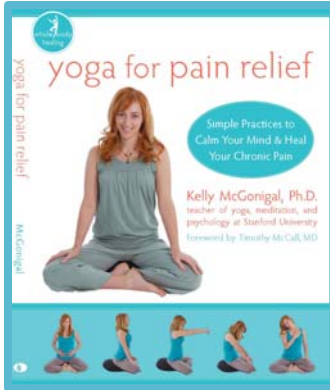


Five Guidelines for Movement That Heals, Not Hurts

From [Yoga for Pain Relief: Simple Practices to Calm Your Mind and Heal Your Chronic Pain](#) by [Kelly McGonigal, PhD](#)



Many people with chronic pain have hurt themselves in other forms of exercise and are wary of trying something new, including yoga. Yoga’s misleading reputation for requiring a contortionist’s flexibility doesn’t help the matter. The truth is, any form of exercise can be harmful or healing, depending on how you approach it. The following guidelines will help you make sure that your yoga practice relieves rather than reinforces your pain. You can also apply these guidelines to any form of exercise, to help you stay safe while staying active.

1. Balance Effort and Ease

You may have approached other forms of exercise or stretching with an attitude of 100 percent effort—go all out, push yourself to your limits. This approach is more likely to cause chronic pain than cure it, and in yoga, it is a guaranteed one-way ticket to injury.

Instead of pushing to your limits, think about staying in a 50 to 60 percent effort zone. You should be able to breathe smoothly, maintain the integrity of your form, and even put a smile on your face in any yoga movement or pose. Exert yourself just enough to meet the demands of a movement or pose, with the least amount of tension in your body or mind.

If you find yourself holding your breath or straining to breathe, you are pushing harder than you need to. If it feels like you are fighting the pose rather than enjoying it, take the effort down a notch or rest. Try it again with more ease and less strain.

Not only will doing less make the movement safer for your body, but you will actually receive more. Staying at 50 to 60 percent effort will give you the energy and comfort to stay in a pose long enough for it to transform the body’s habits and build strength, balance, and flexibility.

2. Pay Attention

Yoga movement is healing because it reunites mind and body. Yoga is not something the body can do while the mind is otherwise occupied. Mindfulness—paying attention to what you are doing as you do it and how it feels to do it—unlocks the full benefits of a movement or pose. Mentally disappearing allows you to reinforce old habits, which means reinforcing pain and stress. As you practice a movement or pose, really pay

attention to what you are doing and how it feels. Stay connected to your breath, thoughts, sensations, and emotions. Let your whole body and mind experience the movement and receive its benefits.

This is especially important when a pose creates strong sensations in the body, like the sensation of a deep stretch or the sensation of muscles working to support you. It is tempting to block these sensations out, especially if you have learned to do this with pain. There is a subtle, shifting boundary between pain and the sensations of positive change happening in the body during a yoga pose. If you aren't really paying attention to how a pose feels, safe and healthy sensations can be misinterpreted by the mind as pain. This will trigger a stress response that increases tension and pain. On the other hand, if you ignore sensations that are true warning signs, you are at risk of injuring yourself. However, if you stay curious about sensations and make sure that you aren't pushing yourself, you can learn how to relax into strong but safe sensations while still protecting yourself from clear pain signals. In each pose, bring to mind a sense of caring and friendliness toward your body. If a pose is painful, come out of the pose and rest.

3. Follow the Law of Karma

In yoga philosophy, *karma* simply means that every action has consequences. This is true for all yoga poses, but the effects of a pose will differ from person to person and even from day to day. To keep your yoga practice healing and not harmful, you need to become a student of karma.

As you practice, notice the effect each movement or pose has on your body. Do you feel comfortable? Are you straining to breathe or breathing easily? Are there any new sensations in the body—and if so, are they painful or pleasant? If you change something about the way you are doing the pose, does it change how the pose feels? After the pose, is there more or less pain? Did the pose increase or release tension in the body?

Being a student of karma also means paying attention to how you feel later in the day and even the following day. Are you in more or less pain? Do you feel more or less stressed? How is your energy? How is your mood? How did you sleep?

As you pay attention to the consequences of your practice, you will learn how to create your most healing practice and avoid poses or movements that are not as helpful for you. This lesson will carry over into other areas of life, helping you listen to your body and care for it with wisdom and compassion.

4. Use Your Imagination

One of yoga's great insights into the body-mind connection is the power of imagination. Traditionally, yogis believed that imagining a movement before actually doing it prepared the mind and body for the full benefits of a pose. You can use this principle to make any movement more pain free.

It may sound like wishful thinking, but there's nothing mystical or silly about it. Scientific research has now confirmed that imagining a movement prepares the body to move with greater ease, comfort, and skill. When you imagine a movement, you activate the same areas of the brain and pathways of the nervous system needed for that specific movement. Even your muscles are primed to work or relax as needed. Imagining a movement while you are relaxed will also prevent unnecessary stress, physical tension, and discomfort during the actual movement. Imagining a typically painful movement as pain-free can even train the brain to experience it as less painful.

Before trying a new movement, read the instructions, look at the photos, and visualize it in action. Then close your eyes and imagine how it would feel to do the movement with grace and ease. If you find any movement or pose uncomfortable, you can always close your eyes and imagine practicing it, pain free and coordinated with your breathing. Even if you do not practice the pose with your body, you will be creating real healing pathways in the mind and body. You can also apply the yogic technique of imagination to any movement, from getting out of bed to riding your bike, and to any upcoming situation that you are worried about, from a medical procedure to public speaking. Imagining the movement or situation while maintaining a relaxed body and breath will go a long way in helping you cope with the challenge when you face it.

5. Be Consistent but Not Rigid

Don't make yoga so complicated or time consuming that you have to force yourself to do it. Doing a little bit of movement every day is better than doing one hour once a week. Doing a few minutes several times throughout the day is even better. If you take the attitude that you need to practice the entire sequence described in this chapter each time you practice, or spend a certain amount of time on your yoga every day, you will set up an unnecessary barrier to doing yoga.

The most important thing is to make yoga a regular part of your life. You want to create a habit of being in your body, and with your body, in a healing way. To help this habit take root, look for five to ten minutes here and there to move your body, breathe, stretch, and relax. There is no fixed prescription of yoga poses for you—what you need and what you can do will vary from day to day. You can choose just one or two movements or poses and let them be a stand-alone practice. Any pose can be paired with a favorite breathing, meditation, or relaxation practice to create your own mini-healing practice.