

RESTORATIVE YOGA AND THE STRESS RESPONSE

KAREN KOVAL

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**“My dear, here we must run as fast as we
can, just to stay in place. And if you wish to go
anywhere you must run twice as fast as that”**

Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland

Resting is a lost art. Today it is safe to say the world could benefit from utilizing creative, simple ways of generating and harnessing energy, without having to use or waste energy in the process. When I look around and see how precious natural resources and ecosystems are being wasted, poisoned or over-taxed by excessive consumption, I can't help but wonder how this relates to how I am using my own natural resources of energy. How are we as humans treating the ecosystems of our own body/mind?

We live in a tension-charged, fast-paced world that is full of demands and complexities that have caused the stress level of the people of our society to reach epidemic proportions. Stress is simply defined as “a factor that creates a mental, emotional, or physical strain.” It is “a state of unresolved tension arising from the pressures, irritations, and demands of life.” Stress often produces a sense of anxiety, irritability, frustration, restlessness and depression. It creates a feeling of hopelessness and disillusionment which undermines a person's sense of purpose, direction and meaning in life. Stress can keep you from realizing your potential and fulfilling your life's purpose.

There are a number of things that contribute to stressful living, especially in our society today. The unrelenting pressures of contemporary life, the constant challenges and deadlines of our fast-paced society, the ever-changing state of our unstable world, and the fear and uncertainties concerning the future contribute to stressful living. Global urbanization, competition and the spread of technology have created a world in which access to information has become an obligation and necessity. People are now held accountable for their actions and whereabouts 24/7 and they are losing both their privacy and “down time”. In addition, we are continually under assault on a physical level, with our environment filled with never before seen levels of toxicity. From the food we eat to the air we breathe, our bodies are under siege by the toxins and chemicals we have introduced into our cities, homes, water, and land. All of

these factors contribute to the host of destructive symptoms which have an effect on us mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. Listed below are a few of the symptoms:

- Mental and emotional fatigue
- Suppressed immune function
- Drug and alcohol dependency
- Loss of appetite
- Physical weariness
- High blood pressure
- Frequent headaches/Migraines
- Stomach problems – IBS
- Heart rate irregularities
- Ulcers
- Hypertension
- Sleep disorders/Insomnia
- Disordered eating patterns

In short, the unforgiving pace and complexity of modern life has greatly challenged our ability to live healthfully and fully in the present moment. While stress is omnipresent in each of our lives to varying degrees, it has reached a point of sweeping concern; a stress pandemic which we must address and conquer in order to survive. Our body's natural response to stress produces a host of chemical reactions and hormonal changes. In other words, the body prepares to "fight or flee", pumping greater amounts of blood to the heart and muscles, shutting down the non-essential functions. As a temporary state, this serves the body well to defend itself. However, when the stress reaction is on constant alert, the normal physical functions that have either been exaggerated or shut down in response, become dysfunctional. Systems of the body that operate under the PNS (parasympathetic nervous system) do not have the opportunity to function well, causing all sorts of imbalances in the physical body. The stress response has its purpose. It saves us in emergencies when we need to react quickly and forcefully. It is a biological survival mechanism built into our systems. But when there is a constant demand for this response to stay active, beyond the immediate needs of the situation, steps must be taken to break the cycle and stop it before injury or permanent damage occurs. The constant barrage of hormonal arousal and rapid heart rate, shortness of breath, tense muscles, and digestive upset cannot be tolerated long before destructive changes occur in the body.

