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Stretch to Destress



Rejuvenate your body and relax your mind after a busy day with these yoga-inspired stretches.

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With mounting to-do lists and full-to-bursting inboxes, it's no surprise that so many of us find ourselves feeling stressed out and overwhelmed each day as we attempt to balance our busy lives.

Regardless of the specific sources causing your unique feelings of tension and unease, the effects of stress on the mind and body are the same for us all. Stress alters our natural state of physiological equilibrium, resulting in increased rates of respiration and perspiration, as well as the additional production and release of stress-related hormones.

While this fight-or-flight response, during which the vital organs and various systems in the body go into high alert, is natural, if stress is consistent, the long-term impact can be harmful. In fact, conditions related to chronic stress can include cardiovascular disease, weight gain, chronic neck and back pain, and depression.

How Stretching Helps

Enhanced flexibility offers a host of physiological and psychological benefits that help combat the effects of chronic stress and collectively enrich quality of life. Studies have shown that regularly performing stretching exercises can reduce mental tension, blood pressure, and

respiration rate, as well as decrease pain levels in individuals with chronic neck or low back pain. In fact, following a seven-day comprehensive yoga program, which included yoga-based stretches and mindful breathing techniques, participants with chronic low back pain experienced reductions in anxiety, depression, and pain, according to a 2012 study in *Complementary Therapies in Medicine*.¹

Bedtime Unwind

Inspired by the practice of yoga, this sequence of stretches can be performed in bed as a welcome way to reduce feelings of stress and anxiety and alleviate muscular tension, allowing for a gentle transition into a restful night's sleep. Being that muscles are best stretched when they are warm, consider devising a complete evening ritual for yourself by first enjoying a relaxing hot bath or shower before hopping into bed to perform these stretches.

To enhance your relaxation while stretching, focus on slowly breathing in and out through the nose and holding each stretch for five to 10 breaths. If at any point you find that you are restricting or holding your breath, allow that to serve as a cue to reduce the intensity of the stretch to the point where you can once again breathe naturally and freely.

Stretch: Cat-Cow

- 1 Begin on your hands and knees, with wrists positioned below the shoulders and knees below the hips, maintaining a neutral, extended spine. Tuck your toes under.
- 2 Inhale, softening your belly toward the mattress and gently arching the back, tilting tailbone and chin toward the ceiling.
- 3 Exhale, gently rounding the spine, drawing chin toward chest and untucking toes, placing tops of feet on the mattress. Repeat this sequence of movements for a total of five to 10 cycles of breath.

Tip: Being that this is a dynamic stretch, focus on the fluidity of the movement, using the breath as a guide.

Stretch: Thread the Needle

- 1 Begin on your hands and knees, then turn your head to the left and slide right arm underneath left arm, positioning palm to face ceiling.
- 2 Keeping knees over hips, extend your left arm fully in front and press your right forearm and upper arm (if accessible) firmly into the mattress. Hold this stretch for five to 10 slow breaths, then switch sides and repeat.

Tip: Use the surface beneath you as leverage when performing this stretch, keeping the forearm firmly pressed into the mattress.

Stretch: Bound Angle

- 1 Sitting with your knees bent, draw the soles of your feet together, allowing your knees to release away from each other. For additional support, place a pillow beneath each knee.
- 2 Place both hands on the tops of your feet or just above ankles, keeping the outer edges of the feet in contact with mattress. Inhale, maintaining length in the spine.
- 3 Exhale and lean forward slightly, drawing your chest toward your heels and pressing elbows gently into thighs. Hold for five to 10 slow breaths.

Tip: Leaning your body forward deepens the stretch in the muscles of the inner thighs while also helping stretch the muscles of the lower back.

Stretch: Half Lord of the Fishes

- 1 Sitting with your legs outstretched in front, bend your right knee and step right foot over left thigh, planting the right foot on the mattress outside the left knee.
- 2 Place right hand behind right hip with fingers pointed away from body. Inhale, lifting left arm toward ceiling while lengthening spine.
- 3 Exhale and gently rotate your torso to the right, hugging right knee with left arm or hooking left elbow outside of right knee. Gaze over right shoulder, if accessible. Hold this stretch for

five to 10 slow breaths, then switch sides and repeat.

Tip: For a deeper stretch, bend the extended leg, folding heel toward opposite glute.

Stretch Name: Supine Spinal Twist

- 1 Lie flat on your back with your knees bent, feet flat; extend the left leg, keeping a slight bend in the knee.
- 2 Inhale, picking up your right foot and drawing the right knee toward your chest with your hands.
- 3 Exhale, extending your right arm out to your right side, palm facing up, while using your left hand to gently guide the right knee across the body to fall outside the left hip.
- 4 Turn head to look toward your right hand, holding this stretch for five to 10 slow breaths, then switch sides and repeat.

Tip: For greater support and accessibility, place a pillow outside of hip, resting the bent knee on the pillow.

Reference

1 Tekur P, Nagarathna R, Chametcha S, Hankey A, Nagendra HR. A comprehensive yoga programs improves pain, anxiety and depression in chronic low back pain patients more than exercise: An RCT. *Complementary Therapies in Medicine*. 2012;20(3):107-18. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ctim.2011.12.009>.

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