

## Managing Lower Back Pain With Relaxation

It is said that almost everyone at some time in their lives will experience some form of lower back pain or discomfort.

There can be many reasons and causes of back pain, e.g. ligaments can be strained, arthritis in the facet joints, postural problems, injuries, trauma and general wear and tear over the years. Conventionally GPs do not tend to examine the role of stress in back pain and from a yoga perspective this doesn't make sense. Many professional body workers believe there is a connection between the body's stress response system and psychological tension.

From a yogic perspective, other factors are important. Beyond stress and negative emotions yoga links back pain to posture, muscle tightness, dysfunction, muscle weakness, overuse of muscles and lack of body awareness, issues that yoga is very effective in addressing.

I have heard from my clients that in order to address back pain they have been advised that one needs to strengthen their abdominal /core muscles. All well and good, we need some core support. The problem with strengthening the core muscles is that it can have an adverse effect, too many abdominal exercises can increase tightness in the hip flexors and in particular in the psoas muscles and can potentially exacerbate some back problems. Besides a tight or shortened psoas, many people have tight hamstrings and many people with back pain have tight hip rotators in their pelvis. And often the back extensors, the muscles that run on either side of the spine and keep you from slumping, can become weakened in some people.

The yogic approach to addressing these issues is to determine which specific muscles need strengthening or lengthening or relaxing and to create a specific programme for your client to address these issues. Many experts believe that back pain can be prevented, while there are various reasons for back problems e.g. congenital, the result of accidents, wear and tear, the majority of back pain is due to how we use our bodies and can also be the result of emotional stress. Ken Dychtwald in his book 'Bodymind' states, *"Abdominal tension and stress are frequently at the root of lower back pain, for as the muscles in the belly tighten and contract, they begin to tug on the muscles that surround the spine, forcing them to become contracted and rigid. The armouring and dis-ease can accumulate until chronic pain and recurring back injuries take control of the health potentials for this region"*. Dychtwald continues, *"Back injury does not begin at the time of the acute injury, but rather that the injury occurred because muscles and emotions of the back had been chronically held and contracted for some time, thereby predisposing the area to injury"*.

Addressing specific back problems when working with clients on a one to one basis is, in my opinion much more productive than trying to address specific back issues in a class setting. As a yoga teacher and therapist, I work intuitively with my clients incorporating assessment techniques including posture, body reading, habitual patterning and the Rosen method which is a form of intuitive gentle hands on approach to healing. Using these assessment tools I am able to help individuals manage their physical pain but also their emotional pain

and on occasions with the help of the Rosen Method we can identify the emotions or trauma that caused the onset of the pain. Working individually with client's I am able to provide them with a bespoke programme of yoga specifically designed for their individual needs.

While it is a joy to work with clients on an individual basis we also have to consider how we cater for a large group and how we can provide our students with a posture that will assist with their own back discomfort. I begin my classes with the '**Constructive Rest Position**' (CRP) explaining to my students the benefits of the CRP. I encourage individuals to master this position as it has many benefits. The CRP invites the individual to bring their awareness to their 'bodymind' e.g. physical body, mental/mind, breath, energy and encourages them to sense and acknowledge how their body and mind feels in the present moment, this is where we can encourage our students to develop 'mindfulness'.

Many professionals believe the health of the psoas can have a big impact on the spine. Liz Koch in her book, *The Psoas Book* talks about 'The Fear Reflex' and says that fear creates our natural conditioned response, the fight or flight response. Due to our modern living, the body does not always have time to return to a state of balanced relaxation and homeostasis, as a result fear can lodge itself in our nervous system and the organs and muscles that it innervates thus causing tension and rigidity. On a physical level the CRP encourages the spine to lengthen, shoulder girdle to widen, psoas to release and supports the parasympathetic nervous system. (See pic 1 The Psoas).

The Psoas is a major muscle and a fascinating muscle too and I could talk lots more about the Psoas but for the purpose of this article I have to keep it brief. I would like to focus on the **Constructive Rest Position** (CRP) because the position can assist in releasing the psoas muscles. The psoas can be overused and can according to some professionals be a large contributor in back pain. The CRP is a relaxing position and allows the psoas to release naturally as you relax into the position.

### **The Constructive Rest Position**

Props required: yoga mat(s), blanket, hand towel, yoga strap.

To begin organise your yoga mat, placing a neatly folded blanket on top of the mat so it is positioned underneath the shoulders and spine (not the neck), you do not want your blanket to be bulky – the blanket is there to allow the spine to release and lengthen (a sticky yoga mat can sometimes prevent the spine from releasing).

