

Under the Weather?

There's a Yoga Pose for That

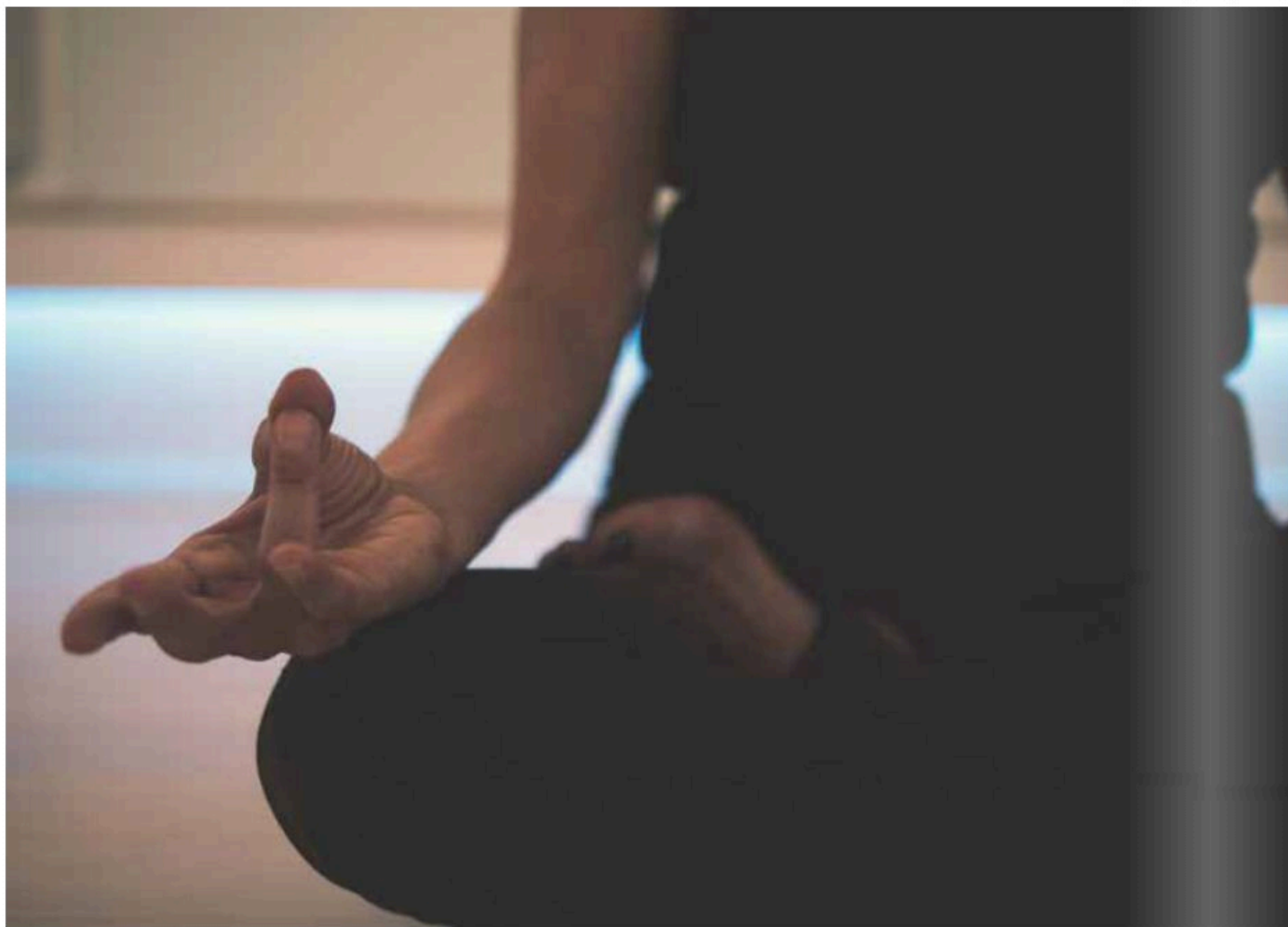
BY ERIKA FITZGERALD

The sun shines through the ceiling-high studio windows and rebounds off the natural wood floors. A gentle breeze brushes through wind chimes outside, mingling harmoniously with the music flowing through the speakers inside. One-by-one, students quietly shuffle in, leaving their shoes at the door. Here, in yoga class, every detail is thoughtfully curated to wash away worries and give people a space to breathe.

