



# Powerful Postures to Melt Stress

Enrich any class by integrating four stress reduction techniques: preparation, poses, pondering and prana.

In today's complicated world, just listening to the evening news on television or radio can raise cortisol rates in the body. High stress levels, combined with current technological advancements, almost unending sensorial bombardment, and the ever-changing dietary habits of many developed countries, can deny the body time for repose and resynthesis.

In the group fitness (and small-group training) world, spending a few moments on stress reduction at the start and finish of any class type can increase general well-being and promote overall health and healing (Souza et al. 2007). Ultimately, creating an experience that addresses both body and soul is sometimes more important than delivering a class based on intensity alone.

Following are some suggestions I have used in more than 30 years of group fitness teaching, not only to help students learn the importance of mind-

fulness, but also to offer them nonthreatening ways to develop it. Remember that these methods may seem untraditional to students who are used to conventionally "intense" classes, but the practices can work in almost any fitness environment if you simply remind participants, "If you want what you have never had, you sometimes have to do what you've never done."

## In the Beginning: The Class Intro

The warm-up gives you a wonderful opportunity to introduce a few simple stress reduction techniques and give participants a taste of what's to come at the end of class. Here are some tips:

**First, remind participants of their responsibility.** During the warm-up movements, remind students to take ownership of their own intensity, breath and inner feelings at all times.

Suggested script: *Remember that you choose your own intensity at all times today, and if you work from the inside out, you can get better results. Research shows that consciously thinking about your muscles yields greater gains in cardio, strength and flexibility (Barbosa et al. 2013).*

**Second, preview the power of looking inward.** Invite people to work as hard as they need during the main workout, and then foreshadow the last section of class, which will be just as intense, not as a workout but as a workin.

Suggested script: *At the end of class today, we are going to take some moments to inventory our muscles—not to tell them what to do, but to be still and listen to what they say to us as we decrease stress and enhance our overall well-being and integration.*

**Third, integrate a timeless yoga posture for stability with a full-body scan.** >>

## MINDFUL RELAXATION SEQUENCE FOR THE END OF CLASS

Purpose	What to Use	What to Do	What to Say (Script)
1. Preparation	lighting, aromatherapy and music	Speak in a gentle voice just loud enough for all to hear comfortably.	Now that we've worked out, we're going to work in and sit comfortably still as a reminder that we are human beings, not human doings, so we will just be, in four deceptively simple but powerful poses. We will sit in silence for a moment in lotus pose, and in silence we will try to listen to ourselves, remembering that the word "listen" is just a reordering of the letters in the word "silent." Perhaps in the silence, as we are listening, we can focus on drawing in energy and recentering ourselves. Whenever possible, try breathing through the nose only. [Set up lotus pose, and pause as appropriate.]
2. Pose: Lotus and Full-Body Scan	lighting, aromatherapy and music	Sit in lotus pose with knees extended or flexed, as able.	Now that we've settled into our bodies as we did at the start of class, we will execute our second full-body scan. Here in lotus pose, one of the blueprints of all yoga and other mindful disciplines, we make no judgments; there is just awareness. Let's focus on the toes and work upward toward the head, inhaling love, light and healing into each body part. As we focus on our breathing, we allow ourselves to feel the warmth of the room, the darkness of the surrounding area, and the relaxing sounds of the music. Let's try to harness the power of prana through the aromatherapy because research says that aromatherapy can help us reach a deeper state of relaxation and healing (Hölzel et al. 2011). [Pause as appropriate.]
3. Pondering	candle	Continue to sit in lotus pose.	Let's meditate on the flame of the candle as we consider ourselves as a lotus flower, where our heart is at the center. The candle's warmth, flame and moving nature balance us as we inhale a sense of well-being and exhale the stresses of life, warming our own self-acceptance and compassion. With each breath cycle, we settle deeper into the flower layers of our lotus bodies, called "koshas" in yoga, becoming aware of our brain, body and breath. We take a conscious break from the stresses and heartaches that the world sometimes offers, and find solace and refuge in our lotus heart center, open to the candle's healing light.
4. Harnessing Chi		Gather and sink the chi.	As we did in the warm-up, we now draw from tai chi, "gathering and sinking the chi" for rebalance and restoration. With each sinking of the chi, we try to feel ourselves enrobed by the light and love of the universe. [Complete eight mindful repetitions.]
5. Pose: Gratitude Bowing	towel or fists	Move into child pose. For participants with knee or other issues, simply lie prone.	We now move into child pose to show gratitude and reverence to Mother/Father Earth for the many blessings of our spiritual and physical bodies. As we bow down to the ground and place our third eye on the floor, we think of sealing and releasing our ego here. Because we are mostly upright and often rush through life, we now find balance down here on the earth. We metaphorically renew ourselves in this fetal position of rebirth, balancing our energy with our minds grounded and our organs facing the sky.
6. Pose: Restorative Crocodile		From child pose, lower into restorative crocodile pose.	Here, let's imagine our inhalation and exhalation bringing a sensation of peace over our extended bodies. Physically, being in this position helps us expand air into the rear parts of our lungs, which can energize us later. Emotionally, being in this position helps us balance the chakra energy centers of the body (Fathi 1996). We feel ourselves elongating with each breath, expanding the energy centers of the body.
7. Pose: Angel		Lie in supine angel pose.	As we finish in this relaxation posture, we can do a final balancing prana, matching the speed of our inhalation to the pace of our exhalation. With our arms reaching outward like angel wings, we imagine ourselves absorbing all of the energy in the room with our open heart and chest. We feel ourselves letting go of the stresses of the world outside. If we can let go a little, we will have a little peace. If we can let go a lot, we will have a lot of peace. If we let go completely, we are free. [Pause as appropriate, and gently dismiss participants].