The most effective tool for managing stress is activating the body's innate "relaxation response". The relaxation response brings the nervous system back into balance by slowing down the heart rate, lowering the metabolism and decreasing the respiratory rate. This

counter-balance to the “fight or flight” response, so common in our everyday life, creates a deep state of mental and physical rest. Relaxation is perhaps the single most important key to counter-act the stressful lifestyle so many of us have adopted. It is the antidote to stress which is known to contribute to the development of disease. When we relax, our body has the opportunity to unwind. Relaxation allows the body to reduce the stress response and ignite the body’s relaxation response (rest and digest). Listed below are a few of the benefits of relaxation:

- Reduced risk of heart disease
- Strengthens the immune system
- Reduced muscular tension
- Decreased blood pressure/lowered risk of hypertension
- Decreased anxiety/panic attacks
- Increased concentration
- Better sleep
- Greater efficiency
- Decreased emotional upheaval
- Less headaches and pain

But how are we able to access this “relaxation response” when we are so busy trying to micro-manage everything in our lives? Judith Hanson Lasater, one of the pioneer teacher in Restorative Yoga, says “when we take the time to create ease in our lives, we not only affect ourselves and our own bodies, we also affect the quality of our actions...and the choices we make...and then we begin to affect the world. When we act from deep ease, we will affect people we haven’t even met.” When I heard her express these words at the Relax and Renew© Teacher Training clinic I attended, I knew I had to find out more and dig deeper into this transforming work.

Restorative Yoga is a revolutionary tool in a world that is surrounded by a constantly accelerating pace and insatiable hunger for production, information and activity. It is a way of setting up the ideal conditions to invite deep relaxation and stillness into our lives. These conditions nourish the vital healing processes of our bodies while simultaneously restoring its natural physiological rhythms. Restorative Yoga postures soothe busy minds and free restrictions and tensions that influence the flow of breath and life force (prana) in the physical body. Generally, restorative poses relieve stress by taking students into a deep state of relaxation. With the fast pace of life today, it is common for the sympathetic nervous system to be on overdrive and for our bodies to stay in a constant state of heightened alert. Our bodies do not know the difference between stress created from work and actual danger such as the

threat of a physical attack. In order to restore, the body needs to be able to relax and return to the parasympathetic nervous system. Restorative yoga postures support the muscles and bones with props so that they can relax. As a result, the nervous system sends fewer messages to the brain, the mind quiets and the body returns to the parasympathetic nervous system. This lowers the heart rate, reduces blood pressure and slows down the breath. Restorative yoga poses can target specific needs of each individual. Each of the poses has specific benefits. For example, supported forward folding postures produce a calming effect on the body and mind. Other supported postures lying on the back have the effect of opening the whole front side of the body; beneficial for those who spend much of their day hunched over a computer. Allowing the body to be fully supported in any of the restorative postures, for a period of 8 to 20 minutes, brings a quality of calm and balance back into one's life. Developing a restorative yoga practice is a good antidote to the stressful, busy lifestyles that many people lead. Just as we take the time each day to eat and sleep, so should we take the time to relax.

I am fascinated by the transformative work of Restorative Yoga. For this thesis project I found three volunteers from three different walks of life who agreed to practice three (3) restorative poses designed for their individual needs. I interviewed each student, using a questionnaire covering health history and lifestyle patterns. From this information I designed a restorative practice for them to follow several times per week for one week. At the end of the week I re-interviewed each student to see what if any effects the practice had on the physical, emotional and spiritual well-being. Following is the practice and follow-up of each student. My intent is that they would continue the practice and incorporate these poses into their lives.

"Time is the most mysterious beast. Some days there is too much, other days not enough. Some days it is too full, others too empty. All the more reason to be present with our lives right here, right now"

Judith Hanson Lasater

Susan

Case History

Susan is 50 years old and in excellent physical health. She works from home, sewing window treatments and decorative pillows. Her hours vary, sewing anywhere between 3 to 8 hours a day. This work can be very physical as she works with large bolts of fabric and spends much of her time working around a large table, cutting and maneuvering the fabric. She leads a very active life style, biking, running, and hiking. She has a strong yoga practice and recently completed her 200 hour Teacher Training Program at Prairie Yoga. Susan sleeps between 6 and 8 hours a night but will periodically wake up and be unable to go back to sleep. She often feels as though her mind is racing and has a difficult time relaxing. She does feel as though the teacher training program has helped her to “be more in the moment” and breathe through her stress.

