

## **Practice Yoga Without Ever Leaving Your Chair**

A seated yoga sequence by Robyn Okrant

### **SIT**

Try to always sit in a firm chair with your hips slightly higher than your knees and your feet either directly under your knees (or slightly forward of them). If you cannot adjust your chair to lift your buttocks higher than your knees, place something underneath you. The object should be even and slightly firm, but not hard. It should support your buttocks and hips, but not the thighs.\*

### **BREATHE**

Remember to breathe! Slow, deep breaths will help reduce stress, give you mental clarity during the day, and keep you from getting as fatigued. Try to breathe through the nostrils with your face, jaw, and throat completely relaxed.

Three part breath:

1. SIT TALL. Hands rest in your lap. Take 5-10 slow, deep breaths filling up your belly and lower back
2. Keep breathing into your belly and lower back, and ADD breath into your side ribs and lower back ribs (5-10 more slow, deep breaths)
3. Keep breathing into your belly, lower back, side and back ribs, and ADD breath into your chest and the space between your shoulder blades (5-10 more deep breaths)

**STRETCH** Take slow, deep breaths whenever you stretch...don't worry if you forget at first. Keep practicing and eventually it will become natural to breathe deeply. It takes time to reverse habits, so don't beat yourself as you start your daytime stretching routine!

#### **1. Neck**

- a.** Sit tall. Arms hang at sides. Let head gently drop toward chest. Don't slump! Roll shoulders up, back and down 3x. Inhale: roll your right ear toward your right shoulder. Exhale: roll your head back down toward your chest. Inhale: roll your left ear toward left shoulder. Exhale: roll your head back down toward your chest. (Do this 3x).
- b.** Sit tall. Hands can hang, or palms can rest in lap. Exhale: turn head to right, without straining or pushing too far. Inhale: Come back to center. Exhale: turn head to left. Inhale: turn back to center. (Do this 3x each side).

#### **2. Shoulders**

- a.** Inhale lift shoulders toward ears (Don't push chin forward! Keep chin in toward throat. Neck should feel long). Exhale: roll shoulders back and down. Really squeeze your shoulder blades together and down the back. (Do this 3-8x)
- b.** Reverse direction. Inhale: squeeze the shoulder blades together, move them up the back as you lift shoulders toward ears. Exhale: roll shoulders forward and down. (Do this as many times as you did 2a)

### 3. Arms/wrists/fingers

- a. Interlace fingers in front of you, heels of the hands press forward (backs of the hands are facing you, palms face the wall in front of you). Roll your shoulders back and down. Slow lift the arms overhead -- only lift as high as you can without squeezing shoulders up toward ears. Hold for several breaths using the stretch to lift your ribcage high up off the hips. Release. Change the interlace of the fingers and repeat.
- b. Make fists. Straighten arms directly in front of you. Make circles with wrists in one direction (5-10x) and then change directions (5-10x)
- c. Straighten left arm in front of you. Hold your left hand up, with fingers facing the ceiling and palm facing forward -- as if you were a traffic cop telling oncoming cars to STOP. Use your right hand to lightly pull your fingers back toward your forearm. Hold for a few seconds (are you still breathing?). Then flex left wrist (fingers point to the floor and back of hand faces forward) use right hand to pull fingers back toward you. Hold for a few seconds. Then change sides.

### 4. Spine/Back

- a. Hands on your knees. Inhale: arch the back, look up. Exhale: round the back, tuck the chin and the tailbone, and pull your navel toward your spine. This is called cat-and-cow pose in yoga and it's usually done on hands and knees. Make sure you keep the movement really slow and expand your torso as you inhale, and strongly draw your belly toward your spine as your exhale.
- b. Twist: sit up tall. Exhale twist to the right. Use your hands in anyway to support you. In our workshop, we took the left hand to the outside of the right thigh and the right hand to the back of the chair. If this is too deep of a stretch for you, experiment a bit and find the appropriate hand position for you. The most important thing to remember is that you should be sitting tall with the crown of your head directly over your tailbone. Don't lean forward or back. Shoulders should be rolled back and down.
- c. Lateral bend. Face forward and sit tall. Lift left arm straight up. Lean/reach to the right. You can allow your right arm to hang down at your right side OR place the right hand on the seat of your chair so you don't tip over. Keep your left arm straight and push your left sit bone down into the chair. Make the longest line you can from your left sit bone to your left fingertips. Deep breath into the left side of your rib cage. 5-10 really slow, deep breaths. Change sides for 5-10 breaths.

