How You Can Fend Off Migraine Pain With Yoga

by BARBARA LEECH

Yoga for Migraine Pain Relief?

With reoccurring migraine pain, it helps if you can find ways to let go of the stress we all hold onto within our body and minds.

As someone who suffers from migraines, I have tried many ways to let go of my daily tension, stress over deadlines and that inner feeling of deep fatigue. After trying just about anything suggested to me (I was desperate), I discovered that yoga is probably the most helpful when it comes to preventing and lessening my migraine pain.

There was a period of time I was getting migraines two to three times per month. I think the second attack was most often a rebound migraine, which occurred because I was not completely recovered from the first attack while diving head-first back into work and stress and, well, life.

I discovered that I can not only lessen the effect a migraine has me, but I can fend off a second or third attack that may follow by simply taking the time for a yoga class or two each week.

Which Type of Yoga is Best?

There are so many types of yoga out there now that it may seem daunting trying to choose which one is best for helping fend off your next migraine.

Each type has its own blend of breathing, poses, meditation, chanting, relaxation, and even philosophy. But I have found that **restorative yoga**, a practice that focuses on a more healing and recuperative experience, brings with it so many wonderful benefits for those of us with migraine or other types of chronic pain, it is an ideal place to start.

What is Restorative Yoga?

With a restorative yoga practice, the yogi typically relies on the use of props and the prolonged holding of a few simple poses to achieve a deep level of relaxation. It is gentle and even the novice can do it.

This relaxation is good for the body, mind and soul. The use of props in this type of yoga makes it easier to maintain balance while you are in poses and allows you to relax during them, basically because you are not fighting to stay balanced on your own. The props are often just large foam bricks, blankets or special shaped pillows that are placed where the body needs extra support during poses.

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What is Restorative Yoga?

While some restorative yoga poses are beneficial to the entire body, others target specific parts of the body, such as the back, neck, head, heart or lungs.

Many restorative yoga poses are similar to other types of yoga poses, with the exception of the use of props to support your movements.

Each class instructor may have a different approach but basically, they start with a warm-up. Then, the real yoga work begins. Each restorative yoga pose has to be held for several minutes, and it can even be held as long as 15 minutes. This may not seem challenging, until you actually do it.

Some of common poses include:

- **Legs against wall –** This pose is noted to specifically help with migraines, and can be performed with a bolster pillow under your legs, hips or back. This pose has you lay down on the floor with your legs at a straight right angle up against a wall, basically butt to the wall and forming the capital letter L. Deep relaxation ensues.
- **Savasana (relaxation) –** With this pose you rest your head on a pillow, legs on bolster and feet on blanket. While you are practicing restorative yoga poses, your instructor may suggest that you use a blanket to cover your body, so that you will feel more comfortable.
- Child's pose - Tuck your heels under your hips and cradle a bolster or pillow with your upper body.
- Reclining bound angle- Also known as reclined cobbler’s pose, this is where you sit with your knees open and draw your heels in toward your pelvis. Press the soles of your feet together and let your knees drop open to both sides, then you lay back and put your elbows to the floor to slowly ease your back onto the mat. This is done with props under head, arms and legs.

Benefits a Restorative Yoga Practice

Helps Heal the Body and Mind

Restorative yoga is an excellent opportunity to disconnect from the busy chaos of life and slow down. It is especially useful when you need to eliminate stress, fatigue and pains within your body that are born from your daily stressful activities.

It can also help you recover from illness and injury or overcome emotional upheaval or depression. All of these things can agitate a migraine or help bring one on.

By moving slowly through the poses yoga allows you to explore your mind and body at a steady and natural tempo.

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Benefits a Restorative Yoga Practice

It is believed that restorative yoga, with its slow poses and breathing exercises, activates the body’s parasympathetic nervous system, which calms the body’s fight or flight responses. This places the regular nervous system at rest, and the muscles tend to become more relaxed.

Constant practice of restorative yoga will make your body less vulnerable to stress-related illnesses and other chronic conditions that are aggravated by stress, like migraines. After a class, it often seems that I can feel a new sense of calm on a cellular level. Even if I came in with a migraine in full attack mode, I leave with it calmed and manageable.

It Encourages You to Be Mindful

Restorative yoga encourages you to look within. Awareness of your physical sensations, your thoughts or emotions and the sounds all around you can take on a deeper significance in how you feel and view your day-to-day activities. This brings a greater feeling of peace, which I think is helpful in preventing migraines.

The comfortable pace of restorative yoga opens the doorway to a deeper understanding of your own body, mind and spirit. You can feel the poses and each muscle stretch or flex and you develop a level of consciousness about how to relax these muscles, even as you go about your day and are not doing yoga.

The more I practice yoga the more I can see the direct cause and effect between my poses, my breathing, and my overall feeling of well-being. I have found that over time I have begun to make more deliberate and attentive choices, both on and off the mat.

Encourages Surrender

The idea of yoga is not to force yourself into painful poses, but instead, releasing and surrendering to them. This allows you to cultivate acceptance of your body and its limitations.

Yoga should not hurt. This is not a “no pain, no gain” activity. After practicing a while, as the poses come with increased ease and comfort, it is easier to gain acceptance and detachment naturally from things that challenge the body and your level of comfort.

To Get the Most of Restorative Yoga Poses You Should:

- Let go and soften and relax your belly. This is not the time to be holding anything in.
- Breathe naturally throughout the length of each pose
- Relax everything including your face, jaw, and tongue
- Take your time getting out of, and into, each of the poses

The benefits I have discovered are not isolated solely to restorative yoga, but this type of yoga is gentle enough that even a novice, like myself, can achieve the poses and reap the benefits.

If you’ve never explored this style of yoga and you suffer migraines, I encourage you to give it a try.