For some, rolling out their yoga mat is a sort of ritual experience. For others, it's a 60- to 90-minute escape from overflowing inboxes and to-do lists. Or, hey, it might just be an excuse to spend more time in stretchy pants. There's no wrong reason to practice yoga. In fact, practicing yoga poses—in or out of class—can relieve the side effects of stressful days, restless nights, and other aches and pains of life. >>



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#1 A BREATH AWAY FROM STRESS

For the unfamiliar, yoga is derived from the Sanskrit “yuji,” which means union. In common practice, yoga unites mind and body. Movement and breath. Anyone who’s been to a yoga class knows that breathing exercises are common at the beginning and end.

These intentional breathing techniques help calm the mind and bring focus to the present. So much so, even mental health professionals recommend breathing techniques for patients recovering from anxiety, PTSD, depression, and other traumas.

The best part? Breathing is free and doesn’t have any side-effects. You can practice simple breathwork techniques anytime, anywhere. Next time you feel uneasy, try exhaling all the air from your lungs. Then, inhale slowly to the count of four. Hold your breath for one count at the top. Exhale slowly to the same count of four and hold for one count at the bottom. Repeat this rhythm for several minutes to re-calibrate your calm. *Abbbb*.

#2 PHYSICAL RELEASE FOR PESKY PAINS

The notion that yoga can treat lower back pain is nothing new. Multiple studies have proven that a downward dog a day can keep the physical therapist away. However, yoga has often been lumped in with less-reputable alternative therapeutics. Until now.

A recent study published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* declared yoga equally as effective as physical therapy in reducing pain, improving function, and eliminating the need for pain meds. When practiced regularly using proper form, poses like downward dog, forward fold, and child’s pose elongate the spine and release tension from the lower back. While you’ll find at least one of these poses in nearly every yoga class, you can also add these easy-to-learn poses to your at-home stretching routine.

#3 SLEEP TIGHT AND WAKE UP BRIGHT

Restless nights got you feeling groggy and depleted? Yoga can help with that, too. If you’ve ever suffered from insomnia, you know that a streak of sleepless nights can really slow your roll—from glossy-eyed space-out spells during work hours to mindlessly calling in a take-out pizza (again) because you’re just too darned tired to cook.

Good news: practicing gentle yoga before bed preps your body and mind for a good night of zzz’s. Gentle yoga incorporates deep breathing, slow movements, long pose holds, and meditation—which cues the brain into a state of calm. And because the brain and body are inextricably connected, restless bodies will follow suit.

Similarly, a powerful vinyasa practice in the morning can add an extra jolt of natural energy to your day by increasing blood flow and circulation throughout the body. >>

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#4 FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Gentle and intentional breathing, as practiced in alignment with yoga postures, helps balance the sympathetic (“fight or flight”) with the parasympathetic (“rest and digest”) parts of your nervous system. The vagal nerves serve as a sort of liaison between the brain and body, telling organs when to perform important functions—like breathing, beating, digesting. The brain is well-known for sending messages to the body, but, in fact, the body sends even more messages to the brain. This means physical movements that affect the body also affect the brain.

If you suffer from chronic gut discomfort, bloating, or other unpleasantities associated with digestion, try incorporating more deep breathing, abdominal stretches, and twists that massage intestinal organs. Likewise, practicing these things before indulging in a big meal can prep your digestive system for the extra work.

#5 SO MUCH AS TOO MUCH?

As with anything, too much yoga can be a bad thing. Benoy Matthews, a UK-based physiotherapist, told BBC News that he’s seeing more and more yoga teachers with serious hip problems because they’re pushing their bodies too hard for the sake of achieving “prescribed” positions. The truth is, not every body is cut out for the fullest expression of every yoga pose. “What’s achievable for one might not be achievable for others,” Matthews tells BBC.

THE KEY TO A HEALTHY AND BENEFICIAL YOGA PRACTICE?

Focus on what’s achievable for you—and you alone. Listen to your body. Stop and modify any pose that causes pinching, blocking, or pain. And never let that one person doing a single-armed handstand with lotus legs in the front row pressure you into pushing past your own limits. There’s no shame in child’s pose (that’s the one that looks like a dead bug facedown on the floor). **SLO LIFE**