

# INTRODUCING YOGA INTO THE LIVES OF TEENS

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Adolescence is a stressful time for most individuals. The body is changing, the mind is experiencing an extreme range of high and low emotions, academic responsibilities are increasing, and social demands are escalating. This is an ideal time for the adaptation of successful coping mechanisms. Yoga is one coping mechanism that can be used with teens.

## Why do yoga with teens?

### **1. Sleep**

Teenagers do not get enough sleep. During the period of adolescence, their biological clocks change. They become prone to staying up late, and they tend to want to sleep in during the mornings. Unfortunately, the school schedule doesn't support this type of sleeping habit, and therefore teens need to go to bed earlier than their body wants. Yoga is a great way to help relax the mind and body, and help teens fall asleep. I teach my yoga clients Bed Yoga, which is a type of yoga they can do on their bed; it is meant to help them fall asleep faster and achieve a deeper sleep.

### **2. Exercise**

Research proves that adolescents are not getting the amount of exercise they need. This is a significant problem considering exercise can act as a natural stress reducer. Yoga provides a physical workout for teenagers that can be done in front of the television, at a desk, or even in a bed. This type of exercise is especially good for the adolescent body because their bones are growing fast and the muscles stay tight, which makes flexibility a challenge. Yoga helps with the flexibility as well as posture, balance, and overall strength.

### **3. Test Anxiety**

Many students get nervous and flustered before taking exams. This can negatively affect their test scores. Teenagers are especially subject to important exams that can sometimes be used for determining their future career paths. It is important that students perform to the best of their ability. I have found that teaching students some simple yoga techniques and breathing exercises to do at their desk, has helped relax them before taking a big test.

### **4. Stress Relief**

As indicated above, adolescence is a stressful time for most people. Teenagers tend to experience emotions at extreme highs and lows, they are dealing with either moving into high school or planning their future career path, many are trying to juggle sports, jobs and homework, most are attempting to form some type of social status and form relationships, and those are just a few of the stressors faced by teens. Many have additional challenges like dealing with a drug/alcohol addicted family member, living in a home of divorce, coping with the

loss of a loved one, etc. It is important for teens to learn coping mechanisms for dealing with their life stressors. Yoga is an excellent coping mechanism for stress, and seems to be a good outlet for this age group.

## Using Yoga with Teens

1. Invite the students/clients to sit around the room, leaving enough space to be comfortable while stretching out. I usually dim the lights and turn on some type of soothing music.
2. Go around the room and ask each person to share on a scale from 1-10, 1 being completely relaxed and 10 being extremely stressed or anxious, what number are they currently experiencing. This will come up again after the yoga sequence, but for now you just want to get an idea of their level of stress or anxiety. (It may be helpful to allow the students to share a little about the cause of their anxiety or stress or to make note of their stress level and discuss at a later point.)
3. Begin the actual yoga exercise by having all participants close their eyes and practice deep breathing exercises. A simple breathing technique that I teach my students is to inhale through their nose, expanding their chest and filling their stomachs, and hold for a count of 3. I then tell them to exhale through their mouth, allowing their chest to sink, and tightening their stomach muscles.
4. During the beginning breathing exercises I always have them in a resting pose like child's pose or mountain pose. **(Note: See link below to a website that has photos of yoga poses)**
  - a. Child's Pose
    - i. Kneel on the floor with your buttocks as close to your heels as possible (don't strain).
    - ii. Place your arms along your sides, palms up.
    - iii. Lower your forehead to the floor.
    - iv. Do the breathing exercises from #3.
  - b. Mountain Pose
    - i. Stand up straight with feet together and hands at your sides.
    - ii. Make sure to distribute your weight evenly through both feet.
    - iii. Continue to breathe.
5. Next, take them through a series of yoga poses of your choice, but making sure to keep it simple, easy, and relaxing. I usually begin by teaching my students some simple poses like downward facing dog, sunflower, cat/cow, dolphin, tree, etc.
  - a. Downward Facing Dog
    - i. Go to the floor on hands and knees.
    - ii. Your hands should be above your shoulders, stretching arms as far forward as possible, and your knees should be below the hips. You will resemble an upside down V.

- iii. Your hands and feet should be shoulder length apart with your fingers spread and your feet as flat to the floor as you feel comfortable.
  - iv. Shift your weight back toward the hips, and pull shoulder blades back toward your waist. The weight of your body needs to be distributed evenly between hands and feet.
  - v. Relax your head and neck muscles and remember to breathe!
- b. Sunflower Pose
- i. Start standing up with feet spread apart and facing out
  - ii. Inhale and reach up, keeping shoulders down.
  - iii. Exhale and bend down with arms at a T position and knees bent.
  - iv. Bend all the way down to the floor allowing your hands to sweep towards the ground.
  - v. Inhale and begin to come back up, sweeping the arms up and straightening the legs.
- c. Cat/Cow Pose
- i. Begin with hands and knees on floor. Knees will be directly below your hips and arms will be perpendicular to the floor.
  - ii. Inhale and round your back dropping your head toward the floor.
  - iii. Exhale and arch your spine, sticking your buttocks up and out.
- d. Dolphin Pose
- i. Get down on the floor on your hands and knees, with your knees directly below your hips and your forearms pressing the floor, shoulders above your wrists.
  - ii. Push your palms together.
  - iii. Exhale and lift your knees off the floor, straightening your legs and putting your heels to the floor like downward facing dog.
- e. Tree Pose
- i. Stand in mountain pose (4b).
  - ii. Shift your weight to the left foot, and grab your right ankle with your right hand. Bring the sole of your right foot to the inner left thigh.
  - iii. Your toes should point down to the floor and the center of your pelvis should be directly over your left foot.
  - iv. Slowly lift both arms straight up.
6. While going through the poses, make sure to continuously remind the students to be aware of their breathing.
7. I recommend that the yoga session proceeds for 20 or 30 minutes in order to leave time for debriefing.
8. After the 20-30 minutes, I have them end in corpse pose for 5 to ten minutes, which I find to be the most relaxing and calming pose. I talk to

- them about their breathing, have them relax each muscle, and I have them visualize their stress as a ball in a part of their body that breaks apart and flows out their fingertips and toes.
- a. Corpse Pose
    - i. Lie flat on your back with your legs spread out and toes facing out.
    - ii. Spread your arms out a little ways from your sides, but not all the way to a T position. Relax your hands, and allow palms to face upwards.
    - iii. Close your eyes and practice the breathing exercise from #3.
  9. After the corpse pose, you can ask the students/clients to give a new number expressing their stress or anxiety level. Hopefully, their numbers will have decreased.
  10. Note: Every session I'll introduce some new poses, and after a few, I ask my students what type of yoga would help them..

Yoga can be used with a variety of client populations and age groups. It can be used in individual and group sessions and with school groups.

## References

Santrock, J.W. (2010). *Adolescence*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.

<http://www.ideafit.com>

**Note:** There are many websites that explain the yoga positions and show pictures:

<http://www.yogajournal.com>

<http://www.fitsugar.com/Yoga-Poses-Sleep-25768095>

YouTube also has many yoga videos.

### About the Author

Laurie McPherson, BS., is a graduate student at the University of Illinois Springfield, receiving her Masters Degree in Human Development Counseling. She is currently interning at Williamsville High School, where she is facilitating group therapy centered on the practice of yoga. During her career, she has gained a variety of experiences working as an adolescent specialist at a residential facility, an educator at a sexual assault center, and an intern for a youth arts and prevention program.