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Stand in a yoga-inspired tadasana, or mountain pose, with hands in prayer position, thumbs on the heart. Feet are as much together as possible, kneecaps lifted, core engaged, shoulders back and down, and spine neutral with gaze forward and dim.

Suggested script, courtesy of Valerie Grant, somatic educator and Guild Certified Feldenkrais Method® teacher, based in Pennsylvania: *Now take just 30 seconds to scan yourself from toes to nose. We strive for awareness and integration of all aspects of our body and mind to maximize our workout today. We will do this again at the end of class. No judgments now; just awareness.*

**Fourth, add a timeless tai chi form for mobility.** To bring energy to the brain, body and breath, "gather and sink the chi" (see the Web Extra) to prepare for the workout; complete eight repetitions.

Suggested script: *As our arms float up, we harness energy to balance the brain, body and breath from the world around us so we can maximize our workout results today, and we cover our body with this energy, or "chi." We'll do this again at the end to integrate and synthesize our energy toward wellness.*

**Last, set a candle within visual access of everyone.** Find a spot where the candle can remain lit throughout class, perhaps on top of unused equipment at the side of the room or on the music cabinet. If a club does not allow an exposed flame in class, consider a rechargeable battery-operated portable candle (available from most discount department stores).

Suggested script: *I'm putting this candle with a lit, live flame in the room to signify the live, burning, collective energy of all of us. At the end of class, we'll return to the candle and use it as a symbol to reintegrate our energy.*

**At the Close: The Class Outro**

As class draws to a close, you can help participants unwind by guiding them through a short sequence of yoga poses and other stress reduction exercises. These are described in the chart.

Set the room to a warm, comfortable temperature, if possible, or invite students to dress in layers. To enhance breathing, offer an aromatherapy dif-



fuser, an aromatherapy candle, or individual aromatherapy spray or wrist roll-on for participants. I suggest lavender-peppermint extract, sold by Origins.

For music, I suggest instrumental music that complements the entire experience, such as natural sounds or harp music like "Garden of Serenity II" from Power Music®. If you feel it is appropriate, you may want to use functional, instrumental chakra-balancing music, which will not only calm the mind but also help to balance the body's organs and energy through its vibrational power (Karageorghis & Priest 2012). ■

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