

A Look Inside The Brain During Exercise

There seems to be no end to the benefits of exercise. Humans need to move or else fall victim to what is often referred to as the sitting disease. If the majority of your day is spent sitting, your overall health will suffer, it can lead to weight gain, heart disease, and other serious chronic illness, especially as you get older. Lack of movement can lead to heart attack, stroke, and a general loss in quality of life in our senior years.

Everyone agrees that exercise is physically great for the body. However, did you know that exercise also has a wide variety of benefits for the human brain? What exactly happens in our brains when we exercise to have such an impressive effect on our mental health?

What Actually Happens In The Brain During Exercise

Exercise causes our heart pressure to rise, which sends a signal to the brain that the body is under stress. In response, a protein is released into our body called “brain-derived neurotrophic factor” (BDNF). This protein is thought of as a “reset switch” – it repairs memory neurons, making thoughts seem crystal clear after exercising and putting the body at ease.

Simultaneously, endorphins are released into the brain, which are meant to limit the degree of pain and discomfort associated with exercise, even creating a sense of euphoria. Like BDNF, endorphins are released in response to the feeling of “stress” brought on by exercise. The term, “runner’s high” is the coin phrase used to describe the surge of endorphins during exercise that act as a natural anti-depressant.

The same antidepressant-like effect from a “runner’s high”

results in a reduction in stress level hormones. Additionally, a study conducted in Stockholm showed that running stimulates cell growth in the hippocampus, which is the portion of the brain responsible for memory and learning.

How Our Mind And Body Are Affected

Together, BDNF and endorphins give us a “happy” feeling after exercise. These are somewhat addictive in nature, which is one reason why some people seem obsessed with exercising, although this “addiction” can be a healthy one.

Besides the short-term high from endorphins and BDNF, exercise also has long-term benefits. Studies show that people are happier and more productive throughout the day when they exercise. A Penn State research study showed that people who had worked out within the previous month were happier and more productive at work compared to those who had not exercised (but not quite to the same degree as those who had worked out earlier that day). People who exercise regularly have much better moods than those who don't and retain a stronger sense of calmness throughout the day.

Exercise affects the brain on various fronts. Not only does it increase heart rate that pumps more oxygen to the brain, it also facilitates the release of various hormones that provides a nourishing environment for the growth of brain cells.

Research conducted at UCLA showed that working out stimulates the growth of new neuronal connections in a variety of important cortical areas of the brain.

How To Maximize The Benefits

20 Minutes

Based on this information, you might think that professional athletes are the happiest people on the planet. According to research conducted by the Department of Exercise Science at

the University of Georgia showed that only 20 minutes of exercise is needed to reach that peak level of productivity, positive mood, and facilitates information processing and memory functions. The key is to turn it into a habit.

Mental And Physical Connection

There is an important mental and physical connection that can increase the benefits of exercise. For example, exercise that integrates different parts of brain activity, such as ballroom dancing that requires rhythm, strategy, coordination and thoughtfulness in movements stimulates cognitive health more than less complex workouts like running or cycling that do not necessarily engage diverse mental abilities.

Adding Exercise To Your Life

Working out in the morning before work or school helps to spike brain activity, prepares you for stresses you may incur during your day, allows for increased retention of new information and learning, and equips you to cope with complex situations that may arise.

Start-off easy – even just 5-10 minutes a day – and gradually increase the length and intensity of your workout. Going to a group or class at the gym makes exercising more fun, and it's a great way to learn new techniques and to meet new fitness minded people.

However, getting motivated to go to the gym regularly can be a challenge, so try different exercises at home and outdoors in your neighborhood, such as jogging, biking, strength training, etc. Variety is the spice of life, and the more you vary your routine the better for your motivation and your body.

There are many apps on your smartphone that can provide you with workout sets for all experience levels and even guide you through the exercises. Furthermore, apps like Map My Fitness and Nike enable you to track your progress, which is a great

way to stay motivated as you watch yourself improve.

Final Thoughts

Remember, the health of your mind and body are closely connected, and exercise is one of the best – if not *the* very best – ways to improve mental and physical health in both the long-term and short-term.

The long-term benefits of exercising regularly are immense – reduced risk of disease, improved mental health, stronger body/muscles, reduced stress, improved digestion, improved blood circulation, and much more.

