savasana, Child's Pose, Legs-up-the-Wall, and Happy Baby can be held for several minutes for deep relaxation and restoration. Longer durations are fine if it feels good.
- Poses like Sphinx may last 5-10 seconds, while Ragdoll and Downward Dog typically range from 15 to 30 seconds to avoid dizziness. Generally, holding a pose for five breaths is a good guideline for duration.
- Incorporating box breathing enhances the relaxation and mindfulness aspects. With each breath, inhale deeply to a count of 5, hold the breath for 3-5 counts, then exhale slowly for a count of 5. This rhythmic breathing pattern promotes a sense of calmness and focus.

## Nightly routine for stressed teens

For teens who have a tough time getting to sleep, this nightly routine is recommended (in this order):

1. **Ragdoll** for 1 minute
2. **Happy Baby** for 1-2 minutes
3. **Child's Pose** for 2-5 minutes
4. **Legs-up-the-Wall** for 2-5 minutes

That should also give them almost 20 minutes of wind down time without screens that help sleep onset.

For stress management throughout the day, it's beneficial to consume protein in the morning and midday in moderate amounts. Stay hydrated by drinking plenty of water, and consider having a light carbohydrate-rich snack, such as toast and a banana, before bedtime.

## Here are some popular websites where you can learn more about Yoga poses, benefits, and practices:

- Yoga Journal ([www.yogajournal.com](http://www.yogajournal.com))
- DoYogaWithMe ([www.doyogawithme.com](http://www.doyogawithme.com))
- Gaia ([www.gaia.com](http://www.gaia.com))
- Yoga International ([www.yogainternational.com](http://www.yogainternational.com))
- Yoga Basics ([www.yogabasics.com](http://www.yogabasics.com))

These websites offer a wealth of information, including pose tutorials, articles on the benefits of yoga, guided practices, and more.