Place a neatly folded hand towel (not thicker than 1.1½ inches) underneath the back of your head (not the neck). The purpose of the towel is to support the cervical spine so that it is the same level along the whole of the spine. You want to avoid tilting the head backward or pushing the head forward, this is very important.

Before you lie down on your mat have the yoga strap close by and looped.

Once you have set up your props, lie on your mat and blanket, with head on the towel.

Have your knees bent (you are in a semi-supine position), feet hip width distance apart and away from your bottom, think ski-slope and not demon drop. Arms alongside your body (see picture 2). You want to keep the natural curvature of your spine, avoid pressing your back into the mat.

Close your eyes unless you feel you may fall asleep in which case keep your eyes open and gaze soft.

Begin to tune in to how you are feeling – bringing your mind to your practice. Spend a few minutes observing your natural breath, soften the abdomen and allow your physical body to surrender to gravity. Sense your body releasing and relaxing naturally with the breath.

As you lie in the CRP begin to tune in to your physical body, notice and sense how your body feels as it rests upon your mat. Be in the moment, notice your physical being, avoid adjustments at this stage. Sense your body. Over time your body will begin to release in its own time. Observe, the weight in both sides of your body, any discomfort or pain, the symmetry of your body, as it slowly releases and relaxes.

In my experience I find that as the physical body, the psoas and the parasympathetic nervous system begins to relax some small adjustments need to be made as the spine begins to release and lengthen, these adjustments may simply be to lightly press the feet into the floor adjusting the weight evenly through both feet. I find often in this position the weight shifts to the outer edges of the feet.

Notice if one leg or maybe both legs want to drop out – if this happens and if keeping the legs in place correctly prevents you from relaxing then use a strap to support the legs (see picture 3). But try not to disturb the position of your body too much as you place the strap around the upper thighs.

This is an effortless position – no controlling or doing. Sense your whole spine from the top of your neck to the tailbone lengthening and broadening. Observe your bodymind in this position, your habitual patterning, your breath, your emotions, images, thoughts, where in your body you may be holding on to tension and let your mind and gravity melt away those tensions. Visualise your spine and psoas muscles releasing. Stay in this position for 15-20 minutes.

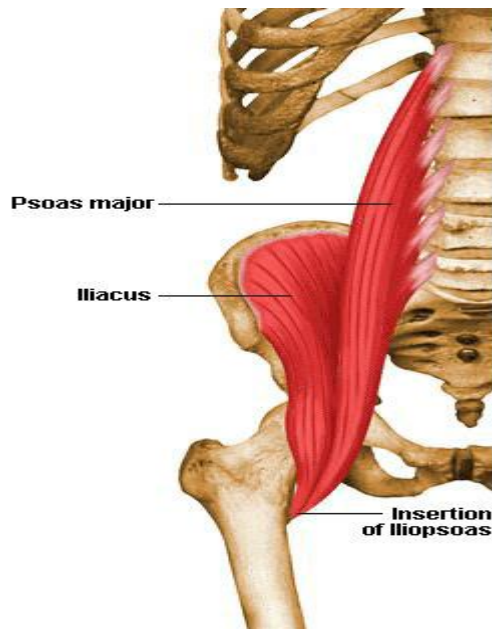
To release from the position hug knees to chest if appropriate and gently roll to your side staying there for a few minutes, use your hands to support you coming up to sitting or standing.

This position is a beneficial position for all regardless of whether you have back issues. Ideally to receive the benefits of the CRP ideally you need to spend 15-20 minutes a day in the position. It takes time for the body, muscles, fascia, and connective tissue to release.

If students find the position too uncomfortable they can use the seat of a chair to support the calf muscles and lower legs (see picture 4).

References: Ken Dychtwald, Bodymind, (pages 37-138).

Liz Koch, The Psoas Book, (pages 49-54)



The psoas major is the biggest and strongest player in a group of muscles called the hip flexors: together they contract to pull the thigh and the torso toward each other.

The psoas major's proximal (closest to the head) attachment is on the sides of the bodies of the vertebrae from T12 through L4. It continues down the sides of the spine, over the front of the pubic bone, and then attaches at the distal end with the fibers of the iliacus to the lesser trochanter of the femur.

Picture 1

Picture 2



Picture 3

Picture 4



#### About the Author

Barbara Ives is a BWY Teacher and Foundation Course Yoga Teacher, Health and Wellbeing Coach and Mentor and founder of Yoganorfolk. She offers private appointments and classes in Norfolk, workshops, retreats and holidays. Barbara also runs a Learning and Development business where she offers consultancy and corporate Health and Wellbeing and Mindfulness programmes. Barbara writes features on yoga and health and wellbeing for various magazines and is a volunteer on the BWY Norfolk yoga group.

Barbara is planning on running the Foundation Course in Norwich in April 2015.

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