Conditions for Calm

Create the proper environment for deep relaxation, and experience ease of both body and mind.

VIPARITA KARANI is a key restorative pose for deep relaxation. For best results, use props, stay warm, and cover your forehead and eyes. (See page 90 for instruction.)

WHAT'S THE DEEPEST relaxation you've ever experienced? Odds are that you can go much, much deeper. You are wired with nerve circuitry that can effortlessly and automatically calm your mind and body. You've used it countless times, but chances are that you've never been taught how to switch it on. When you learn how, relaxation unfolds by itself: You don't have to make yourself relax. You simply set up the right conditions and wait patiently, and then your body will respond by relaxing on its own.

When you relax deeply, your muscles release, your blood pressure and stress-hormone levels drop, and your heart rate, breathing, and brain waves slow down. You experience a wonderful all-encompassing feeling of calm. According to medical research, regularly quieting your mind and body may help you sleep better and reduce your anxiety. It can also have therapeutic effects on your heart, and on your immune, digestive, and other physiological systems.

DUELING SYSTEMS
You may have heard that your sympathetic nervous system (SNS) activates your body and mind, and that your parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) calms you down. This is partly true, but things aren't quite that simple. At least eight major nerve systems activate you, while at least three other major systems quiet you down. To relax well, you need to reduce the influence of your activating systems and increase the effort of your quieting systems. Properly targeting these systems will enhance the effect of your restorative yoga practice greatly.

Your activating systems do three things: They rev up your brain (by speeding up brain waves) so that you can make decisions; contract your muscles, enabling you to carry out those decisions; and mobilize support—from the respiratory and circulatory systems, for example—to
supply your brain and muscles with the resources they need. Once your brain and body are revved up, they tend to stay that way, because stimulating one activating system will trigger others, creating a domino effect among the eight systems.

The combined output results in a busy brain, a fast heartbeat, engaged muscles, rapid breathing, and other reactions—all of which loop back to the nervous system and continue to stimulate it. This cycle could continue forever if nothing were to break it. Fortunately, that's where your quieting systems come in.

Your quieting systems mutually stimulate each other and put a strong brake on your activating systems. Likewise, your activating systems strongly inhibit your quieting systems. Since there are many more activating than quieting systems, the activating systems usually have the upper hand, making it much easier to get revved up than to calm down.

THE GENIUS OF RESTORATIVE YOGA

Restorative yoga poses and techniques produce exceptionally deep relaxation because they stimulate all three quieting systems at once, while systematically reducing stimulation of all the activating systems. The strategy here is to tip the balance in favor of the quieting systems, initiating a self-reinforcing cascade of calming nerve impulses that gradually turn off your activating systems and ramps up your quieting systems to full power. As the quieting systems begin to overpower the activating systems, you will be transported to deeper and deeper levels of relaxation.

To work its magic, restorative yoga relies on eight key relaxation-inducing conditions: physical comfort, muscle release, warm skin, a reclined or inverted posture, darkness, pressure on the bones around the eyes, permission to relax, and holding the pose for a sufficient amount of time. Each condition stimulates one or more quieting systems, while simultaneously inhibiting one or more activating systems. When you set up your poses, you'll want to combine as many of these conditions as possible. By doing so, you'll maximize your chances of breaking the cycle of activation and triggering the cycle of relaxation.

GET COMFY

The first condition, physical comfort, seems obvious. Common sense tells you that if you're uncomfortable, you won't relax. Virtually any sensation, and especially uncomfortable ones, stimulate your reticular activating system (RAS), a nerve network that rouses your brain, turns on your senses, and readies your muscles for action. Almost anything that excites your RAS (such as noise or touch) will disturb your sense of calm, but discomfort is the worst offender. Whatever begins as a minor discomfort when you're setting up your restorative pose can become a major discomfort within mere minutes. For example, in supported Setu Bandha Sarvangasana (Bridge Pose) on a bolster, what begins as a nearly imperceptible compression in the lower back often blossoms into a pose-terminating pain in 5 or 10 minutes later. Therefore, it's crucial for you to systematically eliminate minor aches and annoyances when you set up your poses.

