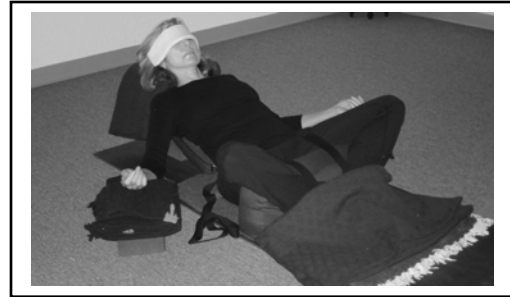


## The Gift of Restorative Yoga

Restorative yoga is the Yoga of “Non-Doing” and pure “Being”. Restorative yoga is about “letting go” which is different than “falling apart”. Restorative yoga is the practice of “reflective” relaxation and is a method for releasing tension within the body, mind and spirit. To relax is to rest “deeply”. Unlike sleeping and dreaming, relaxation is a state in which there is no movement, no effort, and the brain is quiet.



## The Effects of Stress

Stress inhibits the ability of the body to heal by suppressing immune function during challenging times in our lives. Restorative yoga can be practiced anytime, but is especially beneficial during these times of stress, fatigue, illness, treatments, changes in lifestyle, or major life events. The physiological cycle of stress happens when the mind alerts the body that danger is present. The adrenal glands alert the autonomic nervous system and the body prepares for “flight or fight”. The heart rate, blood pressure, mental alertness and muscular tension are increased. Adrenal hormones cause metabolic changes that make energy stores available to each cell and the body begins to sweat. As the body shunts blood to the muscles, systems that are not a priority, including digestion, elimination, growth, repair and reproduction are shut down. In chronic stress, the body does not benefit from nutrition due to the break down of critical systems in the body.

Over time, periods of stress affect the quality of life as well as the body’s capacity to heal, either inhibiting recovery or creating a new illness or injury, such as; high blood pressure, ulcers, pain, immune dysfunction, and reproductive disorders. Our society today is in a state of consistent stress due to the increase in technology and being totally “connected” at all times through telephones, voice mail, email and the internet. Unfortunately, even though we are connected to the outside world, we lose touch with the source, the inner silence, the inner teacher, the inner wisdom of our true nature.

## How Restorative Yoga Works

Through the practice of Restorative yoga, we shift our body and mind from “fight and flight” to “restore and renew”, from human doings to human beings. As this occurs, symptoms of stress, such as depressed or elevated moods, anxiety, depression, insomnia, hypertension, muscle tension, digestive problems, high cholesterol levels, eyestrain, headaches, immune dysfunction, fatigue, circulatory problems, begin to dissolve from the body and mind.

*“Most of us need permission to switch from the doing to the being mode, mostly because we have been conditioned since we were little to value doing over being.”*

*-Jon Kabat-Zinn*

Restorative yoga was developed with the intention of relaxing and restoring energy by manipulating physiology. Roger Cole, PhD, outlines four interconnected conditions that must be in place in order to bring balance to the body. These are: quiet the muscles, quiet the nervous system, quiet the brain and quiet the breath. Restorative yoga does all these things. When the relaxation response is brought to the forefront, the brain and breath become quieter.

The practice of Restorative yoga uses blankets, bolsters, pillows, blocks, straps and other props to **support** the body **completely**, so that no physical effort is needed to maintain the position. Restorative postures are generally held for anywhere between 5 and 20 minutes or more, allowing the benefits of the pose to fully integrate within the mind, body and spirit. Formal yoga props are not required; a chair or couch, blankets, pillows, scarves (strap replacement), and something to cover the eyes can be used to provide the same effect. There are certain restorative postures that can be practiced without the use of props; such as Viparita Karani (Legs up the Wall). A well rounded restorative practice moves the spine in all directions, stimulates the organs and softens the belly.



### **The Restorative Practice**

During a restorative yoga session, practitioners generally experience profound shifts in the nervous system, allowing deep restfulness, peace and well being. “Gravity” does the work as the body unfolds and softens, layer upon layer, alleviating symptoms of chronic physical, emotional and mental stress while inducing a state of deep relaxation. Through extended pauses in a posture, we begin to notice the “outer stillness”, and then slowly become aware of the inner body gently oscillating with the breath, the massage of the organs, the heart beating, the movement of the skin, and the coming and going of thoughts. As we continue to practice restorative yoga, we begin to dive deeper, quieting even more, stilling even more, and when residing in the center, we are present to each moment.

Through the practice we become attentive and learn how to identify where tension is held and we begin to consciously release this tension through the vehicle of the breath and “being”. In a *supported* and *safe* environment, we begin to explore these areas with curiosity, as if we are a child with a fresh, new perspective. Through the practice of restorative yoga, as well as other styles of yoga, we begin to experience Pratyahara, a return of the senses to the source. We begin to realize silence within sound, spaces within thoughts, and movement within stillness. We learn to abide in these “pauses”, experiencing whatever arises, while continuing to reside in the awareness of “what is” in that moment. Resistance is suffering, restorative yoga teaches us how to “let go, allow and surrender”, to find balance not only in the practice, but throughout our day to day interactions.

There are a variety of restorative postures that can be sequenced together to promote a deep sense of relaxation and peace. Some postures have a broad range of benefits, other postures are specific to alleviate symptoms of certain conditions or target a particular organ or body system. All of the postures create physiological responses to reduce stress related illnesses.

The foundation of restorative yoga, **Basic Relaxation Pose** should be included in every session or anytime throughout the day. This pose can be practiced before you get out of bed, during work on a break, after exercise, or before going to bed. The benefits of this pose include lowering blood pressure and heart rate, releasing muscular tension, reducing fatigue, improving sleep, enhancing immune response, and managing chronic pain.

There are several variations, some are more supported than others, however, the basic pose is very simple to setup.

- Lie on the back with the arms out to the sides and legs comfortably apart.
- Use a blanket to support the head, especially if the chin is lifted and the head is tilted backwards. The chin should be slightly lower than the forehead, which quiets the frontal lobes of the brain.
- Place a pillow, bolster or rolled blanket under the knees if there is tension in the lower back. If heels do not touch the floor, place a blanket under them for support.
- The body cools down during this pose; use a blanket to cover the body as needed.
- Place an eye bag on the eyes, or even a washcloth or towel to stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system. When placing the eye bag, press the center of forehead downward gently.
- Focus on breathing smoothly, slowly and softly. Never force the breath.
- Being in the posture, the body may begin to feel lighter, symbolic of deep relaxation.
- Relax in this posture for at least 15 to 20 minutes to receive the full benefits.
- If you are more than three months pregnant, practice Basic Relaxation Pose lying on your left side.



**Remember to adjust the pose as needed to ensure complete and absolute comfort and support!**

When taking the **time** to nurture ourselves through the gift of restorative yoga, we discover a deep sense of harmony, balance and calm on all levels of our being. When exploring the inner landscape, we remain centered, and reflect this inner peace to the external world. Through the practice we learn to be completely present, to what is, in each moment with increased acceptance and non-judgment.

Remember to check with your health care provider before beginning a yoga or exercise program. Some postures are contraindicated for certain conditions.. Cindi Barton is a Relax and Renew Trainer and discovered the power of Restorative Yoga through her own journey of healing. Cindi teaches and practices Restorative Yoga at Three Rivers Yoga Institute and Lotus Heart Rising and can be contacted at [mail@threeriversyoga.com](mailto:mail@threeriversyoga.com) or (412) 259-8602. For more information on Restorative yoga or to purchase the book, Relax and Renew, by Judith Lasater, please visit <http://www.judithlasater.com/>