



STRESS AND ANXIETY IN THE BODY

HOW TO RELIEVE PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS
FOR SELF AND STUDENT CARE

YOGA **ed.**



STRESS AND ANXIETY IN THE BODY: HOW TO RELIEVE PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS

AN INTRODUCTION

As we enter the last quarter of 2020, we are all still discovering new ways that this pandemic impacts ourselves and our communities. This prolonged and unpredictable period of instability presents numerous novel stresses that every one of us is figuring out how to manage.

Before we can begin to manage these stresses, we must first look to assess and understand our circumstances. In other words, what's here? Where are we starting from? What are my needs? Self-assessment can be a tricky endeavor, especially in these trying times, so we suggest this simple self-awareness practice to start.

Take a moment to check in with your body right now:

- Gently draw your shoulders away from your ears

- Lower your tongue away from the roof of your mouth
- Allow your jaw to relax

What do you notice?

Perhaps you were holding tension in your posture or in your face that you hadn't noticed before. Maybe you found some challenge in asking yourself to relax right now. Or, perhaps you simply became more aware in your body and present to your surroundings. There is no right or wrong way to feel—whether we find ourselves in the midst of a global pandemic or not.

**“SELF-REGULATION DEPENDS ON HAVING
A FRIENDLY RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR BODY.”**

— BESSEL VAN DER KOLK

Our bodies are continuously processing and integrating the information that we encounter throughout the day. Feelings of stress are the body's natural reaction to a challenge, creating a "ready state" in which we're poised for fight, flight or freeze behaviors. This stress response is natural and even necessary in reasonable amounts for our wellbeing. However, when stress builds up from a near-constant barrage of challenges, our bodies don't have time to return to a neutral or resting state.

Over time, stress-related symptoms manifest. Physical signs of stress include headaches, stiff joints and sore stomachs. Stress shows up in the mind as well, such as feeling scattered or flustered or anxious. Because each of us may react differently to the same stressor, and we all process stress in our own ways, stress shows up uniquely for each person.

Due to our bodies' own self-protective measures, we might not realize that we're living with symptoms of stress for days, weeks, months, or even years. To address this dual problem of the effects of stress and the difficulty of recognizing stress, Yoga Ed. has created this toolkit: **Self and Student Care Mini-Series: Stress and Anxiety in the Body.**

In this toolkit, you will find body-based practices to support your and your children's/students' physical and emotional wellbeing.

You'll learn clear ways to:

- Understand the effects of stress and anxiety
- Recognize how stress and anxiety manifest in the body
- Practice specific tools to reduce stress and anxiety

Important note: This toolkit is not a substitute for individualized professional care from a doctor or therapist. The effects of stress and anxiety can be debilitating to everyday routines, and in these severe cases the guidance of a healthcare professional is necessary.



HEADACHES

WHY HEADACHES?

- Stress is a common trigger of tension-type headaches and migraines. Stress can also trigger other types of headaches or make them worse.

OTHER POSSIBLE CAUSES:

- Increased screen time
- Prolonged sitting posture

WHAT DOES THIS LOOK AND FEEL LIKE IN CHILDREN?

- A pressure or tightness in the muscles of the head or neck
- Non-pulsating pain on both sides of the head, mild to moderate

WHAT DO THEY LOOK AND FEEL LIKE IN YOURSELF?

- A dull, aching sensation all over your head
- Tenderness or sensitivity around your forehead, scalp, neck or shoulder muscles



HEADACHES

TOOL: BALLOON BREATH



BENEFITS:

- + Relieves symptoms of stress
- + Triggers the relaxation response

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Place one or both hands on your belly and breathe deeply.
2. Inhale, feeling your belly rise.
3. Exhale, feeling your belly lower and contract.
4. Repeat.

TENSION IN THE NECK

WHY TENSION IN THE NECK?

- When you experience stress regularly, your muscles remain actively contracted for longer periods which can result in neck and shoulder tension.

OTHER POSSIBLE CAUSES:

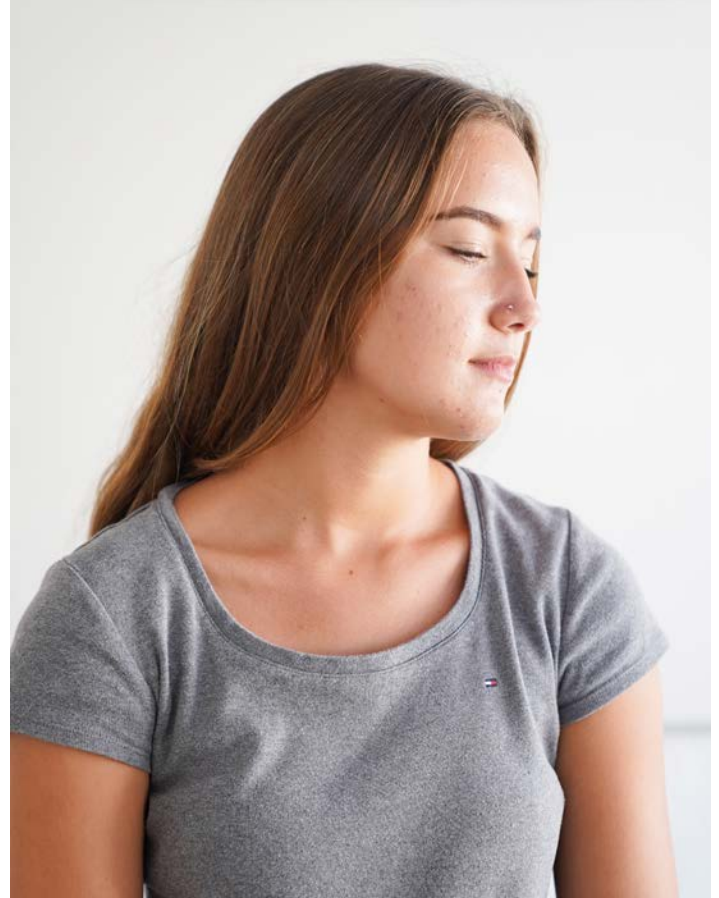
- Head-forward posture
- Prolonged periods with restricted neck and shoulder movement, such as when holding a phone or looking at a screen

WHAT DOES THIS LOOK AND FEEL LIKE IN CHILDREN?

- Straining the neck
- Slumped or unsupported posture

WHAT DO THEY LOOK AND FEEL LIKE IN YOURSELF?

- Muscle tightness or stiffness
- Muscle spasms
- Difficulty turning your head in certain directions



TENSION IN THE NECK

TOOL: NECK CIRCLES



PHYSICAL BENEFIT:

- + Strengthens and stretches the neck

MENTAL BENEFIT:

- + Calms the mind

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Begin seated in your chair with your feet flat on the floor.
2. Inhale, sit up tall.
3. Exhale, bring your chin to your chest. Inhale.
4. Exhale, bring your right ear toward your right shoulder. Inhale.
5. Exhale, bring your head to center. Inhale.
6. Exhale, bring your left ear toward your left shoulder. Inhale.
7. Exhale, bring your chin back to your chest. Inhale.
8. Exhale, bring your head to center and sit up tall.
9. Repeat to the other side.

TIGHT SHOULDERS

WHY TIGHT SHOULDERS?

- The stress response causes you to clench the neck, jaw and shoulder muscles. Stress also heightens your perception of pain, which makes any existing pain feel worse.

OTHER POSSIBLE CAUSES:

- Restricted neck and shoulder movement
- Unsupported, passive posture

WHAT DOES THIS LOOK AND FEEL LIKE IN CHILDREN?

- Shoulder aches
- Posture with the shoulders up by the ears
- Holding or rubbing neck and shoulders
- Difficulty keeping arms raised

WHAT DO THEY LOOK AND FEEL LIKE IN YOURSELF?

- Headaches
- Restricted range of motion in the neck and shoulders
- Persistent, non-pulsating pain in the shoulders, mild to moderate
- Difficulty keeping arms raised



TIGHT SHOULDERS

TOOL: EAGLE OR SEATED EAGLE



PHYSICAL BENEFITS:

- + Strengthens the ankles, calves, knees, and abdominals
- + Stretches the quadriceps, hip flexors, back, and shoulders

MENTAL BENEFITS:

- + Builds focus
- + Develops willpower
- + Stimulates the mind

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Begin in Mountain Pose.
2. Inhale, stand tall in your body.
3. Exhale, bend your knees slightly as you step your right foot over your left leg. Place your right foot like a kickstand to the outside of the left foot.
4. Inhale, reach your arms out to the side.
5. Exhale, bring your right arm over your left arm as if to give yourself a big hug. Either hold your arms in this 'hug' position or bend your elbows and raise your forearms as the backs of your hands press together. As another option, wrap your forearms one more time and press your palms together.
6. Breathe.
7. When you are ready, unwind your arms and legs to return to Mountain Pose.

BACK ACHES

WHY BACK ACHES?

- When stress manifests physically, it causes us to tighten our muscles, particularly the muscles around the shoulders and down the spine. It is often the prolonged tension of these lower back muscles that causes pain.

OTHER POSSIBLE CAUSES:

- Sitting for long periods
- Unsupported or passive posture

WHAT DOES THIS LOOK AND FEEL LIKE IN CHILDREN?

- Pain in the lower back
- Trouble staying seated

WHAT DO THEY LOOK AND FEEL LIKE IN YOURSELF?