Even just going on a 20-minute daily walk is immensely better for you than staying sedentary. Find a training partner, set a schedule, do whatever you have to do to get those endorphins and BDNF proteins pumping as often as you can!

8 Limbs of Ashtanga Yoga

ASHTANGA is Sanskrit for eight limbs. It is a two word phrase incorporated as one: ashta, meaning eight, and anga, meaning limbs. This eightfold system of yoga dates as far back as 2,000 years ago, and was taught by Patanjali.

The eight limbs of yoga are basically guides on how to live a more productive, aligned, purposeful, and intentional life. All of the eight limbs are intertwined; understanding and practicing them opens someone to a realization of one's true self and consciousness, destroying all obstacles standing in their way, as well as the impurities of the mind and body. It also results in directing focus towards our health, and aids

in the acknowledgement and development of our spiritual inclinations.

The 8 limbs of yoga include; Yama, Niyama, Asana, Pranayama, Pratyahara, Dharana, Dhyana, and Samadhi. Each is to be practiced individually, however, all should be allowed to flourish synchronically.

1. YAMAS: The first of the eight limbs encompasses morality and advocates living by upright values. It promotes ethical behavior to allow for a more peaceful and just society. The Yamas are universal principles of life. There are five yamas, all of which are strategically put in place to align our inner beliefs with the external environment.

- **AHIMSA:** This refers to nonviolence. It means to abstain and stay free from violence in thoughts, words, and actions. Practicing the art of nonviolence constitutes and propagates peaceful living and coexistence among humans.
- **SATYA:** Satya means truthfulness. And just like Ahimsa, it is a virtue that should be reflected both on the inside and outside. We must learn to be truthful both in words, and in actions. By virtue of this Yama, we are also admonished to follow a true and honest path, in alignment with our hearts. Satya preaches that by being honest and truthful, your actions become more successful.
- **ASTEYA:** Asteya preaches against stealing. It encourages refraining from stealing of property, ideas, works, wealth, credit, etc. It further stipulates that by engaging in non-stealing, wealth and jewels are accorded.
- **BRAHMACHARYA:** Brahmacharya refers to abstinence. It endorses living a life dedicated to finding self realization, and attaining a higher truth, and

restraining from pursuing vanity. It promotes spiritual development through abstinence.

- **APARIGRAHA:** This means non-possessiveness. It teaches how to overcome greed, possessiveness, discontent, in order for one to gain knowledge of the past, present, and future.

2. NIYAMAS: These are observances, personal spiritual practices to aid spiritual growth. There are five niyamas that encompass the values upon which we interact with ourselves. They are: Sauca, Santosha, Tapas, Svadhyaya, and Isvara Pranidhana.

- **SAUCA:** Sauca means purity. Its teachings are centred on maintaining internal and external purity by keeping the mind, body, and environment clean.
- **SANTOSHA:** This means contentment. Santosha presents us with the need to appreciate what we have and have accomplished, for it is the only way to gain true inner peace. It encourages satisfaction with what we already have.
- **TAPAS:** This refers to self discipline, or spiritual austerity. It is a medium through which the body, and mind are cleansed.
- **SVADHYAYA:** This means the study of self and the sacred scriptures. Observance of the Svadhyaya results in spiritual awakening and tuning of one's mind to spiritual unfoldments.
- **ISVARA PRANIDHANA:** This refers to absolute submission to God. By so doing, one is able to attain *Samadhi*.

3. ASANAS: This is what most people call "yoga" but it is actually *only* the poses one makes during yoga class. It is the third limb, and its practice results in a synchronism between

the mind and body. The asanas help us develop self-discipline, and the ability to concentrate, both important factors of meditation.

4. PRANAYAMA: This literally means “life force extension.” It is the fourth limb, and basically refers to gaining control over the respiratory process. Simply put, mastery of breath control.

5. PRATYAHARA: The Pratyahara is the fifth limb. And it is the withdrawal from the external world to focus on our inner cycle. It is detachment from the attractions and distractions from the outside world. It preserves the mind, and keeps it from engaging in unintentional activities.

6. DHARANA: The sixth limb. It is referred to as the one pointed concentration. It involves deep concentration in order to bring the mind under absolute control.

7. DHYANA: Dhyana is seventh on the list. It is meditation; a process that involves absolute focus and control of the mind. It doesn't allow for distractions to disturb the process.

