



NAFSI YOGA: FOCUS ON THE BACK

Dec 2013

Back stress, strain and injury can play havoc with our daily lives whether you have a physical vocation or just sit at a desk. Just about all of our movements involve some aspect of your back and to that end you should (naturally) pay attention to your body and how it moves. But the introduction of pain or stiffness in your back can make even the most natural movement, difficult and painful.

The following yoga postures (or 'stretching exercises' if you take issue with practicing 'Yoga') work the spinal column in various directions; left, right, forward and back. Increased spinal flexibility will carry an individual far in life! Such movements will also remind you how to stand and walk properly with your shoulders back and your chin tucked giving you an elongated spine. This is a vast improvement over how you see others walk with their shoulders slumped forward (fingering away on their 'Smartphone').

Remember to follow all the information and directions from your Doctor! This includes your physical therapist, chiropractor and spouse (or most of what the latter may say). Having diagnoses in hand means that you will have the information you need to start your path of healing either through western/eastern medicine or a homeopathic path.

Start very slowly moving into and out of the postures. Accomplish these poses with complete body awareness and do not take any posture that places a strain or induces pain anywhere on your back. Mild discomfort is relatively fine, but if you find yourself (or someone sees you) grinding your teeth trying to get into a pose then STOP.

Mountain Pose



Standing properly is a difficult position for many people (even outside the military!).

Try placing yourself against a wall, with your heels touching, buttocks, upper back and the back of your head. Your weight should be balanced on all four corners of your feet – do not favor placing the weight on your toes, heels or elsewhere.

Keep your stomach in, but do not pull in too tight (as one is wont to do while gazing in the bathroom mirror), attempt to elongate your spine upwards. Tuck your chin in slightly (this will help further lengthen your spine upwards).

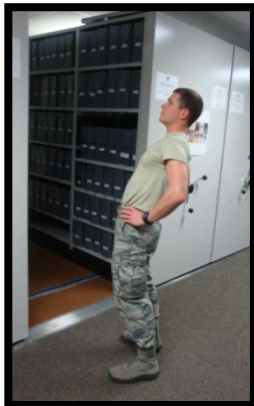
Find stillness in this posture for a few seconds. To see how you might normally stand, use your cell phone..... and then check yourself... notice the difference! Even better? See how other people around you hold themselves....

Standing side stretch



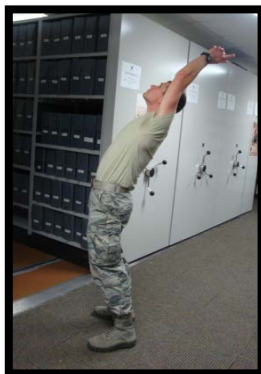
Stand with your feet spread about hips width apart; raise your arms over your head and clasp your fingers if able, or just touch your hands overhead. Begin by stretching to one side, it does not matter how deep your bend, just reach over to one side and feel the stretch emanating from your raised armpit down the side past your hip. It is important that you do not ‘collapse’ your upper shoulder towards the floor. To assist with this posture, turn your head towards your upper arm and pull that shoulder back a little. You may not bend to the side as much as you want, but this is not important in the short term, maintaining a proper stance is!

Standing Back Bend



A backbend from a standing position can be a relief to our typical stance of being slightly hunched forward. The posture has the benefit of opening the front of the body up and provide for strengthening of the back.

Begin by standing tall with your feet spread about hips width apart, your hands can be placed on your hips or flat on your lower back with fingers pointing downward (shoulder issues permitting). With an inhalation, lift your chest upwards, push the pelvis forward, look towards the ceiling as you bend backwards slightly. Continue to push the pelvis forward as you bend back a little more.



You can also raise your arms overhead, clasp your fingers and accomplish the same movement. This alternate pose can place a slightly greater force on one’s lower back, so do this with caution and do not come back as far.

It is important that while in the posture you continue to push your pelvis forward and lift the heart up, the idea is that the spinal column should extend upwards then back as opposed to just collapsing backwards. Hold the pose for four to six breaths and then recover slowly leading with the heart.

Easy Standing Twist

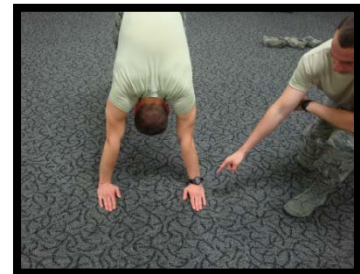
Spinal health is important and with most injuries in this area, recovery actions call for a slow, deliberate manipulation of the spinal column – the twist is an important action!

This twist works by placing one foot over the other and twisting the torso in the opposite direction of the crossed foot. For greater stability, you can do this while lightly holding onto a chair, wall or anyone not moving in your immediate vicinity. The hand on the side of the twist can go to your waist and can be used as a brace point for moving a little deeper into the twist. Before engaging in the twist, stand tall with your shoulders back and the chest soft, turn into the twist bringing your upper torso about but do not over rotate the head (looking just past the shoulder is sufficient).

Do not forget to do the other side!



