yoga for less stress

10 poses to help you reduce stress and feel refreshed
You probably have more to do and less time to do it. And that usually adds up to one thing: stress. That’s when your home practice can come to the rescue—especially if you tailor it to accommodate your changing moods and energy levels. After all, stress doesn’t manifest itself the same way every time you experience it. Sometimes it leaves you exhausted and desperate for a nap; other times it drives you to scour your kitchen from top to bottom until midnight.

If it’s any consolation, the ancient yogis experienced similar fluctuations. We still reference the categories they had for different kinds of energy. Called the three gunas—rajas, tamas, and sattva—these energetic qualities are found in everything in nature.

Rajas is an active force often described as passion, desire, violence, determination, and drive; left unchecked, it can lead to feelings of restlessness and overstimulation. Tamas is passive—the pull of dullness, inertia, and sleep. Sattva is the quality of light, love, and peace. Although the gunas are always intertwined, once you tune in to them, you’ll notice how one or two are likely to be dominant and perhaps out of balance at any point in your day.

The key to finding that sweet spot of sattvic balance is to adjust your practice appropriately. If you’re anxious and jumpy, restorative poses might not be the way to start. “If you’re feeling rajasic, try to occupy your mind by doing a good flow sequence for 20 minutes or so,” says Baxter Bell, a physician and yoga teacher in the San Francisco Bay Area. To contact him, visit www.bellyoga.info. “Go into longer holds when your mind is quiet enough to handle them. Or do just two or three restoratives for a shorter period of time.” If you’re feeling listless, Bell suggests taking a few minutes in a passive backbend before you begin.
This month’s sequence is organized so it can be tailored to meet your needs. It starts with dynamic movement and gradually moves into tension releasing stretches and restorative poses to stimulate deep relaxation. Try the whole series at once, or take it in pieces, depending on how you’re feeling. Whichever way you practice, if you finish feeling light, refreshed, and grounded, you’ll know you picked the right moves.
For these three standing poses, start with dynamic movement, moving in and out of the full pose to lubricate your joints and warm up your muscles. Then hold the full poses for a few breaths to develop your strength and stamina.

1 **Virabhadrasana I (Warrior Pose I)**

Stand in the middle of your mat with your feet 3 to 4 feet apart. Turn your right leg out 90 degrees and the left leg in about 60 degrees. Relax your arms at your sides as you turn your hips toward your right foot. Inhale and bend your right knee to 90 degrees. At the same time, sweep your arms up overhead, palms facing each other. Exhale and straighten the front leg as you bring your arms back to your sides. Repeat the pattern 6 to 8 times, moving at a comfortable pace. As you move into Warrior I for the last time, stay there for 6 to 8 even, smooth breaths.

When you’ve finished the first side, bring both feet parallel and stay for a moment so that your body and mind can absorb what you’ve just done. Then switch to the other side.
2 Parsvottanasana (Intense Side Stretch)

If you use blocks for this pose, start with one in each hand. Take the same stance as in Warrior I, with your right leg out and your left leg in. Turn your hips toward the right foot to square them, then place the blocks on either side of your ankle. Inhale as you sweep your arms overhead and, while exhaling, bend at the hips as you stretch the torso and arms forward, until your fingers reach the blocks. Then, keeping your fingertips on the blocks, inhale and lengthen your spine as you come halfway up. Exhale and fold forward. Repeat this pattern 6 to 8 times, then hold for 6 to 8 breaths.

3 Trikonasana (Triangle Pose)

Taking the same stance (right leg out, left leg in), place a block behind your right ankle. Inhale as you bring your arms out to a T position. Exhale as you move your hips to the left and reach out to the right. Keep your arms in the same plane as you reach your right fingertips down onto the block and your left hand up to the sky. Exhale as you bring weight into the outer edge of your back foot and rise to standing. Repeat 6 to 8 times, then hold for several breaths before repeating on the other side.
keep a cool head
Balancing poses build steadiness and focus—two helpful traits to call upon when stress strikes. These postures also allow you to experience a bit of fear in a controlled environment. If you can stay cool and concentrated as you’re about to fall out of Tree pose, you can call upon that skill when the trials of life make you feel unsteady.

4 Vrksasana (Tree Pose)
From Tadasana (Mountain Pose), bring your weight onto your left foot, bend your right knee and draw your right foot up the left leg. (You may need to reach down with your right hand and clasp your right ankle.) Press firmly through your left big toe and your left heel. Imagine roots growing out of that foot and into the ground. Now press your right heel and your left inner thigh toward each other. Lengthen your tailbone toward the floor as you firm your belly.

Place your hands in Anjali Mudra (Prayer Position). Gaze softly at a fixed point. Breathe for 6 to 8 breaths. Release the right foot down as you exhale and come back to Tadasana. Repeat on the other side for the same length of time.
5 Virabhadrasana III (Warrior Pose III)
Step your left foot back into a high lunge. Lay your torso down on the midline of the right thigh and bring your arms into a T shape. Exhale and press the head of the right thighbone back to straighten the standing leg. Lift your back leg off the ground and actively press through the back foot. Inhale into the back of your body as your torso hovers parallel to the floor. If you feel steady, reach your arms toward the wall behind you. Bring your head up slightly and look forward, without compressing your neck. After 6 to 8 breaths, step back to the lunge, bring your hands to the floor, and step your left foot into a forward bend. Stay there for a few breaths, then repeat on the other side.