8. SAMADHI: This is the final limb, and is referred to as a state of self-realization, and consciousness.

With so much knowledge of the 8 limbs of yoga, *Ashtanga*, where will you start first on your journey to samadhi?

When In Doubt, Smile!

Chances are this isn't the first time you are reading that a smile is contagious.

Why is that important for us to remember?

When you share a smile with someone, the instinctual response is to smile back. It is almost like saying hello.

When the brain is genuinely feeling happy, it produces endorphins and transmits a signal to your facial muscles to smile. The smiling face sends a signal back to the brain that it is happy (more endorphins released), which, if left to continue, can repeat on loop *ad infinitum*.

What a pleasant thought... an endless loop of happily smiling!

Smiling can alleviate one's mood. Smiling can also, incredibly, lower heart rate levels after recovery from stressful activities. This [University of Kansas study](#) introduced brief stressors to participants, and found that smiling during difficult times can help reduce the intensity of the body's stress response. *The findings were the same with both fake smiles and genuine smiles, regardless if a participant actually felt happy.*

The two facial muscles that get a great workout while smiling are your zygomaticus major muscle and orbicularis oculi muscle. Studies have shown that exercising these muscles can trick your brain into thinking you are happy, so it releases the endorphins that can ultimately make you feel better.

How can we use this scientific information for the good of the world?

By smiling at a stranger on the street, or at the grocery store. Consider spreading endorphins for the benefit of others!

Smiling is an easy way to communicate with others without even speaking. You can connect on a level that words sometimes cannot achieve.

It is possible the person you smile to will take it as an insult, and become more sullen. But chances are pretty great

that the other person will smile back. And you know what? It'll make you happy to see that, and you'll smile for real all over again.

Have you maybe been challenged to smile lately? Are the blues overtaking the reds and yellows in your life?

Some self-help is in order! Take a moment to think about some things that make you smile. Even if you get just a little upward turn of the lips, this is the right direction!

Ask yourself: I wonder what will make me smile today?

Daily, give yourself a reminder of what makes you happy. Write it down in great detail if it helps you really feel the pleasure.

Those who smile more live longer, healthier lives, have better relationships, are more successful in careers, receive faster promotions, and have better marriages.

Help your mind find things that will naturally make you smile so that you can continue the loop of happy feelings and more peaceful and relaxed state of mind. And as always, share this pleasant feeling with others as much possible.

5 Signs of Sleep Deprivation

Sleep deprivation is practically an epidemic.

Have you noticed lately how many people are saying they aren't getting enough sleep?

It is a condition running rampant in society.

It is making us sick, irritable, depressed, hungry, and unproductive, to name a few woes.

What's the difference between being tired and being sleep deprived, anyway?

With such busy lives, active kids' schedules, family and social events, not to mention work obligations... It is no wonder that less than 65% of American adults are getting the recommended 7-9 hours of sleep per night. [[Excellent article on sleep by Business Insider's Kevin Loria.](#)]

Increased stress throughout the day can lead to less-than-ideal sleep, so even if we are in bed for eight hours, it doesn't mean we are getting quality rest.

Let's take a moment to look at cues that you might be falling short in rejuvenating slumber.

1. Mood

Probably all of us can relate to this. I'm tired, didn't get enough sleep, and anything can set me off. Heaven help the first person I see who is talking too loudly, saying annoying things, making a mistake, or taking too much time! When our brain doesn't get enough down time, it has trouble regulating emotions, and thus mood. If you notice that you are irritable, snappy, or impatient – in the morning, but really at any time of day, this is a sign of sleep deprivation.

2. Trouble falling *back* to sleep

We all wake up in the middle of the night, but naturally fall right back asleep. Do you wake up in the middle of the night at least four nights a week and struggle to fall back to sleep? We all experience the occasional sleepless night and groggy morning. And difficulty sleeping is to be expected during life's transitions and stresses. But, when it becomes a regular occurrence

unrelated to circumstances, it points to sleep deprivation.

3. Increased Appetite and/or Weight Gain

Have you noticed when you think you are eating super well, you are even exercising regularly, yet you are gaining weight? Lack of sleep can increase your appetite and lead to weight gain. The body's need for energy produces cravings for sweets, carbohydrates, junk food in general. Sleep deprivation also causes imbalance to the hormones, which can also increase appetite.