Downward Facing Dog



This posture is easily one of the most recognizable in western yoga. While the anatomical focus of the posture resides in the shoulders and legs, this pose also lengthens the spinal column while engaging all the muscles in your arms, back and legs. Regular practice of this one pose alone will help strengthen your wrists, low back, calves and shoulder girdle.

Start this posture on your hands and knees on the floor. Your hands should be about shoulders width apart, fingers spread (favor the pinky), press the whole of the hand onto the floor; the hips should be over the knees with your feet resting about hips width apart. Come to your toes and lift your knees off the floor—move as if your hips are being pulled from behind and draw your legs back so that a distinct feeling of one line is formed from your arms up through your tailbone. Lengthen your legs (feeling the pull on the back leg muscles) and stretch your heels towards the floor (do not worry if heels do not touch the floor). If you feel too much a pull from your low back or hamstrings, keep your knees bent while in this pose.

Remain in this posture for up to two minutes and then carefully bring the knees back down to the floor. You can also sit your hips back near your heels and rest in “Childs Pose” to assist with the positive benefits of Downward Facing Dog.

Cat Cow Pose



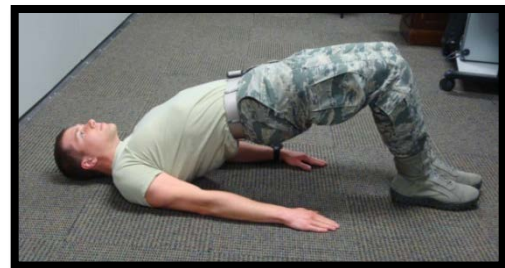
This pose is excellent for manipulating the spine and is easy to do. From a comfortable position on all fours (‘table top’ position) ensure that your hips are positioned over your knees and your shoulders are over your wrists, gently look up and push the stomach towards the floor. Press the hands into the floor as the top of the pelvis tips downward. This phase can be done with an inhale; after a brief pause, reverse this posture by exhaling and arching the back up towards the ceiling, with the breath, bring the head down with your chin moving towards your chest. The shoulder blades will move further apart as the upper back expands upwards. Repeat this sequence five to ten times.



This pose can also be accomplished from a sitting and standing position!

Bridge Pose

Begin by lying on the floor; if you have any issues with your upper back, a blanket can be used to support your shoulders. Bend your knees placing your feet flat with your heels close to your hips. Extend your hands, palms down on the floor next to your feet. With an exhale, press your feet and hands into the floor and press your pelvis up. Keep your thighs and feet parallel to the floor while you tighten your quadriceps.



While in this posture, press your sternum upwards moving the chin closer to the chest. Remain in this posture from 30 seconds to one minute, then recover slowly and deliberately by rolling the spinal column back onto the floor.



Supported Bridge Pose

This variation of bridge pose makes use of a block, bolster, rolled up blanket or if you do not have anything similar with you, a large book (wrapped in a shirt or towel) can be used. Place the block under your sacrum and allow your arms to rest alongside your body [the photograph has the Airman with his arms stretched out only to show the position of the block].

The size of the block is important, start with a smaller block and work as comfort permits. Remain in this posture for several minutes and when you are ready, slowly press down on the feet, lifting the pelvis up and sliding the block out from underneath.



Appanasana

This posture helps to relieve some pressure from the lower back by extending the spinal column to small degrees. It also has the benefit of relieving excess digestive air, working the whole of the digestive system and can be used by those that have constipation issues.

Start the posture by lying on your back with your legs extended, with and with an exhale, draw your legs into your chest. Clasp your arms over the knees and if this just isn't going to work, clasp your hands or any part of your arms in order to hold your knees close into your chest. Keep your head down on the floor and try to keep your shoulder blades on the floor as you squeeze your legs into your chest.



Keeping your breath smooth and steady, hold the posture for up to a minute and then slowly release and extend yourself onto the floor.

To go deeper into the pose, lift your head and attempt to place your nose on your knees; if this isn't going to happen for love or money, than go where you can with distance. If you have a bit extra in the mid section, you can use a yoga strap, towel, belt or similar around your feet and draw in holding the implements. Another option is to grab onto your knees and pulling them off to the sides of the chest, draw your knees towards your shoulders.

This is a simple and accessible posture that can be done in bed both before you go to sleep and when you wake-up. And if you have the office environment that will allow it, do it there!

Jathara Parvritti



This posture is responsible for elongating and strengthening the spine and the muscles of the abdomen. Working the spine in this manner also allows for the extension of and hydration of the spinal discs.

Lying on the floor, you spread your arms wide, palms down, then bring your knees to your chest and drop them to one side while you face in the opposite direction. Once you do both sides, hold your knees towards your chest for a few breath cycles and then slowly extend your legs to the floor.

Spend a lot of time at your desk?

Check out *Nafsi Office Yoga*—on-line at www.nafsiyoga.com

Read on!

Learn more about the art of yoga in relation to back health and overall body enlightenment in general:

“Light on Yoga” by B.K.S. Iyengar

“The Key Muscles of Yoga” by Ray Long, MD, FRCSC

“Yoga Anatomy” by Leslie Kaminoff

www.yogajournal.com



Nafsi Yoga
“Versatility in Thought & Action”