

A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP, *Naturally*

This meditative form of yoga is simple and soothing—and can help you relax into a sound slumber.

BY PAULA DERROW

Instant Serenity

With yoga nidra, you can experience a level of calm this deep in 10 minutes.

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hen Ellen Hansen entered menopause 4 years ago, sleepless nights became the norm.

Hot flashes and anxiety left the then 54-year-old tossing and turning for hours. Her doctor prescribed Ambien, but Hansen felt uneasy about relying on medication to help her drift off—especially a drug with such eerie side effects. “I’d have conversations with people after I took my pill that I wouldn’t remember the next morning,” she says. The medication did work, however, and Hansen needed sleep. So she kept taking it.

That was until she went to yoga class one day and met a fellow yogi named Gabriela Chinnock. Chinnock, a newly certified yoga therapist, mentioned that she taught a special type of yoga to clients who needed help managing health problems like insomnia. Hansen was intrigued but skeptical. “My sleep problems were so bad that I didn’t have a lot of faith that yoga would help,” she says. But she decided to try it.

The routine Chinnock offered was yoga nidra, or “yogic sleep,” an ancient, little-known type of yoga that’s gaining popularity in both the yoga and medical communities. The practice is essentially a combination of meditation, progressive relaxation, and deep-breathing techniques designed to induce a state of intense relaxation that leads to restorative sleep. It can be

done before bedtime or even during the day as a more refreshing alternative to a traditional nap. Though few studies have been conducted on its effectiveness, results so far have been promising, and many practitioners—Hansen included—say that yoga nidra has solved their sleep problems. After about 6 weeks of working with Chinnock, she was able to fall asleep on her own.

Outsmarting Nighttime Anxiety

A natural, no-risk therapy like yoga nidra could help the 50 to 70 million Americans who experience insomnia each year—and one of the largest groups that could benefit is women in perimenopause or menopause. “It’s pretty common for women to develop insomnia in their 40s and 50s because of hormonal and mood changes that occur,” says Amer Khan, a neurologist and sleep medicine specialist in Roseville, CA, who uses yoga nidra techniques in his practice. The anxiety and hot flashes Hansen experienced are common culprits, as are declining levels of estrogen and progesterone—both of which promote sleep.

Practicing yoga nidra can’t restore hormone levels, of course, but it can help tame the tension that often accompanies the physical changes associated with menopause. “Yoga nidra works by giving the mind a focus,” says Laura Malloy, director of yoga at the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. “It helps you get off the mental treadmill and silence the racing thoughts that keep you awake.”



“Yoga nidra helps you silence the racing thoughts that keep you awake.”

The practice begins with an intention, such as “I am calm and relaxed.” This is followed by a “body scan,” in which you relax your body part by part—a process designed to focus your awareness on physical sensations instead of your worries. Finally, you shift your attention to your breath, counting your exhales until you drift off to sleep.

This may sound too easy, but 3 years of teaching yoga nidra to patients has convinced Khan that the routine works. “People really can tamp down a too-active brain on their own,” he says. For Malloy, evaluating its effectiveness is even easier: “When people start snoring in my class, I know I’ve done my job.”

Calm in Minutes

Research is starting to back up the anecdotal evidence. One recently completed study, to be presented at the American

Occupational Therapy Association Convention in April 2017, compared the effectiveness of yoga nidra with that of other natural approaches to better sleep, such as avoiding alcohol and screen time before bed. The result: Yoga nidra practitioners fell asleep faster and woke up less often during the night than those who tried the other techniques.

One of the study’s coauthors is Columbia University clinical psychologist Richard Miller, who has been researching a yoga nidra-based therapy called iRest for the US military since 2004. His investigations have provided clues as to how and why yoga nidra is so effective. “The body scanning and breathing parts of the routine stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system, which is what provides the deep relaxation people need to sleep,” he says. Yoga nidra also triggers a

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transition in brain wave frequencies from beta, which is associated with alertness, to theta and delta, which are linked to a state of profound meditation and deep sleep. The effects of these changes in the nervous system are so powerful that even people suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder have reaped the benefits of yoga nidra. “Many veterans tell me that they’ve gotten their first good night’s sleep since Vietnam by using yoga nidra,” says Miller.

This isn’t to say that the practice is a cure-all for insomnia or that medication is never beneficial. Sleep experts advise anyone with insomnia to check with their doctor to make sure their tossing and turning isn’t a sign of an underlying health problem. But for many, yoga nidra could be the solution they’ve been looking for.

And it’s easy to learn. Your local yoga studio may offer classes, or you can download an audio recording of a session on the Yoga Nidra Network’s website (yoganidranetwork.org/downloads). You can also try yoga nidra on your own with the 10-minute routine at right, provided by Malloy.

For Hansen, this practice has been no risk, all reward. She hasn’t taken a single Ambien in the 4 years she’s been doing yoga nidra. “Instead of lying in bed every night thinking, *I can’t sleep! I can’t sleep!* I do the routine and I drift off,” Hansen says. “Having insomnia was so debilitating. Being able to get to sleep again without medication is a huge relief.”

Your Soothing Pre-Bed Routine

For maximum relaxation, it helps to wind down by doing a few gentle yoga poses before transitioning to yoga nidra. On a yoga mat or carpeted floor, perform each pose at right for the time stated or for as long as you’re comfortable. Once you’ve finished the routine, get into bed, return to Corpse Pose, and follow these steps to begin yoga nidra.

- **Start by stating a positive intention** for your practice, like “I am relaxed” or “I am peaceful and at ease.”
- **Begin your body scan.** Focus on your right foot for several seconds, then your right lower leg, knee, thigh, hip, buttock, and navel. Focus on your left foot and repeat the progression.
- **Focus on the right side** of your torso. Start with your shoulder, then your upper arm, forearm, and hand. Return to your shoulder, then focus on your clavicle at the base of your throat. Repeat the progression on the left side.
- **Focus on the right side** of your face, your right nostril, cheek, eye, and eyebrow. Then focus on the space between your eyebrows. Repeat on the left side.
- **Focus on the right side** of your body, then the left. Focus on your entire body.
- **Notice your breath** as you inhale and exhale through your nostrils. Let your mind follow your breath as you count your exhales from 10 to 1. If you get distracted, start again at 10. Repeat the countdown until you fall asleep.



1. Child's Pose

Kneel with big toes touching and butt on heels. Separate knees until hip-width apart. Lower torso and rest forehead on floor, extending arms in front of you, palms down. Relax 1 minute, breathing deeply.



2. Cat-Cow

Start on hands and knees. Exhale and round spine toward ceiling like a cat. Inhale, dropping belly toward floor, and lift head, gazing forward. That's 1 rep. Do 5 to 10 reps.



3. Supine Twist

Lie on back with legs extended. Draw left knee toward chest and place right hand on outside of left knee. Guide left knee toward right side, bringing knee as close to floor as possible. Turn head to left. Relax 30 seconds, breathing deeply; repeat on opposite side.

4. Legs Up the Wall

Sit with right side against a wall. Exhale, turn, and carefully swing legs up onto wall, resting shoulders and head on floor. Butt should be as close to wall as possible. Rest arms at sides, palms up. Relax up to 5 minutes, breathing deeply.



5. Corpse Pose

Lie on back with legs and arms extended on floor, palms facing up. Spread legs a comfortable distance apart, turning toes outward slightly. Close eyes and take slow, deep breaths, letting go of tension. Relax up to 5 minutes.



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