4. Silly Mistakes

We've all been there... forgetting simple things, messing up the schedule, dropping stuff, being off balance (trip over your own foot, anyone?). When we don't get enough or quality sleep, the brain can't work as fast as it usually does, so the normal signal of the eye-to-brain-to-leg takes longer than walking up to the step you are about to trip on.

5. General Depression

Sleep deprivation has been noted as a symptom of clinical depression, not a sign, to be clear here. When you are deprived of the sleep needed to rejuvenate your body, it is hard to not see the dark at the end of the tunnel, so to speak. When poor sleep builds up over days, your usual chipper mode turns a bit dark and gray. Sometimes you might feel down but can't quite pinpoint why. Chances are a few hours more sleep will help!

With long daily to-do lists and the whole world to tackle, it is easy for sleep debt to creep up.

Lack of sleep is sometimes used as a measuring device of one's self-worth. Let's face it, most of us want to feel wanted. So we do for others despite how it impacts what we need ourselves. Staying up late to catch up on tasks not completed during the day, or over weekend, for example. Could be Susie's school project or typing up the minutes from the volunteer committee meeting you attended last week.

Exposing yourself to sleep deprivation, besides making you fuzzy-headed, irritable, and exhausted, can also lead to weight gain, diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and memory loss. [Learn more from Harvard's article.](#)

It all adds up. So be sure to give yourself quality sleep every night.

For those of you suffering from insomnia or anxiety, guided audio recordings are a great tool for your bedside. Use whatever tools you need to keep yourself at your peak of health.

Sweet dreams....

Let Your Feet Find the Focus

The other day I went for a run on my favorite local trail in a beautiful county park. I just love being in nature, breathing that fresh air, seeing all those colors, hearing animals scurrying or the creek babbling.

I also love the challenge that the trail presents. Navigation

in the woods requires a much more alert mind. You have to really pay attention so that you don't trip. Jumping over curbs is one thing when running outside, but constantly scanning for roots or fallen branches is something else in the woods.

What's the beauty of that? My mind HAS to focus on what's ahead on the ground, which means it gets a break from thinking the squirrely thoughts it normally does all day long. The kind of break that meditation provides. Trail running is moving meditation? Indeed!

Besides the physical aspect of the run, which in the end always makes my body feel more relaxed, being so close to natural elements provides a release that no medicine can. I can go in feeling down and by the end I'll be back to positive.

But let me tell you, I've had some tumbles on the trail. Fortunately it doesn't happen often. Once you fall the first time, you realize: YOU ARE NOT INVINCIBLE! You are perfectly human.

I'd been running on the trails for a couple years before I fell the first time. It was during a 12.5K race, which I hadn't trained for very well. I was tired that morning, and I had neglected my pre-race nutrition.

I knew I wasn't in top form for the race, but it is an annual one I do and I was determined to give it my best.

I stepped to the start line with eager anticipation, believing I would do great.

Half way through the race I realized I was running on empty, with no fuel or water in my belt.

My mind started to move away from the trail and onto the path of monkey mind... how far away is the fuel station? How is my time compared to last year? Why don't my legs move faster? There were probably 100 other questions I asked myself and considered the answers to.

Probably my mind should have been on the ground three feet ahead, but it was wandering widely.

With all this build up, you won't be surprised that I fell three times during that race. Each time I grew more humiliated. Then, worse, I started to feel sorry for myself. How could I not fall with all the negative reaction going on?

I basically lost my confidence and drive to finish the race. I allowed myself to walk in sections, I beat myself up mentally. For a while. Fortunately with about a mile left in the race, I started to look at the ground in front of me.

I pleaded with my feet to pick themselves up higher.

And then something magic happened: I didn't fall again!

I started to feel so grateful that I didn't quit. That despite the dirt on my hands and the bloody scrapes on my legs, I had the power to complete this journey. That gratitude got me to the finish line and has stayed with me since that race day.

Cut to my trail run the other day. I've been training well lately and when I started out I was feeling good. I was grateful to be in the park, and was ready for the run.

Then, you guessed it: My mind went wandering away from the roots and branches onto something else and, boom, I went down. Sometimes it isn't the physical pain that causes the trauma. In this case, since I hadn't fallen for so long, I was startled to find myself sprawled out with dirt under my fingernails.

