Desk Yoga and Other Ways to Relieve Work Stress

For the 2-part webinar that accompanies this handout go to
https://scrlc.org/site/view/1123 and https://scrlc.org/site/view/1107

Compiled by Joanne Gard Marshall
Yoga, Pilates and Tai Chi Instructor

Yoga and other practices intended to relax the body and mind can be helpful in combatting desk and work fatigue. The best thing we can do if our work involves a lot of sitting is to make sure we get out of our chair and take a stretch break every 30-45 minutes or whenever your back, neck or shoulders feels tired. To protect the eyes, look up from your computer screen or desk work often and look towards the place that is farthest away from you.

In general, be mindful of the way you are using your body – are you propping yourself up, collapsing the chest and rounding the spine, or connecting with our foundation to help you rise up with support when you are sitting, standing and walking? As much as possible, keep your hips and shoulders level and sit on your “sit bones”, which are the two bones at the base of the pelvis. Try not to round into the tailbone.

Here are some standing movements from Tai Chi that can help us connect with the support of the earth, relax the back and open the hips:

Tai chi warm up: Stand with the feet a little wider than shoulder width. Slowly transfer your weight from one side to the other, feeling the weighted foot sinking into the earth. Go back and forth a few times. Now stand equally into both feet, place the hands on the belly and rotate from side to side, just like a search light. Notice the hips opening and back releasing. If you want you can add the weight shift to the rotational movement. Keep the body relaxed.

Combining heaven and earth: Hold one hand on top of the other, as if holding a ball. Slide the bottom hand up and press up. Other hand drops and presses down. Wrists bend back slightly. Bring hands back to holding a ball. Repeat several times, always lifting bottom hand up.

Yoga breathing for relaxation

Find your foundation and your breath: Close your eyes and begin focusing inward. Find your foundation by locating the “sit bones” and sit with the shoulders over the sit bones. If you are in a chair, sit away from the back of the chair. Both feet should be flat on the floor and your ankles should be directly below your knees. Feel the connection of the sit bones to the support beneath you. Feel the spine lengthening upward, creating space between the vertebrae. Lengthen from tailbone to crown of head. Let the shoulder blades relax down towards the hips. Allow the upper arm bones to spiral outward so that you broaden across the collar bones. Draw your shoulder blades together to reduce the tendency of the shoulders to round forward. Feel the difference in your posture.

These subtle movements will work together to engage and strengthen the core muscles and restore the natural curves in the spine. You can use this position when sitting at your desk. Be sure that your computer screen is at a height where, when you look straight ahead (chin neither lifted nor dropped), that you are looking at the middle of the screen.

Three-part yoga breath: Inhale deeply into the belly, into the chest and ribs and then up to the collar bones. Feel the belly expand. Exhale completely and feel the belly move towards the spine. Repeat three times. Use the experience to “arrive” in your yoga practice.
Four sided support: Think of breathing up the front of the spine from navel to throat. Then take the breath down the back of the spine, softening slightly and filling the back body with breath. Then think of inhaling up the sides of the body from sit bones to arm pits. Let the arm pits feel light. Repeat several times.

Sitting poses to open and relax the back and hips

Lengthening forward from the sit bones: In a chair, lean forward and place elbows on knees that are hips-width apart. Hands drape towards the floor. Start with long spine, then let the head release downward, feeling the release of muscles along both sides of the spine. Stay for 2 minutes if you can. If it feels comfortable you can release the hands down to the floor and release more deeply. Draw the belly and low ribs toward the spine for low back support.

Cat and dog stretches. In a chair; you can do a cat and dog stretches by placing the hands just above the knees and softening into the back body on the exhale and lengthening up the front body on the inhale. Repeat several times.

Upper body spirals. In a chair, rotate the belly to the side so that you can slide the back arm over the chair back. Take the opposite arm and put it on the outside of the thigh you are rotating toward. Use the resistance of the arm against the thigh to gently rotate a little more. Change sides. Do not over twist.

Hip opener for sitting. Sitting in a chair with ankles directly under knees, cross one ankle over the opposite knee. Think of the thigh bone as spiraling out away from the hip. Gently press the hand onto the thigh to open the hip. If you are sitting at a table that is the right height you can try putting the knee under the table as long as it does not strain the knee or hip.

Yoga standing poses to lengthen and spine

¼ Sun salutation: Start with hands in namaste or prayer position. Inhale as you circle the arms out to the sides. Bring the palms together and draw the hands down into namaste on the exhale. Repeat 5 times, letting the breath open the upper body.

½ Sun salutation. Start with hands in namaste or prayer position. Inhale as you circle the arms out to the sides. Bring the palms together and swan dive forward, bending the knees slightly. Hinge at the hip rather than rounding the spine. Draw the belly towards the spine as you come forward. Rest the hands on the shins, ankles or floor. Come up onto the finger tips, lifting the heart and head to lengthen the spine forward. Soften back down. Bend the knees, press feet into the floor, drop chin to chest and roll up the spine, keeping the knees soft. Keep the knees as bent as needed. Repeat 5 times, letting the breath move the body.

Side stretch. Sink the right foot into the floor. Inhale and lift the right arm and lengthen from foot to finger tips. Gently arch over to the left. If you wish, spiral the chest and ribs upwards. Come back to an upright posture, turn the palm outwards and exhale the arm down, opening from the heart. Repeat 3 times on each side.

