

Relax and Unwind

Restorative Yoga Poses Foster Healing

by Meredith Montgomery



In classical yoga, teachers often sequence instruction toward reaching a pinnacle pose such as an inversion or arm balance. In restorative yoga, the peak pose is *savasana*—in which the practitioner fully relaxes while resting flat on their back. Leeann Carey, author of *Restorative Yoga Therapy: The Yavana Way to Self-Care and Well-Being*, explains, “This passive *asana* practice turns down the branch of the nervous system that keeps us in fight-or-flight

mode and turns up the system allowing us to rest and digest. It feels like a massage for the nervous system and encourages self-inquiry, reflection and change, rather than perfection.”

The physical, mental and spiritual benefits are similar to those of active yoga, but because poses are held longer and supported by props such as bolsters, blankets, belts and blocks, “There’s no stress on the tissue and joints. Each pose gifts us with longer-lasting benefits,

including more time for the mind to unwind,” advises Carey.

“Restorative yoga allows both muscles and the brain to recover from fatigue, so we are stronger, sharper and better able to act in the world afterward,” explains Roger Cole, Ph.D., a certified Iyengar yoga teacher in Del Mar, California, and a research scientist studying the physiology of relaxation, sleep and biological rhythms. He attests that it also serves as preparation for *pranayama*

(mindful yoga breathing) and meditation, which require a clear, well-rested, focused mind.

Perfect for beginners and used by longtime practitioners to complement other yoga styles, restorative poses are designed to accurately realign and reshape the body. They also can be therapeutically tailored to support natural healing for issues related to tension, premenstrual syndrome, weak immune functioning, back pain, pregnancy and recovery for athletes. "Poses for healing may require targeted gentle stretching, but prop use will coax the body into desired positions without requiring muscular effort," says Cole.

An early student of B.K.S. Iyengar and familiar with props, San Francisco resident and co-founder of *Yoga Journal* magazine Judith Hanson Lasater, Ph.D., found herself leading her first class comprised entirely of supported poses during a power blackout at a 1980 workshop. "I didn't want people walking around in the dark, so I improvised a restorative class and everyone loved it," she recalls. She revisited the idea several years later when she personally felt the need for physical, emotional and spiritual restoration.

For a year, 90 percent of her practice was supported poses, and the switch helped her so much that it inspired her first book, *Relax and Renew: Restful Yoga for Stressful Times*. She's since written more books and trained teachers in restorative yoga around the world.

As in classical yoga, a restorative sequence should be balanced with asanas (positions) from all pose classifications—backbends, twists, inversions and forward bends. It takes time for the body to comfortably settle deeply into a pose—as long as 15 minutes—therefore, a 90-minute restorative class may include only a handful of asanas. Lasater says, "Most people don't need more of anything from the culture in which we live. They need much more to learn to be still and at ease."

In today's yoga world, which seems to emphasize power and action, "Restorative yoga has become imperative to balance activity and ambition with stillness and being," she continues. Lasater notes that while many classes are reducing savasana to as little as three minutes,

students need 20 minutes.

Carey clarifies that because this approach focuses on opening and letting go, rather than striving for the biggest stretch, "Sensation-seeking yogis may need to shift their perspective. The biggest challenge is often quieting the mind while the body is still. When a student is uncomfortable because the mind is screaming, it helps to compare it to having tight hamstrings in an active class. We're not chasing relaxation; just breathe, feel and watch," she says. "Eventually, everything will let go."

"The more our mind rebels against

relaxing, the more we need it," observes Lasater. Students often turn to yoga as a strategy for feeling whole, and she suggests that one of the best ways to find clarity within is to listen in stillness, one savasana at a time. "It's a gift to ourself, our family and the world," she adds. "When we feel rested, we're more compassionate and ready to serve the greater good."

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YOGA PROPS 101

Yoga props can help new students maintain alignment and reduce strain while allowing veterans to more deeply explore the intricacies of their practice.

Always adjust the dimensions and placement of props to ensure comfort via soft curves in the body instead of sharp angles, especially in the spine. Body weight must be distributed equally throughout the pose; key places to check for tension are the lower back, abdomen, neck and jaw muscles. Here are some basic tools.

YOGA MATS should have a non-skid surface and not exceed three-sixteenths of an inch in thickness. They cushion the body, serve as a blanket or a base for props or can roll up into a bolster.

BLANKETS AND TOWELS pad hard areas and warm the body. Different ways of folding and rolling transform them into many firm and comfortable shapes with wide-ranging applications.

BLOCKS in various sizes and materials can be laid flat, placed on edge or stood on end. They can add height or length to the body, access core stability and provide leverage. A stack of hardback books or phone books tied together can work in a pinch.

BELTS stabilize joints, support inflexible body parts and create traction and space. Typically two inches wide, soft belts with a D-ring locking system are easily adjusted; two soft, wide neckties or scarves tied together are suitable. Avoid material that cuts into the skin.

BOLSTERS, typically cylindrical or rectangular cushions, provide good supports that are long-lasting, if sometimes costly. Combining folded blankets and rolled mats may be suitable alternatives.

WALLS provide leverage, vertical support and a structure to rest upon. A closed door or large piece of furniture such as a bookcase or refrigerator works; a room corner simultaneously supports both sides of the body.

CHAIRS are versatile props for any practice and make yoga accessible to those unable to get down onto the floor. Backless folding chairs are typically used in studios, but any sturdy chair that doesn't roll is suitable.

SANDBAGS, strategically positioned, encourage overworked areas to release. Their weight also provides resistance and stability. Homemade versions can be made by loosely filling a smooth cloth bag with coarse sand, pea gravel or rice. Retail bags of beans, rice or sugar are other options.

EYE PILLOWS block out light during resting poses, can gently weight the forehead or hands or support the back of the neck. Typically made of silk or soft cotton, they're filled with a mixture of flax seeds or rice and soothing herbs such as lavender, peppermint or chamomile.

*Sources: Restorative Yoga Therapy, by Leeann Carey
Relax and Renew, by Judith Hanson Lasater*