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Yoga to Aid Sound Sleep.

Relaxation in itself is not enough to counteract the effects of the stress and tension which can lead to disturbed sleep. In order to sleep well, we need to eliminate stress and tension from the body, from the nervous system and the mind. We need a combination of both active and passive yoga practice to work on several levels, restoring a sense of harmony overall to allow us to sleep well.

- Active yoga practice is required to release accumulated physical tensions in the body, to develop mental poise and encourage feelings of well-being.
- Passive yoga practice is required to calm the mind, to relax the body and nervous system, allowing the tension to be released and to ebb away.

The use of props in yoga allows for this combination of active and passive yoga practice, helping you to hold poses for longer, to practice without strain, and thus relax more deeply.

You will need a yoga mat, a blanket, a block, a bolster and a chair.

This routine is specifically designed to be done before bed, and should take about 5-8 minutes. You can lengthen or shorten the routine as you wish, using the number of breaths you count during the poses (1 breath = one soft slow round of inhalation and exhalation). Once you are familiar with the routine, you will begin to work in a more intuitive way, repeating the poses or holding them for longer if you feel you need to.

The sequence should flow. Study the sequence – read it through completely first, then refer to the pictures for a reminder. In order that you create as little disturbance as possible in the mind, body and nervous system, try to move quietly into, hold, and out of the poses.

Sweet dreams!

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Tadasana

Stand with your feet together, your big toes and inner heels touching. (You can have your back to the wall for balance, heels slightly away from the wall so your legs are upright.) Spread your weight evenly under your feet, pressing down your outer heels and then balls of the feet equally. Lift and tighten your kneecaps. Press your thighs back and move your tailbone forwards until your top thighs and hips feel very firm. Lift your chest – your head may go back slightly – and roll your shoulders back and down. Let the crown of your head lift towards the ceiling. Extend your arms and lengthen your fingers towards the sides of your knees, gently locking your elbows. Stay for 3 breaths, then slowly release.

Urdhva hastasana



Stand in Tadasana again, working up through your body from the soles of your feet. Bring your hands in front of you and link your fingers. Keeping your legs firm and kneecaps lifted, turn your palms away from you and with your elbows bent, take the little finger side of your hands to the wall above your head. Try moving the hands slightly closer to and further away from the top of your head - see what feels comfortable in your shoulders. Now encourage your elbows back towards the wall. If your shoulders feel loose, you can then extend your arms upwards and push your palms towards the ceiling. Hold for 4 breaths, then release your arms down and soften your legs.



Adho Mukha Svanasana 1 – for Beginners



Hold the sides of the chair firmly and walk your feet slowly back until your body and arms are at full stretch, your legs are vertical with your feet hip width apart and parallel. Grip the sides of the chair and straighten your arms, rolling your shoulders away from your neck and feel the sides of your body begin to stretch. With your back flat and your legs vertical, head between your arms, you will feel your trunk begin to extend deeply and your spine lengthen. Now work up from your heels, pressing them down, stretching your calves, opening the backs of your knees and lifting your kneecaps strongly up, pressing your thighs back, and lifting your buttock bones up. Squeeze your elbows towards each other and roll your upper arms outwards, drawing your shoulder blades away from your ears. Hold the pose for 3 breaths. Keep your breathing soft and your neck and jaw relaxed. Walk towards

your hands to come up. Repeat three times, allowing the stretch to penetrate a little deeper each time.



OR Adho Mukha Svanasana into Adho Mukha Virasana

Put two blocks near to one end of your mat (if you need them to support your heels), and place your hands carefully down at the other end, palms wide and fingers spread. Step one foot back, then the other, bringing your heels to rest on the blocks, balls of your feet on the floor. Have your feet hip width apart and parallel. Press your hands securely into the floor and stretch up through your arms, shoulders, armpits and sides of your body, up to your hips. Encourage your legs to straighten by pressing your heels into the blocks, extending your calf muscles, opening the backs of your knees, lifting your kneecaps strongly up, pressing your thighs back, and lifting your buttock bones high. Work



carefully through each of these stages to feel the pose develop. Keep your breathing soft and your neck and jaw relaxed. Stay for 3-5 slow breaths. Bend your knees and bring them to the floor, wide apart. Bring your big toes together and sit back down on your heels, taking your forehead to the floor. Rest for 3 breaths. Then come up onto your hands and knees again, tuck your toes under and push up into Adho Mukha Svanasana again. Repeat three times, allowing the stretch to penetrate deeper each time. Finally, rest down in Adho Mukha Virasana for 3 breaths.

