

YOGA THERAPY

for Neck & Shoulders

MOST PEOPLE EXPERIENCE A STIFF NECK AND TIGHT SHOULDERS FROM TIME TO TIME. Yoga, as a psychosomatic practice, can help people better understand the mental roots of their tension and identify where it is held in the body. From a therapeutic perspective, Yoga can help people heal from current injuries, manage stress and create new levels of awareness that might also protect from future injuries. As with many injuries prevention is key, and the good news is that there are many things that can be done in daily life to manage and prevent neck and shoulder issues.

Postural Awareness: Sit and stand so that your head is properly aligned over your shoulders. Become aware of how you use your body throughout the different activities of the day. Over time, try to use your newfound awareness to make connections between how you use your body and how movement and posture contribute to the creation of habitual tension.

Phone Hygiene: Rather than propping the phone between your head and shoulder, hold the phone in your hand or use a headset. This seems small, but if you are on the phone a lot throughout the course of the day, it can make a big difference.

Find the Right Pillow: The wrong pillow is a common cause of neck pain. Try different ones and find one that works best for you. Look for something that is designed to reduce sleeping strain on the neck.

Ergonomic Work Space: When you read or write at a desk, prop your books or papers up so your head doesn't have to tilt down. Keep your computer monitor at eye level (if you have a laptop, buy a propping kit for your primary work space, it's worth it). If you work at a desk all day long, get up throughout the course of the day to walk around and/or stretch a bit. Many of the techniques to relax the neck and shoulders offered in this article can be adapted to be used during a work break at the office.

Stress Management: Pay attention to your stress level. Excessive stress can lead to tight and knotted muscles, particularly in the neck and shoulders. Identify your stressors and try to find healthy coping mechanisms that work for you. Taking a yoga class is a great way to not only relieve stress, but to find new tools like breathing that can help with managing stress in other life situations. It is important to understand that stress-induced tension has its roots in deeper emotional life issues. In order to better understand the mind-body connection, observe how you react to emotionally and physically challenging life situations. Try keeping a journal in order to observe

prohibitive patterns of thinking and understand the source of your stress. If the tension persists for long periods of time, consider talking to a yoga therapist or a psychotherapist to help sort through more complex issues. The goal is to create a personal philosophy of living that produces states of self-understanding and relaxation. While this may be a lifelong activity, every positive step that is taken in the process makes a big difference.

GETTING STARTED: VICTORIOUS BREATH (UJJAYI PRANAYAMA)



From a comfortable meditative seat, settle into the sitz bones and sit up straight. Lengthen through the spine up into the crown of the head. Relax the shoulders, the jaw and the throat area. Begin to inhale and exhale deeply through the mouth. With the inhalation allow the abdomen to expand and with exhalation allow the abdomen to relax. Once comfortable with the

belly movement, on an exhalation, slightly narrow the throat in order to gently constrict the passage of air into the lungs. Once you are comfortable with the throat constriction, close the mouth and continue to deepen the breath. Continue to breathe through the nose, with the mouth closed and the throat constricted. If it is helpful, focus your attention on the audible quality of the breath.

Note: *If this technique works for you, it can be used as a fundamental part of any yoga pose practice.*

SOMATIC NECK MOVEMENTS

Side to Side: With a long spine, bring the face to look forward and center, and with an exhale turn to look over the right shoulder, inhale to center and look over the left shoulder. Repeat with the breath 5 – 15 times.



Up and Down: Bring face back to forward and center, with an inhalation look up towards the sky, opening the throat and at the same time keeping length in the back of the neck (try not to collapse the head back into the shoulders). With an exhalation slowly take the chin down towards the chest and continue to relax the shoulders. Repeat with the breath 5 – 15 times.



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Frontal Plane Circles: Keeping the chin slightly forward, take it up towards the sky and slowly bring it around in a full circular motion. Be sure to move with awareness and attention to the cervical spine. Circle 5 – 10 times and then take the circle in the other direction for the same amount of times.

Shoulder Shrugs with HA Breath:

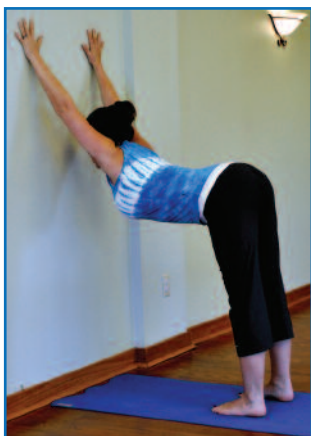
With a big inhalation through the nose, bring the shoulders up to the ears, and with an open mouthed HA breath let the shoulders roll back and down the body. Repeat



the movement with the breath until you feel the shoulders soften and relax. The HA emphasis in the breath mimics a sigh, a natural stress reliever for the body. Repeat with the breath 5 – 10 times.



Neck Side Stretch: From a seated position, head facing forward, reach around the back and grab the left wrist with the right hand. Gently tug down on the left arm with the right hand and then take the right ear over towards the right shoulder. Let the right shoulder relax down and breathe into the length created by the stretch on the left side of the neck. Hold for 5 – 15 breaths and repeat on the other side.



Yoga Wall Hang: From a standing position turn to face an open space on clutter free sturdy wall. Stand approximately 1 – 3 feet away from the wall. Place the hands firmly on the wall above the head, about shoulder width apart. Lengthen through the arms, and with an exhalation sink the chest towards the wall. Let the chest hang as you breathe. If the stretch is too intense come in for

short holds and then come out for a few breaths before coming back in. To make the pose more intense, move the legs further away from the wall, and keep the chest pressed down and forward, taking the forehead towards the wall. Hold for 5 – 15 breaths.