RELEASE YOUR GRIP

Contracting your muscles, purposely or inadvertently, creates tension—so releasing them is a key element of relaxation. In restorative yoga postures, you relieve muscle tension in two ways: through gentle, prolonged stretching, thought to desensitize the stretch reflex (a basic reflex that maintains muscle tension even when your muscles appear to be at rest); and by using props such as bolsters, blankets, blocks, and straps. These props hold your body in place so you do not have to contract any muscles at all to stay in position. Sometimes, the configuration of your pose will induce subtle muscle tension, and you won't even realize it. For example, if your legs are flat against the wall in supported Viparita Karani (Legs-up-the-Wall Pose), you might need to slightly tense your quadriceps muscles to keep your knees from bending. Moving the bolster that supports your hips farther away from the wall (as shown in the illustration) usually eliminates this problem.
STAY WARM
Having warm skin is crucial to relaxation for two reasons: First, cold skin stimulates your SNS, thus raising your blood pressure and making it impossible to relax deeply. Second, warm skin stimulates your anterior hypothalamus, a relaxation-inducing center that inhibits every known activating system. Therefore, always practice restorative poses in a sufficiently warm room and cover yourself with clothing or blankets as needed. But keep in mind that overheating also makes deep relaxation impossible, so don't overdo it.

GO UPSIDE DOWN
When you lie down or invert yourself, gravity pushes blood toward your upper body, stimulating pressure sensors in your neck and upper chest. This in turn stimulates your solitary tract nucleus, a relaxation-inducing center located in your brain. Signals from this center strongly inhibit several of the activating systems and stimulate your PNS, the result being a slower heartbeat, reduced muscle tension, and a general shift of your body into “rest and restore” mode.

TURN DOWN THE LIGHTS
Any light that reaches your eyes sets off nerve impulses that directly inhibit your anterior hypothalamus, weakening the calming signals it sends to your brain. For this reason, keeping the room lights low and/or covering your eyes adds another layer to your relaxation. Sometimes, when you’re on the brink of relaxing but not quite succeeding, darkness is just what you need to tip your physiological balance from activation to relaxation.

FEEL THE PRESSURE
Pushing down on the bones around your eyes triggers a reflex that stimulates your PNS to slow down your heartbeat. This may be why yogis often wrap a towel around their head, cover their eyes with a bandage, or put a small sandbag on their forehead to promote relaxation. When applying this kind of pressure, be careful that it is not too intense—the pressure should be barely noticeable once you’re comfortable in the pose. Also be sure that

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the towel or eye pillow draws the brow of the forehead toward the nose, and that it does not put strong or prolonged compression on the eyeballs.

ALLOW YOURSELF TO REST
If some part of your consciousness is telling you that letting go is not safe or socially acceptable, that feeling will stimulate your amygdala (an anxiety-generating center in your brain), and you won't relax completely. Find the right time and place to practice, reassure yourself that it's OK to let yourself rest, and allow your innate ability to relax express itself.

STAY AWHILE
Deep relaxation depends on chemical reactions, such as the breakdown of stress hormones, that take time to kick in. Some of these reactions take a few minutes; others, tens of minutes or even longer. Thus, for relaxation to develop fully, you have to practice each pose long enough. It's best to practice just a few poses and hold each one for 15 minutes or more.

LOUNGE AND LET GO
Viparita Karani is an excellent restorative pose that provides all the conditions needed for deep relaxation, including comfort; passive muscles; a gentle stretch; an inversion; and the opportunity to cover your body, eyes, and forehead. To experience the maximum benefits of the pose, set aside ample time, dress in layers, and choose a space near a wall in a quiet, warm room. Fold two to four blankets so they are long and narrow, and stack them parallel to the wall—closer to the wall if your hamstrings are loose, and farther back if they are tighter. If there's sufficient room, stack two bolster lengthways between the wall and the blankets. Sit on one end of your blanket stack so that your legs are parallel to the wall, lift your legs up the wall as you turn your torso to face it, and lower your upper body to the floor. If the skin of your feet, hands, or body is cold, cover it with a blanket. Wrap a dark towel firmly over your eyes, and anchor the ends evenly under the back of your head. Make any final adjustments to ensure that your pose is completely comfortable and that you can stay in it without any muscular effort whatsoever. Reassure yourself that it's OK to let go completely. Wait patiently and let the relaxation unfold in its own time. If your feet start to tingle or ache, bend your knees and cross your ankles. Stay in the pose for as long as you are comfortable, perhaps 10 to 20 minutes or more.

HOOKED ON A FEELING
Now that you've learned how to use physiology to optimize Viparita Karani, try applying similar techniques to other restorative poses. There's a very good chance that this practice will take you well beyond the deepest relaxation you've ever experienced. And if you practice the poses again the next day, perhaps you'll go still deeper. Continue practicing daily, and who knows how far you will go?

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