### 5. Hips

- a. Cross right leg tightly over left thigh. Take a twist here to the right -- similar to 4b -- use your left hand to pull your top knee toward the left as you twist to the right. Are you sitting up tall? Take 3-8 breaths and then come back to center. Switch legs and change sides. (Hey sciatica folks -- this can be a good one for you as long as you don't over do it).
- b. Cross your right ankle over your left knee. Use your right hand to lightly press your right knee down toward floor. If this is enough of a stretch, stay here...or to deepen the

pose, take a forward fold over your legs. Stay 5-8 breaths. Then sit up and change sides.

## 6. Core

- a. Sit tall (notice a trend here?). Legs parallel, feet on the floor. Press your right palm down onto your right knee or thigh. Pull your right knee upward. This creates an isometric contraction. You are creating force without actually moving or changing the length of your muscles. Push down with your hand as hard as you can, lift your knee as hard as you can. Hold 5-10 breaths. Change sides. You can do several sets of this exercise.

## 7. Legs

- a. (This also strengthens your hips and core) Sit tall on the edge of your chair. Do not lean back for this exercise and do not lean against the back of your chair. Straighten your right leg out in front of you, lifting it as high as you can. Do not lean back -- I promise your body will want to counterbalance by leaning back...resist! Take as many slow deep breaths as you can with your leg lifted. If you want, alternate between flexing and pointing your toes. Then lower foot to the floor. Change sides. Try to do 2-3 sets of this exercise. The stronger you get, the longer you can keep your leg lifted and the higher you can lift your leg!
- b. Keep left knee bent, foot on the floor under your knee. Straighten your right leg. Lean forward, with your right hand: take hold of the toes if you can. Support your weight by placing your left hand or left forearm on your left knee or thigh. Pull those right toes toward you. At the same time, reach your chest forward. Think about lengthening your torso as you fold forward. Don't worry about lowering your nose toward your knee -- that'll just tense up your shoulders and jaw -- focus more on reaching your heart forward and pulling your toes back. Hold 5 breaths or more. Change sides.
- c. Sit tall with your feet under your knees. Keep your toes and balls of your feet on the floor and lift your heels high (your knees with lift). Then take the opposite movement: keep your heels down and flex your ankles, lifting the balls of the feet and the toes - spread your toes wide. Switch back and forth. This gets that blood pumping in the lower leg. If you can do this one with your shoes off, great!

## Extra Credit

1. Keep your jaw relaxed through the day.
2. Roll your eyes (no, not in frustration with coworkers and patrons). Big circles with just your eyes (the rest of the face stays relaxed) in one direction. Do this 3-5x, then change directions. Then look from side to side (eyes only! don't turn your neck) 3-5x. Then look up and down (again, eyes only...do not move your neck or head) 3-5x. Try to avoid eye strain, by "exercising" those extraocular muscles!
3. Every thirty minutes, shrug those shoulders, shake the arms out, wriggle your fingers. Get the blood flowing through your shoulders, all the way down through your fingertips!

4. A different core exercise when you need to keep your hands busy and can't use them to create isometric pressure (6a). Sit tall. Head directly over the tail bone. If you already have a strong core, don't use your hands to support you -- if you're still building strength, you can hold onto the sides of your chair. Big inhalation. As you exhale: pull your navel and lower belly in toward your spine as you lift your right knee. Lift it as high as you can WITHOUT leaning back in your chair. Inhale bring the right foot down. It's not going to be a really huge movement and at first, you might barely be able to lift your foot off the floor. That's ok. Just keep practicing and you will build strength, I promise. Exhale: lift left knee up without leaning back. Squeeze the lower belly in toward the spine. Inhale lower. Continue! March in your chair without rounding your back or leaning back. If you are already strong, you can lift your knee and take several breaths with your knee up before you change sides.
5. Get up and walk when you can. Any kind of movement is terrific. The more you can stand up and move the body, the better. Take some pressure off that back. You work so hard -- try not to punish your body while you're on the job.

\* I don't advocate any particular product and think it's unnecessary to purchase anything special to create this lift under your hips. I did, however, mention in our session that I use the FitBALL Seating Wedge on my own desk chair. This may or may not work for you, but several folks requested I send them the name of the product. There are others out there which surely will do the same amount of good. Remember, during our session, I simply rolled up my jacket to sit on and it completely did the trick! You don't have to spend money to keep your back healthy.

*Here's the disclaimer: Not all exercise is suitable for everyone, and this or any exercise program may result in injury. Consult with your doctor before you use the "Practice Yoga Without Ever Leaving Your Chair" sequence. To reduce the risk of injury, never force or strain yourself during exercise. If you feel pain, stop and seek medical attention if necessary.*