Determined, I brushed myself off, and carefully proceeded. About 20 minutes later the second fall came. By that time I had stopped shaking from the traumatic fall earlier, and was feeling good about the run again. Great, in fact, and as we were heading toward the end of the run, I picked up speed. I was proudly thinking about how I was actually achieving a negative split. In that moment, I tripped again and fell. Surprised?

When we allow our mind to waiver, our body follows along.

Trail running isn't for everyone, but trails can be used as an analogy for many challenges.

Know that you will fall sometimes, be prepared to pick yourself up, and, when you get back on the trail, remember to keep your mind focused. On whatever is right for that moment.

Don't judge the thoughts and gently remind yourself that the obstacles on your path are there to keep you focused on where you are going.

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Padahastasana for Height

My first yoga teacher really loved Padahastasana. He started us almost every class with a relaxed version. We would be in the pose until everyone got situated on our mats. Sometimes Darren would ask us to hold the pose for really a long time. I don't think we ever were in the pose for less than a minute (unless we were the late comer) and it was usually more like two or three minutes, or more.

At first, it was a difficult pose to get into, not to mention hold for so long. My back wouldn't loosen up, or I would start to feel dizzy, or my arms would start to get sore. I began to think it was maybe a sort of punishment!

But then, after a few weeks, the pose started to feel like a break. I started to feel the benefit of the pose and as I grew stronger, the pose became like a secret connection to the deep peace each practice brought me.

This pose is good for your back, abdomen, and legs. By keeping the fold, your hamstrings find greater flexibility and your internal organs are massaged. A sort of inversion, the pose increases blood circulation (especially to the brain), which improves your concentration and keeps you calm.

Your calves and lower back also gain more flexibility, and as you breathe deep, and hold the pose with intent, you increase strength of the abdomen. It has been argued that this pose helps to lengthen the spine (making you taller!).

The pose also improves digestive disorders and if practiced regularly can remove fat from the abdominal area.

It is important to go gently into this pose so that you gain the strength you need to stay in it for a while. As you fold over, be sure to extend the top of your head out in front of you, always lengthening your spine. Tuck in your belly as you extend out and fold down into the pose.

It also helps to sort of sway a little once you are in the pose, to find the relaxation in it. Keep your nose as close to your knees/thighs as possible, without tucking your neck too far.

Be there are breathe. Find your calm strength, and as you rise back up at the end, draw your shoulders back and feel yourself that much taller.

Power of the Brain in Exercise

Alright, I realize I'm serious behind on some very interesting topics out there, but this [headline from 2003](#) confirmed something I've been wondering lately.

“Exercise has a more powerful impact on the brain than previously thought; may lead to improved treatments for disorders such as spinal cord injury”

I'll summarize the lengthy article, which covered several studies that indicate exercise has a greater impact on the brain than previously thought.

Exercise goes beyond helping your muscles. Exercising regularly helps reduce symptoms of depression. The increase in blood flow to brain plays a great part in this. This is important not only for the healthy among us, but also for the individuals recovering from vascular injuries and trauma and must spend significant time in bed.

The article shares findings from several experiments, in which mice, Macaque monkeys, or humans performed various exercises.

Cleveland Clinic Foundation's study found that when elderly patients put mental focus on the exercise they performed, they became 15% stronger, as compared to the group that only exercised who gained 3% strength.

An [earlier study, also lead by Dr. Guang Yue](#), showed that people who performed mental workouts only (no physical movement), were measured to be 13.5% stronger than their counterparts who did no such thinking. The power of our brains is amazing.

The doctors involved believe that this is a big deal for

patients who have long roads of physical therapy ahead of them. They predict that recovery times will be faster using this technique.

There is a particular interest in looking at the recovery from spinal cord injuries, as approximately 11,000 people in the U.S. yearly sustain a spinal cord injury.

One of the mice studies showed that mice who were given access to (flat-surface) running wheels before a spinal cord injury (I know, science, right?) reached a higher level of walking compared to their neighbors who did not have the running wheel in their cage before the spinal injury. Next study for them is to watch the recovery time with a running wheel *after* the spinal surgery.

One of the researchers in a University of California-Irvine study, Carl W. Cotman, PhD, said, "Translated into human terms, it means that individuals who are appropriately physically active may be able to protect themselves from depression – or be less depressed or relieved from depression – if they are physically active."

Another study at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center showed that patients who incorporated exercise into their recovery saw a greater reduction in the symptoms of major depression than those who relied on medication alone.