Susan is very physically active and has a difficult time sitting still. This past year in teacher training has helped her to realize the benefits of a restorative practice but she hasn't taken the time to actually practice the work. She was very eager to begin. She had recently completed a 150 mile bike ride and was feeling fatigue in her upper back, and legs. She is also dealing with family stress; both children are moving out of state, as is her sister, who she is very close to. She states that this is causing some anxiety and jaw tension. She said that she wakes up at night and finds that she is clenching her teeth and that her tongue is glued to the roof of her mouth.

Medically Susan has no current injuries or chronic conditions. She was first drawn to yoga to increase flexibility and found that she loved the “strong physical practice” of the vinyasa flow classes. She particularly enjoys heart opening poses and hip openers. She has not done a full restorative practice in the past except for the one TT class which focused on restorative poses. We began our session at 11:30 am during the work week.

SEQUENCE SUMMARY

1. Supta Baddha Konasana
2. Instant Maui
3. Supported Savasana

SEQUENCE DETAILS

Pose #1

Supta Baddha Konasana – Duration: 15-20 minutes

Why?

I chose this pose first in our sequence because I wanted to counteract the forward effects of Susan's long bike ride and bring ease to her hips. Supta Baddha Konasana opens the whole front of the body; pelvis, belly, chest and throat. In this pose, the legs are supported. The inner groins can release and the lower belly and pelvic area can soften. When we release tension (by softening) in an area, we allow circulation to flow. Fresh blood and lymphatic fluid can circulate in the pelvic region. As such, this pose is very healing for the pelvis. In addition Supta Baddha Konasana can be very grounding and soothing. It calms the sympathetic nervous system. Susan loved this pose and felt an immediate release of tension throughout her body. She said she felt as though she was "floating", stating that the feeling of support was wonderful. After I set her up in the pose and took photos, I covered her with a blanket. She remained in the pose for 20 minutes.



SEQUENCE DETAILS

Pose #2

Instant Maui - Duration: 15-20 min

Why?

I chose Instant Maui as the next pose in her sequence because I wanted to continue with a heart-opening pose, but one that would also balance her very active lifestyle. Given that Susan spends a good portion of her day on her feet, I thought that this pose could bring rest and relaxation to her legs and feet. Instant Maui stimulates apana, quiets prana. Good for stress and emotional anxiety because it has an effect on baroreceptors, which help regulate blood pressure. Instant Maui also helps to relax the muscles of the abdomen, as well as the muscles of the lower back. This is also an excellent pose for refreshing the legs and quieting the mind. This was Susan's favorite pose and the look of bliss on her face was beautiful! After I set her up in the pose and took photos, I covered her with a blanket. She remained in the pose for 17 minutes.



SEQUENCE DETAILS

Pose #3

Supported Savasana - Duration: 15- 20 min

Why?

I chose to end our session with Supported Savasana because I felt Susan needed the sense of stability and support that this pose offers. With the number of family changes that Susan is experiencing in her life, the stability and sense of complete support found in this pose would bring ease, comfort and the much needed rest Susan is looking for. Savasana rejuvenates the Central Nervous System (CNS), reduces blood pressure, anxiety, and helps with sleeplessness. Lastly, I wanted a simple and straightforward pose that Susan could easily practice during the middle of the day that would allow her be fully comfortable physically so that she could quiet the activity of her mind – to rest. After I set her up in the pose and took photos, I covered her with a blanket. She remained in the pose for 20 min. (I think she fell asleep after 7 minutes!)



FOLLOW UP

Susan practiced all three of the poses for the next four days and then the next three days she continued to practice Instant Maui and Supported Savasana stating “I don’t really have the time for all three of the poses and find I like these two the best.” Because she is very familiar with setting up poses, she was able to get herself into the poses without any difficulty. She liked all three of the poses but really found that Instant Maui and Supported Savasana brought her ease and helped to quiet her “monkey mind”. She practiced Supta Baddha Konasana and Instant Maui in the afternoon about 3pm and Supported Savasana before going to bed. By day 4, she said that she was able to relax quicker once she was in the pose and in her regular yoga class, her Savasana felt deeper and more relaxed. “I’m wondering if there is a connection....am I able to find that ‘special place’ easier?”