- Pain while sitting
- Muscle spasms or sharp sensations in your back
- Discomfort while getting up and down from a seat or the floor
- Pain may also radiate down the legs or worsen with bending, twisting, lifting, standing or walking



BACK ACHES

TOOL: SEATED FORWARD FOLD



PHYSICAL BENEFIT:

- + Stretches the ankles, quadriceps, hip flexors, and lower back

MENTAL BENEFIT:

- + Calms the mind

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Begin seated in your chair with your feet on the floor, sitting up tall in your spine.
2. Inhale, reach your arms up to the sky.
3. Exhale, hold opposite elbows.
4. Inhale, sit up tall.
5. Exhale, fold forward to your desk, allowing your head to rest on top of your arms.
6. Breathe.
7. Inhale, come back up to seated.

SORE HANDS

WHY SORE HANDS?

- Stress can cause inflammation and swelling of the joints in the hands and wrists.

OTHER POSSIBLE CAUSES:

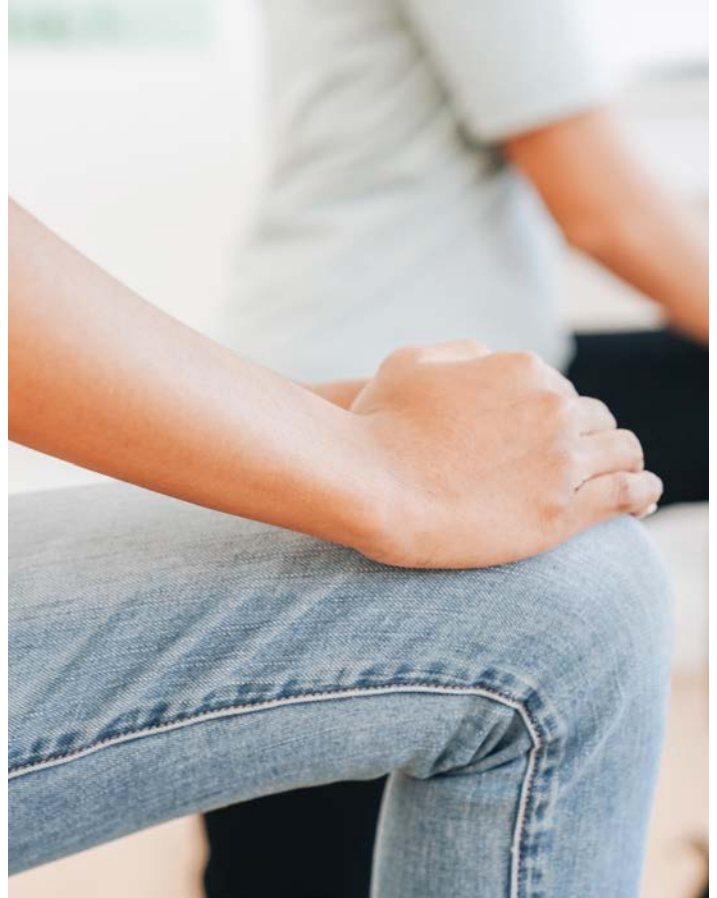
- Long periods of typing at a keyboard or holding a phone
- Lower circulation from a lack of whole-body movement

WHAT DOES THIS LOOK AND FEEL LIKE IN CHILDREN?

- Stiffness in the wrists and hands
- Clenching fists
- Fidgeting or wringing hands

WHAT DO THEY LOOK AND FEEL LIKE IN YOURSELF?

- Aching wrists and hands
- Dull or mild burning sensation in joints of fingers or wrists
- Swelling around these joints
- Stiffness in these joints in the morning



SORE HANDS

TOOL: TENSE AND RELEASE

BENEFITS:

- + Helps restore a sense of balance
- + Eases frustration and tension
- + Develops self-awareness
- + Note: This relaxation exercise helps encourage children and adults alike to notice how much tension they unconsciously hold.

INSTRUCTIONS:

Read or paraphrase the following prompt:

1. “Close your eyes, breathe, and rest. As if you’re falling asleep, let go of all thoughts. Feel your breath.
2. “Without changing anything, notice your breathing. Is it fast or slow? Is it loud or quiet? Smooth or jerky?”
3. “We’re going to tense our arms now, and we’ll hold for a count of five. Here we go.
4. “Beginning with your hands, clench your fists. Press your arms tightly into your sides. Breathe evenly while you are squeezing your muscles. Hold for five counts, five... four... three... two... one. Now, relax. Let it go. Let your arms and hands be floppy.”
5. Repeat by coaching students through tensing and releasing different areas of the body, such as their legs, feet and toes or their torso, including the stomach and back. To tense the stomach area, have students pull their belly-buttons inward. Once all body parts have been tensed and released, continue with the prompt as follows.
6. “Now, tense all the muscles you can at the same time. Hold for five counts, five... four... three... two... one. Relax one last time. Let everything be floppy.
7. “Notice if you feel any different now than you did at the beginning. Notice your breathing. Has it changed? How?”
8. Pause for a few moments.
9. “Gently begin to wiggle your fingers and your toes. Take any final stretches that feel good to you. When you are ready, come back to a comfortable seated position.”