Eagle Arm Isolations: From a standing mountain pose, bend the right arm at the elbow and bring it to the center of the chest. Take the left elbow and place the outer right elbow on the inner left elbow. Continue to take the left hand around to reach for the right thumb or palm. With an inhalation, lift the arms towards the sky and with an exhalation lower them back to chest center. Repeat with the breath in a straight up and down fashion, or if you want more intensity, take a tiny backbend in the upper body with the inhalation and arm lift and a tiny forward bend (emphasis on rounding the upper back and spreading out the area in between the shoulder blades) on the exhalation. Repeat for 10 – 15 breaths on each side.



Standing Forward Fold with Neck Modification:



From a mountain position, inhale the arms by the ears and reach up back into a slight backbend. With an exhalation, fold forward, lead with the chest, and keep going until you hit a natural stopping point. Pause there and breathe. With another exhalation, allow the upper body to round slightly, and release the head and neck into the pull of gravity. Be sure to distribute your weight evenly between both feet. If the stretch is too intense on the low back or legs, bend the knees to modify. As you feel the head and neck relax, reach the hands around and interlace the fingers so that the cups of the palms can rest right where the bump of the head meets the neck. Allow the elbows to fold towards the ears and enjoy the extra depth that the weight of the arms brings to the stretch. Hold for 5 – 15 breaths.

Cow Face Pose: From a seated crossed leg position slide the knees to center, and stack the right knee directly over the left. Lift up the buttocks to help stack the knees and sit back in between the feet onto the sitz bones. If the knees do not stack let the knee of the top leg come towards the sky and if the right foot is not able to touch the ground, place a block underneath it for support. With an inhalation, reach the left arm up towards the sky, bend it at the elbow, and then bring the left hand down the center of the back. Take the



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right arm out to the right side, and reach the right hand around for the left one. Grabbing on to finger tips or if the fingers tips don't reach grab both hands onto a tie or sock. Draw both of the elbows back slightly towards center and breathe. If you want more intensity, start to fold forward slightly, leading with the chest. Hold for 5 – 10 breaths and repeat on the other side.

Puppy Pose (Side to Side Variation): From a tabletop

position, start by squaring the right forearm towards the front of the mat. Then extend the left arm long in front of you, palm and fingers spread flat on the earth to create a grounding point for the stretch. Keeping the buttocks up in the air, take the hips back towards the wall behind you, and let the forehead rest on the right forearm. You may feel this in the shoulder, armpit or all the way into the waist and hip. Hold for 5 - 10 breaths and repeat on the other side.



Table Thread the Needle:

From a hands and knees position, bring the left hand on the floor underneath the face. With an inhalation, take the right arm up towards the sky and then back a bit, opening the heart into a twist.

With an exhalation take the right arm under and through, threading the needle and settling into the right shoulder, resting the right side of the cheek and head on the earth as well. Relax the right hand and arm into the floor and breathe. If you feel comfortable and stable, go one step further, inhaling the left arm up and then taking back and around to rest on the low back or reach for the right hip/thigh. Hold the pose for 5 – 10 breaths and repeat on the other side.

Rabbit Pose: From child's

pose, reach the hands back to grab onto the heels. With an inhalation pick up the buttocks and lightly roll onto the forehead/crown of the head. Stay grounded by firmly holding the heels and allowing the shoulders to relax with continued breath. If you would like more challenge, instead of reaching for the feet, interlace the fingers together behind the back, roll the shoulder blades down away from the ears. As you pick up the buttocks, also lift the



arms towards the sky with the palms turn down towards ground – they can be apart or pressing together. Hold the pose for 5 – 10 breaths.



Supported Fish Pose:

Stack 2 z-folded blankets (note you can also use a bolster or firm narrow pillows here) and line up another blanket or pillow at the top (see photo). Come to sit in front of the blanket stack and line it up with the sacrum. With the knees bent, slowly start to lower the spine onto the blanket stack. Allow the throat to slight open and the back of the head to be supported by the single blanket at the top of the stack. Knees can stay bent here or legs can lengthen to the earth. Allow the space between the shoulders to deeply rest into the blanket stack as you bring the forearms and palms to rest on the floor by the buttocks. Continue to deepen the breath, with a focus on the rib cage expanding and contracting. Hold for 1–3 minutes.

Supported Childs Pose:

From a tabletop position, open the knees out to the side of the mat and bring the big toes towards touching. Draw a stack of 2 z-folded blankets in between the legs, and line up the edge of the stack with the top of the pelvis. With an exhale fold forward, and bring the torso to rest on the blankets. Turn and let one cheek rest on the blankets and allow the arms to rest. Rest here for 1–5 minutes, making sure that you turn the resting cheek to the other side.



Closing Throat Chakra Meditation: Take a few



moments to settle back into a comfortable meditative seat, noticing the breath and slowing it down into a deep even rhythm. Come into Vishudda Mudra by taking the thumb tips to the lowest joint of the ring fingers. Stretch the other fingers open and away from each other. Rest the backs of the hands onto the knees

or thighs so that the hands are supported and the shoulders can start to relax.

Bring an energetic awareness to the throat and notice it's relationship to the base of the head, the neck and the shoulders. Relax the throat, and allow the relaxation to radiate into the surrounding area. Visualize the color of a clear blue sky surrounding the entire area. With the inhalation let the breath expand the color, and with the exhalation allow the muscles in the face, neck and shoulders to continue to relax. Sit in meditation 5 – 15 minutes. ▲