

Yoga Asanas (postures) and Pranayamas (breathing) for Anxiety and Stress

Yoga and breathing exercises are a very good way to control anxiety and stress. Yoga's unique combination of gentle physical movements, breathing practices, relaxation and meditation are designed to harmonize the workings of the nervous system and to relax the physical body.

1. Savasana

2. Alternate Nostril Breathing (Nadi Sodhana)

3. Shoulder Stand (Sarvangasana)

Savasana

Before starting your yoga practice to control anxiety, spend ten minutes in Savasana (the "Corpse" pose). Use this time mentally to separate yourself from your experiences of the past, and from the anticipated happenings (real or imaginary) of the future. This pose is an excellent posture that can be used between poses for total relaxation. Simply let the muscles relax, feel the circulation of prana (breath) throughout the system and be mindfully attuned. Savasana can also be practiced any time one requires a few minutes of total rest and relaxation. If desired, one can watch the breathing rhythm and inwardly chant the mantra of one's choice. Savasana can also be repeated at the end of one's yoga practice.

Technique:

Lie down on your back, in a quiet place. Place the arms beside the body, palms upturned. Keep heels about a foot apart and let the legs relax so that the feet naturally fall outward. Breathe slowly and deeply, feeling a sense of calm relaxation come over your whole body. Concentrate on loosening all tensions. The following variation will increase your ability to relax:

1. Slowly inhale through the nostrils (always breathe in through the nostrils during yoga, since the tiny hairs strain out impurities) and tense the ankles, feet and toes. Hold the breath while you tighten the muscles. Exhale and relax.
2. Slowly inhale and contract the kneecaps, calves, ankles, feet and toes. Hold and tighten. Exhale and relax.
3. Slowly inhale, contracting all the muscles of the abdomen, pelvic area, hips, thighs, kneecaps, calves, ankles, feet and toes. Hold the breath and tighten the muscles. Exhale and relax.
4. Inhale. Tense the neck, shoulders, arms and elbows, wrists, hands and fingers, chest muscles, down to the toes. Hold and tense. Exhale and relax.
5. Inhale and contract the scalp, the tiny muscles of the face, the forehead; squint the eyes, wrinkle the nose and mouth, tighten the tongue, constrict the throat and tighten the whole body. Hold and feel the tension. Exhale and relax. Now, let the tension melt into the floor. Feel heavy. Enjoy the support of the floor. Sense the tingling of fresh circulation, the new muscle tone and emotional calm.

Benefits:

1. Stimulates blood circulation and exercises inner organs.
2. Alleviates fatigue, nervousness, neurasthenia (a general worn-out feeling), asthma, constipation, diabetes, indigestion, insomnia, and lumbago.
3. Teaches mental concentration

Focus your awareness on the present moment only. If your attention strays during the practice (described by yogis as mental clutteriness), quietly bring your mind back to this awareness. If your mind become flooded or won't stay quiet, try counting breaths or saying "out with negative energy" on the exhale and "in with calming energy" on the inhale.

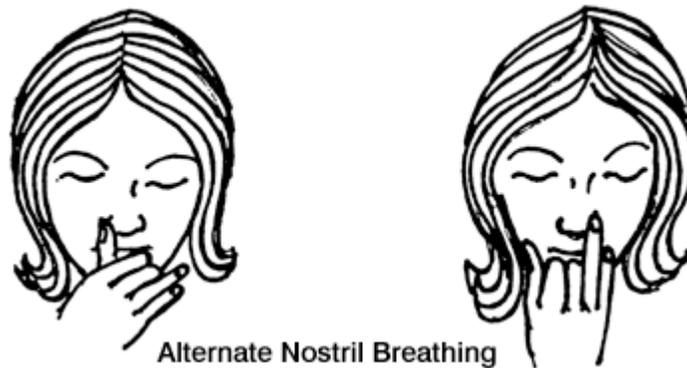
Nadi Sodhana (Alternate Nostril Breathing)

If you don't do anything else, this is a simple yoga breathing exercise that can be done virtually anywhere, anytime. You will be glad you did. It is simply dynamic!

The name alternate nostril breathing is due to the fact that we alternate between the two nostrils when we do the breathing. Yogis believe that this exercise will clean and rejuvenate your vital channels of energy, thus the name nadi sodhana (purification of nadis or channels).

With this exercise, we breathe through only one nostril at a time. The logic behind this exercise is that normal breathing does alternate from one nostril to the other at various times during the day. In a healthy person the breath will alternate between nostrils about every two hours. Because most of us are not in optimum health, this time period varies considerably between people and further reduces our vitality. This exercise clears any blockage to air flow in the nostrils and reestablishes the natural nasal cycle.

Technique



1. Close the right nostril with your right thumb and inhale through the left nostril. Do this to the count of four seconds.
2. Immediately close the left nostril with your right ring finger and little finger, and at the same time remove your thumb from the right nostril, and exhale through this nostril. Do this to the count of eight seconds. This completes a half round.
3. Inhale through the right nostril to the count of four seconds. Close the right nostril with your right thumb and exhale through the left nostril to the count of eight seconds. This completes one full round.