6 Ardha Chandrasana (Half Moon Pose)
Come into Triangle Pose on the right side with your left hand resting on your left hip. Inhale, bend your right knee, and drag your left foot about 6 to 12 inches forward along the floor. At the same time, reach your right hand a foot beyond the little-toe side of the right foot and onto a block. Exhale and straighten your right leg, simultaneously lifting the left leg parallel to the floor. Lengthen the tailbone toward the heels, and firm your shoulder blades toward each other. Keep your head in a neutral position, and gaze forward. With an exhalation, lower your leg to the floor and return to Triangle Pose.
tension tamers

These poses, which target the upper back, neck, and hip flexors, are perfect antidotes for stress that causes muscle tension, shallow breathing, and a foggy mind.

7 Garudasana Arms (Eagle Arms)

This is a great pose for releasing tightness between the shoulder blades. Sit in Virasana (Hero Pose); if you’re at your desk, any upright seated position will do. Inhale as you reach both arms out to a T position, exhale as you bend both elbows, and cross your right elbow over your left.

Spiral your forearms around each other until your left fingertips press into your right palm. Move in and out of the arm position to warm up before you hold it: Inhale and bring your arms back out to a T, then exhale and cross your left elbow over the right and spiral your arms around each other until the hands press together. Do this 2 or 3 times.

Return to the pose on the first side and hold for 6 to 8 breaths. During the hold, lift your elbows but release your shoulders down your back. Direct your inhalations into the space between the shoulder blades to create a massage from the inside out. Take a moment after you release to notice if any tension has eased. Then repeat on the other side.
8 Neck Release
Sit in a chair with your back supported and both feet planted firmly on the floor. Hook the fingers of your left hand under the chair and drop your right ear toward your right shoulder. Notice a nice stretch along the left side of your neck. To deepen the intensity, pull up against the chair with your left hand. Stay here for 8 to 10 breaths. To come out, bring your right hand to the right side of your head and gently guide your head back to center. Repeat on the other side.

9 Chair Lunge
If you sit in a chair for much of the day, your hip flexors—the muscles along the front of your hipbones—are probably tight from being in a compressed position. Your co-workers might find it odd to see you lunging at your desk, but once they see you walking tall, they might just try it, too.

Place the back of your chair against a wall (or your desk) so that it’s stable. Stand a few feet in front of the chair, facing it, with your hands on your hips. Place the sole of your right foot on the seat of the chair and begin to lunge forward, keeping the back foot on the floor. If you need to, grab the sides or the back of the chair for support. Keep your right knee over your right ankle and your left leg back far enough that you feel a stretch along the front of your left leg. Be sure to fully engage the muscles of the back leg by pressing the thighbone firmly back and reaching through the back heel.
recharge and refresh

Restorative poses require little or no effort to maintain. They take some awareness and effort to get into, but the payoff is worth it. These two offer a unique type of restoration that allows you to practice conscious relaxation: While you rest, you also notice where you’re holding tension. Once you notice those places, try letting them go. You’ll learn where you unconsciously hold tension, which can then help you recognize and let go of damaging patterns in your day-to-day life.

10 Supta Baddha Konasana
(Reclining Bound Angle Pose)

This pose requires props, but it’s worth the effort. Place a bolster over a block so the block is centered underneath the top half of the bolster. Sit in front of the bolster with your sacrum touching its edge. Using your hands for support, lie back, then place folded blankets under each of your outer thighs. Press the soles of your feet together and let your knees drop open onto the blankets. Avoid turning this pose into a groin opener; have enough height underneath the legs to relax your inner thighs. Place an eye bag over your eyes and enjoy for up to 20 minutes.
11 Viparita Karani (Legs-up-the-Wall Pose)
Inversions like this can help return blood from the legs to the heart more efficiently. They also tend to lower your heart rate and blood pressure. All of these things calm your nervous system, promoting the relaxation response, a term coined by Herbert Benson, M.D., in the 1970s.

Place a bolster or two folded blankets parallel to a wall and about 4 to 6 inches from it. Sit in the middle of the bolster with your left side to the wall, and use your hands to lie back on the floor and swing your feet up onto the wall. Move your buttocks as close to the wall as you can and rest the backs of your legs on the wall. The bolster should support the back of your pelvis. Allow your upper chest to open as you release your lower ribs toward your spine. Rest your arms on the floor with your elbows bent, in a saguaro cactus position. Stay here for 5 to 10 minutes, keeping your mind focused on your breath and the sensations that arise in your body. To come out, press your feet into the wall and slide back off the bolster. Roll to your right side and rest for a moment before coming up.

finishing sequence

KNEES TO CHEST Lie back and, placing one hand on each shin, draw your knees in toward your chest. Feel your lower back release as you press it into the floor. If it feels good to you, roll around on your sacrum. Circle the knees clockwise for a few breaths, then counterclockwise.

GENTLE TWIST With your knees tucked in toward your chest, bring your arms out to a T shape, palms facing up. Keeping your knees bent and your shins at a 90-degree angle to your thighs, drop both legs to the right and look to the left. Then bring the knees back through the center, drop the legs to the left, and look to the right.

CORPSE POSE Do Savasana for 10 minutes.
(Set a timer so you don’t create more stress worrying about the time.) Look for a gentle rise and fall in your belly—deep, even breathing is the clearest indicator that you’ve reduced at least some of your stress.