VERTIGO

WHY VERTIGO?

- The stress response speeds up our heartbeat and breathing, dilates our eyes and makes us more alert. These effects can feel dizzying or disorienting and can trigger other symptoms of vertigo.

OTHER POSSIBLE CAUSES:

- Addressing or facing a phobia
- Chronic anxiety or anxiety attack
- Hyperventilating

WHAT DOES THIS LOOK AND FEEL LIKE IN CHILDREN?

- Disoriented behavior or facial expression
- Dizziness
- Fainting
- Trouble balancing, falling down

WHAT DO THEY LOOK AND FEEL LIKE IN YOURSELF?

- Same as in children, plus
- Blurred vision
- Nausea



VERTIGO

TOOL: LEGS UP THE CHAIR



PHYSICAL BENEFIT:

- + Reduces fatigue in the legs and feet
- + Relieves minor backache and headache
- + Gently stretches the calves and hamstrings

MENTAL BENEFIT:

- + Calms the mind
- + Cultivates a sense of presence

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Begin lying down on your back, legs facing toward your chair.
2. Inhale, lift your legs up to the air.
3. Exhale, bend at the knees and rest your lower legs on the chair seat.
4. Inhale, flex your toes towards your shins.
5. Exhale, bring your hands to rest on your belly, or lay your arms out to your sides.
6. Breathe.

STOMACH ACHES

WHY STOMACH ACHES?

- The enteric nervous system—the “gut brain”—has nerves that respond to the same stress hormones and neurotransmitters that our brains do. These stress hormones can interfere with digestion, and the effects compound over the long term.
- Because stress decreases our pain threshold, a smaller stimulus such as passing a gas bubble can feel much worse when the person is stressed.
- Also, factors related to stress-related eating can worsen symptoms.

OTHER POSSIBLE CAUSES:

- Nervousness
- Anxiety
- Feelings of hopelessness/helplessness, such as when receiving bad news

WHAT DOES THIS LOOK AND FEEL LIKE IN CHILDREN?

- Staying out of school/class due to stomach aches
- Stress-related eating
- Loss of appetite

WHAT DO THEY LOOK AND FEEL LIKE IN YOURSELF?

- Stress-related eating
- Increased food cravings
- Loss of appetite



STOMACH ACHES

TOOL: SEATED TWIST



PHYSICAL BENEFIT:

- + Strengthens the back
- + Stretches the groins, chest, spine, and shoulders

MENTAL BENEFIT:

- + Calms the mind
- + Reduces stress

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Begin seated in your chair with your feet on the floor sitting up tall in your spine.
2. Inhale, reach your arms up.
3. Exhale, reach your right hand to the outside of your left knee.
4. Inhale, sit tall.
5. Exhale, bring your left hand behind you. Hold onto the chair back or chair seat if you like. Twist to look over your back shoulder.
6. Breathe.
7. When you are ready, untwist and come back to a neutral seat.
8. Repeat on the other side.

JAW / TEMPLE PAIN

WHY JAW/TEMPLE PAIN?

- Stress may contribute to clenching the jaw more frequently or at greater length, often subconsciously, which creates more pressure in the jaw joints. Clenching the jaw also puts strain on the muscles of the jaw, throat and neck.

OTHER POSSIBLE CAUSES:

- Forward-head posture
- Limited range of physical focus, such as staring forward all day (as with a laptop screen) instead of looking up, down, to the sides, etc. (as with a classroom or playground environment)

WHAT DOES THIS LOOK AND FEEL LIKE IN CHILDREN?

- Teeth grinding or clenching
- Jaw clicking
- Difficulty biting or chewing thoroughly

WHAT DO THEY LOOK AND FEEL LIKE IN YOURSELF?

- Same as in children, plus
- Changes in how facial expressions feel or look



JAW / TEMPLE PAIN

TOOL: LION BREATH



BENEFITS:

- + Releases excess energy
- + Relieves tension in the jaw, neck and chest

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Begin in a comfortable seat, sitting up tall. Inhale through your nose.
2. Exhale through your mouth with a sighing roar, opening your mouth wide and sticking your tongue out.
3. As an option, lift your hands to your face and spread your fingers wide to make “lion claws.”
4. Repeat this breath with different roaring sounds.
5. To finish, relax your face and return to your normal breath.