

# Restorative Yoga



## *The Fine Art of Relaxation*

“Active Relaxation” may sound contradictory, but restorative yoga is just that. It is often perceived as “doing nothing.” Yet allowing oneself time to “just be” is one of the most healthful things you can do. Even though our culture values “doing” over “being,” the “just be” state reached in restorative yoga is one of the most effective ways to relieve stress.

For our early ancestors, the stress response was essential for survival. It is a physiological response to a threat. The mind alerts the body to a perceived danger and the body responds. The adrenal glands secrete hormones which activate the nervous system, preparing the body for fight or flight. Blood pressure, heart rate, mental alertness and muscle tension increase.

This response served our early ancestors well, allowing them to escape danger. These days, however, when the flight or fight response is usually unnecessary and even unhelpful, we sometimes find it hard to exit this state of hyper-alertness and stress. In turn, this chronic stress compromises our health. It creates new health problems, such as insomnia, ulcers, high blood pressure, cardiac disease, back pain, immune system disorders, and depression.

Restorative yoga is a simple solution for chronic stress. It allows the body to relax deeply, both physically and mentally. Using a variety of yoga props such as bolsters, blankets, blocks, and eye rests, the body is fully supported. In this fully-relaxed state, no muscular effort is required and there is no movement or effort. The brain is quiet. We don't actively create relaxation. We give ourselves permission to relax, an ability we all possess but many of us may have lost. While it may sound similar to deep sleep, in sleep we dream, which can bring muscle tension. In restorative yoga, muscle tension is minimized.

So what exactly happens in a restorative yoga session? In a well-planned restorative practice sequence, the spine is moved in all directions. Yogic wisdom maintains a healthy spine enhances one's overall wellbeing. Then there are supported back bends, forward bends and gentle spinal twists. Easy inverted postures that anyone can do are also included. Or, the legs may simply be elevated on a bolster, which reverses gravity and gives blood and lymph fluid that has accumulated in the legs the opportunity to return to the upper body, enhancing

cardiac function. This sequence of movements also stimulates and soothes the internal organs and encourages blood circulation. The gentle movement in all directions frees the body's natural energy, known as prana and apana in yogic terms, to circulate.

How do you get started? Discuss your plan to begin a yoga practice with your healthcare provider and get his or her approval. Seek the guidance of a trained, experienced yoga instructor. Discuss any medical conditions or concerns with your instructor prior to your first yoga session. If there are any contraindications a well-trained instructor will be able to modify the posture or recommend a safe alternative. ■

*Cheryl LeClair is a yoga instructor at Yoga for You in Morehead City*

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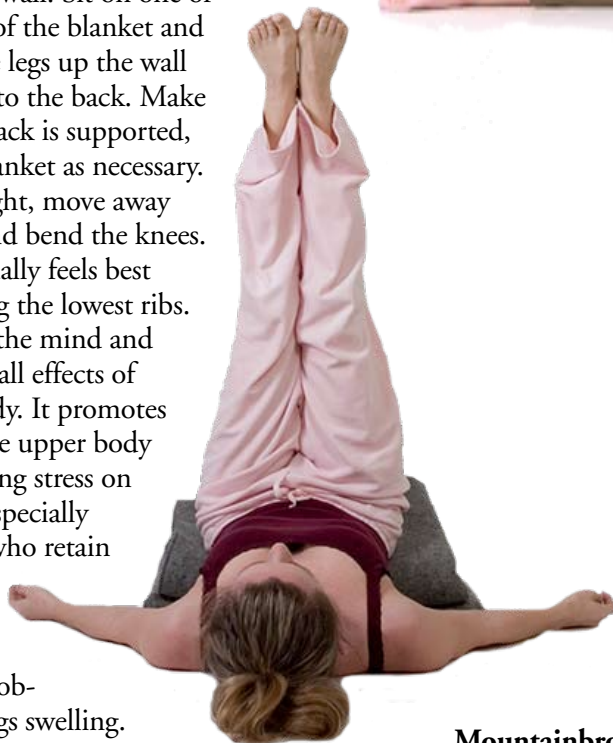
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# Get into Position

## Slowly Moving into 3 Basic Yoga Positions

**Supported Legs-Up-The-Wall is an inversion and one of the most healing of the restorative yoga postures.**

Place the long edge of a folded blanket 6-8 inches from the wall. Sit on one of the short edges of the blanket and gently swing the legs up the wall while rolling onto the back. Make sure the lower back is supported, adjusting the blanket as necessary. If the legs are tight, move away from the wall and bend the knees. The blanket usually feels best when supporting the lowest ribs. Benefits: quiets the mind and reduces the overall effects of stress on the body. It promotes circulation in the upper body without increasing stress on the heart. It is especially good for those who retain water, who stand for long periods of time, or have problems with the legs swelling.



**Supported Child's Pose releases tension in the hips and lower back.**

Kneel with knees hip-width apart and place a bolster or stack of folded blankets between the knees, allowing the stack to support the chest. Rest the head to one side. The torso should be completely supported. Add folded blankets to raise the height of the stack to ease the stretch and add padding under the knees and ankles if needed. Rolled or folded towels or washcloths work well.

Benefits: supported child's pose quiets the mind, provides a gentle stretch on the low back and relieves shoulder tension.

**Mountainbrook is a variation of the basic relaxation pose with a gentle supported backbend.**

Lie on your back on the floor, a rolled blanket or a bolster placed under the knees with the legs comfortably apart. Place a folded blanket under the back, aligning the top edge with the underarms. Allow the arms to rest outstretched to the sides. Gently support the curve in the neck with another rolled blanket. Allow an unrolled length of the blanket to support and pad the back of the head. Make sure your body is completely supported.

Benefits: this simple backbend counters the rounding of the shoulders and gently opens the chest, freeing the breath.



*Caution: These postures are not recommended for those with eye pressure, retinal problems, hiatal hernias, heart or neck problems. They should be avoided past the third trimester of pregnancy and if there is a risk of miscarriage. Women should not practice inversions while menstruating. If there is any question to the safety of practicing a pose, consult your healthcare provider first. Seek the guidance of a knowledgeable yoga instructor and discuss any conditions or concerns. He or she will be happy to guide you to a safe and relaxing practice.*