She stated that after a week of practicing these restorative poses, she was sleeping better and wasn’t waking in the middle of the night. She also felt more rested and relaxed during the day and felt that in giving herself permission to rest she had given herself a gift.

Ron

Case History

Ron is 52 years old and employed as an instrument repair technician at a Chicago public high school. He also owns a piano tuning business. He really enjoys the work he does but does notice his main source of stress comes from dealing with the Chicago metro traffic. From September through June (school calendar) Ron works approximately 9-10 hour days but during the summer months he slows down, averaging 2-3 hours per day. He spends most of his working day seated, either at a piano bench, desk or commuting. Ron sleeps an average of 7 hours a night and most of the time he feels rested. He usually gets up at least one time to use the bathroom.

Ron enjoys bike riding, bolleyball, reading and puttering around the house. He has practiced some yoga in the past but injuries along the way prevented him from continuing. Had he of been introduced to therapuetic yoga somewhere along his life path he most likely would still be practicing. What he was looking for was a way to find ease in his upper back, hips and legs. He always loved childs pose and the arthritis in his knee prevented him from finding a way to revisit the favortite pose. The restorative chair childs pose was one of his favorites and he is now interested in therapuetic yoga!

Regarding Ron's medical history, he has a reconstructed right achilles tendon, a diagnosed partial tear in his right rotator cuff, diagnosed arthritis in left knee and recently (4 months ago) had surgery to replace his right hip. He also suffers from periodic muscle tension headaches. Ron maintains a positive, healthy perspective and continues to enjoy being active. He is currently on no medication and takes vitamins when he remembers!

We began our session at 4pm during the work week.

SEQUENCE SUMMARY

1. Supported Chair Child
2. Viparita Karani
3. Side Lying Savasana

SEQUENCE DETAILS

Pose #1

Supported Chair Child – Duration: 3 to 5 min/each side of face

Why?

Ron stated early in our first interview how much he missed practicing child's pose. He craves relief from upper back, neck and shoulder tension he feels at the end of the day. After the stress of driving the long distance from school back out to the suburbs, this pose would help to quiet his mind and release built up tension in his upper back and neck. This was an easy pose for Ron to "sink" into and the first thing he said was "Ahhhhhhh"! He especially liked the rolled blanket between his low belly and hips. He said this relieved low back and hip tightness he wasn't even aware of. After I set Ron up in the pose and took photos, I draped a blanket over his upper body and covered his feet with a blanket. He stayed in the pose for 10 minutes, changing the direction of his face after the first 5 minutes.



SEQUENCE DETAILS

Pose #2

Viparita Karani – Duration 20 min

Why?

I chose Viparita Karani as Ron's next pose in order to open up his chest, broaden his collarbones, and release tension in his jaw. Ron spends a lot of his day working over small parts at his desk or at a piano keyboard and says that he likes to come home and just lie down with his legs up the wall. He does have tight hamstrings, so this pose was never truly comfortable and I wanted to give him a way of practicing this pose in total comfort. Lastly, I wanted to bring Ron down to the floor to give him the general benefits of a gentle backbending pose (rejuvenating) and to feel grounded, supported and stable in order to release and let go of the days "work". Once I completed taking the photos, I covered his legs with a blanket and placed a second blanket over his torso, arms and hands. He remained in pose for 20 minutes.

After coming out of this pose, Ron said that he didn't feel any discomfort in his hamstrings and really liked the support of the bolster along the back of his legs. He is able to set himself up in this pose on his own, minus the sandbag on top of his feet!



The dog, Indigo, kept trying to get in on the shots! He seemed to enjoy the restorative session as much as Ron did! You can see him sneaking in the photo on the last shot!

SEQUENCE DETAILS

Pose #3

Side Lying Savasana – Duration: 20 min

Why?