The article also mentions a University of California-Irvine study (this is the macaque monkey one) that "demonstrated that regular aerobic exercise increases the number of capillaries in the motor cortex, a small area on the outer part of the brain that controls voluntary muscle movements." The increased volume of capillaries leads scientists to believe the brain can help heal itself, inspires further research to see how exercise might help reduce the effects of aging, and increase recovery rates in patients of all types.

So when you are out walking, running, or inside lifting

weights or even yoga, you might put some mental effort into your movements if you want to get stronger. Or if you are stuck in an airplane for many hours, try closing your eyes and imagining yourself performing your favorite exercise. I'm sure you can't build your muscles mentally overnight, but these list of studies sure gives hope that our minds can put us in the direction of healing bodies!

5 Eye Exercises to Improve Your Vision

This article isn't for everyone, like those with unresolvable eye issues. It is for people who have either lived with for a while, or are now starting to experience blurry vision – both nearsighted or farsighted.

I am excited to share with you some tips on how eye exercises can strengthen your eyes and improve your vision. I've been fortunate to have good vision for most my life. In graduate school, when I was spending a significant number of hours reading and writing on the computer, I noticed that I couldn't see far away as clearly as I had in the past.

My yoga teacher at the time showed us a few techniques for relieving stress in the eyes. Because she was amazing and brought so many good things to my life, I thought, yeah, I'll give it a try. I proceeded for the next several weeks to dedicate a short time every day to performing a regimen with my eyes.

Long story short: I started leaving my glasses at home when I went to my classes. My sight had improved enough that I could see the blackboard clearly, even from the back row.

Our modern life is full of reasons why our vision is failing: spending hours and hours on the computer or phone, watching TV, spending long periods under fluorescent lighting.

Glasses and contacts are an amazing invention, but once you start wearing them, your eyes don't have to work as hard, which in turn worsens your vision.

Give these exercises a try for a month and watch how strong your eye muscles can be!

1. Palms

Rub the palms of your hands together fast for a few seconds to generate some heat. Then cup your hands around your orbital bone (the bone around the eye socket) and leave them there for 30 seconds. While your hands cover your eyes, keep your eyes closed. Enjoy the break your eyes receive. Warm your hands and cup your eye sockets three times.

2. Clock

Seated comfortably and without moving your head, move only your eyes to look up as high as you can – that's 12 o'clock. Then move your eyes clockwise to go all the way around the clock: from 1 o'clock, back up to 12. Keep your eyes looking as far to the edges as you can. Go 3 times around clockwise, then 3 times around counter-clockwise. This should be done as slowly as possible.

3. Focus

By mixing up what you are looking at helps improve your eye muscles. Bring a pen to just in front of your eyes with your right hand, then hold another pen with your left hand at arm's distance. Focus on the close pen, then the pen a couple feet away, then on a point across the room, and then at a point outside a window. Position yourself so that you don't have to move your head for this. Look at each of the four spots for two seconds, and rotate through these points for about 2

minutes total.

4. Zoom

Extend your arm out while holding a pen. Slowly bring the pen to 2-3 inches away from your face, all the while keeping the pen in focus. Slowly move the pen back to an arm's distance, again, keeping your eyes focused on the pen. Repeat this several times.

5. Blink

I was surprised to learn that when we are looking at a computer/phone screen or reading we blink less than when we are looking at things further away. [[Check out this cool study on spontaneous eye blink rate.](#)] Dry eyes can lead to blurry vision. You can help your keep your eyes moist by blinking several times very quickly. Blink 10 times, then sit with your eyes closed for 20 seconds. Repeat this exercise 5 times.

Train your eyes to use their full functioning and you will be surprised how how strong you can make them! There is also the 20-20-20 rule... Every 20 minutes look at something 20 feet away for 20 seconds. This helps to give your eyes light exercise throughout your day.

Keep your eyes strong and in good health and before long, you too, might be able to ditch those glasses!

Finding Deep Release in

Paschimottanasana (Seated Forward Fold)

When I first started doing yoga asanas, I remember my teacher telling me I must have been a yogi in a past life as the poses came so naturally to me.

It wasn't that I was the most flexible student, but he noticed in me a true dedication and passion for the experience and how even the first time learning an asana series, I seemed to intuitively know what to do.

I found great relief in many of these poses, and always felt a great lightness when the practice was over. Most people have one or two poses that are difficult to master. This is no different for me, even after all these years of practice.