Downward facing dog. Using a chair or desktop stand far enough in front of the chair or desk that when you swan dive forward and put your hands can on the chair back or desk top. Lengthen the spine from navel to throat as you extend the heart forward. Open and spread the
toes, planting all four corners of the feet. To release, hinge at the hip, fold down, and let hands come down towards the floor. Then inhale and come up with a long spine, engaging your core.

**Engaging the core using the Pilates powerhouse**

Pilates often uses isometric exercises that engage the muscles without moving them. This approach can be useful if you are sitting at a desk or have a limited space in which to move. Isometric exercises are very strengthening and can be used to support upright posture.

Sitting in your chair, bring the knees and thighs together. Draw the sit bones together. Alternately tense and relax the muscles. Think of drawing towards the center line of the body. Notice how this lengthens your spine. You can also do this by placing a book or yoga block between the knees and pressing knees and inner thighs towards each other.

Keeping the knees and thighs somewhat engaged, scoop the low belly in and up and draw the low ribs together. Notice how your back feels stronger and more supported. Release and repeat. Think of this as an inner massage.

Relax the shoulders down the back and feel the neck lengthen. Feel as if the crown of your head is being lifted up to the sky by a silver string.

Try a rib breath to strengthen support through the mid-section of the body. Put the hands around the low ribs. Inhale horizontally into the sides of the ribs and feel them expand into the hands. As you exhale, draw the ribs together as much as you can. Feel the support.

**Relaxation for the head the neck**

**Drop the ear to shoulder** on one side, letting the weight of the head release the opposite side of the neck. Stay for few breaths. Repeat several times.

**Drop chin towards chest:** Rotate chin towards one shoulder and then the other, breathing mindfully as you move. Relax the jaw.

**Reducing strain in the hands and wrist:**

**Carpal tunnel rehab exercise:** Start with hands vertical and facing each other. Think of this making the number one. Drop hand forward at the wrist. Think of this as number seven. Repeat twice. Hands go back to number one and make fists. Do this twice. Fling your fingers wide. Make hitchhiker hands and rotate wrists in both directions. The sequence is 1, 7; 1, 7; 1 fist; 1 fist; fling fingers; hitchhiker thumbs. Repeat several times for a good hand and wrist work out.

**Texter’s delight:** Wrap the first three fingers of one hand around the pinky finger of the other hand and gently pull down. Thumb supports the joint from below. Wrists stay straight. Move through each digit, ending with the thumb. Switch hands. Shake out hands when you are finished. This gently lengthens the tendons in hand an arm that get tight from the repetitive stress of using handheld digital devices.

**Foot and ankle release**

From sitting or standing, lift one foot. Extend the leg if there is room. Alternately **point and flex** the foot, gently opening up the front and back of the ankle. Repeat several times. Next, press
alternately into the outside and inside of the foot. Repeat several times. If you can, pick up the foot by wrapping the hands just above the ankle. Shake the foot until it relaxes and shakes freely. Do both sides. Massage into the sole of the foot if you can.

**Final resting pose.** This can be done sitting on a chair or lying down on the floor. In a chair sit back so that you have some back support. Lengthen the spine. Inhale and as you exhale release your entire body into the support of the earth. Review the parts of the body starting with the feet and relax each part in turn, continuing to relax and release with each exhale. Find a peaceful place in your heart and spend the last few minutes of the practice here. If you are on the floor, bend your knees and roll over to the side. Take two breaths on your side, then place your hands on the floor, bring chin to chest and roll up to sitting. Enjoy your breath!

**Meditation.** Resume your initial seated pose on the floor or in a chair. If sitting, find your sit bones and lengthen the spine upward. Keep the breath steady and relaxed. Gently close the eyes or gaze softly downwards. Observe any thoughts that cross your mind, accept them without judgment and return your attention to the breath. Stay in your meditation for as long as you wish. Start with a brief period of 3 to 5 minutes. Gradually increase the time period with practice. When your mind wanders, gently bring your attention back to the breath. When you are finished, draw your hands into namaste position or simply place your open palms one on top of the other in your lap. Reflect on something that you feel grateful for in your life. Notice the calming effect of focusing on the breath and expressing gratitude. Using this approach, you can do a brief meditation at your desk any time. If you wish, you can also bring the hands into prayer position and bow forward, thinking or saying Namaste.

**The Meaning of Namaste**
I honor the place in you where the entire universe resides.
I honor the place in you of love, of light, of truth, of peace.
I honor the place in you where, when you are in that place in you, and I am in that place in me, there is only one of us.

**Additional resources:**

Yoga video for back release with Rodney Yee. 

Mindful meditation lecture given at Google by Jon Kabat Zinn. In his mindfulness training, Kabat Zinn incorporates yoga movements. 
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3nwwKbM_vJc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3nwwKbM_vJc)

**Relaxing music**
Carlos Nakai. Canyon trilogy.
Jim Oliver. Harmonic resonance.
Ben Leinbach. The spirit of yoga.
Todd Norian, Bija.

For further information email marshall@iils.unc.edu or check out an article about her yoga teaching at [http://gazette.unc.edu/archives/09oct28/file.4.html](http://gazette.unc.edu/archives/09oct28/file.4.html)