

YOGA FOR RESTFUL SLEEP



What is Yoga?

Yoga is an integrated system which uses the body, breath and mind to encourage a sense of well-being. It originated in India and has been practised for 2000 years. Mindful Yoga is wholistic in that it incorporates ethics, movements, breathing and meditation.

Why is sleep important

Sleep is truly one of life's wonders. It assists our physical healing, our emotional regulation and our memory. But sometimes it can be hard to get to sleep, or often we wake up at night and struggle to return to sleep. Often the stress of not sleeping then adds to the original stress that may have woken us in the first place.

We know that "enough" sleep helps to regulate the amygdala which assist with our emotional regulation. Too little sleep also impacts on the striatum of the brain which is connected to impulsivity and reward seeking. This means we can be prone to making impulsive choices when sleep deprived and therefore can experience emotional mood swings. It can also be difficult to concentrate and use our memory effectively.

<http://healthysleep.med.harvard.edu/healthy/matters/benefits-of-sleep>

How does yoga help promote sleep?

Yoga can help promote restful sleep in two ways. It can help calm an overactive mind, and it can help promote physical relaxation in the body which will encourage sleep. This handout focuses on the latter. You may also want to look at the '[Yoga for calm](#)' handout for further ideas.

One of the paradoxes of getting the body to relax, is we often need to tighten into already tight muscles first. This helps reset the muscles and can promote an ability to settle into bed with ease and comfort.

Tips for using yoga for restful sleep

- Meet yourself where you are at, compassionately and kindly.
- Focus on your exhale breath. Try and progressively increase the length of your exhale so it is longer than your inhale.
- Allow the belly to be free to move when you breathe
- All movements should be done slowly and mindfully. The smoother you can do the movements the better.
- Keep it really simple. Just legs up the wall focusing on your belly will help. It might help to practice these movements when you are not tired, so they become available to you in those tired moments when sleep is elusive.

To learn more

Yoga is best learned from a qualified teacher. Free Mindful Yoga classes are available for Flinders University Students on Tuesdays during term times between 12noon- 1pm at OASIS. No bookings are required. Mats and other equipment provided – www.flinders.edu.au/mindfullyoga

Sample practice sequence

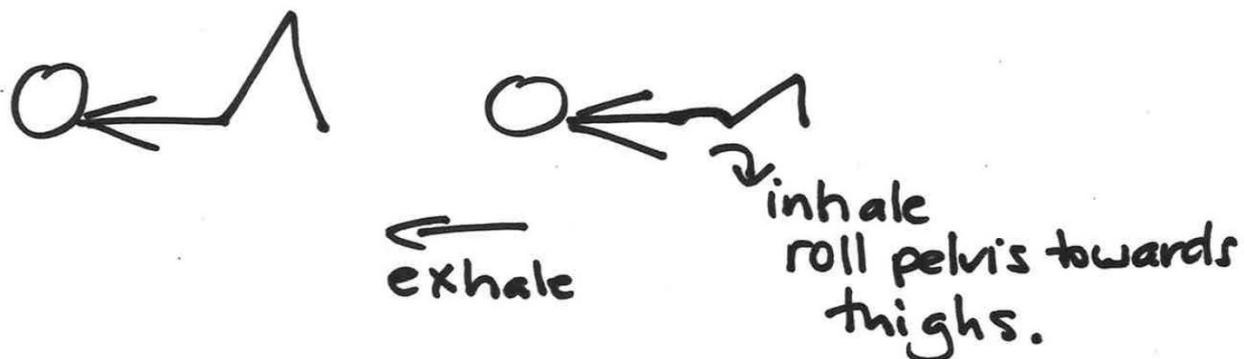
Constructive rest position (belly breath awareness)

Lie on the floor with your knees bent and the soles of your feet on the floor. Place your hands on your belly if this is comfortable to do so. Allow your body to develop a smooth rhythmic breath. Allow your belly to lift with an inhale and fall with the exhale. Focus on feeling the gentle movement under your hands rather than forcing.



Pelvic rolls – tense and release through back of body

Keep your body exactly where it is, and transition from breath awareness to moving gently with the rhythm of the breath. As you inhale allow your pelvis to roll forward towards your thighs. Your lower back will arch off the floor. Deliberately tense into the back area of your body, maybe hold for a brief moment, and then release any tension in your lower back as you exhale and allow your pelvis to roll back to neutral. Keep this up for about 6 rounds.



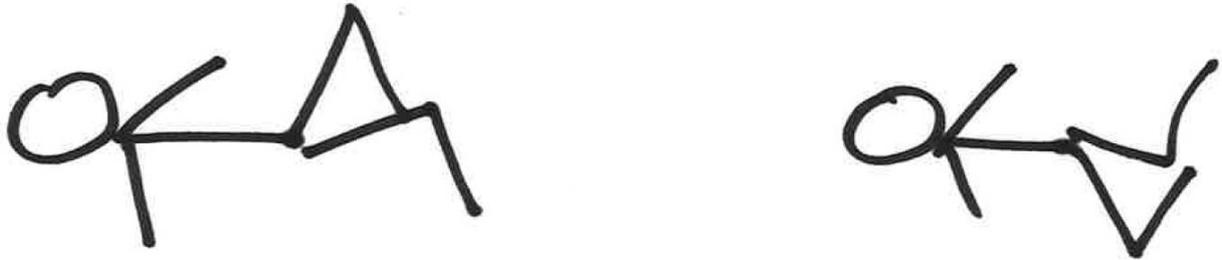
Washrag twist for upper body

Bring your arms out at shoulder height. Palms up. Turn your head to the left and turn your right palm down. Then turn your head to your right, while turning your left palm down and your right palm up. It sounds more complicated than it is. Imagine you are like a washrag through your shoulders and you are gently ringing the tension out. Move slowly and breath smoothly. Find a pattern that works for your body.



Windshield wiper twist, allow head to move with the body

Keep the arms at shoulder height and bring the legs wider apart. As you exhale allow your right knee to drop towards your left ankle. Your left arm can sweep up towards your ear if you like, and you can also move the head if comfortable. Inhale return to centre and exhale to the other side. You are still now gently wringing yourself out, this time through the sides of the body. Allow yourself to relax and enjoy the movements.



Legs up wall

This is a brilliant all-round yoga pose, it can help rejuvenate, but it can also help promote rest. Find a chair or a wall, or the end of the bed. Support your legs on something. Knees can be bent over the chair or bed, or straight on the wall. If having straight legs creates tension in your hamstrings, then bend them. Allow your belly to soften and come back to the smooth rhythmic breath in the belly. Rest your hands here. Follow the cycle of breath for about 12 rounds. You can progressively let your exhale breath become longer with each breath until it is twice the length of your inhale if that is comfortable. Otherwise just have focus on breathing as smoothly as you can.

