

Restorative yoga: what it is, how it works, and why we need it

by James K. Weber, M.D.

Like the word calories, stress has developed an undeservedly bad reputation in Western society. Calories are essential to life, they are the building blocks of the energy we need to perform our daily tasks, such as digestion, ambulation, and even cognition. The stress response is likewise essential; it is what enabled ancient man to escape from the saber-tooth tiger and modern man from a truck running a red light. However, just as too many calories are a bad thing, so too is unrelenting stress.

And stress levels seem to be mounting higher and higher as the economy has taken a sharp turn for the worse—job losses, mortgage foreclosures—and the war on terrorism seems endless.

Yoga teaches us to slow down, to quiet the mind, to turn inward. All this and more help us to deal with stress. We learn to activate our parasympathetic nervous system, engaging the “rest, digest, and relax” response, rather than the sympathetic “fright, fight, or flight” response.

While any of a number of methods of yoga will help in this regard, gentle, restorative, and *yin* yoga are the most effective, and “power” yoga would, not surprisingly, be least effective at stress reduction. A well-balanced *Hatha* style would fall somewhere in between.

Restorative and *yin* yoga utilize fewer and less challenging poses than are called for in other yoga styles, and the poses are held longer, generally for two to five minutes. This allows for sufficient time for tense muscles and taut tendons and ligaments to release. More of the poses involve forward bends and twists, which tend to be relaxing, rather than back bends, which tend to energize. The back bends which are used, in part to counterpose the forward bends, are usually supported with props such as bolsters, straps, and blocks, in order to lessen the energy requirement.

Yin yoga derives from Taoist Buddhist yoga traditions, where *yin* is the feminine, more contemplative, slower form of activity, opposite from *yang* (think “power yoga”). Most of the poses are based upon classic *yogasana*; however, rounding of the spine and bending of the knees are encouraged in *yin* yoga. Essentially the student folds into a position with sufficient modifications to suit his needs. Western *yin* teachers have adopted a whole new series of names—such as “dragon” and “butterfly”— for their modified poses, rather than using standard nomenclature.

The ultimate goals of restorative and *yin* yoga are the same: to create mental and physical serenity and healing where indicated through the use of a limited number of relatively undemanding poses.

In my work as a certified yoga teacher and therapist and an Ayurvedic Wellness Counselor, I employ a great deal of restorative techniques, even in my flow classes (at the beginning and the end of each session). Even while I was still practicing surgery, I found myself recommending yoga as a great stress reducer.

I still keep an eye out for trucks running red lights, just in case I happen to be in the middle of the cross-walk...