Prasarita Padottanasana



Put the chair in front of you on the wide edge of your mat with its front feet just on the mat, so it won't slip about, and a bolster on the seat. Stand on the back edge of your mat and take your feet very wide apart, keeping them parallel. (Hold onto the chair for support if necessary the stand up.) Put your hands on your hips. Press your feet firmly into your mat, lift and tighten your kneecaps, and press your thighs back. Lift your chest and roll your shoulders back, tucking your shoulder blades in. Keeping the lift in your legs, and your kneecaps up, hinge at the hips, and keeping your back straight, take your trunk towards the chair, holding onto the seat of the chair for balance. As you go further down, fold your arms and take your elbows wide until they are resting on the bolster. Rest the top of your chest, your folded arms and your head on the bolster, keeping your legs stretching and lifting up strongly. Hold the pose for 10 breaths.

Using your hands for support, 'heel and toe' your feet closer to come up. Move your bolster aside and sit down on your chair.



Chair Bharadvajasana

Sit sideways on the chair, feet flat on the floor and knees pressed together, with the back of the chair to your right. (If your feet don't reach the floor, place a block under your feet.) Keeping your knees and hips steady, turn your trunk towards the back of the chair and hold with both hands. Press your knees and thighs together as you push gently with the right hand and pull with the left, so your trunk turns and your spine revolves to the right. Keep your shoulders level, breathe steadily, and keep your chin in line with your breastbone. Hold for 3 breaths. Slowly turn to the front and pause for a breath. Swivel round on the seat so the back of the chair is now on your left. Come back to the centre and repeat to the right and left once more, pausing between each twist. Do these twists slowly and use your exhalations to help you turn a little more, tucking your shoulder blades in and keeping your shoulders level – ask someone to tell you if one has lifted, as it's hard to see for yourself.

Move your chair aside and put your bolster or two blocks on the mat. It is restful to support your back through the next section, so place the bolster a few inches from a wall.



Dandasana

Sit on your bolster or two blocks and stretch your legs forwards. Place your fingertips either side of your hips and encourage your shoulders to roll back and down, lifting your chest. Lengthen the backs of your legs, extending your calves towards your heels. Now look at your feet - the weight needs to be on the centre of each heel, your toes pointing straight up. Encourage your inner feet to come together by stretching your inner legs. Finally, pull your kneecaps up your thighs and press your thighs down towards the floor. You'll notice the shape of your thighs changes - your outer thighs move strongly in when you do this. Hold for 6 breaths and release.



Upavista Konasana

Gently widen your legs. Stretch them away from your body at an angle, keeping the centre of the back of each heel on the floor and your feet upright. Put your fingertips on the floor by your hips to support your trunk. Press your thighs down and lift your chest, creating space around your waist and abdomen. Stay, for 10 breaths. Gently lift your knees and bring the soles of your feet together.



Baddhakonasana

With the soles of your feet together, draw your heels closer to your bolster and let your knees spread apart. (You can support your knees on bricks or two large cushions.) Allow your upper spine and chest to lift and your lower spine to release down. Draw your navel back towards your spine and lift your back ribs up to create space around your waist and abdomen. Press down with your fingertips on the floor or bolster behind you to lift your spine, then rest your hands on your inner knees. Allow the muscles along your inner thighs to release, extending gently from your groins to your knees. Keep your gaze soft and your facial muscles relaxed, breathing quietly and naturally for 10 breaths. To finish, bring your knees gently up and extend your legs forwards.

Passive Back bend



Place a folded blanket at the top end of your mat, and your bolster across your mat, about a third of the way down. Sit on your mat in front of the bolster with your legs bent, feet flat on your mat. Roll down over your bolster so that your back ribs come to rest on it, your chest lifts up, and the back of your head rests on the blanket beyond. Your shoulders will be in mid air and your arms will rest on the floor at shoulder height, just beyond the bolster. (Look at the picture to get your position

correct before you finally stretch your legs out straight and relax.) If you find the stretch intense at first, have more height in the blanket under your head, and/or put a block under your hips. As you become familiar with the pose, reduce the height of the blanket, and try without the block. Once you have mastered the position of your body over the bolster, it is also pleasant to push the soles of your feet into a wall. This is a *passive* back bend. Although your chest is lifting and opening, the bolster is doing this for you so the pose should still feel relaxing. Stay for 10 breaths. To come up, bend up your knees again and roll your whole body over to your right hand side to push yourself up from the floor. Do not sit straight up!



Savasana

Put a chair sideways on your mat with a folded blanket on the seat. Sit down close to it, swinging your legs over the seat, and lie with your back on the floor and your legs resting over the seat of the chair. The edge of the seat should come right into the backs of your knees, so your calves rest completely on the seat. If you are less than about 5'6" tall, you might be more comfortable with a block under your sacrum. If you are over 5'9", you will

find more height on the chair seat more comfortable. Roll your shoulders back and have your hands either side of your body, palms facing upwards and fingers relaxed. Close your eyes (put your eye bag over your eyes if you like) and rest for 3-5 minutes, keeping your jaw relaxed and your mind focused on your gentle, steady breathing. When the time is up, roll over to your right side and stay resting there for a few moments. Come up to sitting when you feel ready.