I chose this version of Savasana as Ron's final pose because it is his favorite sleeping position and its ability to relieve fatigue. I wanted to end our session with a pose that was accessible and easy for him to set up. He told me that he would most likely practice this pose before going to bed at night as a way to "settle" before getting into bed. He said he felt very safe and secure in this posture, almost as if he were wrapped in a nest. After taking the photos, I covered him with a blanket. He remained in the pose for 20 minutes.



FOLLOW UP

I met with Ron the following week in order to get his comments and feedback on the practice. He practiced all three of the poses, the entire week, for the time recommended. Here is what Ron had to say about practicing the poses on his own....

“I found the three poses helpful – with the side-lying pose the most restful. I would even practice this at work if I knew I would be undisturbed for 20 minutes at a time. I never know when a student will come knocking on my door for an immediate instrument repair. However, I loved practicing this before bed to let go of my day and prepare for sleep. For the other two poses, I had requested something that would allow for a supported deeper forward fold following hip replacement surgery. The supported adapted child’s pose using two chairs really allowed me to relax into the posture and gave me the same feeling I loved when I was able to practice the traditional pose. I also liked the supported legs up the wall pose. It relieved tension in my hips and low back and I also found that my chest felt open and my jaw tension released! This really surprised me.”

Ron also stated “I may not have been the neediest subject for a restorative practice, as a piano tuner and instrument repair technician; I am in one of the least stressful jobs possible! But after long battles with traffic, the sequence was wonderful.”

Russ

Case History

Russ is 58 years old and has for the past 35 years held a variety of jobs in the sales world. For the past year he has worked in the software industry. He also does side work linking potential buyers, sellers and investors for energy and medical projects. I'm not clear what this all entails but he did state he finds this work to be stressful. He mainly works from home but travels two to three times a month for up to three days at a time. He generally works an 8am to 5pm day, but several nights a week he will spend two to three additional hours on side projects. Russ is married and has two daughters.

Russ's current physical state of health is good. He was diagnosed with Celiac Disease three years ago and has since resolved many of the digestive issues he once had. This past January Russ did mention that he had suffered stress related health issues, but that "all is good now. I have altered my perspective and it really helped." He did not disclose what the "issues" were, only that after a night in the ER he was cleared and released. He did state that he feels tight in his upper back and shoulders and every once in awhile he has stomach issues.

Russ power walks 30 minutes a day. He enjoys golf and several times a month will walk a nature trail in our area that takes him about an hour to complete. He sleeps approximately 6 to 7 hours a night; wakes to use the bathroom at least once. He does have restless leg syndrome but finds that if he eats some protein, peanut butter or cheese, before going to bed the symptoms seem to resolve themselves (his wife is not so sure). He also has sleep apnea, but uses a mouth guard that eliminated his snoring. He currently takes no medications and states he has no chronic or aggravating conditions.

We began our session at 5:30pm during the work week.

SEQUENCE SUMMARY

1. Supported Reclining Pose
2. Supported Childs Pose
3. Side Lying Savasana

SEQUENCE DETAILS

Pose #1

Supported Reclining Pose – Duration 15 – 20 minutes

Why?

I chose this as Russ's first pose because Russ is new to yoga and this is a pose that he can simply set up on his own, using just a couch cushion. He spends much of his work day seated at the computer, rounding his shoulders and jutting his head forward. This pose helps to relax the body by manipulating the body and the brain. I also wanted to counteract the (forward) effects of his sitting in a chair all day. This pose helped to open up his chest, relax his upper back and release tension he was feeling in his neck. He stated that he felt his whole body sink and relax into the posture! After I set him up in the pose and took photos, I covered him with a blanket. He remained in the pose for 18 minutes.



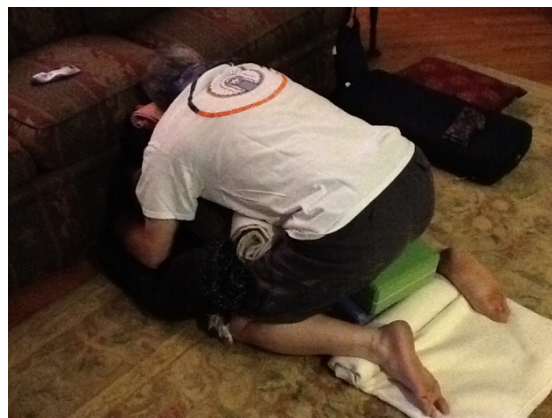
SEQUENCE DETAILS

Pose #2

Supported Childs Pose – Duration: 3-5 minutes on each side of face

Why?