Even though I'm not really very good at it, in terms of gently gliding my forehead to my shin, I love Paschimottanasana (Seated Forward Fold). I love it because it gives me a sweet relief, even if bittersweet, that very few things in life can.

I humbly bow down in this pose because when I really get into it, an emotional tightness is released and, at those times, tears flow from my eyes, down my shins and drip to my mat. Tears likely come from from the primitive gestalt; with my head bowed, I let go of the past and stretch into the future, while being aware in that very moment.

After you have warmed up with a few Sun Salutations, sit in [Dandasana](#). Bring the flesh away from your sits bones and get really grounded. Keep your feet flexed, legs straight and thighs activated, shoulders back, and belly pulled in toward the spine. As you reach forward, hold your big toes with your thumb and forefingers, or wrap your palms around the sides of your feet.

For the first few breaths, your gaze is on your big toes. With each inhalation stretch your spine longer, bringing the crown of your head farther from your sits bones. On the exhale, fold down a little further. After you've done this 3-4 times, keeping your back as straight as possible, on your next exhale, allow your forehead to come to rest on your shins.

Of course if this is the first time you are doing this pose, you may not make it that far. That's ok. Fold down as far as you comfortably can. And breathe. Allow yourself to relax but also keep engaged. Remember to keep your shoulders relaxed and your back straight. Breathe here for at least 5 full breaths, then on an inhale lengthen your torso upward slowly and on the exhale release your hands and come to sit.

The intense stretch that this pose gives to your entire body helps improve digestion by stimulating the liver, kidneys, ovaries, and uterus; it soothes headaches and anxiety as well as reduces fatigue; it helps keep blood pressure down, insomnia at bay, helps relieve mild depression; and more.

[source](#)

This amazing pose can bring you a deep sense of inner calm.

Your Fitness Friend: The Medicine Ball

I love my home gym. It isn't terribly fancy, but it is awesome to have most of my favorite workout gear available at any hour. After a few months of CrossFit training, I realized a medicine ball was a must have.

It is so versatile, and you can get many different benefits

from various exercises that incorporate the medicine ball. If you don't have a medicine ball in your home gym, or haven't tried one at your local gym, I strongly suggest you pick one up and try one or more of these impactful exercises.

Slams

This one is great if you are having a particularly stressful day. Start by holding the ball over your head and use all your force to slam it into the ground. Squat to pick it up, raise it over head, and slam it again. Do this for three minutes and then take a 30 second break before doing it another three minutes.

Balancing Burpees

In a traditional burpee, you put your hands on the ground and jump back. Using a medicine ball between your hands and the ground means you have to really be able to balance well. Which means you have to have a strong core. Do circuits of 15-20 of these in a row, with a 30 second break in between for 5 minutes.

High-Low Chops

Start by holding the ball over your head with both hands, arms straight and torso twisted to the right. As you bring the ball down towards the floor to the left of your left foot with your arms extended, come into a squat (be sure your knees don't extend out past your toes). Keeping the medicine ball away from your center of gravity makes this an intense move, so you may want to start out with a lighter ball. Reach the ball up as you twist back to the right. Do this at least 10 times on each side to start, and work your way up to more repetitions.

Cross-Behind Lunge

To cross-behind means to do a squat like a curtsy – with your right foot coming behind and to the left of your left foot. The medicine ball is held in your arms and as you go down for the lunge, you raise the ball up to shoulder height. Come

back to stand bringing the ball back down to hip level. Repeat on the other side by lunging your left foot back and to the right of the right foot and bring the ball up to shoulder height, arms still extended. Do this as many times as you can, and hope to feel the healthy burn tomorrow (as sure sign you are doing it right!).

Twister

This one will strengthen your core, and build up those biceps! Start seated on the ground with your legs in front of you, knees bend about 90 degrees. Hold the medicine ball just above your knees and while keeping your arms straight, move the ball to the left of your hips. Bring the ball back to above your knees and then bring it down to the right of your hips. As you twist, concentrate on making it an effective twist to not only build that core strength, but it also helps with digestion. Start with 30 second intervals and build up to 60 seconds at a time.

This short video by [Popsugar Fitness](#) that shows you 5 more exercises to get your whole body fit with just a medicine ball. Happy balling, and be sure to let me know which is your favorite medicine ball exercise!