Start by doing three rounds, adding one per week until you are doing seven rounds.

Alternate nostril breathing should not be practiced if you have a cold or if your nasal passages are blocked in any way. Forced breathing through the nose may lead to complications. In pranayama, it is important to follow this rule: under no circumstances should anything be forced. If you use the

nostrils for breath control they must be unobstructed. If they are not, you must practice throat breathing.

Benefits:

1. The exercise produces optimum function to both sides of the brain: that is optimum creativity and optimum logical verbal activity. This also creates a more balanced person, since both halves of the brain are functioning properly.
2. The yogis consider this to be the best technique to calm the mind and the nervous system.

The Scientific Confirmation:

Medical science has recently discovered the nasal cycle, something that was known by the yogis thousands of years ago. Scientists have recently found that we don't breathe equally with both nostrils, that one nostril is much easier to breathe through than the other at any particular time and that this alternates about every three hours. The yogis claim that the natural period is every two hours, but we must remember these studies were done on people who do not have an optimum health level.

Scientists also discovered that the nasal cycle corresponds with brain function. The electrical activity of the brain was found to be greater on the side opposite the less congested nostril. The right side of the brain controls creative activity, while the left side controls logical verbal activity. The research showed that when the left nostril was less obstructed, the right side of the brain was predominant. Test subjects were indeed found to do better on creative tests. Similarly, when the right nostril was less obstructed, the left side of the brain was predominant. Test subjects did better on verbal skills.

The Shoulder Stand (Sarvangasana)

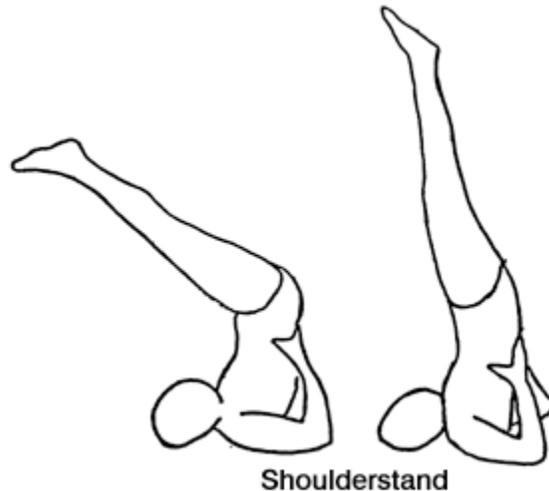
Technique

1. Lie flat on your back. Inhale deeply while raising your legs and spine until the toes point to the ceiling. Flex your toes (the "Barbie Doll" foot position).
2. The body rests on the shoulders with very little pressure on the back of the neck. The body is supported by the hands, which are placed on the center of the spine between the waist and the shoulder blades. Keep your spine and legs straight.
3. Breathe slowly and deeply with the abdomen and concentrate on the thyroid gland. On a male, the thyroid gland is located behind the Adams apple. For women, it is located in the same area which is a few inches above the sternal notch (hollow of the neck where the neck joins the rest of the body.) or approximately half way up the neck from the sternal notch. Stay in this position for about two minutes.
4. To come out of this posture, just bend your knees, curve your back and slowly return to lying on the floor while exhaling. First bend your knees, put your palms on the floor, then curving the spine, gradually unfold it the way one unrolls a carpet. When your entire back touches the floor, straighten the knees, take a deep breath and slowly lower your legs to the ground while breathing out.

The Sanskrit name for this posture, sarvangasana, means 'all the body.' Retain this position for fifteen seconds to six minutes, adding fifteen seconds per week.

Caution:

Do not try this exercise if you are suffering from organic disorders of the thyroid gland. Be very cautious if you are suffering from chronic nasal catarrh.



Benefits

1. The main benefit of the shoulder stand is to get the thyroid gland working at peak efficiency. It's the thyroid gland that is mainly responsible for your correct weight and youthful appearance.
2. The shoulder stand also regulates the sex glands.
3. It vitalizes the nerves, purifies the blood and promotes good circulation, strengthens the lower organs and helps them to stay in place.
4. It gives a healthy stretch to the neck muscles.
5. It is beneficial for people suffering from poor circulation, constipation, indigestion, asthma and reduced virility.
6. This pose is especially recommended for women after childbirth and for those suffering from painful menstruation, other female disorders, and seminal weakness.

Simple Breathing Exercise for Managing Anxiety: Abdominal Breathing

Lie on your back in a comfortable place. Breathe slowly through your nose. Use your diaphragm to suck air into your lungs. Allow your abdomen to expand at the same time. After the abdomen is fully expanded, continue to inhale as deeply as possible. Reverse the process when you breathe out. Contract your abdomen while exhaling slowly and completely. Repeat this exercise several times. You can place one or both of your palms gently on your abdomen to help feel the breathing.