I chose this a Russ's second pose because I wanted to give him a chance to turn his focus inward and further quiet his mind. This pose is soothing and comforting for most individuals. In this position the limbs protect the soft abdominal and pelvic organs. This gentle cradling of the abdominal cavity allows the abdominal organs to soften, supporting digestion. The back of the heart, the kidneys and the sacrum are gently opened as they are exposed to the sky. This pose can also help an individual begin to feel breath in the back of the body, bringing relief to tense shoulders and entire length of the spine, including the hips. After setting Russ in the pose and taking photos, I covered him with a blanket. He remained in the pose for 4 minutes per side of face, total of 8 minutes.



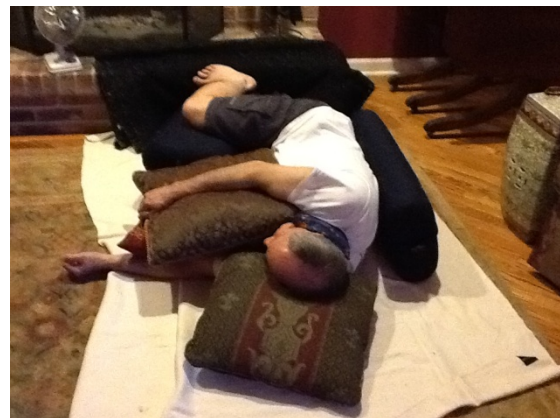
SEQUENCE DETAILS

Pose #3

Side Lying Savasana – Duration: 20 minutes

Why?

Although I had used this same Savasana for another student, I really felt that this was an appropriate pose for Russ. I set him up so that he was able to brace his legs against a wall to help relieve the “restless leg” symptoms. He also is a side sleeper and finds this pose to be the most comfortable. Lying in this position, on his side, also relieves some of the distress he occasionally feels in his “belly”. This pose also has the ability to relieve fatigue and insomnia and I felt that Russ works long days; this would be an appropriate pose for instilling the feeling of support and ease. After setting Russ up in the pose and taking photos, I covered him up with a blanket. He remained in this pose for 20 minutes, falling asleep after about 6 minutes in the pose. He relaxed the quickest in this particular pose. He did state that he loved the feeling of his feet against the base of the brick fireplace.



FOLLOW UP

I met with Russ the following week to get his feedback on the practice. Russ was able to practice all three of the poses for the next seven days! I was really surprised that he practiced all three poses each day. Because he did work from home and two of the days were the weekend, he was able to take a break twice during the day to practice the first two poses and then practiced the Savasana before going to bed. He did state that he found more relaxation and ease in the Supported Reclining pose than he did in Childs Pose, but that both were good at restoring clarity, relieving tension in his upper back and shoulders, and giving him a “mini” break during the work day. He also mentioned that this helped him to stay on task after the he had practiced! He also mentioned that the Side Lying Savasana with his feet braced helped to eliminate the “shaking leg” syndrome. He even tried not eating protein before going to bed and the “shaking leg” syndrome did not occur.

Russ also went on to state that he would continue to practice these poses and that he was going to investigate taking an intro yoga class!

FINAL THOUGHTS

I really enjoyed this project. I feel as though these poses provide the opportunity for the body to rest; something we, in our fast-paced society, hardly ever give ourselves permission to do. All three of the students noticed changes in the way they felt after practice and will continue to use these poses to take “mini breaks” during the day in order to find a sense of ease and relaxation. Although this particular project followed these students for only one week, I know adopting a restorative practice into the regular asana work is a powerful antidote to the daily stress we live under.

“Sometimes the most important thing in a whole day is the rest we take between two deep breathes.”

Etty Hillesum

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